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MODERN ART IN
COLD WAR BEIRUT
DRAWING ALLIANCES

SARAH ROGERS



Modern Art in Cold War Beirut

Modern Art in Cold War Beirut: Drawing Alliances examines the entangled histories of modern art and international politics during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s.

Positing the Cold War as a globalized conflict, fraught with different political ideologies and intercultural exchanges, this study asks how these historical circumstances shaped local debates in Beirut over artistic pedagogy, the social role of the artist, the aesthetics of form, and, ultimately, the development of a national art. Drawing on a range of archival material and taking an interdisciplinary approach, Sarah Rogers argues that the genealogies of modern art can never be understood as isolated, national histories, but rather that they participate in an ever contingent global modernism.

This book will be of particular interest to scholars in art history, Cold War studies, and Middle East studies.

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Cover image: Stélio Scamanga, *Arabesque*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 60 cm. Private Collection.

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Modern Art in Cold War Beirut

Drawing Alliances

Sarah Rogers

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This book is lovingly dedicated to Kinda, Maysa, and Aida—may possibility always lie on your horizon.



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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction	1
1 Beirut as Cultural Capital: Cosmopolitanism in the Shadow of the Cold War	18
2 “An Artistic Coup”: Maryette Charlton and the Founding of the American University of Beirut’s Art Department	39
3 The Artist as Cultural Diplomat: John Ferren in Beirut, 1963–64	61
4 Abstraction’s Universalist Claims: Local Debates on the Practice of Art	82
5 Figuration, International Alliances, and Palestinian Art in 1960s Beirut: The Painting of Tamam al-Akhal and Ismail Shammout	103
Conclusion	128
<i>Bibliography</i>	137
<i>Index</i>	145

Figures

0.1	Tamam al-Akhal in her Beirut studio, c.1965.	2
0.2	Maryette Charlton with the first art class students at the American University of Beirut, c.1952.	2
1.1	Reproduction of Philippe Mourani's <i>Le Cèdre du Liban</i> (c.1920s) in <i>La Revue du Liban</i> , 1928.	21
1.2	Girault de Prangey, <i>Cedars of Lebanon</i> , 1844. Daguerreotype. 18.8 × 24.1 cm.	25
1.3	Cover of 1939 World's Fairs pavilion, Republic of Lebanon.	28
2.1	Omar Onsi, <i>Landscape</i> , c.1935. Oil on panel. 40 × 43 cm. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.	41
2.2	Maryette Charlton teaching an art class at the American University of Beirut, c.1955.	43
2.3	Charlton and first lady Zelpha Chamoun at Jafet Art Gallery at the American University of Beirut, c.1956.	44
2.4	Charlton and Alexander Calder at Alexander Calder exhibition at the American University of Beirut, c.1953.	44
2.5	Charlton in front of a Calder sculpture at Alexander Calder exhibition at the American University of Beirut, c.1953.	45
3.1	John Ferren, <i>Yellowstone Yellow</i> , 1966. Acrylic on canvas. 50 × 56 inches. Finday Galleries Collection.	62
3.2	John Ferren in his Beirut studio. Reproduced in <i>Ferren, Beirut '64: Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren</i> , Centre d'art contemporain exhibition catalogue, Beirut, 1964.	72
3.3	John Ferren, <i>Jounie</i> , 1963. Oil on canvas. 59 1/16 × 64 9/16 in. Collection unknown. Reproduced in <i>Ferren, Beirut '64: Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren</i> , Centre d'art contemporain exhibition catalogue, Beirut, 1964.	73
3.4	John Ferren, <i>Peace</i> , 1965. Acrylic on canvas. 72 × 60 in. Finday Galleries Collection.	76
4.1	Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon.	84
4.2	Shafic Abboud, <i>Child's Play</i> , 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 100 cm. The Sursock Museum, Collection, Beirut.	88
4.3	John Hadidian, <i>Torzaya</i> , 1964. Oil on canvas. 97 × 117.5 cm. The Sursock Museum Collection, Beirut.	89
4.4	Jean Khalifé, untitled, 1964. Watercolor, gouaches and white pastel on paper. 57 × 48 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.	91

4.5	Amine el-Bacha, <i>Composition No. 10</i> , 1964. Oil on wood. 24 × 35 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.	92
4.6	Saïd Akl, <i>Totem</i> , 1964. Mixed media on canvas. 27 × 41 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.	92
4.7	Stélio Scamanga, <i>Arabesque</i> , 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 70 cm. Private Collection.	96
4.8	Stélio Scamanga, <i>Arabesque</i> , 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 60 cm. Private Collection.	97
5.1	Ismail Shammout, <i>Where To?</i> 1953. Oil on canvas. 125 × 95 cm. Collection of the Artist.	106
5.2	Ismail Shammout, <i>We Will Return</i> , 1954. Oil on canvas. 94 × 78 cm. Collection of the Artist.	110
5.3	Ismail Shammout, <i>Here Sat My Father</i> , 1957. Oil on canvas. 90 × 60 cm. Private Collection, Kuwait.	111
5.4	Ismail Shammout, <i>Newlyweds on the Border</i> , 1962. Oil on canvas. 60 × 50 cm. Private Collection, Beirut.	112
5.5	Ismail Shammout, <i>Madonna of the Oranges</i> , 1997. Oil on canvas. 100 × 80cm. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.	113
5.6	Sliman Mansour, <i>The Village Awakens</i> , 1987. Oil on canvas. 116 × 97.5 cm. Collection George Al'ama, Bethlehem.	115
5.7	Ismail Shammout, <i>Life Goes On</i> , 1975. Oil on canvas. 70 × 50 cm. Private Collection, location unknown.	116
5.8	Tamam al-Akhal, <i>The Rift</i> , 1999. Oil on canvas. 165 × 200 cm. Collection of the Artist.	117
5.9	Tamam al-Akhal, <i>Uprooting</i> , 1998. Oil on canvas. 165 × 200 cm. Collection of the Artist.	119
5.10	Ismail Shammout, <i>The Sea and Us</i> , 1984. Oil on canvas. 110 × 70 cm. The Khalid Shoman Collection, Amman.	121

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xii *Acknowledgements*

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As I finished writing the manuscript, Beirut suffered the realities of a pandemic, and for once in its history, this time was not alone but alongside the rest of the world. Then, on August 4, 2020, an explosion devastated the city, yet again. Our hearts broke and our words failed at the tireless efforts of individuals and communities to rebuild the city after a mind-numbing list of wars, political assassinations, and violent unrest over only the last 50 years. In a worldwide moment when divisive politics hold cities and communities hostage, we can only continue on and look towards cities such as Beirut that persist amid and against destructive violence.

Note

Transliterations of Arabic in the text follow the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Introduction

The photographs each capture a woman artist surrounded by artwork. In the first, Palestinian artist Tamam al-Akhal smiles proudly at the camera, surrounded by a collection of her paintings, visually chronicling the post-*nakba* history of the Palestinian community (Figure 0.1). The photograph dates to the mid-1960s, when al-Akhal was living and working in the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut. The second portrays American artist Maryette Charlton enthusiastically teaching an inaugural studio art class to students at the American University of Beirut during the early 1950s (Figure 0.2). Together, the photographs suggest the important role played by artists from different locales living, working, creating, and teaching in the Lebanese capital of Beirut, a city often characterized during this period as a cosmopolitan cultural capital and, a key regional node in forging Cold War alliances. Al-Akhal and Charlton are protagonists in the historical narrative charted in this publication, book ends that open and close a story of modernism in Beirut as one that undermines the rooting of artistic practices and ideologies in Cold War-era configurations of nation-states and purges notions of center and periphery.

Art history is a discipline forged through genealogies—of an artwork’s maker, of the work’s production and exhibition history, and of the work’s formal, aesthetic language. The sixteenth-century Italian painter and architect Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, considered a foundational text in the discipline, inaugurated the genre of biography as a means to produce artistic lineage.¹ The student-teacher relationship as the basis for artistic development became the paradigm for understanding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century academic Beaux-Arts painting. Later, in standard twentieth-century modernist narratives, the overturning of the previous generation’s academic conventions bred the avant-garde. Central to these models of historical narration is a reliance on genealogy as a linear trajectory that moves through both temporal and spatial geographies. This is particularly evident in histories of modernism, standard accounts of which trace modernity and its accompanying visual language to the radical overturning of academic conventions in nineteenth-century Paris. Modernism’s assumed origins and subsequent trajectory are evidenced in one of the most well-known titles of art of the post-World War II period, one devoted to a critical reckoning with the apparent pluralization of art world centers: Serge Guilbaut’s 1985 publication, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*.² Guilbaut’s title underscores the Cold War’s heightened ideological necessity to claim a national genealogy for art: an aesthetic expressive of and rooted in a geographical locale and accompanying national values. Even as it offered a necessary critique of discourses of American exceptionalism—one still relevant today—it also upheld a polar model of arts, governments, and economies, pitting one against others.

2 Introduction



Figure 0.1 Tamam al-Akhal in her Beirut studio, c.1965.
Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal



Figure 0.2 Maryette Charlton with the first art class students at the American University of Beirut, c.1952.
Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Archives and Special Collections, American University of Beirut

This study shares its historical period of investigation with Guilbaut's work yet takes a different approach to the concept of genealogy within modernism as a development that takes place at a certain moment, crystallized in particular artworks, or located in a distinct geographical locale. Instead, this project considers the history of modernism as a series of fraught debates materialized across artists' manifestos, exhibition statements, and critical reviews in the press, alongside more banal, bureaucratic procedures such as artist's residences, college art curricula, and diplomatic missions that often seem distant from modernism's interrogation of institutional constraints and expectations. This approach to the study of modernism is indebted to work undertaken with colleagues and co-editors Anneka Lenssen and Nada Shabout on the research and publication of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*.³ Particularly significant to the historical period of the Cold War are the ways in which public, private, and government initiatives coalesced as gestures of cultural diplomacy, bringing into contact artists, formal languages, and pedagogical approaches to art making from across geographies and ideological positions. Within this historical context, modern art can never be understood within an isolated national narrative, which is the most commonly established paradigm for studies of twentieth-century visual production.⁴

In order to conceive of modernism as a network of exchanges, strategies, and resistances, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut: Drawing Alliances* situates its study in the Lebanese capital, when, at the height of the Cold War during the 1950s and 1960s, the multilingual, Mediterranean port city served as a regional cultural capital and a strategic node in American plays for regional influence in the face of communism and socialism and the competing political agendas of Lebanese nationalism, pan-Arabism, and Palestinian liberation movements. Guided by recent histories of the Cold War, this study posits the period as one of globalized conflict and asks how these historical circumstances shaped local debates in Beirut over artistic pedagogy, the aesthetics of form, and the possibility for art to speak for the nation.

This is not a story that seeks to reconstitute Beirut as a locale central to standard histories of modernism, nor does it provide an alternative or addendum to centralizing histories of European and American modernisms. Instead, my contention is that Cold War Beirut was a site animated by the local, regional, and international politicians, journalists, publishers, militants, authors, and artists who convened in the Lebanese capital. Indeed, historians have charted the ways in which the country's laissez-faire economy and liberal censorship laws set the stage for Beirut's role as a regional capital in the decades leading up to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), sadly suggesting the failures of the city's purported cosmopolitanism as an open hub for exchange. This book charts how that particular historical context forged a series of ambivalent, contradictory, and nuanced positions in which the formal language of art was mobilized by different actors to speak to key concerns regarding the position of Lebanon in relation to Cold War political stances, namely Lebanon's regional alliances and Euro-American influences. These debates, as detailed in this study, centered on figuration versus abstraction and the aesthetic possibilities of a universal modernism in opposition to a national vernacular. As the five chapters together argue, to posit figuration or abstraction as a visual language somehow internal to the Lebanese nation requires forging or obscuring aesthetic genealogies. As such, genealogy in the traditional art historical understanding is always a discursive construct: aesthetic genealogies are always more complex than essentialist discourses, such as national identity, suggest. Beirut offers the study of modernism a site through which the discipline of art history can distance historical understandings of modernism from the concept of genealogy as a spatial and temporal trajectory, and, in turn, do away with models of center and periphery, which persist within the discipline. Instead,

4 Introduction

Modern Art in Cold War Beirut considers genealogy as a term that encompasses a non-linear series of travels, formulations, and redeployments that is constituted across geographies and discourses rather than inherent to an aesthetic object.⁵

The Need to Define a National Art

Throughout the mid-1960s and early 1970s in Lebanon, galleries and art critics tackled a collective project to define Lebanese art. In doing so, they adopted two prominent strategies: drawing comparisons with other national artistic production, and establishing a historical genealogy for modern art in Lebanon. In 1965, for instance, both the American University of Beirut and the francophone newspaper *L'Orient* sponsored exhibitions that sought to historicize Lebanese art. The university's Alumni Club featured painters Daoud Corm (1852–1930) and Habib Srour (1860–1938) as the first generation of Lebanese modern painters, and *L'Orient* mounted the exhibition *Confrontations: 5 Generations of Lebanese Painters*, a visual timeline of 45 artists working from the mid-nineteenth century to the year 1965. In 1967, the UNESCO Palace held a retrospective of Lebanese painting. Four years later, Contact Art Gallery's inaugural exhibition historicized contemporary Lebanese painting through a focus on the first generation of graduates from l'Académie libanaise des beaux-arts.⁶ In 1974, Waddah Faris, cofounder of Contact Art Gallery, published a visual history of abstract and figurative oil paintings, watercolors, ink drawings, and engravings—beginning with Daoud Corm—in the catalogue for the annual Baalbeck International Festival.⁷ Critics writing in the press took up similar concerns during the mid-1960s and early 1970s. In January 1965, prominent critic Nazih Khater published a piece in *L'Orient* provocatively titled “Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?”⁸ Together, these exhibitions and press reviews underscore both a historical and critical nature of investigations into modern Lebanese art. Moreover, Khater's appropriation of his article's title from French artist Paul Gauguin's famous primitivist painting for a review of Lebanese art written in Arabic and translated for a francophone newspaper speaks to the complexity of identity politics and their artistic and linguistic translation within Beirut's cosmopolitanism.

One of the critics most dedicated to delineating the parameters of a national Lebanese art was Helen al-Khal (1923–2009), the Beirut-based American Lebanese painter, critic, and cofounder of Gallery One. As art critic for the anglophone publication *Monday Morning*, a local news and society magazine sold throughout the region, al-Khal vigorously engaged the issue. An important entertainment publication, *Monday Morning* revealed the efforts of Lebanon's artistic elite to reach a wider public. Reviewing the work of Egyptian artist Salah Taher (1911–2007) on exhibit in Beirut during the summer of 1971, al-Khal wrote:

It was so unlike much of the painting in Lebanon. Here is most often an emotive color and a sensuality of texture that is the artist's main preoccupation, and a sense of form is frequently as incoherent and romantically spontaneous as the Lebanese personality. Like a chameleon, the artist in Lebanon reacts immediately and directly to the variable contrasts of life and land. He lacks the stability of a continuous, integrated cultural heritage; from ancient Phoenicia to modern Lebanon is not all the same authentic, unadulterated link as the Pharaonic age to Egypt today. And in general, the contemporary art of each region reveals the differences of their separate historical developments.⁹

Al-Khal encapsulates Taher's art as a manifestation of a national Egyptian aesthetic that is then contrasted to Lebanese art; whereas Taher's creative production developed from an unbroken tradition stretching from the Pharaonic age to modern Egypt, the Lebanese artist is likened to "a chameleon" whose colors shift with the environmental or contextual variables. The visual characteristics of incoherent and spontaneous form ascribed to modern Lebanese artists reflect the variability and inconsistency of Lebanon's history and varied geography, from port city to mountainous region. This artistic personality is described by al-Khal as an effect of the nation, and the artist serves as both an individual embodiment of the collective and an intermediary between history and art. Defined as a product of history and geography, national boundaries are thereby naturalized as a national aesthetic through the very process of their definition. al-Khal's review appeared at the close of the two decades under consideration in this study and documents the historically persistent agenda to define a national Lebanese art.

At the heart of al-Khal's characterization of Lebanese art is the paradox of articulating a collective national trait through variation, diversity, or the more commonly deployed term to describe Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, cosmopolitanism.¹⁰ This trope is common to both popular and scholarly portrayals of the Lebanese capital and one often traced to the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Literary historian Robyn Creswell opens *City of Beginnings*, his 2019 study of modernist poetry in Beirut, with a description of West Beirut during the 1950s as "a highly politicized bohème" and, "a magnet for disaffected thinkers from within Lebanon and neighboring countries," relating the tightly compact area of Hamra as, "the closest the Arab world could ever get to having its own Greenwich Village."¹¹ As Creswell details, the country's laissez-faire economy, inherited under the French Mandate (1920–43), marked the capital as a node in the international trafficking of goods and services, bringing together a substantial community of artists, intellectuals, and cultural activists who launched an actively engaged locale for exhibition spaces, literary journals, and a growing discourse of art criticism. Likening the capital to New York City's Greenwich Village, Creswell joins a long history of classifying tropes that include Beirut as the Paris or Switzerland of the Middle East. Linking the Lebanese capital to other purported cosmopolitan locales, the comparisons paradoxically dismiss differences for the sake of a generalized cultural diversity. In the case of Lebanon's history, however, such comparisons and characterizations of cosmopolitanism have an intensely fraught political resonance.

Within the Arab world, Lebanon is often culturally and politically situated between Europe and the Middle East, particularly in the period leading up to fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the French Mandate. In the aftermath of World War I, debates over the formation of a nascent independent nation-state coalesced around two principal stances. Arab nationalists promoted a regional nation, advocating Lebanon's reunification within Greater Syria based on a shared language, religion, ethnicity, culture, and history. In contrast, Lebanese nationalists supported territorial sovereignty based on Lebanon's regional differences—its substantial Christian population and historically amicable relations with Europe. Of particular relevance to the present argument is the formation of a paradoxical cosmopolitan nationalism—based on Lebanon's ancient Phoenician roots and a Franco-Mediterranean cultural orientation—fashioned at the hands of Maronite Christian politicians, economists, and intellectuals such as francophone poet Charles Corm (1894–1963), businessman and politician Michel Chiha (1891–1954), and poet, writer, and critic Saïd Akl (1912–2014). Such a seemingly mundane comparison of Beirut with European and American urban locales thus suggests a

6 Introduction

refusal to acknowledge the political history of nationalist claims to Lebanon's relationship with France, a result of the mandate, premised in Lebanon's Phoenician past, and one with which the country's Maronite Christian community could identify.

As al-Khal's 1971 review evinces, even when discussing an Egyptian artist's exhibition in Beirut, critical attention time and again turned toward the need to define the comparable characteristics of a national Lebanese art. Certainly art historical studies have documented the role of art—despite its geographical origin of production—as a visual materialization of the nation-state.¹² Yet what marks the decades of the 1950s and 1960s during the Cold War as significant for tracking the stakes of yearning, on the one hand, for a narrative of situated genealogies and distinctive subjectivities, and on the other, a spirit of cosmopolitan openness, is that they are characterized by claims to Beirut as the center of exchanges of goods, services, and people in the name of cultural diplomacy and foreign policy. Although Cold War studies often focus on the cultural war between the United States and the former Soviet Union, Beirut and its complex claims to a modern history of diversity served as a critical node in the region. This is precisely because of its position as politically, culturally, linguistically, and ideologically between the Arab world and Europe.

Cold War Beirut

Conventional Cold War studies center on the diplomatic standoff between the United States and the former Soviet Union. More recent scholarship, however, has challenged readings of the period as the Long Peace, instead detailing the military history of violent proxy wars across South East Asia and the Middle East.¹³ By reframing the geographical focus of the Cold War, historian Paul Thomas Chamberlin considers it a violently disruptive globalized conflict that killed millions.¹⁴ Chamberlin's publication bolsters earlier scholarship in the field of Middle East studies that argues for the Arab world's significance for understanding the Cold War, prominent among them Rashid Khalidi's 2009 pioneering work, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*.¹⁵ In Khalidi's analysis, the ideological contest between the United States and the Soviet Union played out in the Middle East as a fierce competition to gain control over access to oil. That legacy of the Cold War, in turn, enabled a more complex and nuanced understanding of the contemporary Middle East. The work of Chamberlin and Khalidi serve as critical signposts for the present study, calling attention to the significance of the Arab world during the Cold War and underscoring the American government's agenda to establish a strategic presence in the region. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the ways in which the US government mobilized the visual arts to compete not only with the Soviet Union, but also with France, which continued to maintain a strong cultural and linguistic presence despite the end of the mandate in 1943. Beirut's multicultural status is an integral element of that story, and Chapter 1 historicizes Beirut's positioning between a regional Arab identity and a Euro-Christian orientation during the mandate era with a particular focus on the deployment of the visual arts to forge a cosmopolitan national vision during these earlier decades.

By 1957, Beirut had emerged as a critical node in the region precisely because of its positioning between the Arab world and Europe. With the Eisenhower Doctrine, the United States acknowledged Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–70) as too powerful to isolate amid political, cultural, and military third-world alliances, including that of pan-Arabism. The United States government thus adjusted its strategy, instead

attempting to strengthen conservative Arab governments with pro-Western leanings, such as Lebanon. This book considers the ways in which this change in US Cold War policy shifted American cultural resources to Beirut. Following studies such as those of Chamberlin and Khalidi, the arguments here posit the Cold War as a globalized conflict with different political ideologies and intercultural exchanges, and asks how America's deep investment in the region coalesced with local debates in Beirut over artistic pedagogy, the social role of the artist, the aesthetics of form, and, ultimately, the development of a national art. In doing so, I argue that the rubric of the nation-state falls short of providing a full understanding of the development of and discourses around modern art during the 1950s and 1960s because individuals and art institutions on the ground were in the process of situating their individual and collective agendas in relation to the false binary of capitalism and communism that has long defined our understanding of the Cold War. Resisting the polarizations that were imposed during the height of the Cold War (democracy–communism, freedom–censorship, East–West) and the McCarthy era in the United States, the case of Beirut begs a historicization of the push to identify a national art, and in doing so contends that the genealogies of modern art can never be understood as isolated national histories but rather participate in an ever contingent global modernism.

The Cold War production of a global modernist literature has been undertaken by literary scholars. Andrew Rubin, in his groundbreaking study, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War*, suggests that US government initiatives under the CIA to fund literary journals created transnational alliances and, in turn, the appearance of a global literary canon.¹⁶ Although Rubin's work centers on the North Atlantic, the work of Robyn Creswell and Middle East studies scholar Elizabeth Holt have documented Beirut's centrality as a meeting ground for literary production during the Cold War. Attributing Beirut's status as a publishing hub to its liberal censorship laws, Creswell labels the Lebanese capital "the nerve center" for Arab modernists.¹⁷ Through a close examination of the poetry quarterly *Shi'r*, founded in 1957 by poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917–87), then-husband of artist and art critic Helen al-Khal, Creswell highlights the role of translation in forging a modernism without borders.¹⁸ The influx of funds for translation efforts constituted an integral component of broader diplomatic efforts, particularly on the part of the United States government. For her part, Holt carefully details how such seemingly innocuous investments in literary production and translation propelled debates in the region over modernism's ideology of artistic autonomy.¹⁹ Although both Holt and Creswell focus on poetry and literary magazines, the interdisciplinary nature of Beirut's artistic and intellectual circles extends their historical observations to the visual arts. One of the most commonly noted overlaps is the al-Khal's opening of Gallery One and the Thursday soirees held by the *Shi'r* poets at the gallery.

Similarly, Zeina El Maasri's 2020 study, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*, details the importance of graphic design as a meeting ground between artists, writers, poets, and activists and the global networks of revolutionary alliances.²⁰ El Maasri's publication is a significant contribution to the field in that she examines Cold War Beirut from the perspective of visual economy, attending to both the power of images to produce fields of relations and the necessary circulation of images beyond national borders. Equally critical is El Maasri's nuanced understanding of a cosmopolitanism on the ground, embodied in the figures who constituted Beirut as an active site of as political radicalism in the 1960s. Building off Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi's analysis of the transformation of Beirut's cosmopolitan identity from the

‘Paris of the East,’ to ‘Arab Hanoi,’ El Maasri considers modernist graphic design in Beirut as not limited to a Euro-American trajectory but encompassing competing circuits of modernism, including the militant resistance struggles of Third Worldist liberation movements.

El Maasri and I share a site of study and historical period of investigation premised on different deployments of cosmopolitanism, albeit with different kinds of interest in the historical resonance of a value-laden characterization such as “cosmopolitan.” El Maasri reclaims the category of cosmopolitanism away from some of its conventional internal uses in Lebanese cultural writing, in which it is synonymous with European alignment and politics-free bonhomie. In her book, Beirut’s actual cosmopolitanism is radical, formed by artists and intellectuals who weave through the city along often overtly politicized trajectories, and undertaking projects of aesthetic experimentation and social contestation. My study historicizes the changing fortunes of cosmopolitanism as both a trope and material reality in order to acknowledge its paradoxical national rooting in the context of Lebanon. As I have argued elsewhere, conventional understandings of cosmopolitanism as a political, economic, or ethical construct has the potential to reconfigure borders—territorial, cultural, or otherwise, is complicated in the context of Lebanon, where the term has been historically deployed to further entrench ethno- and religious national boundaries.²¹

The present study accords with *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* and other recent studies in seeking to chart the translocal movements that gave form to individual artistic experiences, and not simply leaving the nation and national affiliation as given. Yet *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut* proposes to chart those considerations through a different cast of protagonists and a different kind of art object. I focus in particular on the fine arts. I have done so because I see this study as less a history of Cold War Beirut or a more nuanced understanding of cosmopolitanism and more a disciplinary intervention into the writing of the history of modernism, not only in the region but also at-large. In Beirut, among the communities of painters and educators it housed during the Cold War decades, we find works of art that sustained vivid debates and energetic statements of appreciation that were, nevertheless, not overtly radical in the sense of seeking to raze structures of power and not necessarily issued in a print media domain of agitprop. These are the works collected today, and they have come to anchor the still-present, still-articulated desire for a national art history. How, then, write a history that not only accounts for the revolutionary alliances of the Cold War period but also the more mundane bureaucratic workings of modernism? Although these two aspects of Cold War Modernism are often narrated as distinct histories within art history, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut* demonstrates just how tightly they intertwine.

Lebanon’s Place within the Study of Modern Art in the Arab World

A central question guides scholarship on modern and contemporary art in the Arab world: how to define a regional or national art when the category of modern art is itself considered a colonial import. This dilemma—most often framed as a choice between tradition and modernity—arrived with great urgency during the 1950s and 1960s, a period characterized by the failures of the pan-Arab movement, founded on the premise of a shared language, ethnicity, history, and culture, to unite the Arab world as threatened by increasing Western intervention in the region. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the internationally acclaimed Palestinian Iraqi novelist, artist, and critic, addressed this issue of cultural authenticity:

The closer the Arab world came to the West intellectually after World War II, the wider the political divergence seemed to become between them. As more and more Arab scholars and artists studied in London and Paris and Rome, an intellectual rift began to show, as an echo of the political stance, soon to become an obsessive issue: it became the question of identity. And the Arabs who had for several centuries, until World War I, had lost political control of their destiny to foreign rulers, began to sense, as one country after another achieved independence as sovereign states, that a new kind of domination, some thinkers argued, of an alien culture assuming the guise of cosmopolitan spirit, which would finally negate the innate force the Arabs were trying to build up... . The artists no less than the writers and thinkers were intensely aware of this disturbing possibility. Were they to be real contributors of ideas and visions to their times, or mere consumers of other peoples' ideas and visions?²²

As this section outlines, Jabra's fears continue to haunt contemporary art histories of modern art in the Arab world.

One of the first book-length publications in English that endeavored to define a modern regional aesthetic was artist and art historian Wijdan Ali's 1997 *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*.²³ Based on her 1989 London exhibition catalogue *Contemporary Islamic Art*, Ali's later text surveys the countries of the Islamic world, including the Arab region.²⁴ In her discussion, in which chapters are organized by individual countries, Ali devises a standard structure that legitimizes the artistic narrative through its historical reinforcement. She begins with the argument that modern art—oil painting on canvas produced by an individual artist—is a colonial import. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's stages of revolutionary national consciousness, Ali defines three progressive phases of artistic consciousness.²⁵ Throughout the colonial era, Islamic artists mimicked nineteenth-century European styles. After independence, artists rejected these traditions and instead relied on vernacular subjects and symbols in a gesture of national allegiance. The third stage, "the search for identity," represents a historical culmination of the previous periods.²⁶ In the second half of the twentieth century, artists developed a thoroughly modern artistic language with authentic local roots: the calligraphic school of modern art.

A second pioneering work on modern art in the Arab world is art historian Nada Shabout's 2007 publication *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*.²⁷ For Shabout, the modern is represented not by an Islamic aesthetic but rather by an Arab subject position that is at once cultural and political. Shabout contends that despite the multiple regional wars premised on the assertion of national identity, there is a regional attachment to a cultural pan-Arab identity based on the shared Arabic language. In her investigation of the artistic field, Shabout insists that the descriptive category of "Arab" is prioritized as a political stance rather than naturally determined by ethnicity, linguistics, or geography.²⁸ Arab aesthetics do not represent a historical development from Islamic aesthetics, but rather a cultural vision that responded to a national, secularized ideal during the second half of the twentieth century.

Art histories focusing on individual countries also map artistic developments onto historical-national ones, specifically privileging the relationship between colonialism and modern art. Egyptian Canadian artist and critic Liliane Karnouk devised a trajectory parallel to Ali's in her *Modern Egyptian Art: 1920–2003*, which defines the Egyptian artist as emblematic of the polarities defining postcolonial countries.²⁹ For Karnouk, however,

the dilemma is a choice not only between tradition and modernity, but also between a national Egyptian identity and a regional Arab-Islamic identity. Each modern movement is defined by an assumed binary: national (Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, or Arab) or modern (Western or international). Paradoxically, this scholarship acknowledges a long history of cross-cultural movement between the region and Europe. Karnouk, for instance, documents the biography of sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar (1883–1934), the first Egyptian to receive a government scholarship to train at *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Throughout this experience, Moukhtar was torn between his artistic discoveries in Paris and his national loyalty. Karnouk thus frames artistic choices of allegiance as exclusive and neglects the possibility of an individual artist who operates outside the categorical confinement of the nation-state. Furthermore, Karnouk, similar to Ali, fails to historicize the nation-state and, in turn, the terms *tradition* and *modernity* as categories for artistic analysis.

In each of these art histories, innovation and authenticity are the two key elements in the formation of modern art. Because the category of modern art is itself considered to be an import, the authors struggle to identify a vernacular difference that contributes to a global art history. Both Ali and Shabout isolate contemporary calligraphic art as a prime example of modern Arab art's worldly contributions. The premise of their argument neglects the cross-cultural interactions that have long characterized artistic production and consumption—particularly during the modern period—in both the Arab world and Europe.³⁰ Moreover, the claims in each of these three histories fabricate a series of temporal and conceptual breaks: colonial/postcolonial, traditional/modern, regional/Western, and derivative/Western. The potential for a regional art history and, more significantly, its contributions to the larger discipline are hampered by the categories of analysis.

The study of modern art of the Arab world continues to be plagued by questions of tradition and modernity. Recent studies have endeavored to circumscribe such binaries through the notion of a geographical and cultural hybridity. Art historian Alex Dika Seggerman's 2019 publication on modern art in Egypt, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt Between the Islamic and the Contemporary*, is one example.³¹ Mobilizing the terms *Islamic* and *contemporary*, Seggerman positions modern artistic production in Egypt between a cultural-religious rubric of analysis and a temporal one, as in her study, *contemporary* refers to a time period rather than a set of aesthetics.³² Seggerman deploys the term *constellation* to acknowledge the different sites of influence and training of modern artists in the Arab world—many of whom furthered their training abroad—without privileging a center and periphery for the development of Egyptian modern art. Although visualizing different points, or locales, coming together to forge a constellation—with no point more significant than any other—the notion of a constellation nonetheless maintains distinctive geographical sites. This approach allows Seggerman to position artists producing modern art in Egypt between Europe and Egypt, or between the Islamic and the contemporary. Whereas the visual metaphor resists designating a center and periphery, it also refrains from acknowledging the ways in which these sites constitute one another. In other words, the clear distance between points is necessary so that each site operates as a singular unit within a collective. Despite the insistence of modern Egyptian art as contemporaneous with other artistic production and acknowledging a cultural-religious context, a binary remains yoked to geographical divisions. This binary carries temporal connotations, as anthropologist Johannes Fabian articulated in his classic study, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. “Over there,” in geographical

terms, translates into a temporal “back then,” with the assumption that the Global South, or the non-West, or whatever terminology references geographical regions and cultures and religions outside of white Euro-America failed to modernize at the same pace.³³

An exception to dominant frameworks for understanding modernism in the Arab world is Anneka Lenssen’s 2020 publication, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria*.³⁴ For Lenssen, whose study begins at the turn of the twentieth century so as to arrive at the Cold War decade of the Global Sixties, formal experimentation among Syrian artists becomes the very means through which the ideologies of assumed social and political subject positions may be interrogated. Perhaps most notable for the considerations of the present study, Lenssen’s analysis of artistic practices cultivated within different political parties active in Syria—namely the Ba’th Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party—suggests that claims to specific national affiliations could in fact undermine the authority of the Syrian state rather than merely buttress its modern sovereignty. Examining the interstices between aesthetics and politics, Lenssen moves away from contextualist models that seek to either confirm or wholly reject nationalist identities via the figure of the artist or the individual art object.

Anthropology, as a discipline concerned with defining and understanding difference, also offers insightful models for a more nuanced understanding of an intercultural art history. Recent ethnographies of the Arab world have examined the field of art as a contested domain for political struggles over national, ethnic, and religious identity. These studies have focused on art’s investment within value systems through public and private institutions. Jessica Winegar’s 2006 *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* situates national debates about cultural authenticity within the legacies of the colonial past and transformations of the global present.³⁵ Winegar’s account is a significant departure from previous histories in that she considers the dilemmas of local and global, traditional and modern not as predetermined by Egyptian history but rather as institutional constructs deployed by artists, cultural actors, and government officials. At times, the insightful analyses offered by studying art through its interlocutors often sacrifice attention to the role of formal language in understanding art’s inscription within different value systems. Moreover, Winegar, similar to Karnouk, interprets the dominant role of the Egyptian state as a hindrance to the development of an autonomous modern art, thereby maintaining a reliance on a Euro-American conception of art as an original creation of an individual actor, often figured as countercultural.

In standard art histories of the Arab world, the absence of a stable nation-state in Lebanon is considered to be one of the reasons for Lebanon’s regional incongruity in the visual arts. Al-Khal’s efforts in her 1971 review in *Monday Morning* characterize modern Lebanese art as unconcerned with the development of a vernacular visual language, in striking contrast to modern art in other regional countries during the postcolonial period. Similarly, Palestinian artist and art critic Kamal Boullata defines Lebanese art during the 1960s as derivative of Western styles. Outlining the dominant trends of modern Arab art, Boullata delineates two schools: artists inspired by “drilling out the forgotten fragments of a spectral past,” and those who “subscribe to extracting their vision from an unmade future.”³⁶ Significantly, in Boullata’s narrative, Beirut is the artistic center for the latter: “Like two generations before them, their products mirror every major current in the western world today. Beirut has rightly been the domestic stadium and souk to this school.”³⁷ Boullata’s choice of the word *souk*, the Arabic word for marketplace, to describe Beirut is of considerable consequence because it underscores two primary, related characteristics of the Lebanese capital: its mercantile history as a Mediterranean port city and

its intercultural orientation toward Europe and the Arab world. Boullata substantiates an aesthetic characteristic through a perceived national one—cosmopolitanism—that is, in turn, construed as a liability in its risk of superficiality.

Likewise, Silvia Naef, in *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, her 1996 comparative study of modernism in Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon, concludes that because of Lebanon's diversity, the country lacks a national art movement. She writes, "Modernity was manifested much less by a return to sources, to local patrimony, than by an experimentation with styles in use in Europe... It is therefore relatively difficult to define a *specific* characteristic of Lebanese fine arts" (emphasis in original).³⁸ This conventional narrative of modern art in Lebanon has resulted in a standard format for art histories produced in the region in which history is organized as a series of individual artist's biographies, following the format standardized in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. In addition to monographs, prominent examples of publications organized according biographical format include Cesar Nammour's 2003 Arabic text *Before the Canvas: Writings on Painting*, Michel Fani's 1998 francophone publication *Dictionary of Painting in Lebanon*, and Richard Chahine's 1982 trilingual study, *One Hundred Years of Plastic Arts in Lebanon*.³⁹

One of the few exceptions to customary biographical monographs and formats that maps aesthetics onto history and geography is the scholarship of anthropologist Kirsten Scheid. Her 2005 unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State," begins her study by addressing the common assumption that Lebanon suffers from "an overall lack: lack of a public collection, lack of a standard historical account, lack of institutional support, and so on."⁴⁰ In a close examination of the genres of landscape, nude, and abstraction produced between the 1920s and 1980s, Scheid demonstrates the function of art in qualifying Lebanese society both internally and externally. In doing so, she asserts that art is a medium through which "ambiguous" identities, including that of the emerging and tenuous Lebanese Republic, are produced. Critical to Scheid's body of work is the contention that art and society are mutually constitutive rather than reflective.

This book follows Scheid's investment in examining the ways in art as an active in the construction of, rather than a mere reflection of, society or the nation. Related is a consideration of the ways in which discourse acts upon art and its social understanding. I also share with Scheid the site of my investigation, although the time period under consideration here are the subsequent decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the height of the Cold War. Beirut, customarily positioned between Europe and a regional Arab world, is understood in my argument not as a site between two distinct geographical and ideological locales, but as a site characterized by competing local, regional, and international populations, political parties, and ideologies during a particular historical moment. In this way, Beirut is itself a protagonist in this history. Moreover, the artists and cultural actors themselves are not stable entities who move between sites of influence, whether those be geographical, cultural, religious, or national. Instead, my historical understanding of the protagonists and the city act upon one another, constituting one another. There are no stable, monolithic subject positions.

Part of acknowledging Beirut's role as a cosmopolitan hub during this historical period requires that we also refrain from positioning individual actors as representative of a monolithic identity. The actors in this history hail from difference cities and countries, live and work in various locales, and ascribe to what historian of Ottoman Lebanon Ussama Makdisi astutely describes as "multiple circles of belonging."⁴¹ Rather than forge a distinctly national Lebanese modernism, fashioned either at the hands of foreigners or

as somehow essentially local, the present study considers training, career trajectories, and aesthetics to be discursively positioned as Lebanese, or American, or between two such assumed distinctive locales or ideological positioning.

Modern Art in Cold War Beirut situates modern art in Lebanon within the international context of the Cold War. Drawing on recent historical studies that posit the Cold War as a globalized conflict, it argues that the modern art produced during this period cannot be studied through the rubric of the nation-state, despite its prevalence at the time in the discourse surrounding artistic production. Indeed, this study argues that it is precisely because of the globalized nature of the Cold War that nation-states asserted the necessity of national art forms. Moreover, because of art's purported ability to materialize through its visual ideology, art is yoked to political stakes and alliances within the context of a globalized Cold War. By considering the debates around art—constituted through an extremely active press and the publication of manifestos and establishment of galleries and museums dedicated to particular positions within the landscape of the Cold War—this study considers art not as a stable entity that mirrors back geography or ideology, but rather as a site of active contestation and negotiation. As such, modern art in Lebanon during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s can never be isolated through a consideration of the rubric of the nation-state alone, nor of the region of the Arab world or the lens of Arab nationalism. Indeed, because of the globalized nature of the Cold War, Arab nationalism itself must be historicized within this landscape, as must the concept of American art or the New York school.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1, “Beirut as Cultural Capital: Cosmopolitanism in the Shadow of the Cold War,” contextualizes Beirut’s development as a regional cultural capital and international hub throughout the 1950s and 1960s within the country’s *laissez-faire* economy set in place under the French Mandate and its relaxed censorship laws. Providing a historical context for the development of modern art in Beirut, the chapter traces the development of an infrastructure for the visual arts. As Lebanon’s identity as a crossroads between East and West primed its pro-Western foreign policy and underscored its potential strategic usefulness for the United States during this moment, the chapter examines the ways in which artists, galleries, and critical discourses became entangled in plays for political and economic influence through the influx of energy and attention from the United States, European countries, and the Soviet Bloc. The chapter concludes with a consideration of how overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, political affiliations in the region sparked debates on political commitment and aesthetic integrity within Beirut’s self-proclaimed cosmopolitanism.

The second chapter, “‘An Artistic Coup’: Maryette Charlton and the Founding of the American University of Beirut’s Art Department,” considers American plays for cultural influence in Cold War Beirut through an examination of the 1953 art department at the American University of Beirut established under Chicago-based artist Maryette Charlton (1924–2013). It draws on archival material from the papers of Charlton housed at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, departmental archives at the American University of Beirut, and interviews with department graduates to consider how the rhetoric of the department situated the visual arts within the liberal arts tradition and relied on paradigms of individualism and freedom of expression. The chapter situates this approach to art within both the rhetoric of Cold War America and the

landscape of art training in Lebanon in order to argue that the American University of Beirut's Fine Arts Department introduced and institutionalized the concept of an artist whose professional expertise lay in the vision of the eye rather than the technique of the hand, an alternative to the dominant nineteenth-century European Beaux-Arts tradition.

Chapter 3, "The Artist as Cultural Diplomat: John Ferren in Beirut, 1963–64," presents an extended study of an earlier essay on John Ferren, the first American artist sent abroad to Lebanon in 1964 through a new artist-in-residence program under the auspices of the United States Information Agency.⁴² It opens with an introduction to the aesthetic and discursive claims of American abstract expressionism as mobilized during the Cold War. The chapter then considers the circumstances leading to Ferren's being chosen for a residency in Lebanon, in particular his previous work in Algiers with the Office of War Information (1943–45) and his artistic and linguistic fluency in French, a paradoxical strategic American counter to Beirut's strong francophone presence. Drawing on published interviews, press reports, Ferren's private papers in the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, and works of art, this chapter argues for Lebanon's strategic position within American plays for Cold War influence, the role of art and the artist within those plays, and the fraught nature of asserting a national identity when those boundaries are most porous.

Chapter 4, "Abstraction's Universalist Claims: Local Debates on the Practice of Art," surveys local debates over the universalist assumptions of modernist abstraction during the 1960s, a decade in which several of Lebanon's leading artists expressed a dedication to abstraction as a truly modern language. In 1964, when Shafic Abboud (1926–2004) won first prize at the Salon d'Automne for his lyrical abstraction *Child's Play*, critics fiercely debated the public's ability to understand abstract art and questioned its relevance to a national Lebanese art. Later that year, painter Stélio Scamanga (b. 1934) wrote a manifesto-like statement, "Toward a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract." Influenced by Byzantine icons and Islamic art, Scamanga proposed a theory of two-dimensional spatial depiction in contrast to Western art's three-dimensional pictorial space. Focused on a series of exhibitions, manifestos, and critical reviews in the Arabic and French press, this chapter maps out the various threads of abstraction in Beirut, contextualizing the different aesthetic visions within the competing ideologies and political alliances of the Cold War, growing concerns over Lebanese nationalism, and art's role in representing national ideals.

Against the push of abstraction and American University of Beirut's pedagogical philosophy of personal expression in the arts, figuration remained a prevalent mode of artistic expression rooted in the Beaux-Arts tradition. Chapter 5, "Figuration, International Alliances, and Palestinian Art in 1960s Beirut: The Painting of Tamam al-Akhal and Ismail Shammout," focuses on the career and paintings of Beirut-based Palestinian artist and inaugural director of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's Art Department, Ismail Shammout (1930–2006) and his wife and collaborator, Tamam al-Akhal (b. 1935). In the paintings of these two celebrated artists, figuration served to embody a collective Palestinian subjectivity. The chapter begins by documenting the role of Palestinian art and activism in forging international alliances with nonaligned revolutionary movements throughout the decade of the 1960s. It then offers a close critical analysis of the role of the paintings of Shammout and al-Akhal as speaking for a displaced and disenfranchised Palestinian population in ways never possible by a supposedly universal abstraction.

Notes on Image Titles and Reproductions

Many of the art works included in this publication exist under different titles as well as in Arabic and French. As this is an English-language publication, I have chosen to identify the paintings by the English title previously established in pre-existing English-language publications. I also made the decision to sacrifice, at times, quality of the reproduction or the inclusion of additional works for the efficiency of publishing during a worldwide pandemic, holding onto the conviction that *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut: Drawing Alliances* marks only a beginning in a longer series of conversations.

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (1550; Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1991).
- 2 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
- 3 Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds. *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).
- 4 One exception in the field is Raja Adal, *Beauty in the Age of Empire: Japan, Egypt, and the Global History of Aesthetic Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
- 5 On the persistence of center and periphery models in scholarship produced and in the structure of college curricula in art historical studies across Latin America, the Middle East, and South East Asia, see Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, "Decolonizing Art History," *Association for Art History* 43, no. 1 (2020): 8–66. For a methodological approach to the center-periphery model outside of the Arab world that also attends to a global understanding of modernism's genealogies, see Atreyee Gupta, "In a Postcolonial Diction: Postwar Abstraction and the Aesthetics of Modernization," *Art Journal* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2013), 30–46. Similar to the present study, Gupta's essay accounts for the movement of modernist champions and practitioners based in Europe and America to India and the encounter of diverse readings of modernist aesthetics and nationalist projects.
- 6 Exhibitions and reviews documented during this period were culled from newspaper archives held at Saint-Joseph University and the American University of Beirut.
- 7 Waddah Faris, "Lebanese Painting, 1870–1970," *The 19th Festival International de Baalbeck XIX* (Beirut, 1974): 16–95. For the catalogue the year before, Faris included a list of galleries and artists but not a visual history as in the 1974 catalogue.
- 8 Nazih Khater, "Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?" Trans. anonymously, *L'Orient* (January 22, 1965): 13.
- 9 Helen al-Khal, "Here from Cairo for a Painting Holiday: Salah Taher," *Monday Morning* 1, no. 11 (1971): 28–29.
- 10 In a second essay also dating to 1971, al-Khal would reiterate the characteristic of Lebanon's cosmopolitanism as the basis of the country's artistic tradition. See her "Birth of a Tradition," *Middle East Forum* (Spring 1971): 9–16. I thank Farid Haddad for drawing my attention to this essay.
- 11 Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 1.
- 12 In the Arab world, see Beth Baron's pioneering essay, "Nationalist Iconography: Egypt as a Woman," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, eds. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 105–24; and her later book-length study, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 13 The well-known phrase is attributed to prominent Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 14 Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: Harper, 2018).

16 Introduction

- 15 Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).
- 16 Andrew Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- 17 Creswell, *City of Beginnings*, 1.
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1 Beirut as Cultural Capital

Cosmopolitanism in the Shadow of the Cold War

Introduction

An 1876 edition of the popular *Cook's Tourist Handbook to Palestine and Syria* vividly depicts the traveler's entrance into Beirut, then considered part of Greater Syria under the Ottoman Empire:

Descending towards Beyrout, every turn of the road gives fresh glimpses of Beyrout and its charming environs. As we clear the level a civilized region is entered, orchards, and gardens abound, pleasant villas are seen on every hand, the Pineta, or pine grove, is traversed and soon we find ourselves among the shops and paved streets of Beyrout.¹

After much disenchantment with other towns—the streets of Jaffa are “dirty, narrow, and winding”; Jerusalem is “a disappointment”—the delightful entrance into Beirut is refreshing.² But such an enjoyable experience is soon mitigated by the city's apparently muted Oriental character:

Beyrout is the principle commercial town of Syria, and is strangely different from any other. Bankers abound; there are consulates of all the principle countries in the world. Almost everything that can be purchased in a European city may be purchased in Beyrout.... The Bazaar does not present any of those Oriental features that are so attractive in other eastern towns.... The houses are of semi-European build, and the costumes of semi-European cut.³

By 1912, guidebooks warned visitors to the region not to waste time in Beirut, because “it is essentially a modern town.”⁴ The signs of Beirut's modernity—its banks, its foreign consulates, its paved streets—were staged as both a familiar welcome to the Euro-American tourist and a disappointment to foreign travelers searching for the adventure of difference. Such descriptions were predicated upon well-rehearsed distinctions that produced the binaries distinguishing East from West, namely those of tradition and modernity, conservative and progressive, backward and enlightened.⁵ These guidebooks suggested, however, that Beirut's urban identity was muddled, not quite Western and not quite Eastern. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we encounter the historical germ of modern and contemporary characterizations of Beirut: a commercial crossroads and Mediterranean port where Arabic, French, Armenian, and English mix interchangeably. Endowed as such with an intermixed identity within the region, the Lebanese capital was celebrated as

cosmopolitanism in certain contexts and bemoaned as indistinguishable from the West in others.

The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tropes found in Cook's travel guides find parallels in contemporary art historical scholarship on Lebanon. In 1996, the Swiss-based art historian Silvia Naef published the pioneering study *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe: l'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak*.⁶ The work's importance is its consideration of the visual arts as a field through which configurations of modernity were negotiated in the Arab world. Through a comparative approach, Naef explores the ways in which subject matter and style are deployed to express a particular relationship to the postcolonial nation-state.⁷ She argues that modern artists in Lebanon, in contrast to those in Iraq and Egypt, were unconcerned with establishing a vernacular visual language. In the case of the first generation—those artists working during the 1930s—the choice of subject matter—landscapes and genre scenes, for instance—may be described as Lebanese, yet the styles emulate conventional European academic models. Neither social realism nor Islamic aesthetic traditions took hold as formal strategies for the formation of a national visual identity as they had in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. Subsequently, throughout the 1960s, as abstraction replaced academicism, the former was without the pedigree of “an invented tradition,” as artists made little effort to attach the formal language of abstraction to that of religious spiritualism or Lebanese nationalism.⁸ The cultural nationalism of pan-Arabism, a movement promoting Arab unity in opposition to colonial intervention in the region, failed to taint abstraction's claims to universalism among Lebanese artists.⁹ The premises underlying Naef's argument are that modern Lebanese art is distinguished from European art by its stylistic imitation and that a regional political art is equated with either pan-Arabism or an Arab-oriented nationalism. Furthermore, the artistic community in Lebanon was itself fragmented according to Naef—no collectives were formed and no manifestos were written.¹⁰

Lebanon's regional artistic difference is thus defined by two related absences: the lack of a politically engaged art and the lack of a social collective that translated into an aesthetic unity. Naef writes, “It is true that Lebanese art is rarely claimed to be militant; there were no artistic collectives that defended a common artistic, political, or social cause; artistic production was always an individual experience.”¹¹ This aesthetic is a result of a conflicted political orientation in the aftermath of the 1920 creation of Greater Lebanon. As Naef explains, “This reflected the general cultural atmosphere in the country: while particular groups believed in Arabism, the dominant opinion always saw Lebanon as a point of entry between the Arab world and Europe.”¹² Lebanon's supposed muddled identity in Naef's argument recalls that of the nineteenth-century travel guide discussed above. In Naef's argument, this characterization results in political and material realities: Lebanon's failure to achieve both national and artistic authenticity. Her contention suggests the modern obsession with the paradigm of authenticity as an analytical category for art, particularly in relation to a postcolonial formation of a national identity.¹³

To juxtapose Cook's nineteenth-century travel guide next to Naef's contemporary analysis of the development of modern art in Lebanon is to document the historical longevity and discursive persistence of the supposed “muddled” urban identity of Ottoman Beirut, an identity that later, as the city transitioned into a twentieth-century national capital, became a stand-in for modern-day Lebanon. This chapter historicizes, through a focus on the visual arts, the production of what is often termed *cosmopolitanism* in the case of Lebanon as a

putatively national trait.¹⁴ In Naef's argument, aesthetics and the nation mirror one another in a self-referential circle. This chapter takes a different approach to art, focusing instead on discourses on art in order to consider art not as a natural outgrowth of the independent nation-state, but rather as constituted by dynamic social networks and processes to be inherently Lebanese. As scholar Elizabeth Thompson has studied, the press under the French Mandate (1920–43) constituted a significant forum for debates about national visions of independence.¹⁵ Moreover, by the late 1920s, the visual arts were a regular feature in certain publications, particular the francophone ones, and as this chapter documents, these art reviews engaged national debates. Indeed, Kirsten Scheid's scholarship examines the reciprocal relationship of the visual arts and the nation-state, characterizing both as "unsettled" during this historical period of the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁶

The chapter thus begins in the 1920s, when Lebanon was governed under the French Mandate and political and cultural figures charted a vision for a future nation-state, promised by European powers under the post-World War I mandate system. Of particular relevance to the present study is the formation of a cosmopolitan nationalism—based on Lebanon's ancient Phoenician roots and a Franco-Mediterranean cultural orientation—fashioned at the hands of Maronite Christian politicians, economists, intellectuals, and cultural figures. An analysis of one of the earliest periodicals to feature the visual arts, *La Revue du Liban*, considers how a Christian nationalist vision was disguised as a cosmopolitan nationalism. As such, cosmopolitanism emerges as a national trait and an aesthetic vision that is discursively constructed and whose meaning is institutionally contingent, rather than a sociopolitical cultural reality reflected back in Lebanon's aesthetic orientation, as suggested in Naef's argument of modern art in Lebanon.

The second half of this chapter considers the ways in which this Euro-Christian cosmopolitanism would render Lebanon, decades later, strategic to the United States during the Cold War. When the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine acknowledged the popular and political power of then-Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–70), the United States issued a Cold War policy shift; rather than attempt to isolate Nasser and his position of pan-Arabism and third-world alignment, the United States would instead work to strength conservative Arab governments with pro-Western leanings, such as Lebanon. The chapter concludes by detailing the cultural resources that accompanied that shift in United States policy, one that sought to explicitly exploit Lebanon's purported "muddled" identity and call on cultural forums such as the visual to play a prominent role in the Cold War battle for "hearts and minds."

***La Revue du Liban*, Art, and Maronite Nationalism**

In 1928, the francophone weekly *La Revue du Liban* reproduced a seemingly mundane oil painting, *Le Cèdre du Liban* (The cedar of Lebanon) by established Lebanese artist Philippe Mourani (1875–1970) (Figure 1.1). The work is exemplary of Naef's characterization of painting in Lebanon during the 1930s. The subject, a tree native to the area of Mount Lebanon, attaches the painting to a geographical location, whereas Mourani's artistic language draws on European tropes of arcadia.¹⁷ Recalling an unspoiled wilderness, Mourani acknowledges his artistic training in Paris within the French Academy yet posits a natural setting removed from the historical realities of Lebanon at the time. As historian Elizabeth Thompson details, the 1930s witnessed volatile political contests as organized social movements not only actively opposed the French Mandate, but also forcefully worked to transform the civic order under mandate rule. Such social movements



LE CÈDRE DU LIBAN A LA PATTE DE LION
Tableau de Mourani, faisant partie de la riche collection
de M. G. Sacazan.

L'Art libanais

Le Cèdre du Liban à la patte
de lion

(Tableau de Mourani)

Les Cèdres du Liban ont leurs cantiques et leurs poèmes. Les prophètes les ont divinisés. Les poètes leur ont consacré des vers sublimes. Et l'admiration grandit sans cesse devant ces majestueux et immuables témoins des temps anciens. Comme les poètes dans les chants, les peintres aiment à immortaliser sur la toile cet emblème de la force et de la durée.

Pour avoir vécu longtemps parmi les Cèdres, le peintre Mourani a su exprimer toute leur puissance et tout leur charme.

Figure 1.1 Reproduction of Philippe Mourani's *Le Cèdre du Liban* (c.1920s) in *La Revue du Liban*, 1928.

Source: Public Domain.

included women's federations, nationalist parties, religious organizations, labor unions, and proto-fascist youth organizations.¹⁸ Mourani's choice of the cedar tree thus idealized and naturalized the concept of the nascent nation-state at the moment when its socio-political reality was in the very fragile and fraught process of being constituted. A brief consideration of the text accompanying Mourani's painting underscores the role of art in this acclimation of the nation-state.

A small text describing the role of painters in celebrating the cedar tree aligns the painter—a novel profession in Lebanon at the time—to artists working in the already culturally sanctioned forms of poetry and song. The text reads, "As the poets do in their songs, painters immortalize this symbol of force and duration on the canvas."¹⁹ The painting's caption connects the subject of the work to the act of production so that the painter assumes responsibility for preserving Lebanon itself for the future. Mourani would reinforce those same claims in his 1932 essay, "The Role of the Fine Arts in the Life of the People," also published in *La Revue du Liban*. Establishing an ethical role for painting and sculpture, Mourani argued that the visual served a moral and practical mission whose immediacy could not be replaced by the written word.²⁰

Articles such as these actively defined the potential development in mandate Lebanon's emerging secular art world by making a claim for art's public importance at a moment when the concept of the civic itself was in the process of being defined. In Thompson's scholarship on the contested formation of citizenship in mandate Lebanon, she underscores the significance of the press as a forum for such public debates. Between 1935 and 1945, the number of newspapers in mandate Syria and Lebanon increased to over 40 in addition to more than three hundred magazines dedicated to special interests ranging from literature,

women's issues, political satire and sports.²¹ The success of publications such as *La Revue du Liban* was enhanced by a surging literacy rate, estimated by Thompson to have reached 60 percent of the population by the early 1930s.²² Benedict Anderson's influential study on the role of print capitalism in producing the nation as an imagined political community bridges to Thompson's contention that the press simultaneously "created" and "represented" a community of "like-minded people."²³ Newspapers, for instance, largely operated by middle-class men as politically biased family businesses, targeted the literate urban-elite population.²⁴

As an extensively distributed press began to incorporate art journalism, the role of art was also explained according to each publication's agenda. *La Revue du Liban* was one of the earliest weeklies to regularly feature art reviews, and the publication mobilized art to represent a national vision popularized during the mandate period, one that drew on a Phoenician history to promote a Mediterranean cosmopolitanism, paradoxically grounded in a francophone perspective.²⁵ Viewed through this historical lens, Mourani's choice of the cedar tree, associated as it was with the geography of Mount Lebanon, a Maronite Christian stronghold, alongside his imperative for artists to visualize this symbol of Lebanon, is thus deeply imbricated in local political debates, and as such, far removed from Naef's characterization of early Lebanese modern art as apolitical, comprised of a subject matter rooted in Lebanon and a style derivative of European academic conventions.²⁶ Mourani's cedar tree is not representative of two distinct elements (subject and style) from two divergent national locales (France and Lebanon). Rather, Mourani's choice of subject and style together render visual the nineteenth-century concept of Lebanism, an ideology that molded a francophone Lebanese nationalism further solidified under the French Mandate.

Lebanism: Drawing Boundaries in Mandate Lebanon

On September 1, 1920, in the aftermath of World War I, the French Mandate authorities announced the creation of Greater Lebanon, carved out of the former Ottoman Empire. These new territorial boundaries brought together the Al-Biqā' (Beqaa) valley, previously under Syrian jurisdiction, and Mount Lebanon, an autonomous region under the Ottoman Empire, together with the coastal cities of Tripoli, Tyre, Sidon, and Beirut, the newly declared capital. The concept of Greater Lebanon as a territory separate from the region of Greater Syria, as it was considered under the Ottoman Empire, was not novel. In *Reviving Phoenicia: In Search of Identity in Lebanon*, historian Asher Kaufman tracks the idea of an independent framework with Mount Lebanon as its core, a concept he terms Lebanism.²⁷ Despite its various historical guises, Lebanism, argues Kaufman, cannot be divorced from its origins within Mount Lebanon's Maronite Christian community.²⁸ Historian Carol Hakim-Dowek dates the first utterance of the concept of Lebanism to an October 1840 petition from the patriarch of the Maronite Church in Mount Lebanon to the Ottoman authorities in control of the Beirut port.²⁹ However, it was not until the years immediately preceding the mandate that advocates of Lebanism sought an independent state distinct from a larger Syrian framework when the patriarch of Mount Lebanon pressured France to create Greater Lebanon at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.³⁰

The 1920 drawing of territorial boundaries brought about radical sociopolitical transformations, in particular a shift in the demographics; the new geography merged a Maronite Christian community in the north of Mount Lebanon and a mixed Maronite Christian and Muslim Druze population in the south of Mount Lebanon with a mixed

Christian and Muslim population in the coastal region and a mainly Shi'i Muslim population in the rural areas to the east and south of Mount Lebanon.³¹ In the years preceding the mandate, the majority of Maronites had advocated for an independent nation, separate from the region of Greater Syria and under French military protection.³² But the 1920 borders were more expansive than originally advocated by the Maronite Church. With Mount Lebanon folded into a larger jurisdiction inclusive of the coastal cities and the Beqaa Valley, the Maronite community lost its majority population status. The consequence was a Maronite Christian dependency reliant upon the French Mandate authority to preserve their political and economic status. Additionally, a confessional system of government, ratified in the 1926 constitution, was established in which political and civic appointments were based on sectarian affiliation. Such institutional initiatives exemplified France's colonial policy of divide and rule through the systematic promotion of regional and ethnic fragmentation rather than national unity.³³ Just as the creation of Greater Lebanon strengthened the Maronite community's dependence on France, so too did it widen the separation between the Maronite community and their fellow Muslim nationalists in Lebanon and neighboring Syria.

The period leading up to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the French Mandate witnessed the development of two principle stances regarding Greater Lebanon's future as a nation. Arab nationalists promoted a regional nation, thereby advocating Lebanon's reunification with Greater Syria based on a shared language, religion, ethnicity, culture, and history.³⁴ In contrast, Lebanese nationalists supported territorial sovereignty based on Lebanon's regional differences—its large Christian community and historically amicable relations with Europe.³⁵ It is this francophone position that would later be framed as the national trait of cosmopolitanism, one that the French Mandate's cultural policies would work to naturalize.

Lebanon's Cosmopolitan Nationalism

The three figures most prominently associated with the development of a Maronite nationalism are the poet Charles Corm (1894–1963), son of pioneer painter Daoud Corm (1852–1930); businessman and politician Michel Chiha (1891–1954); and poet, writer, and critic Saïd Akl (1912–2014).³⁶ All three grounded a Lebanese national identity in the ancient mercantile civilization of the Phoenicians that had inhabited the coast of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. Each of these three figures, however, espoused varying degrees of Christian isolationism. Corm worked and published in French, advocated an intimate cultural and political relationship between Lebanon and France, and located Lebanon's national origins in Mount Lebanon, the region of his own ancestral roots. Such efforts included Corm's short-lived journal, *La Revue Phénicienne*, launched in 1919. Chiha, a Chaldean Catholic whose family originated in Iraq, was more politically active than either Corm or Akl. Founder of the francophone daily *Le Jour* in 1934, Chiha supported Lebanon's political integration into the region over Christian isolationism and promoted a liberal political and economic policy geographically grounded in Beirut's role as a Mediterranean port. Akl, from the predominantly Christian village of Zahlé, also promoted a distinct Lebanese entity dependent upon its substantial Christian community and Phoenician roots. Unlike Corm however, Akl was an Arabophone and believed the Lebanese dialect should serve as the national language.³⁷ Few Muslim communities and organizations supported claims that Lebanon's national roots were Phoenician, yet a class of Beirut Sunni Muslims did share certain convictions concerning Lebanon's territorial sovereignty,

including those that benefited their own socioeconomic interests such as laissez-faire economic policies.³⁸

The mandate institutionalized the claims of Phoenician origins for Lebanon, emphasizing sectarian divisions even more.³⁹ The official language was changed from Turkish to French, rather than Arabic; the national curriculum focused on Lebanon's Phoenician roots and historical ties to France instead of a shared regional history grounded in Arab civilization.⁴⁰ By the time Lebanon was granted independence in 1943, the history of ancient Phoenicia and its mercantile community was offered as justification for a laissez-faire economy and dependence on the service industry.⁴¹ Although Phoenicianism was attached to Maronite claims for a territory distinct from Greater Syria during the first decades of the twentieth century, it soon evolved to imply a non-Arab, non-Syrian, pro-Western orientation. Of primary interest to this study is the reliance on symbolic means, rather than economics or violence, to secure Lebanon's supposed Phoenician foundations. The country's first national museum, created under the auspices of the newly created Service of Antiquities and Fine Arts, opened in Beirut in 1922. Focusing on the Phoenician period, the museum employed material objects as the basis for reconstructing a national history.⁴² It is precisely within this particular moment that we can understand *La Revue du Liban's* invitation to painters to immortalize this emerging nation, symbolized by the cedar tree, in their canvases.

Art in the Press: Drawing Allegiances

Beginning in the 1930s, several Arabic, French, and English dailies featured a weekly section dedicated to cultural events and reviews. Although cinema and theater initially dominated these early pages, the visual arts were occasionally included. Beirut-owned francophone newspapers were the first to feature art criticism on a regular basis. *Le Jour* included a section dedicated to the arts with its first issue in 1934; *L'Orient* followed with its "Art and Ideas" section two years after the newspaper's 1943 debut. Beirut's first English-language paper, the *Eastern Times*, printed a biography of painter Daoud Corm in its inaugural 1944 edition, although English-language publications did not feature the visual arts regularly until the end of the sixties with the *Daily Star* newspaper and the weekly magazine *Monday Morning*.⁴³ Somewhat later than their francophone counterparts, Arabic newspapers also introduced regularly featured reviews in the 1960s. As documented by anthropologist Kirsten Scheid, the occasional review in Arabic and English sources did appear intermittently throughout the 1930s in the following publications: *al-Baraq*, *al-Mar'ad*, *La Syrie*, *al-Ahrar*, *al-Kulliyah*, *al-Nahar*, *al-Makshuf*, *al-Bashir*, *Bayrut*, and *al-Farj*.⁴⁴ In all these publications, reviews were most often published anonymously. Not until the 1960s did the newspapers and magazines employ named on-staff critics, including Nazih Khater at *an-Nahar*; Mirèse Akar, André Bercoff, and Joseph Tarrab at *L'Orient*, *Le Jour*, and *as-Safa*; Samir Sayegh at *el-Anwar*; Victor Hakim at *La Revue du Liban*; Yolande Adjemian at *Le Soir*; and Dorothy Parramore and Helen al-Khal at the *Daily Star* and *Monday Morning*.⁴⁵

With the press as a key public forum in mandate Lebanon, art criticism was assigned a role in producing the identity of each publication's readership—a decidedly francophone Lebanese slant in the case of *La Revue du Liban*. Launched in 1928 by two Lebanese émigrés to Paris, brothers Ibrahim and Emile Maklouf, this weekly unfailingly championed the importance of art, aligning it with the future progress of the nation and civilization. A 1929 article, "Modernism or Tradition?," encouraged readers to embrace new forms in

architecture, painting, and music even if they did not understand them, rhetorically asking if those who resist modernism in the arts also refuse the modern technologies such as the telephone and automobile.⁴⁶ That same year, an editorial by Ibrahim Maklouf on the value of monuments concludes, “And the future that will judge us, we will be grateful for having thought of our past, of our glories, and of our artists.”⁴⁷ Another editorial, this one about the well-known Lebanese sculptor Youssef Hoyeck (1883–1962), strategically includes the artist’s statement, “The artistic production of a people is the thermometer of its civilization.”⁴⁸ The language deployed here prescribes a communal attitude toward the arts through the process of establishing a public. In Maklouf’s quote, the pronoun *our* invites a community of readers who are inferred to be Lebanese. Yet what exactly did this national identity encompass?⁴⁹

The choice of Mourani’s painting of a cedar tree to inaugurate the arts section of *La Revue du Liban* is far from inconsequential in defining the “we” of this readership. European painters and photographers had captured the cedar tree, in strikingly similar formal terms as Mourani, since the mid-nineteenth century when French daguerreotypist Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey undertook a documentary mission across the Eastern Mediterranean and Upper Egypt in 1843 (Figure 1.2).⁵⁰ Yet as the text accompanying the reproduction of Mourani’s work clarifies, the painter’s task within this European tradition was decidedly Lebanese. Native to areas of Mount Lebanon, the cedar tree naturalizes the connection between a nascent national state and its symbols. Although made to stand for a unified



Figure 1.2 Girault de Prangey, *Cedars of Lebanon*, 1844. Daguerreotype. 18.8 × 24.1 cm. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

nation, the cedar tree, because of its geographical concentration in Mount Lebanon, had been associated with that locale's nationalists since the nineteenth century. The name of the nineteenth-century newspaper addressing this mountain community, for instance, had been *Youth of the Cedar*.⁵¹ When intellectuals, writers, and historians began to produce a historical narrative for a Lebanese nation-state during the 1930s and 1940s, Beirut emerged as the locus of progress and knowledge and, more importantly for certain nationalists, the site of cultural and religious pluralism.⁵² With its local specificity and supposed provincialism, Mount Lebanon remained in apparent contrast. However, the symbols of Mount Lebanon supplied the future nation with its name and the cedar tree for its flag in 1943. Moreover, francophone poet Charles Corm characterized Lebanon as regionally distinct because of its Mediterranean cosmopolitanism yet anchored his nationalism in Mount Lebanon as the site of tradition and historical continuity.⁵³

Given the historic ties of the Maronite community to Mount Lebanon and France, it is unsurprising that *La Revue du Liban* chose Mourani's painting to visualize this relationship. Indeed, the francophone newspaper *Le Jour* also chose the painting as the front-page feature of its second issue in 1934, alongside a review of Charles Corm's book of poetry celebrating Mount Lebanon, *La montagne inspirée; chansons de geste*, published that same year. The correlation between Lebanon and France is further cultivated in *La Revue du Liban's* essays on the movement of artists between Beirut and Paris in addition to advertisements for French products. The occasional comparative article on the visual arts in Syria reinforced Lebanon's emerging national identity as modern and European. With Damascus described as an "Oriental" capital, Syria's art and architecture are characterized as "traditional."⁵⁴ *La Revue du Liban* invoked a set of binaries during a historical moment in which Maronite nationalists sought to distinguish Lebanon from the surrounding Arab-Islamic region.

A 1930 review of the paintings of Moustafa Farroukh (1901–57) in *La Revue du Liban* stresses the artist's national identity above competing cultural influences: "An Oriental influence, Italian influence, French influence—which one takes precedence? We don't know, but what we notice is that it is he himself, Mustapha Farroukh, the great Lebanese painter."⁵⁵ Farroukh's Lebanese-ness is wedded to a cosmopolitanism that is expressed through the accumulation of influences on his art. In the case of *La Revue du Liban*, that cosmopolitanism—like the symbol of the cedar tree—was secured by a particular vision of the nation. As this examination of the mandate-era press demonstrates, the case of a multilingual Lebanon adds a layer of complexity to Benedict Anderson's argument that the use of a standard language was a primary means by which a population of strangers was able to imagine itself as a community despite geographical distances.⁵⁶

By the time Lebanon was granted independence in 1943, a cosmopolitan nationalism had been molded from a Phoenician history, which was believed to represent an economically liberal mercantile society and Mediterranean culture and articulated linguistically through the language of the French Mandate. Cosmopolitanism in the Lebanese context thus references a particular correlation between Lebanon and France and represents a national vision historically attached to Christian communities, particularly the Maronite Catholics.⁵⁷ This national vision manifested itself at the Lebanese Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair.

Visual Articulations of the Nation: The Lebanese Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair

From the mandate's inception, direct rule was secured by substantial military and civilian administration. Yet the symbolic realm, as the previous section argued, was equally critical

to the process of naturalizing a politically repressive system. Such symbolism was on full display at the Lebanese pavilion of the 1939 World's Fair on the eve of its independence from the French Mandate. Although Lebanon had been a feature of previous world's fairs, the country's participation had always been under the banner of France's colonies. The 1939 pavilion thus carried exceptional significance, as these forums served as stages to display individual countries' technological and cultural achievements. Adding special resonance to Lebanon's participation as an independent country was the substantial Lebanese American community in New York City at the time.⁵⁸ Under the direction of Charles Corm, the pavilion harnessed the cultural image of Lebanon within the folds of France. Indeed, one US review led with the title "Too Much French, but a Swell Exhibit."⁵⁹ A consideration of Corm's role underscores the ways in which Beirut, and by extension Lebanon's, muddled identity, characterized as cosmopolitan in certain contexts, harnessed political differences.

Historian Asher Kaufman mobilizes the case study of the 1939 Lebanese pavilion to critically reflect on Franco-Lebanese relationships toward the end of the mandate.⁶⁰ As Kaufman notes, the pavilion took place just a year shy of Lebanon's expected independence, and as such, its production united inter- and intra-sectarian positions in a shared goal of national independence. After some debate over the choice of Corm to direct the pavilion—his francophone allegiance giving some government officials pause—Corm was tasked with navigating two seemingly distinct strategies for the pavilion: showcasing Lebanon's political and cultural connections to France and advocating national independence. Although Lebanon had been a feature of previous world's fairs, the country's participation had always been under the banner of France's colonies. The 1939 pavilion thus carried exceptional significance, as these forums served as stages to display individual countries' technological and cultural achievements.

Whereas most pavilions claiming to represent countries in the Arab world sensationalized the region's difference from Europe and America through an emphasis on Islam (visualized through mosques and Islamic architectural details, for instance) and Orientalist tropes (belly dancing and coffee shops with water pipes), Lebanon's 1939 pavilion took a decidedly different approach under the direction of Corm.⁶¹ Corm's greatest task was to balance work across inter- and intra-sectarian divisions and, as Kaufman argues, in the case of the 1939 World's Fair, the staunch positions between Lebanists and Arabists cannot be simplified along sectarian lines, because Corm orchestrated efforts from individuals across political and sectarian positions, united in the conviction of Lebanon's national independence and presentation on the world stage.

Indeed, the political alliance between French colonial powers and Lebanese nationalists had begun to suffer in the later years of the mandate as both Lebanese nationalists and Sunni Arabists together championed independence from the mandate authority. As a result, the dynamics of the pavilion acknowledge shifts in the dynamic between Lebanese nationalists and the Maronite Church and the French Mandate authority as the Lebanese political parties came together in pursuit of a shared national goal. And yet, as witnessed in the reproduction of Mourani's painting of a cedar tree in *La Revue du Liban*, for figures such as Corm, Lebanese nationalism remained grounded in a perspective that privileged a Franco-Christian heritage. Corm's hiring of French speakers as guides in the Lebanese pavilion suggests the linguistic stronghold of the mandate, as well as Corm's persistent positioning of Lebanon toward Christian Europe rather than its Arabic-speaking neighbors. The pavilion's accompanying brochure, which framed Lebanese as modern equivalents of Phoenicians, reinforced those connections (Figure 1.3). Moreover, the

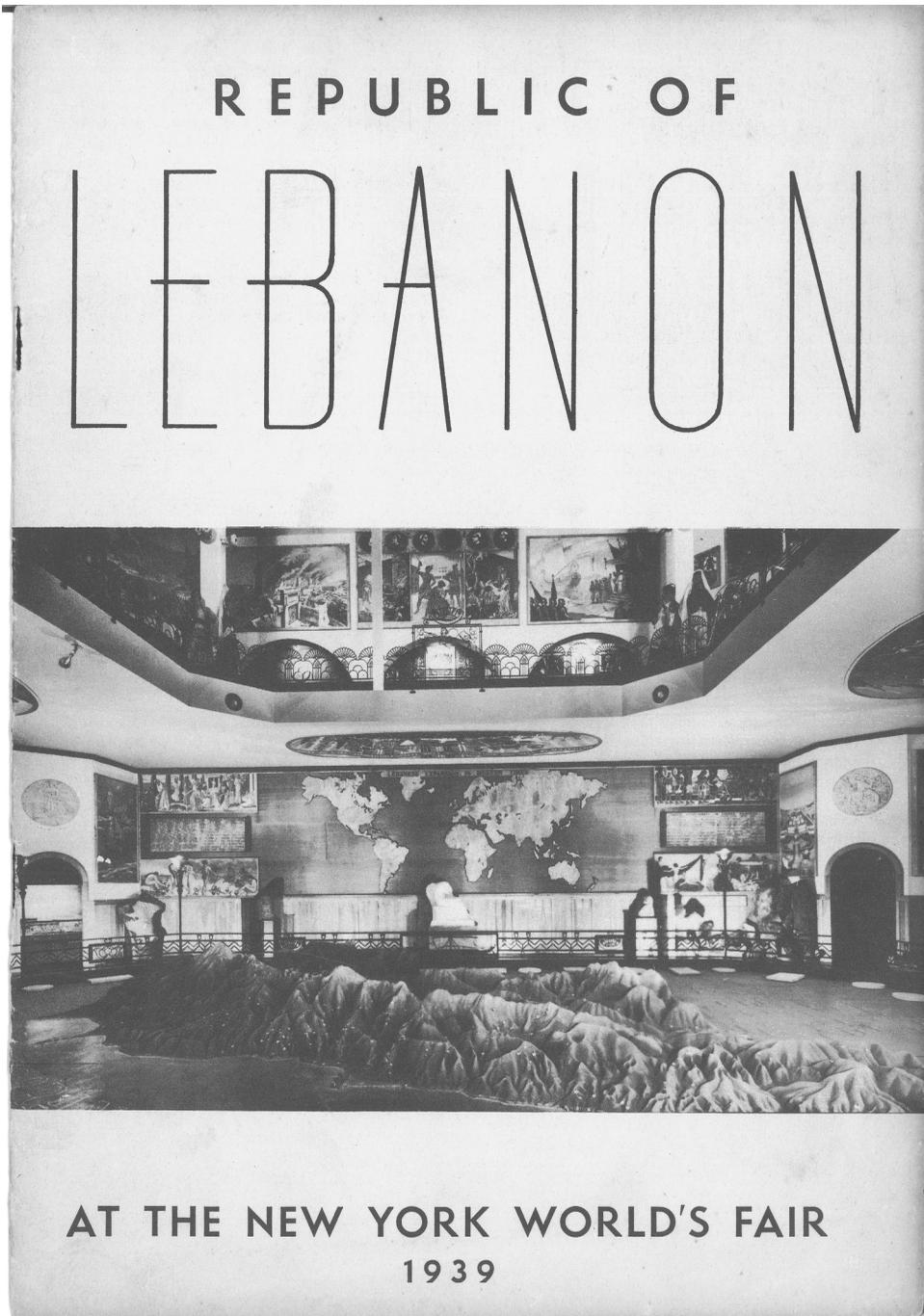


Figure 1.3 Cover of 1939 World's Fairs pavilion, Republic of Lebanon.
Source: Collection of the author.

brochure's inclusion of pavilion reviews and official speeches at the inauguration compared the strength of the country to that of the cedar tree.

A third prevalent genealogy for modern-day Lebanon, according to the brochure, was France. A speech excerpt by the commissioner general of the French Republic at the official dedication of the Lebanese pavilion proclaims, "The radiant destiny of France has been to scatter and sow to the utmost richest of seeds," continuing on, "Lebanese poets, artists and scholars, nourished with our great culture, render to that culture great honor today."⁶² The reference to seeds and nourishment literalizes and naturalizes a francophone genealogy for Lebanon, embodied in the French-speaking tour guides for the pavilion. This political aspiration would be institutionalized following independence through the 1943 National Pact.

The Path to National Independence

Integral to the path of Lebanon's independence was the 1926 constitution to create the Lebanese republic. The constitution ratified a single Chamber of Deputies elected on the basis of religious representation, solidifying a sectarian basis for political rights (the core principle of confessional democracy). Not until the National Pact in 1943 had the formula for determining representation been specified. The constitution also provided for a president elected by the chamber yet retaining extensive authority, including the right to appoint the prime minister and cabinet.

France maintained control of Lebanese foreign relations and military affairs despite the ratification of the constitution. Throughout the 1930s, the critical issue was the possibility of reconciling the conflicting political aspirations of what would constitute a distinct Lebanese polity. Émile Eddé (1883–1949), Lebanon's president from 1936–41, for instance, was not against a French presence in Lebanon and sought to align Lebanon's interests with those of its European allies. Eddé's political rival, Bechara El Khoury (1890–1964), president from 1943–52, shared Eddé's conviction that Lebanon serve as a Maronite homeland, yet El Khoury nonetheless insisted on the need to account for and include Muslim aspirations to forge an independent Lebanese nation-state. Building alliance with Muslim communities, El Khoury organized the Constitutional Bloc that united Muslim and Christians in its advocacy for complete independence from France. In 1936, French and Lebanese representatives agreed to a treaty that guaranteed fair (rather than equal) representation for all the country's sects. Anticipating independence, Eddé was the one elected president in 1937. For his prime minister, he nominated Khayr al-Din al-Ahdab (1894–1941), a Muslim, establishing what would soon become official policy: Lebanon's president a Maronite Christian and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim. Unfortunately for the Lebanese, on the brink of independence, World War II intervened, and the high commissioner suspended the constitution and dissolved parliament.

The fall of France and the collaborationist Vichy regime in 1940 left the civilian populations in Lebanon to suffer horrific economic conditions and a drastic food shortage.⁶³ The 1941 defeat of the Vichy government by allied forces promised independence for Lebanon and Syria. However, when Free French leader (and future president of France) Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) became suspicious of British interests in the region, he restored mandate authority in Lebanon and Syria. By 1943, mounting popular unrest and British political pressure finally compelled the French to restore the constitution and hold elections in Syria and Lebanon. The election brought Eddé's political rival, El Khoury, to the presidency.

It was to El Khoury that the task of unifying the new nation fell. Together with his prime minister, Riad al-Solh (1894–1951), El Khoury established the National Pact of 1943, which attempted to comfort the fears of both Muslim and Christian communities. The pact declared Lebanon’s Arab identity and its independent identity, forsaking previous claims for either reunification with Syria or a formal relationship with France. The pact also outlined sectarian representation in the Chamber of Deputies, based on the census of 1932 that numbered Christians and Muslim populations in a six-to-five ratio. Thus, Lebanon’s 1926 constitution and the 1943 National Pact together attempted to resolve post-independence Muslim and Christian demands. The constitution established equality for all Lebanese as citizens yet institutionalized their inequality as subjects belonging to religious communities with unequal access to political power and public office.⁶⁴ Positions within both government and civil society were awarded based on sectarian quotas, established through a 1932 census. Conducted by the mandate authority, the census’ six-to-five ratio favored Christians by including Lebanese living abroad, the majority of whom were Christians. The National Pact, an unwritten agreement between the republic’s first president and prime minister, addressed this fundamental contradiction of the constitution. As such, the National Pact had two purposes. Its first was to confirm the office of the president as reserved for a Maronite Christian and that of the prime minister for a Sunni Muslim. Its second attempted to resolve Lebanon’s conflicted national position by defining the country as having “an Arab profile that assimilates all that is beneficial and useful in Western civilization.”⁶⁵ Unfortunately, a strong and effective government continued to be marred by sectarian-based contestations for political and economic power.

Just as the end of World War II witnessed Lebanon’s delayed independence at the hands of the French as a result of competing ambitions in the region, so too did the end of the war usher in Cold War rivalries in the region. The United States and the Soviet Union originally set their sights on Europe and, in particular, on Germany. By the 1950s, however, as the world was dissected between the Marshall states and the Soviet Bloc, the Arab region would come into play.

Lebanon at the Dawn of the Cold War

An intimate portrayal of Beirut throughout the 1950s is glimpsed in *Beirut Spy: The St. George Hotel Bar*, by well-known Palestinian journalist and author Said K. Aburish (1935–2012). The 1989 publication narrates in captivating detail the regional and international politicians, leaders, dissidents, spies, businessmen, and journalists who populated one of city’s most well-known hotel bars. A political history of the region seen through clandestine conversations and impromptu nights of gallivanting through Beirut, Aburish vividly captures a moment in the city’s history, often referred to as the “golden era,” a time in which Beirut usurped Cairo as a regional cultural capital.⁶⁶ Throughout Aburish’s story, the bar—and, by extension, Beirut—emerges as a location where history is in the very process of unfolding. He writes:

For well over twenty years, from the early fifties until 1975, those who followed developments in the Middle East were wont to utter the key phrase, “let’s go to the bar and find out.” An ordinary day at the bar in the fifties might reveal a plot to assassinate an Arab leader, while the sixties was a period of financial manipulations involving hundreds of millions of dollars and the early seventies were devoted to solving Lebanon’s seemingly insoluble problems.⁶⁷

Transformed from a historical reality into a legend, Beirut's status has been the subject of much scholarship documenting the circumstances that generated the Lebanese capital's regional and international appeal. The country's reliance on the private sector resulted in few government restrictions in terms of either economics or culture. As a result, financial investments from the Gulf States fostered a construction boom alongside relaxed censorship laws that lent Beirut a key role in the publishing sector. Zeina El Maasri's scholarship on graphic design during the 1950s charts efforts to promote through advertisement Beirut's cosmopolitan modernity—often visualized through smiling, bikini-clad sunbathers—as a site of tourism and leisure. Through her work, El Maasri carefully constructs insight into the infrastructure for tourism at the hand of The General Commission for Tourism and Summer Vacationing, founded in 1948 as part of the Ministry of Economy, and private investors in Beirut's hotel and hospitality market. These initiatives include the 1950 establishment of the *École Hôtelière de Beyrouth*, a public technical hospitality school.⁶⁸ Furthermore, as Robyn Creswell details in *City of Beginnings*, his study of poetic modernism in Beirut, the city during this moment welcomed a growing community of poets, writers, publishers, and intellectuals. Creswell goes on to characterize Hamra Street, Beirut's main commercial area, as a site of “cosmopolitan provincialism.”⁶⁹ Also contributing to the city's cultural diversity was a substantial Palestinian and Armenian refugee community.⁷⁰

Despite writing from diverse perspectives—a journalist's first-hand recollections and scholars' archival mining—Aburish, El Maasri, and Creswell together suggest a different cosmopolitanism than that found in previous centuries. Unlike publications such as Cook's nineteenth-century travel guides and *La Revue du Liban* during the 1930s, Beirut in the work in the 1950s no longer straddles the East–West binary that produced a muddled identity or represented a distinctly francophone vision. Instead, cosmopolitanism in the 1950s offered a variety of political and cultural alliances, in no way limited to a bisected Cold War world; in other words, a cosmopolitanism on the ground rather than one discursively constructed and contingent on a particular political ideological perspective.

At the dawn of the Cold War, these historical factors favored Egypt over Lebanon as a key regional node in American plays for ideological influence. In his study of poetry, Creswell points to a 1953 memorandum that identifies Egypt rather than Lebanon as the preferred location for a regional office for the Congress for Cultural Freedom because Lebanon seemed the most susceptible intervention. Moreover, according to Bruce Riedel, CIA representative in the Middle East at the time, Nasser was “America's man,” following the July 1952 coup that brought him to power, until 1955 when Nasser denounced the Baghdad Pact and following the Egyptian leader secured an arms deal with Czechoslovakia.⁷¹ Although earlier histories of the Cold War neglected the Arab world's significance, scholars of Middle East studies such as Rashid Khalidi have since historicized the period as one of radical transformation in the region, much of which is politically integral to Cold War dynamics.⁷² Beginning with the 1948 declaration of the creation of the State of Israel and the resulting Palestinian refugee camps throughout Syria, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and Jordan, the region witnessed the 1949 and 1954 military coups in Syria; the 1951 assassination of King Abdallah of Jordan; the 1952 Egyptian Revolution; the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal; the 1958 outbreak of civil war in Beirut and the July Revolution in Iraq; and the short-lived formation of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria (1958–61). In the midst of these sweeping transformations, many of which are detailed in the conversations recalled by Aburish in his history of the St. George Hotel bar, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser popularized pan-Arab unity as the United States and Russia competed for regional authority, and the policies of individual Arab

governments toward this strategic movement were critical signposts of the direction of each country's national identity.

In Lebanon, these debates over the country's regional alliances were aggravated by the country's confessional system of government. When Camille Chamoun, president of Lebanon from 1952–58, refused to break ties with Western powers after their attack on the Suez Canal, conflict arose among government officials as members lobbied for Lebanon to join the United Arab Republic. Civil strife finally erupted in the summer of 1958. When the Lebanese Army refused to deploy its forces in this internal conflict, President Chamoun invoked the Eisenhower Doctrine and US Marines arrived on Beirut's beaches that summer.⁷³ Representing a shift in US policy, the Eisenhower Doctrine acknowledged Egyptian president Nasser as too powerful to isolate and instead attempted to strengthen conservative Arab governments with pro-Western leanings, including Lebanon, a shift in policy that accompanied a shift in military resources, witnessed in the arrival of US marines in 1958, and, as detailed in the next section, a shift in cultural resources as well.⁷⁴

Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War

Since the 1999 publication of Frances Stonor Saunders's groundbreaking work, *The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters: The Cultural Cold War*, historians have acknowledged the pervasive deployment of soft power during the Cold War.⁷⁵ Saunders meticulously documents the extensive transnational network established by the CIA among artists, writers, and secret agents and their unwitting and suspicious audiences. Following the 1957 declaration of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan came the establishment of the Central Intelligence Agency, created by the National Security Act on July 26, 1947. As Saunders elucidates, this new agency marked a radical turn in conventional paradigms of American politics through the legitimization—and even encouragement—of eschewing accountability. Moreover, the gathering of military and diplomatic intelligence was to be performed through the secret funding of cultural programs under the covert campaign of an organization called the Congress of Cultural Freedom, whose paradoxical title indicated the CIA's undercover strategy of cultural propaganda.

The target of such propaganda—which, as all good propaganda, was carefully designed never to reveal itself as such—was to be intellectuals, purportedly free and critical thinkers. Indeed, as Saunders documents in her study, the cadre of individuals the CIA gathered together in this task were former radicals and leftist intellectuals whose belief in the possibilities of communism crumbled in the wake of Stalin's totalitarianism.⁷⁶ Sanders writes, "This view of the CIA as a haven of liberalism acted as a powerful inducement to collaborate with it, or, if not this, at least to acquiesce to the myth that it was well motivated."⁷⁷ The corporation of intellectuals and avant-garde artists, however, were also to be incorporated unwittingly into the folds of the CIA's mission. By framing itself as the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA sought to quite literally manufacture a cultural program that embraced the avant-garde ideals of art for art's sake, far removed from the insidious nature of propaganda. This would serve a secondary aim of the CIA, which was to prove to the world that America did indeed have culture and was a nation that deserved more than just economic respect.

Once established, the CIA got to work aggressively funding radio shows, musical performances, art exhibitions, trade shows, high profile international conferences, residencies, and magazine and journal publications. The achievements of the Congress for Cultural Freedom were considerable in both duration and breadth: holding offices in 35 countries;

publishing over 20 magazines; hosting art international art exhibitions, musical concerts, and trade shows; and awarding international prizes to intellectuals and artists.⁷⁸ When, in June 1948, a new directive—NSC-14—overtook Truman’s National Security Council, the CIA was awarded even more freedom to sponsor covert psychological operations. Its new department, the innocuously christened Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), was to have considerable reach; within only a few short years of its 1948 founding, the OPC’s staff grew to over three thousand overseas personnel, with a staggering increase in budget, from \$4.7 million in 1948 to \$82 million in 1952.⁷⁹ Within the CIA, the vast number of international programs it launched were guided by a single imperative—to win “the battle for hearts and minds.” For the wider public, however, including those hired by the CIA to run such programming, the OPC glossed its efforts with a more laudatory sheen: to create conditions in which artists, writers, poets, and intellectuals could create freely, without material or institutional constraints—in stark contrast to the communist imperative to produce in the name of the state.⁸⁰

The result of such a solidified internal strategy created what scholar Andrew Rubin has described as a global simultaneity of world literature.⁸¹ In his groundbreaking study on literature during the Cold War, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War*, Rubin argues that these initiatives created a transnational literature through international alignments created by these literary magazines. The effect was two-fold. The first was the creation of a canon of purported world literature whose contours were clearly drawn with an agenda. For Rubin, this was evident most prominently through questions of translation; the writers whose works were translated became the figureheads of this supposed new world literature. The second was a shift in the role of the writer. No longer did writers travel for experience. Now, they traveled as ambassadors, reconfiguring the relationship between writers, institutions, and their audiences.

Rubin’s focus is the North Atlantic. Although he does indicate that the Middle East was encompassed as well, pointing to the 1945 translation of George Orwell’s 1945 allegorical novella, *Animal Farm*, from English into Arabic, sustained investigation into how the Arab world was equally imbricated in plays for influence by the Congress for Cultural Freedom has only just begun. Scholars Elizabeth Holt and Zeina El Maasri, for example, have examined the ways in which the Congress for Cultural Freedom built a worldwide network of literary journals.⁸² In turn, that network, through a shared aesthetic vision in a supposed global avant-garde that believed it was producing culture outside the constraints of the state, positioned itself as an alternative to communist artists who worked directly under an ideological imperative. According to Holt, this suggests a shift in empire after the twentieth-century colonial era to an indirect policy in which soft power and the realm of culture made willing participants out of cultural actors.

Of interest to the present study is Holt’s contention that the avant-garde was critical to Cold War soft power, a factor documented by art historians of American modernism and an issue addressed in subsequent chapters. Moreover, similar to Rubin, Holt illuminates that the strategy to use literary production and dissemination as a political tool necessitated the creation of a transnational network. As such, the Cold War period requires that we closely examine the cultural exchanges that were positioned to fashion a transnational, cosmopolitan aesthetic. Whereas Saunders documents the extensive nature of the CIA’s network of intelligence gathering, Holt and Rubin examine the ways in which the CIA’s vast resources directly affected the formation of a canon of world literature, translation, an aesthetics, and the role of the writer within that strategy. As the remaining chapters consider, the visual arts were also an integral aspect—as was Lebanon—in the forging this global network.

Conclusion

This chapter covered an expansive period in Lebanon's history, from the 1930s to the beginning of the Cold War in the 1950s. In doing so, it aimed to chart the different meanings of cosmopolitanism in Lebanon, from a muddled East–West identity presented in guidebooks for an emerging Euro-American tourist industry to discursive nationalist vision fashioned through the pages of *La Revue du Liban* and a material reality recollected and memorialized through poetry and literature in the bars and cafes of Hamra Street. Yet what unites this diverse source material for the present study is the premise that cultural production—paintings, reproductions of paintings, poetry, literature, and the accompanying criticism—has vast potential to be deployed for the political workings of national visions, government agencies, and, as the next chapter document, pedagogical initiatives. The periods of the mandate and the Cold War, historically linked by World War II, represent two significant moments that highlight the ideological workings of art. Moreover, as this first chapter sought to assert, it is precisely Lebanon's muddled or cosmopolitan identity, in both its discursive and material forms, that primed its future role as a node in American plays for strategic influence. The next chapter considers this through the case study of the American University of Beirut and its 1953 launch of a visual arts department under the leadership of Chicago-based artist Maryette Charlton.

Notes

- 1 *Cook's Tourists' Handbook for Palestine and Syria* (London: Thomas Cook & Son, Ludgate Circus, E.C.; Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1876), 367.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 367, 368–69.
- 4 Eustace Reynolds-Ball, B.A., F.R.G.S., *Jerusalem: A Practical Guide to Jerusalem and its Environs with Excursions to Bethlehem, Hebron, Jericho, the Dead Sea and the Jordan, Nablus, Nazareth, Beirut, Baalbeck, Damascus, etc.*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912), 154.
- 5 Edward W. Said's scholarship is the preeminent work on the discursive construction of the binaries between East and West. See his *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978) and *Covering Islam: How Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 1981). See also Thierry Hentsch, *Imagining the Middle East*, trans. Fred A. Reed (Montréal: Black Rose, 1992).
- 6 Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe: l'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996).
- 7 The British protectorate over Egypt terminated on February 22, 1922. The British Mandate in Iraq ended in 1932, although Britain retained the right to hold military bases. In 1941, Britain invaded again, resulting in a military occupation that ceased on October 26, 1947.
- 8 Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–14.
- 9 Abstraction among Lebanese painters during the 1960s is the subject of Chapter 4. In mapping out the local debates surrounding abstraction, the chapter aims to complicate such a monolithic reading of abstraction as is presented in Naef's study.
- 10 The one known exception, discussed in detail in Chapter 4, is Stélio Scamanga's 1964 manifesto, originally published for an exhibition in Arabic, English, and French, "Towards a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract." A copy of Scamanga's manifesto was originally provided to the author by Farid Haddad. For a published English translation from the French, see Stélio Scamanga, "Toward a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract," trans. Jeanine Herman, reprinted in *Modern Arab Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Annela Lenssen et al., (New York: Museum of Modern Art): 209–11.
- 11 Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, 186.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 183.

- 13 The well-known Syrian art historian and critic Aff Bahnassi suggests a similar relationship between authenticity and national identity. Writing a decade after the 1967 War, a period of critical introspection in the Arab world, Bahnassi defines authenticity as a condition for artistic production that results only from the collective determination of a national identity. Bahnassi locates the particular characteristics of a national identity not in the past but rather in the present circumstances. See his “Authenticity in Art: Exposition, Definition, Methodology,” trans. John W. Butt, *Cultures* 6, no. 2 (1979): 65–82. For a critical examination of authenticity as an aesthetic value in the critical reception of postcolonial art in Euro-America, see Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 14 For a more nuanced reading of Lebanon’s “muddled” national identity, see Zeina El Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut’s Global Sixties* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020). El Maasri’s study historicizes Beirut’s cosmopolitanism by tracing the capital’s identity from the Eurocentric “the Paris of the East” to a radical “Arab Hanoi,” through an examination of graphic design during the late 1960s and early 1970s.
- 15 Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
- 16 Kirsten Scheid, “Painters, Picture Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005).
- 17 Mourani studied in Italy and later in Paris (1892–95) under French academic painter Jean-Paul Laurens (1838–1921) at École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts.
- 18 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 6.
- 19 Quoted in *La Revue du Liban* 1, no. 2 (1928): 14.
- 20 Philippe Mourani, “Le rôle des Arts Plastiques (la sculpture et la peinture) dans la vie des peuples,” *La Revue du Liban* 4, no. 27 (March 1932): 3.
- 21 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 211–12.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 212–13.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 211; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
- 24 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 213.
- 25 For a discussion of *La Revue du Liban*’s promotion of links between Beirut and Paris during the 1960s through a series of fashion advertisements, see El Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut’s Global Sixties*, pp. 41–46.
- 26 Several years later, in 1934, poet Charles Corm (1894–1963) would mobilize Mount Lebanon as the core of the nation-state in his well-known literary work *La montagne inspirée*, translated into English as *The Inspired Mountain*, awarded the Edgar Allan Poe International Poetry Prize that year. See Charles Corm, *La montagne inspirée; chansons de geste*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Éditions de la Revue phénicienne, 1964).
- 27 Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: In Search of Identity in Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).
- 28 The decisive work on the relationship between Mount Lebanon and Beirut during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is Albert Hourani’s essay, “Ideologies of the City and the Mountain,” in *Essays on the Crisis in Lebanon*, ed. Roger Owen (London: Ithaca Press, 1976): 33–41.
- 29 Carol Hakim-Dowek, “The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea” (PhD diss., St. Anthony’s College, 1997), 54.
- 30 Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*, 11. The use of archaeology as material evidence for the construction of national narratives within the region is the subject several studies. For regional studies, see Nadia Abu el-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Elliot Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 31 Each of these regions had a different tradition of administration under the Ottoman Empire. Mount Lebanon was governed as a separate administration under local lords whereas the coastal cities and rural areas east and south of Mount Lebanon were integral parts of the empire. See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press-Harvard University, 1991), 429.
- 32 For a detailed historical overview of Lebanonism’s trajectory and the modified positions among its different champions, see Kais M. Firro, “Lebanese Nationalism versus Arabism: From Bulus Nujaym to Michel Chiha,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 5 (September 2004): 1–27.

- 33 In the case of Uganda and South Africa, Mahmud Mamdani argues that British indirect rule institutionally enforced racial and ethnic divisions, in comparison to sectarian identities in the case of mandate Lebanon. See his *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 34 In his 1939 groundbreaking study, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, historian George Antonius traces the roots of Arab nationalism to a group of intellectuals educated at the Syrian Protestant College, later renamed the American University of Beirut, during the mid-nineteenth century. See his *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (J.B Lippincott Company 1939; 2001 reprint), 35–60. Historians have since debated the actual effects of this intimate elite group on the general population, particularly the greater Muslim communities. Historian Philip S. Khoury, for instance, argues that the activities of the pan-Arab movement are to be found among a group of Damascene notables. See his seminal studies, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism, the Politics of Damascus 1860–1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). On the study of Arab Nationalism, see Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih, and Reeva S. Simon, eds., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni, eds., *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- 35 Historically, the Greek Orthodox of Beirut assumed a pan-Arab political position rather than one that advocated Christian isolationism for Lebanon.
- 36 For an examination of how the paintings and career trajectory of Daoud Corm was deployed to speak for a cosmopolitan nationalism rooted in Maronite Christianity, see my essay, “Daoud Corm, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and the Origins of Lebanese Modern Art,” *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 46–77.
- 37 On the ideologies of Corm, Chiha, and Akl and their supporters and adversaries, see Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 141–229 and his “‘Tell Us Our History’: Charles Corm, Mount Lebanon and Lebanese Nationalism,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004): 1–28; Kais M. Firro, “Lebanese Nationalism versus Arabism: From Bulus Nujaym to Michel Chiha,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 5 (September 2004): 1–27; and Franck Salameh, *Language, Memory and Identity in the Middle East: The Case for Lebanon* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012), 113–60.
- 38 Michael Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut: The Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State, 1840–1985* (London: Ithaca Press, 1986).
- 39 Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*, 82–84.
- 40 Ibid., 111. See also Heghnar Watenpaugh, “Museums and the Construction of National History in Syria and Lebanon,” in *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Study*, eds. Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluggett (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004): 185–202.
- 41 On the history of Lebanon’s path to economic liberalization and its push by a predominantly Christian group of bankers and political figures in the immediate after of Lebanon’s independence, see Carolyn Gates, *The Merchant Republic of Lebanon: Rise of an Open Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).
- 42 Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*, 122.
- 43 According to my research, this is the earliest published biography of Corm. Published a year after Lebanon’s independence from the mandate authority, the author of the article, Bishara Malouf, positions Corm as the father of Lebanese art so that his artistic pedigree assumes a national one; the evolution of the artist, represented through the biographical genre, serves as an embodiment of the national and its historical reinforcement with artistic and historical genealogies premised on a parallel linear development. See Rogers, “Daoud Corm,” 46–77.
- 44 Documented in Scheid, “Painters, Picture Makers, and Lebanon,” 156.
- 45 My gratitude to artist Farid Haddad for helping me to compile this list.
- 46 Irène Kéramé, “Modernisme ou Tradition?” *La Revue du Liban* 1, no. 8 (April 1929): 23–24.
- 47 Ibrahim Maklouf, “Érigeons des Monuments!,” *La Revue du Liban* (1929): 26.
- 48 Emile Maklouf, “Interview avec Yousef Hoyeck,” *La Revue du Liban* 7, no. 46 (1935): 6. For an insightful and in-depth examination of art as an index of civilizational progress in the context of modern art in Lebanon, see Scheid, “Painters, Picture Makers, and Lebanon.”

- 49 Historian Keith David Watenpaugh argues that the press in Aleppo following the 1908 Young Turks revolution addressed the nation without assuming the need to define it. See his *Being Modern is the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 93.
- 50 De Pranguey's daguerreotype of the Cedar tree is a rare landscape among a body of remaining daguerreotypes that focus primarily on architecture (in the case of Lebanon, the Roman ruins at Baalbeck). See the exhibition catalogue, *Monumental Journey: The Daguerreotypes of Girault de Prangey*, edited by Stephen C. Pinson (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019).
- 51 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 211.
- 52 Politician and economist Michel Chiha is the figure most associated with this nationalist position.
- 53 On the development of Phoenicianism in the work of Corm, see Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*, 87–96.
- 54 See Anouar Hatem, "Discovering Damascus, Capital of the Orient," *La Revue du Liban* 7, no. 46 (January 1935): 12–14.
- 55 René Catelot, "L'art libanais: Mustapha Farrouk," *La Revue du Liban* 2, no. 17 (July 30, 1930): 16.
- 56 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 37–46.
- 57 Maronite Catholics represent the largest Christian population in modern day Lebanon, followed by the Greek Orthodox and a smaller number of Greek Catholics, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrians, and Protestants.
- 58 On the history of Arab American community, see Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch, 2005).
- 59 Quoted in Asher Kaufman, "'Too Much French, but a Swell Exhibit': Representing Lebanon at the New York World's Fair 1939–1940," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 1 (April, 2008), 59–77.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 The decisive scholarship on World's Fairs and Orientalism is Timothy Mitchell, "Egypt at the Exhibition," in his *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Zeynep Celik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at the Nineteenth Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Mitchell's is singular in its consideration of the Egyptian delegation's perceptions of the Egyptian pavilion at the fair.
- 62 Quoted in the brochure *Republic of Lebanon: At the New York's World's Fairs, 1939*. David and Hiram Corm private papers, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 63 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 229–46.
- 64 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2007), 109.
- 65 Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 111.
- 66 See the inaugural exhibition for the Saradar Collection's Perspective series, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *Witness to a Golden Age: Mapping Beirut's Art Scene, 1955–75*. See <http://www.saradarcollection.com/saradar-collection/english/perspective>.
- 67 Said K. Aburish, *Beirut Spy: The St. George Hotel Bar* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1990), 15.
- 68 See El Maasri, "Dislocating the Nation: Mediterraneanscapes in Lebanon's Tourist Promotion," in her *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*, 25–62.
- 69 Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 1.
- 70 Two of the most internationally recognized Palestinian artists who lived in Beirut for a substantial time are Ismail Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal, both refugees of 1948. The couple and their work are the subject of Chapter 5.
- 71 Bruce Riedel, *Beirut 1958: How America's Wars in the Middle East Began* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2020), 12; 17–18.
- 72 Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).
- 73 The result was an onslaught of harsh criticism directed toward President Chamoun from Lebanon's anti-Western political parties. The president resigned, and the Lebanese Army officer Fouad Shihab assumed office. Shihab's ensuing political and economic reforms, aimed at ameliorating sectarian relations and socioeconomic divisions, ushered in a period of relative stability.
- 74 According to CIA operative in the Middle East Bruce Riedel, Eisenhower's speech to Congress in January 1957, now known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, was the first time a US President

- identified the Middle East as a vital American interest, a result of oil and to prevent Soviet domination in the region. Reidel, *Beirut 1958: How America's Wars in the Middle East Began*, 32.
- 75 Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2001). The book was originally published in London under the title *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: The Press, 1999).
- 76 Sanders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 2.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 80 On this tension between social realism in the service of the state and a purportedly universal abstract modernism in the context of Syria, see Anneka Lenssen, *The Shape of Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).
- 81 Andrew Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- 82 Elizabeth Holt, "Bread or Freedom: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and the Arabic Literary Journal *Ḥiwār* (1962–67)," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44, no. 1 (2013): 83–102; El Maasri, "The Hot Third World in the Cultural Cold War: Modernism, Arabic Literary Journals and US Counterinsurgency," in her *Radical Cosmopolitanism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*, 63–100. Whereas Holt's study focuses on the creation of a supposed avant-garde global literary network, El Maasri examines the role of visual imagery and graphic designs within Arabic literary journals, understanding *Ḥiwār* in relation less to the CIA and instead in comparison to two other leading journals out of Beirut at the time, *al-Adab* (1953–) and *Shi'r* (1957–64).

2 “An Artistic Coup”

Maryette Charlton and the Founding of the American University of Beirut’s Art Department

Introduction

In a letter dated March 28, 1950, to then-president of the American University of Beirut (AUB) Stephen Penrose (1908–54), Chicago-based artist Maryette Charlton (1924–2013) recounted her lasting impression of Beirut. Charlton had visited the Lebanese capital the previous spring for several weeks during a three-month trip with her mother throughout Europe and the Middle East. The two had stopped in Beirut to visit Charlton’s sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and Peter Seips, both professors in AUB’s Economics Department. The letter was lighthearted—Charlton and Penrose were family friends—yet Charlton had a professional proposal for Penrose: launch an art department at AUB with herself at the head. Courses would include graphic design, art practice, and art appreciation.¹ Charlton was a recent graduate of the Pratt Institute in New York and currently on staff at the Art Institute of Chicago in the Education Department and an instructor at the Chicago Public Art Society. She admitted that she had no art historical training, but she offered to complete a course at Yale University over the summer. After submitting an application through the Near Eastern College Association, a New York–based advocacy organization for American colleges abroad, of which AUB was a member, and following several salary negotiations, Charlton was awarded the position. She arrived in Beirut in September of 1952 and remained in the department until her return to the United States in 1956.²

Reflecting upon her achievements at AUB in a 1976 letter to fellow colleague John Carswell, Charlton wrote:

I found out years later that a number of Arab professors at AUB had bet between each other as to whether I could make a “go” of the Art Department during those early years. And I shall always remember the silence that followed my first suggestions in a faculty meeting that there be an Art Degree available to AUB students. It has taken years, but it is all YES now, thanks to you, John, and all who have contributed. My philosophy in starting the AUB art department was simple. I believed that scholarship and execution in the arts were definitely to be encouraged, but pure enjoyment of art in life, art in everyday life was, and indeed is, the heart of existence.³

Despite Charlton’s confidence, histories of modern art in Lebanon place little emphasis on AUB.⁴ The department produced only a select number of local and internationally established artists, many of whom graduated with degrees in engineering or the sciences. AUB’s significance to the history of art in Lebanon lies outside individual achievement, including Charlton’s own. Charlton’s approach to art was integral to everyday life—not

to a specialized discipline—and in turn, it was open to all. The inaugural rhetoric of the department situates the visual arts within an American liberal arts tradition and relies on paradigms of individualism and freedom of expression that resonated with the context of Cold War America and the rhetoric around abstract expressionism.

As revisionist art historians of American modernism and historians of the Cold War have documented, American art during the 1950s was considered by both the United States government and wealthy private individuals like Nelson Rockefeller, whose mother was a founder of the Museum of Modern Art, as an invaluable tool in Cold War diplomacy. This conviction was well established by the time Charlton traveled to Beirut; the US State Department purchased its first art collection for exhibition abroad in 1946. Both Charlton’s artistic vision and the networks of individuals through whom she worked underscore the entanglement of art in America’s Cold War arsenal.

The chapter traces the institutionalization of American investment in Lebanon to the founding of AUB itself in 1866 by American Protestant missionary, Daniel Bliss (1823–1916). The key role assigned to education and culture by nineteenth-century American missionaries is an early incantation of the deployment of soft power by the US government and private institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art during the Cold War. However, to understand Charlton’s pedagogy as a strictly American Cold War intervention in Lebanon would be to read the encounter as one dimensional. Indeed, scholars have studied the emergence of an American avant-garde during the mid-twentieth century, historicized its European connections, and have examined its ideological deployment.⁵ But Charlton’s pedagogical approach was, as we will see, multidimensional, full of complexities and the aesthetic contingencies produced by individual encounters. To posit art’s visual language as distinctly national is a discursive construction.

Artistic Pedagogy and National Narratives

On October 3, 1945, the francophone newspaper *L’Orient* published the article “Culture ’45,” in which the author pronounced the previous decade an artistic and intellectual renaissance.⁶ Throughout the mandate era, the isolated easel painter had been transformed into a vibrant art world—a sufficient number of artists to be considered a generation, a burgeoning press that included art journalism, an audience for exhibitions, and a private, university-level art academy.⁷ The crowning achievement of this cultural flowering, according to the author of “Culture ’45,” was the founding of l’Académie Libanaise des beaux-arts by Alexis Boutros in 1937.⁸ Before the galleries and foreign cultural centers encouraged a prosperous on-spec market for the visual arts, ALBA trained a generation of painters. In 1943, ALBA established its Department of Art and Architecture. The program followed a strict hierarchy in which students copied from models and plaster casts; nineteenth-century European styles were encouraged. Despite a European Beaux-Arts pedagogical approach, ALBA’s departmental rhetoric equates training artists with guiding a national direction for the history of modern art in Lebanon.

Before the establishment of ALBA, Lebanon’s first generation of painters—among them Moustafa Farroukh (1901–57), César Gemayel (1898–1958), and Omar Onsi (1901–69)—had worked in the studios of Daoud Corm and Habib Srour (1860–1938). Several substantiated their atelier training with time studying in Europe, Farroukh in Rome and Gemayel in Paris. Their overall choice of subject matter veered away from the commissioned academic portraits of their predecessors and instead portrayed predominantly landscapes, genre scenes, still lifes, and figure paintings, including nudes (Figure 2.1).⁹



Figure 2.1 Omar Onsi, *Landscape*, c.1935. Oil on panel. 40 × 43 cm. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.
Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Working mostly in oil and watercolor, this generation also exhibited looser brushwork. Before beginning their artistic careers, several had established a more financially secure path in the sciences; Gemayel studied pharmacology and Onsi majored in biology at AUB. The establishment of ALBA thus represents a critical turning point in the history of art in Lebanon. Now, artists could train at an institution without leaving the country. Similar to the 1908 founding of Cairo’s School of Fine Arts, ALBA’s very existence validated the fine arts as a career choice.¹⁰ Alexis Boutros’s inspiration to establish ALBA, initially composed only of a music department, resulted from his own creative activity. As the founder of an amateur orchestra that performed publicly to great success, Boutros dedicated his efforts to establishing a university for the arts.

Soon after the first students of music entered ALBA in 1937, Boutros began to plan a department of architecture and art.¹¹ With its official inauguration set for November 8, 1943, the department’s opening day was overshadowed by, or perhaps complemented by, the declaration of Lebanon’s independence from the French Mandate.¹² This historical coincidence reinforced and naturalized ALBA’s role as a source for a national Lebanese

identity in the arts. The words of painter and founding faculty member César Gemayel indicate the importance of post-independent art: “This [ALBA] will help us in nurturing the true talents that will later create a Lebanese art.”¹³ Over a decade later, Boutros, presiding over a 1957 exhibition, reiterated the national significance of artistic production: “Among civilized people, art comes first.”¹⁴ Boutros’s sentiments resonated with France’s *mission civilisatrice* in its colonies. ALBA, however, assumed a distinctly national responsibility within this colonial agenda: the goal to foster a Lebanese art. Moreover, ALBA’s success took place *plus tard*. This belatedness configured art as a product of the nation; with the establishment of both ALBA and the Lebanese Republic, artists could proceed with the work of establishing an artistic genealogy.¹⁵ According to those speaking at ALBA’s inauguration, that tradition would be nurtured from Lebanon’s geographical location.

With both Lebanese and French flags draped at the entrance of the newly established university, ALBA defined the genealogy of Lebanese art as a meeting point between Lebanon and France, East and West. In his speech for the department’s inauguration, French architect Michel Écochard urged that the development of an original visual language be culled from the country’s Mediterranean surroundings: “To keep and develop Lebanon’s artistic personality, it was important to work diligently on creating artistic centers, while benefiting from the experience of civilizations, which radiated from the Mediterranean and adapting the spirit of forms to their environment.”¹⁶ Geography lends itself to both a national and artistic character. For Écochard, Lebanon’s identity as a cultural meeting point assumed the specificity of a francophone nation. Although the majority of the department’s faculty members were Lebanese, the choice of Écochard, then working in Beirut, to address the inauguration reinforced the ties between Lebanon and France. Écochard emphasized Lebanon’s francophone Christian identity by contrasting it with its neighbor: “Almost entirely Muslim, Syria was able to find its artistic character in religious architecture and assimilate the art of the Turks who are of the same religion.”¹⁷ Similar to the essays published the previous decade in *La Revue du Liban* discussed in the previous chapter, Écochard defined Syria’s culture as directed toward the past, represented by an obsolete Ottoman Empire. The tradition-modernity binary was reinforced through a Muslim-Christian opposition, and the boundaries of national culture were drawn both externally and internally.¹⁸ When AUB established its own department, the institution assumed a progressive approach against ALBA’s European traditionalism.

The Beginning of AUB’s Golden Age

Ten years after the *L’Orient* article “Culture ’45” declared ALBA a crowning achievement, AUB instituted its own “golden age” with a nascent art department.¹⁹ Although the department had offered studio courses before, most notably under Lebanese artist Moustafa Farroukh, Charlton’s presence at AUB constituted a concerted effort to establish a formal department. The first semester, Charlton offered two courses in art through the English department (Figure 2.2). The first, focusing on practice, was an art workshop that introduced students to the techniques of painting, drawing, and sculpture. The second, Introduction to the Arts, was designed as a non-chronological survey aimed at teaching students the importance of “seeing art in relation to everyday surroundings,” to borrow Charlton’s words.²⁰ Through slides of photographs taken by her of her surroundings, Charlton sought to instill in the students an understanding of line, color, form, texture, space, light, and movement. The courses proved popular. By the second semester, enrollment had tripled (ten students are documented as enrolled during the first



Figure 2.2 Maryette Charlton teaching an art class at the American University of Beirut, c.1955. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Archives and Special Collections, American University of Beirut.

semester), and within a year, an independent department was established with Charlton as chair.²¹ A growing faculty followed. Throughout the 1950s, Charlton recruited American couple Arthur and Fay Frick; fellow Chicago Art Institute faculty member George Buehr and his wife, self-taught artist Margo Hoff; and British artist, archaeologist, and Islamic art historian John Carswell.

Throughout the next four years at AUB, Charlton did much to build a public for the visual arts both within and beyond the university campus. In 1953, she opened a gallery in AUB's Jafet Memorial Library (Figure 2.3). The inaugural exhibition, *The Elements of Design*, featured a portfolio from New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Subsequent shows included student works, traveling exhibitions from MoMA, and arts and crafts from the region. The gallery proved so popular that the university expanded it to include a passageway between two of the library's reading rooms to expose students to art in their everyday comings and goings. American visiting artists were also an integral component; these included muralist Tracy Montminy (1911–92), abstract painter Jack Youngerman (1926–2020), and, most famously, sculptor Alexander Calder (1898–1976, Figure 2.4 and Figure 2.5).

Charlton's most well-known accomplishment was the introduction of the Art Seminars, an annual program of public lectures by faculty and visiting artists and studio courses for various age groups, ranging from grade school children to adults. Press reviews, Charlton's letters, and photographs at the time document the success of the series. On-staff translators welcomed participation of those outside AUB's Anglophone community. The annual series was sustained by the patronage of then-first lady Zelpha Chamoun (1900–87), who developed a close friendship with Charlton.²²



Figure 2.3 Charlton and first lady Zelfha Chamoun at Jafet Art Gallery at the American University of Beirut, c.1956.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Archives and Special Collections, American University of Beirut.



Figure 2.4 Charlton and Alexander Calder at Alexander Calder exhibition at the American University of Beirut, c.1953.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Archives and Special Collections, American University of Beirut.



Figure 2.5 Charlton in front of a Calder sculpture at Alexander Calder exhibition at the American University of Beirut, c.1953.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Archives and Special Collections, American University of Beirut.

Charlton also traveled regionally, delivering lectures and exhibiting her own work. One of her most extensive projects was the 1956 exhibition *Young Artists of the Near East*, sponsored by the Near East College Association. Visiting art studios and fine art departments in Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain, Turkey, and Greece, Charlton, along with George Buehr, mounted an exhibition of 134 paintings and sculptures at the Carnegie Endowment International Center in New York City under the auspices of the American Federation of the Arts, a prominent nonprofit organization that had been organizing travel exhibitions nationally and internationally since 1909. The exhibition’s mission, as outlined in the catalogue, was one of cultural exchange.²³

Charlton’s time in Beirut was also enriching personally. On November 14, 1953, she married Hall Winslow, a graduate of Michigan State University, who at the time was editor of AUB’s English magazine, *al-Kulliyah* (The College). Her guest list to the wedding included prominent Lebanese artists Shafic Abboud (1926–2004) and Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916–2017) and artist and poet George Corm, along with AUB Middle East studies scholars Rosemary and Yusef Sayigh, suggesting a network of colleagues and friends among the local Beirut artistic and intellectual community. A little over two years later, Charlton and Winslow welcomed a son, Kirk Winslow, on January 21, 1955.

Charlton resigned in 1956, citing the need for the family to “renew ourselves.”²⁴ Upon her return to the United States, Charlton earned a master’s degree in art education, often using her experience at AUB as a case study for her research papers. Her relationship with AUB continued until her death in 1998; she donated annually to the university and collected press related to Lebanon.²⁵ And she remained closely connected to the art department, corresponding with John Carswell and Arthur Frick, who remained at AUB

until the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, at which time the department dissolved for a period.

The presence of an American figure living and working in Beirut has a long history. So too does the context in which such a possibility could be imagined. America engaged with Lebanon on at least two previous occasions, both of which sought to actively build cross-cultural relationships and inculcate social values through institutional initiatives. The first was when the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary from Vermont, Daniel Bliss, arrived in Beirut with a dream to build an American university in Lebanon. Although there are several authoritative biographies of Bliss and histories of AUB, including Bliss’s own published memoirs, here we will consider Bliss in relationship to a seemingly disparate second moment of the 1950s, when Charlton arrived in Beirut with similar ambitions, albeit couched in artistic rather than religious terms. This approach moves away from highlighting Charlton’s individual achievements in the art department, instead contextualizing the circumstances of those within a longer history of American intervention in Lebanon.

The Ties That Bind: Daniel Bliss and the Establishment of AUB

An American institutional presence in Beirut dates to the 1866 founding of the Syrian Protestant College (SPC, renamed the American University of Beirut in 1920) by Daniel Bliss. A native of Vermont, Bliss spent his teenage years in Ohio before attending Amherst College, founded in western Massachusetts in 1821 to educate missionaries. Bliss enrolled at Amherst in 1848, at the mature age of 25, a result of his having had to quit school at age 16 to work alongside his father. Religion dominated university life at Amherst, and aspiring missionaries such as Bliss believed themselves to be agents of God with a nationalist view of America as the world’s path to salvation. After graduation, Bliss pursued his religious studies at Andover Theological Seminary, the oldest seminary in America and a bastion of New England Congregationalism. By the time Bliss graduated in the spring of 1955, his religious idealism matched a growing desire for social activism, and he sought employment with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM).

Established in 1810 and headquartered in Boston, ABCFM was the largest and most influential missionary society in nineteenth-century America. With a well-established American trade presence in the Mediterranean and the Holy Land in Jerusalem, the Middle East was the target destination of most of ABCFM’s mission, and on December 12, 1855, Bliss and his young bride, Abby, set sail on the *Sultana*. The three-mast bark carried the two newlyweds on the arduous month-long journey from Boston Harbor to Valetta, the capital of Malta, then a British naval port that served as the staging point for Western missionaries heading to the Middle East. During the brief stop at Valetta, Bliss visited the British and Foreign Bible Society, the headquarters of Western missionary activity in the Middle East, and became entranced by one of the society’s primary projects: the Malta Protestant College, founded in 1846 to educate young men throughout the Ottoman Empire. When the *Sultana* set sail the next day for Smyrna, the Ottoman port on the coast of Anatolia, Bliss took with him the dream of an American Protestant college in Beirut, then under control of the Ottoman Empire.

By the time Bliss arrived in Beirut, American missionaries had spent the last two decades working to secure a presence there, with the first US missionary arriving in Mount Lebanon in 1823. Despite lacking the military backing or government support enjoyed by

their European counterparts, American missionaries by 1834 had succeeded in establishing a press in the Ottoman town, which was active by the 1840s. A little over a decade later, in 1848, the first church was built, and four years previous to the Bliss’s arrival, the Ottoman Empire legally recognized Protestantism.²⁶ Yet despite an active missionary presence in Beirut and the surrounding area, American missionaries, like Americans generally, knew little if anything about the region, despite their deep-rooted evangelical ambitions.²⁷ Although the American Congregational mission established itself in Beirut in 1823, the American flag was still foreign in most parts of the region in 1860. According to Bliss’s memoirs, he used the English flag for protection when traveling around Beirut and out-laying towns during the 1860 civil war.²⁸

Intensely determined, Bliss immediately began inculcating himself in the local culture and among the local community. His first task was mastering the Arabic language, which Bliss undertook for five hours daily with tutor Butrus al-Bustani, himself a Maronite Christian convert to Protestantism, renowned author of the first Arabic encyclopedia, and a leading figure of Beirut’s intellectual elite during the late nineteenth century. After several months, Bliss assumed his first official post as director of a girl’s school in the mountain village of Suq al-Gharb, a predominantly Christian village. After only two years, Bliss raised the idea of an American university in Beirut at an annual gathering of American missionaries stationed in Greater Syria. His idea was well received, and Bliss set out to convince his American colleagues at ABCFM headquarters in Boston. Despite the many uncertainties facing ABCFM during the American Civil War (1861–65), budget not least of all, the board agreed—leaving fundraising solely in Bliss’s hands.

Beginning in the spring of 1862, the Blisses spent three years traveling across the United States to raise the necessary funds. They found support in New York businessman William E. Dodge, who would eventually serve as a founding member of the board of trustees of SPC and whose son would go on to support the Near East College Association from his personal accounts from its 1919 founding until his death in 1926.²⁹ To garner this initial, critical support, Bliss understood the importance of appealing to the Puritan ideal of education and the Protestant fear of a growing Catholic Jesuit missionary presence in Mount Lebanon. Historian Brian VanDeMark elucidates the paradox at the heart of Bliss’s educational mission: “Funded through appeals to sectarian bias, the SPC would become a bastion of sectarian inclusiveness,” as Bliss touted the opportunity for men of all classes and conditions to enroll.³⁰

When Daniel Bliss returned to Beirut in 1866 to commence building the college, he found a city radically transformed from the modest town on the coast of the Ottoman province of Greater Syria he had encountered ten years earlier. Beirut’s urbanization and emergence as a key regional coastal port had actually been underway since the 1830s. During Egyptian rule (1831–40), when Muhammed Ali of Egypt (1769–1849) seized control from the Ottoman Empire of territories in the Levant, including Greater Syria, he identified Beirut as a political center. Foreign consulates followed, permanently relocating to Beirut.³¹ As historian Leila Tarazi Fawaz has meticulously documented, the industrial revolution enabled the possibility of growing trade and communication between Europe and region, rendering port cities like Beirut critical.³² Infrastructure projects jointly sponsored by the Ottoman and European governments further lured government officials, merchants, and a small number of French authors and artists to the mix of foreign missionaries already residing in the city.³³

The local population had been also growing. Although statistics from the time vary dramatically, the general trend of population growth between 1830s and 1850s quadrupled,

and by the 1840s, the city had begun to spread beyond its walls.³⁴ According to Fawaz's detailed history of the city, descriptions from the late nineteenth century characterize Beirut as predominantly Sunni Muslim, with the population of Maronite and Greek Christians immigrants increasing as Beirut earned a reputation as a welcoming center in the region and a safe haven from persecution. As Fawaz explains, the immigration of Christians to Beirut from villages throughout Mount Lebanon often occurred under pressure from authorities of the Ottoman Empire, as an act of protection from hostilities either from Druze or other Christian sects. In one such case, a substantial number of converts from the Greek Orthodox Church to the Anglican, fearing persecution, moved to Beirut, where the English consul and the American and English missionaries there offered them protection.³⁵ Fawaz documents another wave of Christian immigration to the growing port city in 1850, this time from Aleppo following clashes between Christian and Muslim communities.

These population shifts were further magnified following the 1860 civil war in Mount Lebanon, which resulted in changes in Ottoman law there and in other areas of Greater Syria. According to Arab studies scholar Ussama Makdisi, the seeds of later sectarian clashes between Christian and Druze communities were planted two decades earlier as the British-aided Ottomans regained jurisdiction after the Egyptian conquest of areas of Syria and Mount Lebanon.³⁶ In the wake of the invasion, the Ottomans issued a series of reforms known as the Tanzimat. Until this point, Mount Lebanon, on the outskirts of the Ottoman Empire, had functioned as a semiautonomous area within the broader parameters of the empire. This administrative and political structure enabled several family dynasties to serve as political units in controlling the region.³⁷ Although aimed at modernizing the Ottoman army, the administration, and society along European lines, the Tanzimat reforms replaced the former system with one in which religious identity became the basis for asserting political claims.³⁸ Rival religious sects' accelerating tensions regarding loyalties, land reform, and taxes sparked violent strife in 1857 and 1860, causing the Ottoman government to once again reorganize the Mount Lebanon region. In 1864, the region from Mount Lebanon to the sea—excluding the port cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon—was officially declared a semiautonomous state known as a *mutasarrifa*. Governance was by an Ottoman-appointed non-indigenous *mutiassarif*, who was assisted by a locally elected administrative council and gendarmerie.

The changes following the 1860 civil war ushered in an interlude of political stability and commercial prosperity. After intervening in the civil war on behalf of the Christians, the French penetrated Mount Lebanon's economy via the silk industry—although they had been investing in the industry since the 1840s. The Ottomans also granted European countries trading privileges. The percentage of land reserved for farming mulberry trees grew from 10 to 40 percent after 1860.³⁹ With steamboats reducing travel time, cheaper labor in Mount Lebanon, and an increased demand for silk textiles at home, the French investment brought the Mountain into the folds of capitalist Europe.

The transformations affecting the Mountain were felt just as strongly in Beirut, if not more so. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the building of hospitals, educational institutions, libraries, and residences stretched the city outside its previous boundaries. The population grew from 6,000 to 120,000, with the numbers quadrupling between the 1930s and 1950s. In a population surge following the 1860 civil war, many of the immigrants were Christians, although Sunni Muslims constituted the majority of the city's population until the French Mandate in 1920.⁴⁰ A foreign community composed approximately 1 to 3 percent of the population.⁴¹

Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, Beirut was well underway to its future development as an Ottoman capital. Importantly, the communities who established themselves in

Beirut during this period brought economic and trade skills. Historian Jens Hanssen traces Beirut’s fin de siècle importance to the subversive activities of a group of Damascene merchants working in Beirut at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the time, the port city of Acre was the most prosperous of the coastal cities of Greater Syria. Acre’s “uncontested” economic prosperity resulted from a system of monopolies over regional exports to Europe.⁴² With Beirut outside the military reach of the regional power in Acre, a number of Damascene merchants initiated trade with Europeans, who quickly capitalized on the merchants’ ability to undercut Acre prices. The modern-day portrayal of Lebanon as a “republic of merchants” originated in Beirut at this time.⁴³ Moreover, in collaboration with Fawaz’s earlier study, Hanssen identifies a host of families who migrated to Beirut from Aleppo, Damascus, Tripoli, Acre, Sidon, and Mount Lebanon to join the Damascene merchant families in forming the nucleus of an upwardly mobile urban class united by shared economic and political interests to protect Beirut against ensuing provincial rivalries between cities. Within a decade, many of these families, as members of the city’s urban intellectuals and cultural elite, would successfully petition the Ottoman government for Beirut’s status as a provincial capital.

As this brief history suggests, these population shifts were not isolated from the activities and initiatives of foreign missionaries in the region, including Bliss’s own ambitious plan. The second half of the nineteenth century represented a shift in the empire’s allocation of funds for education. As a result, government schools were established alongside local efforts undertaken by religious leaders and private individuals.⁴⁴ In Beirut, Bliss’s former Arabic tutor had opened, in 1863, *al-Madrasa al-Wataniyah*, the National School, and during the first few years of SPC, Bustani’s school served as a preparatory school for the missionary college.⁴⁵

American missionaries, however, had competition in the Italian Jesuits, who had a foothold in Mount Lebanon, home to Lebanon’s Maronite Christian population.⁴⁶ Italian Jesuits had been active in Greater Syria since the beginning of the seventeenth century. After 1831, the Jesuits reasserted their initiatives in response to the growing presence of the American Protestant community. A year before the Blisses’ arrival, the Jesuits opened a school in the mountain village of Ghazir. The school would educate several figures prominent in Lebanese history, including painter Daoud Corm, considered the father of Lebanese modern art, and Elias Hoyek (1843–1931), the future patriarch of Antioch for Lebanon’s Maronite community.⁴⁷ In 1875, when the Jesuits received funding to expand the school in Ghazir into a university, they relocated to Beirut, which had now become a regional capital. Renamed St. Joseph University, the small Ghazir school had French replace Italian as the language of instruction, further indicating changing political forces in the city.⁴⁸

The story of the Italian Jesuits and their education initiatives in Mount Lebanon underscores two critical components for the nascent history of the SPC. The first is the centrality of language to the work of missionaries and forging cross-cultural relationships. When the first missionaries arrived in Greater Syria in 1820, the main form of proselytizing was through the distribution of Bibles and preaching the Gospel. However, between the years 1844 and 1856, Rufus Anderson (1796–1880), an American minister and secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, toured the region and upon his return to Boston wrote a scathing report on the failures of direct proselytizing. The report also stressed the importance of preaching and teaching in the native language.⁴⁹ Bliss’s fluency in Arabic thus enabled not only his cultural rootedness in Beirut, but also his commitment to Arabic as the language of instruction for those initial years of the SPC, thereby attracting Arabic-speaking students from across the Ottoman Empire.

The second reason for the failure of Protestant proselytizing, according to Rufus Anderson (and one that also resonates with the history of the Italian Jesuits in Ghazir), is the importance of education in forging cultural inculcation, a process facilitated by language fluency. In characterizing the American missionary presence in Mount Lebanon, Ussama Makdisi has used the phrase “a gentle crusade” to stress the missionaries’ reliance on symbolic rather than military means to garner influence among the local population.⁵⁰ Makdisi’s observation comes from a methodological approach that traces the intersection of the beliefs and ideals of American missionaries with that of Ottoman Mount Lebanon as a story of “how relevant histories unfolded simultaneously.”⁵¹ This approach to cross-cultural encounters is particularly useful in understanding SPC’s position as an American missionary college within Ottoman Beirut.

When Bliss opened the college on December 3, 1966, with 16 enrolled students and six instructors (two Americans, two Europeans, and two Lebanese), he made a crucial decision to launch with Arabic as the language of instruction. Moreover, despite the missionary origins of the school, the educational philosophy nonetheless encouraged Arab culture and identity. At the end of the nineteenth century, there existed a nascent sense of an Arab imaginary that developed from a perceived need to distinguish an Arabic-speaking collective in the region.⁵² Bliss’s determined focus that the college encourage a growing sense of Arab nationalism alongside its missionary origins enabled it to address a regional population. Thus, although American missionaries perceived their work as offering enlightenment to the local community, the college served as a site for both “a gentle crusade” and meaningful exchange. This balance would be tested as SPC transitioned into the twentieth century and experienced shifts in policy within the changing landscape of regional politics and American foreign policy.

Even earlier, debates over changing the language of instruction to English (the justification being that textbooks and course material were becoming increasingly specialized and available only in the English language) highlighted the school’s discriminatory policy. In 1878, with voting rights reserved for English-speaking faculty only, the language of instruction officially changed to English. In 1920, when SPC became the American University of Beirut and its mission of Christian proselytizing officially ended, the school’s identity as an American missionary initiative within Ottoman Beirut transformed into one that needed to balance its regional allegiance with American foreign policy. The next section examines a later moment in “relevant histories unfolding simultaneously,” when, during the 1950s Cold War, student protests against American foreign policy in the Middle East strained relationships within the university. Turning its focus to the founding of AUB’s art department under Maryette Charlton, the remainder of this chapter considers how the pedagogical vision of a small, nascent art department, seemingly isolated from university politics and American foreign policy in the Middle East, uncovered that just as education became the critical component in the American Protestants’ “gentle crusade,” so too would AUB become a site for the US government’s deployment of soft power during the Cold War, suggesting that mobilization of soft power during the Cold War had its roots in missionary activity of the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Changing Face of AUB

By the time Charlton visited Beirut with her mother in 1950, nearly a century after its founding, the standing of SPC, now AUB, in both Lebanon and the United States had undergone a radical shift. As historians of the college have documented, the educational

missionary work at the heart of the school’s founding and mission experienced immense pressure when the United States took a more nationalistic and strategic interest in Lebanon following World War II. In 1943, the United States became a net importer of oil for the first time in its history, the result of a sweeping expansion of industrial output. This marked a transformation in the nature of American interests in the region and in Lebanon more particularly when, in 1945, the United States and Saudi Arabia partnered to construct a pipeline, over 1,000 miles, to be built by Aramco’s Trans-Arabian Pipeline Company, which would link the oil fields in Dhahran on the Persian Gulf across the Saudi desert, through Jordan and Syria, to a terminal at Sidon in Lebanon, 40 miles down the coast from Beirut. The tap line took on added importance with the European Recovery Program in that the Sidon terminal could dramatically facilitate shipments of oil to America’s European allies.

Within AUB’s campus, the 1948 establishment of Israel and the resulting expulsion of an estimated 750,000 Arab Palestinian refugees launched an era of intense—and sometimes violent—student protests. AUB historian Brian VanDeMark has documented the shifts at the college through the radicalization of individual students. George Habash (1926–2008), the future leader of the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, for instance, was a medical student at AUB in 1948. When the first Arab-Israeli war erupted that year, Habash quickly returned home to Lydda, Palestine, to serve as a medical orderly. On July 12, after the Israelis captured Lydda, Habash and his family were forced to flee alongside the other Palestinian inhabitants of the city. By the time Habash returned to Beirut that fall to continue his studies, the aspiring medical doctor had undergone a radical politicization. For Habash, AUB no longer represented a symbol of opportunity but rather an imperial institution; Habash was unable to resolve the university’s claim to the principles of freedom and humanitarianism with the American government’s support of Israel.⁵³ Habash was not alone. Demonstrations against the American government erupted around campus in response to 1948. For the first time, Lebanese crowds protested American policy and attacked the US Information Center in downtown Beirut.

American University of Beirut’s precarious position in the region only increased throughout the 1950s as the college benefited from an influx of funding from US government.⁵⁴ In 1951, AUB president Stephen Penrose, a veteran of the Office of Strategic Services, delivered a lecture at Princeton University that referenced a failed recent attempt of Soviet infiltration on the AUB campus among Iraqi and Palestinian students.⁵⁵ Under a perceived growing threat of communism, the American government saw AUB’s role as an outpost of American culture as an asset initiated an influx of federal funding to the university. This in turn provoked concerns that AUB could no longer operate as an independent institution, serving instead as an agent for American foreign policy.

It is within this political and financial context that Maryette Charlton, a recent graduate with a newly minted BFA, was offered a newly salaried position at AUB as an art teacher. Charlton’s later status as an avant-garde painter, printmaker, photographer, and filmmaker must be situated within the possibilities offered by this Cold War context and the changing relationship between the US government and AUB. As the 1950s brought AUB and the Lebanese capital of Beirut more generally into the folds of Cold War competition and competing political and national ideologies, the city witnessed an increased presence of foreigners and foreign institutions. The seemingly isolated discipline of the visual arts was no exception.

Artistic Pedagogy and the Cold War

A 1956 article by Charlton published in AUB's English-language magazine, *al-Kulliyah*, conveys the department's philosophy. She writes, "You need to appreciate the freedom of personal expression in the arts. You need to realize the importance of searching within yourselves. You will find that you are a warm and passionate people with an innate sense of color and design."⁵⁶ Addressing her audience directly, Charlton encouraged students to find that which was distinct and "innate" to "their" people. This was to be achieved, however, by embracing the American ideals of Cold War culture: individualism and freedom of expression.⁵⁷

American University of Beirut's Art Department, based in an American liberal arts tradition, was nestled within the larger scholastic life of the university. Because of this, the department encouraged all students to register for studio courses as electives. AUB cited this inclusiveness strategically, as an example of its democratic approach to art.⁵⁸ Moreover, according to Charlton's colleague and fellow artist Arthur Frick, Charlton's initiatives sought to directly engage both the larger university community and a local public.⁵⁹ Charlton pursued this through the development of the Art Seminars, which were open to the public and featured international artists, poets, playwrights, and philosophers. This public service helped garner both general and academic support for the nascent department as it integrated itself into the broader university life and the local community. Indeed, Frick, who was on the faculty from 1956–76, recalls the Art Student's Association as one of the most active on campus, sponsoring lectures, exhibitions, fashion shows, and the popular Beirut-wide annual Artist's Ball, complete with stage sets, costumes, entertainers, and orchestras.⁶⁰

Such initiatives on the part of the art department expressed a pedagogical approach to art underscored by Charlton's own rhetoric: art as an integral part of life that was not limited to artists, but rather encouraged participation from both the college community and the general public outside AUB's Bliss Street gates. Yet the department's development and strategic plans, interrupted by the outbreak of fighting in 1975, indicate a desire to assert and establish the department as its own discipline. Eventually, the department had enough institutional support to offer a BA in studio art and art education, followed by an MA in art education. According to Frick, by the time of the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, the department was in the process of offering a BA in art history as well. The department was also in coordination with the Department of Architecture to become a separate college in the university, differentiated from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences and Engineering.

The young department was also determined to differentiate itself from its francophone counterpart, expressed not only in its pedagogical approach, but also in its choice of exhibitions and lectures. While ALBA professors delivered public lectures on Delacroix, Courbet, Manet, and Picasso, those at AUB adopted an alternative definition of art, exemplified through its choice of university-sponsored exhibitions. Each year, the department hosted five lectures and three exhibitions, which often included media excluded from the traditional European histories of painting taught at ALBA: *Modern German Type-Faces* (1959), *Children's Paintings from Britain* (1961), *Children's Cut Outs from Syria* (1970), and *Metalworkers of Beirut* (1970). Several of these choices follow artistic trends popular in the United States during the second half of twentieth century. Art historians have contextualized the formal language of abstract expressionism within popular culture's interest in the subconscious.⁶¹ Within this discourse, children were championed because of the common perception that they behave without the hindrance of social conventions. In parallel, the production of artists with no formal training or from the non-West was considered more

authentic. An exhibition focusing on children's cut-outs from Syria thus further suggests AUB's reliance on Cold War rhetoric.

The conviction that artistic vision and production are measured more by their accessibility to a general public rather than by the skill or innate talent of the artist has been historicized by scholars within the context of MoMA during the middle of the twentieth century. Art historian Suzanne Hudson, in her monograph study of American modernist Robert Ryman, for instance, roots the institution's pedagogical approach to art education in John Dewey's ideas for creative education, which proposed that knowledge came from practice, or rather the application of a concept in practice.⁶² In many ways, this accessibility stands in stark contrast to the assumed elitism and aesthetic inaccessibility of abstract expressionism, the subject of the next two chapters. To foster a model of experimental learning as put forth in the writings of Victor D'Amico, director of MoMA's education department for over three decades and head of the People's Art Center (in MoMA's Department of Education), worked in tandem with MoMA's 1929 educational charter, which declared a mission to create and educate a community. Indeed, D'Amico himself had learned from Dewey when Dewey lectured at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York. For Hudson, the pedagogical model of formal discovery as the germination for artistic production produced "an ethos of modernist self-discovery," which resonates with Charlton's own pedagogical vision.⁶³ As Hudson's own narrative of Ryman's institutional formation and aesthetic practice unfolds, MoMA's educational offerings in the early 1950s foreground an investment in integrating the production and consumption of art within daily life, entailing an emphasis on teaching how to look and the fundamentals of practice and different media, which Hudson characterizes as "a permissive, subject-oriented mission."⁶⁴ Moreover, this approach enabled an openness to children's art, as well as other media outside traditional art forms of painting and sculpture—underscoring again the influence of Dewey and reflective in Charlton's public programming at AUB. Considering Charlton's own implication within the politics of the Cold War, it is paradoxical that D'Amico's art education convictions, according to Hudson, must also be contextualized within a growing concern over the future of the arts within a Cold War context that privileged science programs and information-based disciplines that served the national defense.⁶⁵

In many ways, then, the initial years of AUB's art department suggest a particular genealogy that can be traced to an institutional modernist approach to art-making housed at MoMA and professed in the writings and programming of those at the helm such as D'Amico. Such connections are evident in the importance of creating a community around the production and consumption of art and in the variety and extent of its public programs. The Art Seminars, as one element of programming consistently referenced in the histories of the department, can be taken as a central example of art pedagogy in the United States during this period. Indeed, art historian Howard Singerman has identified the visiting-artists program as an example of the shift in art education in the United States during the 1950s and 60s whereby students in art school were taught not just a set of skills, but how to *be* an artist.⁶⁶ Although the Art Seminars capitalized on artists traveling in the region and served to expand a limited arts faculty, they are nonetheless closely modeled on the visiting-artist's program so central to the modernist concept of cultivating an artist.⁶⁷

The MoMA's education department, however, does not represent the singular genealogy for Charlton's pedagogical approach: those purportedly American aesthetic ideals had their roots in Germany with the Bauhaus art school (1919–33), which after closing

under the Nazi regime, found many of its protagonists teaching in the United States.⁶⁸ Singerman has examined the formative role the German architect Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus played for inaugural director of MoMA Alfred H. Barr, Jr.’s (1902–81) conception of modern art.⁶⁹ Barr’s relationship with the Bauhaus developed throughout his career, from a trip throughout Europe in the late 1920s to the 1938 Bauhaus exhibition at the MoMA. Such explicit material interest was matched with a philosophical one towards modern art, as evident in MoMA’s previously examined education department. Championing a concept of art that integrated different artistic media as well as integrating art with daily life, the avant-garde and experimental Bauhaus school introduced a revolutionary concept of not only the artist but also of art education. Insisting art was not a profession in the sense of a set of technical skills to be taught and mastered in the tradition of the classical academy, the Bauhaus philosophy fashioned a craftsman who addressed a general audience with a common visual language of the everyday. Singerman explains the shift, “One of the corollaries of the equation that art cannot be taught is that everyone can be taught.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, as Singerman details, this philosophy opened up practitioners to the value of children’s art, cast as an innocent vision. Singerman’s characterization of Gropius’ concept of modern art and its teachability and accompanying accessibility for artists and audiences alike reflects back to Charlton’s approach to pedagogy at AUB and a number of the exhibitions Charlton mounted during her time at AUB. Singerman details the formative role the Bauhaus professors also played in the formation of the artist in the American university in contrast to the traditional academy pedagogy. He characterizes the transition as substituting, “creation for copying; experiment for dictation; and synthesis for segregation.”⁷¹ As Singerman highlights a transition from technique to vision, or hand to eye, we recognize Charlton’s own artistic vision.⁷² However, Singerman is careful to observe that Bauhaus in the US is not a seamless translation from German Bauhaus and as this chapter argued, neither was it when those pedagogical ideals traveled with Charlton to Beirut and were fashioned as American Cold War values.

Conclusion

Decades later, in 1993, John Carswell, British-born Islamic art historian and department faculty member from 1956–76, underscored the situated novelty of AUB’s department. In a lecture delivered at the university, Carswell reflected on the department during the 1950s: “It is not unfair to say that at this point Beirut was very much oriented in the direction of France, when it came to cultural and literary matters; so that it was something of a coup when AUB, of all places, suddenly started dishing out an entirely novel concept of what art and culture were.”⁷³ Carswell’s loaded terminology, expressed through his choice of the word *coup*, reflected AUB’s confrontational approach of the Cold War that pitched nation-states against one another in a bid for cultural authority. This chapter offered a historical context for Carswell’s rhetoric by tracing the role of cross-cultural encounters in reformulating modern art through the case study of the 1953 founding of the department of art at the American University of Beirut under the leadership of Maryette Charlton. The novelty of AUB’s art department, underscored in Carswell’s words, cannot, however, be understood solely within the political context of US involvement in Lebanon. It must also be understood by considering AUB’s artistic pedagogy in relation to that of ALBA. It is here that the Art Department at AUB offered something to the history of art in Lebanon, outside the aims of US foreign policy in Beirut: to borrow again, Singerman’s characterization of the presence of the Bauhaus in

the American university, the introduction of the concept of the artist whose professional expertise lay in the eye rather than the hand, in vision rather than technique—an alternative to the dominant nineteenth-century European Beaux-Arts tradition.⁷⁴

These attempts to reroute Beirut’s francophone influence via the arts were enhanced by Carswell’s own installation projects. In his 1972 installation *Plastic Art* Carswell engaged with issues of ecology and pollution by filling a twenty-meter transparent bag with plastic garbage that he had collected from local beaches.⁷⁵ Displayed in Jafet Library, the piece, which provoked student responses ranging from confusion to outrage, was accompanied by a small text panel discretely placed on the wall that explained the work’s environmentalist message. In direct contrast to ALBA’s focus on painting and sculpture, Carswell intentionally challenged such conventional media. Years later, he recalled:

Although there had always been a tradition of painting in Lebanon going back 100 years before the AUB art department, it was very much to begin with Western style painting in terms of what was going on in Constantinople at the time. The flow of influence came from the Ottoman capital rather than Europe, but the scene there was in turn a reflection of what was happening in Paris in the nineteenth century—realistic, landscapes, nudes. What the AUB department did was bring an American tradition and Bauhaus tradition here, open to all, and hold exhibitions conceived in a spirit of confrontation that gained increasing critical attention.⁷⁶

Carswell acknowledged an artistic tradition in Lebanon yet diluted its supposed authenticity by rerouting a French influence through Constantinople, now Istanbul. Carswell was held captive by a paradigm of authenticity in which a national art was awarded aesthetic value instead of acknowledging an art world in which multiple centers coexisted and intermingled.⁷⁷ His comments suggest further that Lebanese art was both geographically and historically removed from its European counterparts. The revival of the arts through an aggressive “confrontation” of the German Bauhaus tradition, however, also travelled to Lebanon via a conduit. In this case, the conduit was American.

Notes

- 1 Maryette Charlton, letter to Stephen Penrose, unpublished, March 28 1950, Maryette Charlton papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. In a letter, dated twenty-five years later to fellow AUB professor John Carswell, Charlton recalled the story with slight variations: during a visit to President Penrose’s home, Charlton exclaimed that she didn’t find AUB to be a university at all because it did not have an art department. When Penrose suggested Charlton start one, she agreed once there was a salaried position. Three years later, AUB contacted her with the news that funding was secured. Related, AUB historian Betty Anderson notes that Penrose was the first AUB president to have previously worked for the US government and under his presidency, AUB received US government subsidies for the first time. See Maryette Charlton, “A Letter to Professor John Carswell, Regarding the Early History of the Art Department at AUB, 1952–56,” unpublished, March 7 1967, Maryette Charlton papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; and Betty S. Anderson, *The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 137.
- 2 Maryette Charlton papers, Box 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 3 Maryette Charlton, “A Letter to Professor John Carswell,” n.p.
- 4 See Nour Salamé Abillama and Marie Tomb, *Art from Lebanon: Modern and Contemporary Artists, 1880–1975* (Beirut: Wonderful Editions, 2012); Joseph Abou Rizk, *Regards sur la peinture*

- au Liban (Beirut: Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 1956); Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe: l'évolution des arts plastiques en Égypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de la Peinture au Liban* (Paris: Éditions de l'Escalier, 1998); Cesar Nammour, *Amam al-Lawha: kitabat fi al-rasm* (Before the Canvas: Writings on Painting) (Beirut: Dar al-Funun al-Jamila, 2003); Frieda Howling, *Art in Lebanon: The Development of Contemporary Art in Lebanon, 1930–1975* (Beirut: Lebanese American University, 2005).
- 5 The most well-known examples of this revisionist history include Max Kozloff, “American Painting during the Cold War,” *Artforum* 11, no. 9 (May 1973): 43–54; Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39–41; Jane de Hart Mathews, “Art and Politics in Cold War America,” *American Historical Review* 81 (February–December 1976): 762–87; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
 - 6 Saed, “Culture ‘45,” *L’Orient* (October 3, 1945): 2. “Saed” signed a number of art reviews printed in *L’Orient* throughout the 1940s.
 - 7 Although Daoud Corm is considered the first professional painter and father of Lebanese modern art, he is often grouped with painters Habib Srour (1860–1938) and Khalil Saleeby (1870–1928) as constituting the first generation of artists. See Maha Aziza Sultan, *Rūwād min nahdah al-fann al-tashkili fi Lubnan: Corm, Srour wa Saleeby* (Beirut: Kaslik University, 2006). Silvia Naef labels these three artists, “Les premiers peintres professionnels,” or the first professional painters; Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, 133.
 - 8 Saed, “Culture ‘45,” 2.
 - 9 On the nude among this generation, see Kirsten Scheid, “Necessary Nudes: *Hadatha* and *Mu`asara* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese,” in Octavian Esanu, ed., *Art, Awakening, and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 17–43. Scheid references two additional texts from the perspective of the artists who worked with Miriam, the well-known model for many of the nudes among ALBA’s students. See Helen Khal, “The Denuding of Miriam,” published originally in a 1972 editions of Contact Art Gallery’s newsletter and Nadia Nammar, *Hikayat Jasad* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2001).
 - 10 In the fall of 1924, the director of public instruction in France issued several decrees regarding the instruction of arts and handicrafts in Lebanese public and private schools. See Kirsten Scheid, “Painters, Picture Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005), 181. On the incorporation of drawing classes in elementary schools in Egypt, see Raja Adal, *Beauty in the Age of Empire: Japan, Egypt, and the Global Aesthetic Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). Adal’s study is of particular relevance to the present chapter in that he charts documents a pedagogical approach to aesthetics, characteristic of the modern age, which while spanning languages and continents was deployed nonetheless to inculcate a particular national identity.
 - 11 According to Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf, plans for the school were formulated during informal meetings at painter César Gemayel’s studio in downtown Beirut. See his *The Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj* (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 198.
 - 12 The complete withdrawal of French troops occurred later in 1946.
 - 13 Quoted in Denise Ammoun, *Alexis Boutros: ALBA, Le Défi Culturel* (Beirut: ALBA, 2002), 102.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 109.
 - 15 Gallery owner Saleh Barakat reiterated this claim in 2005. He writes, “However, it is only with the independence of Lebanon and the foundation of the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in 1943 that we can speak of a national movement in the arts reaching maturity with groups of artists, formed, trained, and graduated in Lebanon.” Barakat’s assertion relies on an assumed purity in the formation of a national art. See his “Lebanon: The Art Scene,” in *Neighbors in Dialogue*, eds. Beral Madra and Ayşe Orhun Gültekin (Istanbul: Norgunk, 2005): 24.
 - 16 Quoted in Denise Ammoun, *Alexis Boutros: ALBA, Le Défi Culturel*, 68.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 67.
 - 18 These binaries do not belong exclusively to a francophone Christian perspective. Anthropologist Kirsten Scheid and artist and critic Walid Sadek describe a similar conviction in artist Moustafa Farroukh’s autobiography, published posthumously in Arabic in 1986, in which the Sunni Muslim Lebanese artist faults Arab Islamic culture for failing to modernize alongside its

- European counterparts. All this is more disappointing, according to Farroukh, given his culture’s historical glories. In both Farroukh’s autobiography and ALBA’s rhetoric, the artist assumes the job of spreading France’s *mission civilisatrice*. As in my discussion of *La Revue du Liban*, art is the symbolic means through which the mandate authority enforced its political and economic agenda. See Scheid, “Painters, Picture Makers, and Lebanon,” 103–53; and Sadek, “In Health but Mostly Sickness: The Autobiography of Mustafa Farrouk,” in *Out of Beirut*, ed. Suzanne Cotter (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006): 66–70. The difference in spelling of Farroukh’s last name is the result of different transliterations.
- 19 Xena Nehlawi, “Whatever Happened to the Fine Arts Proposal?” *Outlook: AUB Student Newspaper*, October 27, 2004, Presidents/John Waterbury Papers, Art Center, file AA/2, Library and Special Collections, the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, n.p.
 - 20 Maryette Charlton, syllabus to Art 211, 212: Introduction to the Arts, Maryette Charlton papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
 - 21 Maryette Charlton, “An Introduction to the Arts,” unpublished graduate paper, October 19, 1956, Maryette Charlton papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
 - 22 Charlton’s lasting friendship with Zelpha Chamoun is documented in their active exchange of letters after Charlton left Beirut, which suggest an intimate bond, as Zelpha felt comfortable enough with Charlton to openly discuss the political revelations of the rising tensions in Lebanon, including Chamoun’s concern over an impending 1958 civil war and her fear for her young grandchildren. Zelpha Chamoun to Maryette Charlton, unpublished letters, Maryette Charlton papers, Box 9, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
 - 23 *Young Artists of the Near East*, exhibit catalogue (Near East College Association, 1956), n.p.
 - 24 Maryette Charlton, unpublished resignation letter, January 17, 1956, Maryette Charlton papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
 - 25 See documents in Maryette Charlton papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
 - 26 One of the reasons the imperial powers of the Ottoman Empire tolerated missionaries was that it was illegal to convert Muslims.
 - 27 In his historical analysis of American universities abroad, Kyle A. Long dates American awareness of the Ottoman region to the 1915 Armenian genocide, citing the successful fundraising activities of the Near East Relief, a private charity established in 1915 that raised over \$100 million for displaced Armenians. See Kyle A. Long, “The Emergence of the American University Abroad” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018), 67–68. In the American academy, histories of the region were not included in course offerings until 1926, when AUB graduate Philip Hitti moved to Princeton University to teach Oriental history and colleges and universities began to include courses on Arab and Islamic studies. Brian VanDeMark, *American Sheikhs: Two Families, Four Generations, and the Story of America’s Influence in the Middle East* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), 141.
 - 28 See *Daniel Bliss and the Founding of the American University of Beirut*, ed. Carleton S. Coon Jr. (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 1989), 59. For a detailed history of the 1860 civil strife, see Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
 - 29 Long, “The Emergence of the American University Abroad,” 71. Long identifies William Dodge’s son, Cleveland, who would support NECA, as among a growing class in the United States of cultural capitalists during the first decades of the twentieth century who made their financial backing from industry but chose to support cultural enterprises.
 - 30 VanDeMark, *American Sheikhs*, 45. For an extended examination of the ideological conflict between Daniel Bliss’s American Protestant missionary ambitions and a purportedly inclusive liberal arts education that aimed to empower local students through the development of critical thinking, see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 141–79.
 - 31 France and Britain established permanent consulates in Beirut in 1833. The United States followed in 1836. By the mid-1840s, Prussia, Sardinia, Tuscany, Spain, Naples, Holland, and Greece had consulates-general stationed in the city as well. Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Merchants*

- and *Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 26.
- 32 On the history of Beirut’s urbanization process throughout the nineteenth century, see Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*; Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).
- 33 The commercial potential of the Levant region in the nineteenth-century French imaginary is evident in the novels of acclaimed French novelist Emile Zola.
- 34 Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 28–31.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 52–53.
- 36 Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 51–66.
- 37 Carol Hakim-Dowek, “The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea, 1840–1920” (PhD diss., St. Anthony’s College, 1997), 23.
- 38 Makdisi argues that sectarianism did not constitute a resistance to modernization but rather was produced by the forces of modernity. Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xi.
- 39 Khater, *Inventing Home*, 22. On the European intervention in Lebanon through the development of the silk market, see also Carolyn Gates, *Merchant Republic of Lebanon: Rise of an Open Economy* (London: I.B. Taurius, 1998), 12–30.
- 40 Fawaz *Merchants and Migrants*, 1, 31, 44.
- 41 The percentage rose at the outset of the French Mandate in 1920. Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 52.
- 42 Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 27.
- 43 *Ibid.* See also Carolyn Gates, *Merchant Republic of Lebanon: Rise of an Open Economy*.
- 44 On the history of schools in the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire, see Albert Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 302–4; Anderson, *The American University of Beirut*, 6–12. For a more critical history of SPC within this mid-nineteenth-century educational reform, see Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 211–12; and Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 180–87.
- 45 In its efforts to create a non-sectarian school community, Bustani’s National School frustrated Bliss and other active American missionaries. For more on this contentious relationship and Bustani as a figure entrenched in both American missionary and local Beirut cultures and therefore, ironically, at odds with Bliss’s strict missionary idealism, see Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 207–13.
- 46 This relationship can be traced to when the Maronites entered a formal union with Rome during the twelfth-century Crusades. Centuries later, the union enabled the establishment of the Maronite College of Rome in 1584. The school’s mission to train local clergy in theology also served a more politically advantageous aim of strengthening ties between the region’s Christian communities and the Vatican. The newly strengthened Christian European claim upon the region during this period was reinforced by missionaries and clerics traveling between Italy and Mount Lebanon. Art histories of Lebanon award the presence of Jesuit missionaries in Mount Lebanon a central role in the introduction of Italian painting techniques in Mount Lebanon. See Rizk, *Regards sur la peinture au Liban*, 1; Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 35; John Carswell, “A History of Lebanese Painting,” in *Lebanon: The Artist’s View, 200 Years of Lebanese Painting*, ed. British Lebanese Association (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1989): 16; Charbel Dagher, “How Painting Came East,” trans. Pauline Homsy Vinson, *al-Jadid: A Review of Arab Culture and Arts* (Summer/Fall 2006): 12; Howling, *Art in Lebanon*, 10; Cesar Nammour, personal interview, May 2005; Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe*, 113–32.
- 47 The two men most probably met at the school in Ghazir and both later would study in Rome.
- 48 On the transition from an Italian to French orientation among the missionary presence in Mount Lebanon as a result of political struggles within the respective European countries, see John P. Spagnolo, “The Definition of a Style of Imperialism: The Internal Politics of the French Educational Investment in Ottoman Beirut,” *French Historical Studies* 8, no. 4 (autumn 1974):

- 563–84; and Mathew Burrows, “‘Mission civilisatrice’: French Cultural Policy in the Middle East, 1860–1914,” *Historical Journal* 29, no. 1 (March 1986): 109–35.
- 49 Anderson’s report also resulted in a decrease of funding for missions, marking Bliss’s ability to convince the ABCFM board in 1864 to establish AUB a historical victory, despite the board’s taxing of Bliss with the responsibility to raise the funds.
- 50 Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 16.
- 51 Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 15.
- 52 On the historical development of an Arab imaginary, see Ussama Makdisi, “The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World,” *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Nada Shabout, Anneka Lenssen, and Sarah Rogers (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018): 28–34.
- 53 VanDeMark, *American Sheikhs*, 132.
- 54 Long dates the precariousness of the purported political disinterestedness of American universities abroad to 1938, when the US Department of State created a division of cultural affairs to coordinate private funding efforts. Long, “The Emergence of the American University Abroad,” 68.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 56 Maryette Charlton, “Notes to Young Middle Eastern Artists,” *al-Kulliyah* 31 (March 1956): 2.
- 57 On the deployment of abstract expressionism as an artistic style supposedly inherent to democracy, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 58 Ramsey Short, “Former AUB Professor Returns to Boast Beirut’s Art Scene,” *Daily Star*, July 11, 2003, 8.
- 59 Frick served on the faculty from 1956–76. His recollections referred to here are recorded in a letter to the author, dated December 14, 2011.
- 60 Short, “Former AUB Professor Returns to Boast Beirut’s Art Scene,” 8.
- 61 See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
- 62 Suzanne P. Hudson, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 2–51.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 66 Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3.
- 67 Arthur Frick has emphasized the significant impact of the visiting artist’s program on AUB’s art students. Personal correspondence with author, dated December 14, 2011.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 69 Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American Century*, 7. On the formative role of the Bauhaus on Barr’s concept of modern art and the Museum of Modern Art, see Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 155–61, 253–59, 310–12.
- 70 Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American Century*, 8. Singerman highlights the paradox of Gropius’ logic in relation to the professionalization of the artist, “Despite Gropius’ protest but according to his logic, I would again claim art as a profession: the privileging of overarching principles over specific technical competencies—the grounding and guiding of art practice in visual fundamentals and the fashioning of individual works as experiments, researches, proofs—echoes the severing of articulated theory from manual labor that characterizes the process of professionalization.”
- 71 Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 70.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 73 John Carswell, “Islamic Art: The Future of the Past,” unpublished lecture, John Carswell Papers, file AA/6, January 27 1993, Library and Special Collections, the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, 4.
- 74 Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 79.
- 75 On the controversial student response, see Helen al-Khal, “Is This Art or an Anti-Pollution Drive?” *Monday Morning* 1, no. 2 (1972): 32; M.A., “Plastique et Anti-Art,” *L’Orient* November 29, 1972,

John Carswell Files, AA/6, Library and Special Collections, the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, n.p.

76 Quoted in Short, “Former AUB Professor Returns to Boast Beirut’s Art Scene,” 7.

77 For a similar reliance on the trope of authenticity in characterizing modern art in Lebanon, see Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe*, 113–32. For a more culturally heterogenous reading of Carswell through his artwork, see Octavian Esanu’s introduction to the exhibition *Trans-Oriental Monochrome: John Carswell* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2015), n.p.

3 The Artist as Cultural Diplomat

John Ferren in Beirut, 1963–64¹

Introduction

American artist John Ferren's *Yellowstone Yellow* (Figure 3.1) from 1966 immediately announces the artist's formal affiliations with geometric abstraction. Bright, saturated colors neatly organize the composition into distinct linear and ovoid components. The relations between adjoining colors create on the surface of the canvas the illusion of overlapping form in terms of both movement and depth. Little known today in histories of American abstraction, Ferren (1905–70) was a significant participant in the movement. Included in the highly publicized 1936 show *Five Contemporary Concretionists* at New York's Paul Reinhardt Gallery, he was also an active member of the famous Eighth Street Club that provided a semiformal structure for debates and exhibitions among such artists as Robert Motherwell (1915–91), Mark Rothko (1903–70), Alexander Calder, and critics and curators such as the inaugural director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr Jr.

By 1970, however, when critic Irving Sandler published *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, official narratives had already sidestepped Ferren, despite the fact that Sandler had interviewed Ferren decades earlier, in 1936.² Sandler's choice of a victoriously confident and confrontational language to characterize a movement that launched American art on a global stage recalls John Carswell's rhetoric, discussed in the previous chapter, describing the art department at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as staging a 1950s coup in the Lebanese capital. The deployment of wartime terminology in the history of art suggests the Cold War context alongside a second, related narrative characterizing the rise of American abstraction as a coherent movement: art as cultural diplomacy. As it happens, *Magnificent* was painted after Ferren spent ten months in Beirut as the inaugural artist-in-residence sponsored by the United States Information Agency (USIA), known abroad as the United States Information Services (USIS) and operated under the auspices of the State Department.³

This chapter does not seek to recover Ferren's place in histories of American abstraction, nor does it attempt to overemphasize Ferren's role in the history of modern art in Lebanon. Indeed, in many ways, considering the substantial expat community there during the 1960s, Ferren's presence as a foreign artist in Beirut is almost negligible. Instead, the chapter highlights one of the more mundane yet often ignored aspects of avant-garde modernism: the historical details enabling the bureaucratic decisions that positioned the artist into an agent of cultural diplomacy. The chapter also documents the role of Lebanon within that history. As outlined in the chapter one, the work of Frances Stonor Saunders studiously implicated the Congress for Cultural Freedom within the United States' Cold War arsenal.



Figure 3.1 John Ferren, *Yellowstone Yellow*, 1966. Acrylic on canvas. 50 × 56 inches. Finday Galleries Collection.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Finday Galleries.

More recently, scholars of Middle East studies have begun to chart these implications in the Middle East through the field of literature. For their part, art historians of American art have chronicled the ways in which abstraction, and abstract expressionism in particular, was mobilized by major, internationally recognized museums like the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and wealthy individuals and families such as the Rockefellers, to stake a claim for the American ideals of freedom of expressionism and capitalistic individuality. This chapter brings together these bodies of scholarship—Middle East studies on Cold War literature and American art histories of Cold War abstraction—to disclose yet another component of mid-century American interest in the Middle East and the importance of not only literature but also the visual arts in this agenda.

Significantly, art could transcend linguistic barriers without requiring textual translation, and abstraction's shift in focus from narrative to the expressive formal elements of form and color only further primed abstraction for its renewed diplomatic role.⁴ To further examine the institutional aspect of Cold War abstraction as critical to this history, this chapter takes a close look at John Ferren, the first visual artist sent abroad to Beirut as part of the USIA's newly launched artist-in-residence program and considers the factors that primed him as the

government's choice. Similar to the previous examination of Maryette Charlton, this chapter focuses on an individual artist-in-residence—in this case, a cross-cultural encounter with a specific, intended goal: soft-power propaganda. In a comparable strategy to earlier chapters, this study frames an individual story within a broader historical context to understand the fraught tension between individual and institution as a defining characteristic of the Cold War cultural interchange and to further the argument that a national visual language is discursively produced precisely when the borders are most porous.

Modernism's Universal Aims

Although Ferren claimed that he was “not one of those red-hot brush throwers,” his driving interest in color nevertheless aligns his practice with one of modernism's central tenets: the privileging of form and color for their own sake rather than as illusionistic devices.⁵ In 1958, he published the article “Epitaph for the Avant-Garde,” in which he asserted that modernism represented neither a style nor a way of working but, rather, an attitude toward art, the artist, and the artist's social role, with the aim being to “get rid of the accretion of history.”⁶ Ferren's formal and theoretical languages are suggestive of modernism's claims to universalism: if formal elements were relieved of the traditional burden of narrative representation, then art could speak a language that transcended linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural barriers.⁷ Indeed, only five years after Ferren was sent to Beirut, Charles Frankel, American philosopher and assistant US secretary of state, summarized the importance of the idea of universalism in cultural diplomacy:

One imperative, which bears with particular force on a large power, is that cultural diplomacy must have a transnational flavor. In both the richer and poorer parts of the world, it is a condition of successful cultural diplomacy that the culture presented not be merely a piece of exotica. It must have a quality of translatability, of applicability to conditions beyond the borders of its country of origin. It must have, in other words, an element of universality.⁸

Writing for a special edition of the *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* devoted to Soviet–American rivalry in the Middle East in the context of the Cold War, Frankel asserts that policy must be considered cultural exchange, going as far as to claim that it must attend to the needs of the local population in order to avoid being viewed as repressive, ideological, or even too American.⁹ In accordance with this strategy of cultural propaganda, the deployment of individual artists works well to ensure two levels of discourse that differentiate between the singular artist-in-residence and the sponsoring government and accompanying policy.

In the case of Ferren, his modernist visual language with its universalist ambitions aligns with Frankel's conventional Cold War view of cultural propaganda that deployed abstract expressionism abroad. Ferren's francophone artistic training would suit the particular context of Lebanon in that he spoke French, yet his Americanness would serve to differentiate and thus reroute a francophone influence in the former French Mandate. Moreover, American exhibition catalogues and reviews of Ferren describe his work in terms of the American nationality yet persistently make reference to his acceptance in French art circles.¹⁰ Ferren thus represents cultural diplomacy's paradoxical strategy of what might be termed “subtle assertion.” Ferren adopted this approach seamlessly. Reflecting on his subsequent lecture on modern abstract art at the government-funded College of

Arts in Dacca, the artist told the newspaper *Pakistan Observer*, “I came to Pakistan not as a missionary seeking to convert but as a member of a group of painters whose search for freedom of expression may have some meaning to those who hear me.”¹¹

Ferren’s comment underscores the arguments examined in previous chapters whereby American Cold War strategy in the Middle East, and Lebanon in particular, assumed the form of the earlier nineteenth-century form of what Ussama Makdisi characterized as “a gentle crusade.”¹² Yet Ferren’s comments also work to deny a possible historical relationship between American missionary work in Lebanon and his residency. Ferren identifies himself not as a missionary, but rather as a member of a group of painters who nonetheless cohere around a set of guiding principles, including freedom of artistic expression. Furthermore, as scholar Elizabeth Holt argues, the assertion of individual freedom as an aesthetic principle was in reality not liberation from an ideological position, but rather its disguise.¹³ Modernism’s attention to form, visual or literary, enabled it to claim its break with aesthetic convention and cohesive narrative as apolitical and universal. This newly designated role for modernist abstraction, however, was novel; only a decade earlier, Republican congressman George Anthony Dondero (1883–1968) of Michigan had led a public campaign against abstraction, linking it to communist and socialist ideals. The next section details modernist abstraction’s reversal of fortune, which would enable Ferren’s residency in Beirut.

Modernist Abstraction’s Diplomatic Aims

Ferren’s lecture, “The Ideas of the Avant-Garde,” delivered abroad after his Beirut residency and based on his previously published “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde,” begins by considering the effects of World War II on American artists. Cut off from French imports, the United States nonetheless saw a substantial emigration of French artists (as it did with German members of the Bauhaus school). Ferren’s observations highlight the period of World War II and the subsequent Cold War as ones characterized by the movement of artists—including Ferren himself, who was unable to return to France after a visit to New York City because of the outbreak of war. Yet Ferren’s lecture also discussed the work of art in terms of truth and intuition, far removed from the political materialities of artists forced into exile. Recognizing that the two observations are not completely divorced, Ferren writes, “I believe that art is useful, not for political propaganda, as in the 1930s, but to close the gaps, the wounds that contemporary life have inflicted.”¹⁴ In Ferren’s words, the work that art was to undertake was psychological rather than political. Contrasting abstract modernism to art under the 1930s New Deal—a period in which artistic projects were directly commissioned by government as a means of support following the Great Depression—Ferren obscures abstract modernism’s own Cold War government patronage, which provided the means for Ferren’s very presence in the region and the occasion for his talk.

Ferren was not alone in mobilizing comparisons to the period of the 1930s as a means of drawing attention to the purported freedom represented by American modernism. Two decades earlier, inaugural curator of the Museum of Modern Art Alfred H. Barr Jr. had published his *What is Modern Painting?* The concluding section, titled “Truth, Freedom, Perfection,” explicitly underscores the necessity of freedom—in contrast to Hitler’s censorship of the visual arts—to create and interpret modern art. In an article examining Barr’s language in relationship to the Cold War, former curator at MoMA and art historian Patricia Hills highlights a directness in Barr’s comparison between the social realism and abstraction within Cold War terminology.¹⁵ The publication,

reprinted in four iterations between 1944 and 1966, documents small yet significant changes in Barr's rhetoric, according to Hills. Comparing the 1945 and 1952 editions, for instance, Hills notes that Barr specifies totalitarianism as communist totalitarianism and identifies the abstract avant-garde as examples of democracy.¹⁶ Further in the 1952 edition, Barr explicitly links social realism as an artistic style with the ideologies of totalitarian regimes. Barr's publication, it is important to note, was intended for a broad, widely dispersed public, including students and teachers. As Hills details, in the summer of 1943, Barr sent the completed manuscript to boards of education and high school teachers nationwide for feedback. Although most reviews were positive, there were some expressions of concern over the last chapter and its explicit reference to the Nazis' attack on artistic freedom, which some readers claimed dated the publication. According to Hills, Barr nonetheless insisted on retaining the reference, stressing the importance of deploying this recent historical example to argue for the importance of freedom to create and to interpret.¹⁷

These two central goals of Barr's publication—a widespread audience and the assertion of the importance of freedom in art—recall Maryette Charlton's pedagogical approach to the visual arts at the American University of Beirut, outlined in the previous chapter. Indeed, Charlton's approach modeled that of MoMA's director of education Victor D'Amico who, according to Patricia Hills, encouraged Barr to author a text explaining modern painting for the general public rather than for specialists (Barr was working on three book projects at the time, including a history of modernism).¹⁸ Opening the art department to all students, Charlton, too, invoked terms like democracy, intuition, and freedom of expression to align pedagogy to national ideals, yet she obscured those national underpinnings with more abstruse concepts, such as freedom, truth, and intuition. More importantly, the strategy of instilling those values within a broad public (as did AUB's lecture series inaugurated by Charlton), rather than cultivating a select group of specialists, is itself a Cold War strategy. For Barr, that same tactic was deployed to counter a series of attacks on modern art that came earlier that decade at the hands of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which included an attack directly on MoMA. Indeed, Barr's aim to convey modernism's aesthetic and ideological value in the publication *What is Modern Painting?* served not only to expand MoMA's own audience but also to inculcate that public with the essential Americanness of abstract expressionism. Only a few years earlier, in 1952, Barr had published an essay in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "Is Modern Art Communist?"¹⁹ Barr's assertion that such an art form could flourish only in a democratic country such as the United States positioned abstraction in direct opposition to Dondero's equally public campaign against modernism.

Although art historians have since interrogated modernism's idealistic claims, contending that both modernism and universalism are historically contingent and ideologically driven, the belief that art, and abstraction in particular, could speak a universal language primed it to serve as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy during the 1950s and 1960s. Of course, abstraction itself was critically contingent. Dondero's very vocal witch-hunt against modernism had occurred only ten years earlier. Head of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Dondero traveled throughout the United States delivering public lectures and publishing short essays that repeatedly yoked abstraction to leftist and communist parties. In a speech at the first session of the 81st Congress, Dondero opens:

Mr. Speaker, quite a few individuals in art, who are sincere in purpose, honest in intent, but with only a superficial knowledge of the complicated influences that surge in the art world of today, have written me—or otherwise expressed their

opinions—that so-called modern art or contemporary art cannot be Communist because art in Russia today is realistic and objective.

The left-wing art magazines advance the same unsound premises of reasoning, asserting in editorial spasms that modern art is real art. They plead for tolerance, but in turn tolerate nothing except their “isms.”²⁰

Dondero proceeds to chastise various modernist movements such as futurism, surrealism, and abstraction, and throughout his speech, he identifies by name targeted artists who are either communists or share communist sympathies. He concludes with a statement on art and politics:

I repeat and now emphasize, that when art becomes a weapon to destroy, when art becomes art with a social or political protest, when art is the art of the isms, it ceases to be free, and having entered the ideological and political field, it is properly subject to restrictions we have always placed upon politics and political writers in our great and untrammled press.²¹

Situating Barr’s language alongside that of Dondero underscores the contingency of terms such as freedom, art, and politics—and the relationship between them. Both Barr and Dondero asserted the importance of freedom in artistic expression, and both sought to separate art from the service of political protest or ideology. The resulting visual form, however, was different for Dondero and Barr. The very fact that in order to signal its creative freedom, art must assume a particular visual language is itself a paradox. For Dondero, certain visual languages—such as abstraction—did signal a political perspective, and as a result, were, in his words quoted above, “properly subject to restrictions.” Art historian David Craven has mobilized Levi-Strauss’s concept of the myth, deployed to reconcile contradictory phenomena, in order to understand the context of abstract expressionism during the Cold War. In Craven’s reading, free expression needed to be reconciled with opposition to subversive values and the claims of free speech reconciled with the requirements for national security.²² The paradox and thus need for myth-making surrounding abstract expressionism under the Cold War is precisely what enabled its change of fate by the early 1960s. Dondero’s scathing condemnation of abstraction, and abstract expressionism in particular, would lose its traction by 1963, when Ferren was chosen to represent the US government abroad in Lebanon.

By mid-century, modern American abstraction—and abstract expressionism in particular—was an ideal export to assert, on the international stage, that America’s cultural product matched its postwar economic and political superiority.²³ This shift in abstraction’s fate is securely tied to the efforts of Barr and MoMA, alongside those of the Rockefeller family, with whom Barr worked closely, and Lloyd Goodrich of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Those efforts took various guises—from Barr’s own writings and publications as director of MoMA, to the museum’s establishment of the International Program, founded in 1952 with the aim of promoting international understanding through the circulation of MoMA’s exhibitions (of which AUB’s art department under Charlton was a host).²⁴

In 1965, the *New York Times* published an article introducing the Art in Embassies Program, which, according to the article’s author, had taken more than a decade to launch, with the encouragement of the Museum of Modern Art and the Woodward Foundation (Stanley Woodward had served previously as a foreign service officer before

establishing his foundation). The State Department's agonizingly slow launch wasn't its only sluggish foray into cultural export. The US government also lagged behind other countries, such as France, Britain, Canada, and Iceland, that had long before sent "native art to missions abroad."²⁵ That this art was to serve as "cultural diplomacy in action" is stated in the program's brochure, and the art itself was not chosen by the ambassador but rather by the committee (the committee further dictated where each work would be hung in the residence).²⁶

The US State Department's resistance did have a source—a controversial exhibition it had sponsored in Paris and Czechoslovakia in 1947. Often highlighted in art histories of the Cold War, the exhibition's popularity sparked the Soviet Union to launch its own, rival exhibition. Yet despite having successfully prodded the Soviet Union into mounting a cultural counter, US members of congress, including Dondero, accused the US artists who had participated in the US's own exhibit of having communist affiliations. The basis of the charge? The abstract nature of their work. Two years later, art critic Emily Genauer would recall Dondero's response to the 1947 exhibition.²⁷ Genauer, writing in the popular *Harper's Magazine*, was reviewing a small exhibition curated by husband and wife the Auments, which was brought to St. Alban's Naval Hospital as a gesture of goodwill—and which Dondero attacked because it included artists previously involved in the 1947 State Department exhibition. Genauer's article documents the reach of Dondero's attacks on art—from exhibitions sponsored abroad by the State Department to small, individual gestures of goodwill (other than some funding from the Red Cross, the Auments' exhibition was otherwise an individual initiative on the part of the couple). Genauer's piece also underscores the extent of Dondero's wrath. Interviewing the congressman for the article to "understand what the Congressman really had in mind," Genauer quotes his saying that "modern art is communistic because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country, our cheerful progress, and our great material progress."²⁸ Moreover, according to Dondero, it was up to the critic to police the painters' political affiliations. This could be done, according to the congressman, through the list of the names of artists included in the now infamous 1947 State Department show.

Dondero continued his attacks into the mid-1950s; two exhibitions of modern art organized under the auspices of the USIA were cancelled because of purported left-wing politics of participating artists.²⁹ Unfortunately for Dondero, his voice was not as loud as those in the art world. As noted earlier, by the early 1960s, abstraction had undergone a radical transformation in its so-called nationalism. By the time of Ferren and the Art in Embassies Program, abstraction and abstract expressionism were framed by both its champions (at MoMA and at museums throughout the country) and the US State Department as a formal and ideological language that simultaneously transcended and reified national borders; it both represented American ideals of freedom and individualism yet communicated across linguistic, cultural, and political difference. Indeed, in the very same year (1963) that he signed the USIA Artist-in-Residence Program, President John F. Kennedy appointed Nancy P. Kefauver to the position of Department of State advisor on fine arts as part of the Art in Embassies Program, launched as a worldwide program in January of that year. These initiatives were part of an influx of funding for USIA during the Kennedy years.³⁰ Yet while the breadth of historiography tracking the period between the late 1940s and early 1960s is rich, with the exception of recent scholarship on Latin America, little attention has been awarded to the travels of modernism outside Europe and America.

USIA's First Artist-in-Residence

When asked what he did in Beirut, Ferren replied, "I was just an artist. I didn't do anything."³¹ The circumstance of a residency sponsored by the State Department in 1963, however, betrays the disingenuousness of Ferren's claim. This seemingly paradoxical perspective—that he was sent by the State Department to just paint—comes through in Ferren's own recollection of his time in Lebanon during a 1965 interview immediately following his residency. Responding to a question about how his time in Lebanon influenced the artist and if he in turn influenced Lebanon, Ferren stated:

The influence of Lebanon, which, of course, I was sent there to make, I think was at least considerable. I don't know the quality of it but they had never seen American painting or an American painter actually, although certainly there must be people who pass through there, but I mean who actually was working there. And I was there on my own premises. In other words, I went there as a working artist, you see. So, I set up a studio and started to work and the artists began to gravitate to my studio. They were interested in the fact that an American painter was there and they'd heard about American Abstract Expressionism and so forth. I just really sat there and worked and people came around. And then I gave an exhibition there which is still being discussed a year afterwards. Most of my work was almost anathema to a great number of people who had never seen anything like that. They considered it terribly brutal.³²

This extensive quote underscores the paradoxical nature of Ferren's presence in Beirut. On the one hand, that Ferren just set up his studio and painted suggests an innocuous gesture and one undertaken on Ferren's own independent accord. On the other hand, as he articulates from the outset, the American artist was there precisely to have an influence—one funded by the United States government through a department launched for the specific purpose of Cold War propaganda. In many ways, Ferren described his presence in the same nonchalant terms that worked to mask the agenda of American cultural propaganda, which sought to operate by mere presence. Ferren, for his part, just painted.³³

Yet according to Ferren's recollections, his purportedly novel approach to art, grounded in American abstract expressionism, attracted Lebanese painters to his studio and generated much discussion around his exhibition. To produce Ferren's Americanness, however, his Parisian basis in modernism had to be repressed. Much of Ferren's own words, and the essay accompanying his Beirut exhibition, centered his production through recourse to conventional symbols of American culture. In that same 1965 interview, Ferren claimed that he was attacked by the Francophiles of Beirut: "It's very curious because in America I'm considered a very refined painter, not a brutal painter. There I found myself the barbarian."³⁴ Ferren's claims differentiate French and American artists—critical to the Cold War Lebanese context—but his comments also underscore an insightful observation that aesthetics, and modernism in particular, are not universal. Rather, contexts receive and render art meaningful in different ways. What is striking about the use of the term *barbarian* is the invocation not only of a civilizing discourse that continues to haunt the Global South in Western representation, but also of an American claim to barbarianism (in comparison to France) as a mode for claiming America's purported Wild West identity. Several years later, in a 1968 interview, Ferren would again invoke the term *barbaric* to describe responses to his exhibition, holding onto a positive connotation with the effect of shaking up the Lebanese public.³⁵ Moreover, for Ferren's Beirut catalogue, francophone poet George Schehadé penned a brief,

poetic piece titled “The Roots of Color” in which he likens Ferren to “a tall Indian chief” who wields his brush like “a cowboy’s lasso”—a mix of metaphors that asserts not only Ferren’s American-ness but also his status in the art world (a chief) and a hypermasculinity (the figure of the cowboy) often associated with the New York school of abstract expressionism.³⁶ Yet because the United States government could only secure an influential presence in Lebanon by surpassing a francophone stronghold, it was Ferren’s francophone beginnings that made him an ideal candidate for the cultural diplomacy at hand.

Beirut’s Appeal, Ferren’s Appeal

In a 1962 memo to President Kennedy, the Lebanese ambassador to the United States suggested a more aggressive cultural and commercial approach in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, “the showplace for the Arab world.”³⁷ As detailed in the first chapter, the Lebanese capital of Beirut had served as a regional center for economic, political, and missionary activities since the second half of the nineteenth century. By the early 1960s, the city had developed into an artistic hub for Lebanese and Arab artists, many of whom settled in Beirut after their studies abroad in Paris and Rome. Much of Beirut’s appeal stemmed from Lebanon’s *laissez-faire* economy. Set in place under the French Mandate, the country’s open political economy molded Beirut into a regional capital for international commerce, trade, and tourism. This, coupled with the country’s relaxed censorship laws, attracted to the capital a broad mix of businesspeople, journalists, writers, artists, and tourists. Moreover, Lebanon’s national identity as a crossroads between East and West primed its pro-Western foreign policy and potential strategic use to the United States.

In 1963, only a year after the Lebanese ambassador’s memo to Kennedy, the USIA initiated its sponsorship of artists’ residencies abroad with Lebanon. Ferren was an easy choice to launch the program. Despite the precarious beginnings of abstraction in United States—yoked as it was to leftist politics during the witch hunts of McCarthy and Dondero—by the early 1960s, the formal languages of modernism had survived a stunning turn of fate. As art historians have documented, abstraction had been popularized through the mass media, the staunch efforts of individuals such as MoMA’s Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Whitney’s Lloyd Goodrich, and government agencies.³⁸ Framed as a representation of the individuality and freedom posited by the United States government as national values, abstract expressionism in particular marked the ascent of American art on the global stage. In similar terms, representatives for the State Department explained their choice of Ferren in a 1964 *Newsweek* article: “As an abstract expressionist, he is a member of a distinctly American school.”³⁹ Despite formal affiliations with his American peers, Ferren’s artistic trajectory suggests certain differences as well, ones that would later position him as an ideal candidate for the USIA’s involvement in Beirut: his francophone beginnings and his service in the Office of War Information.

Born in Oregon in 1905, Ferren moved to Los Angeles with his family before the restlessness of young adulthood brought him to San Francisco. There he had his first seemingly accidental encounter with art-making; on his way to work as an engineer for the phone company, Ferren passed an art supply store with plasticine in the windows. Curious, Ferren purchased some and began to model small clay busts and figures. Soon after, Ferren took a job in an Italian stone yard, where he worked for the next four years. In 1929, he traveled to Europe, where once again, apparent happenchance shaped his career. At the time, Ferren didn’t speak French. Drawn to the familiar sounds of his

native language on a beach in St. Tropez, he met up with the American students of German-born American painter Hans Hoffman. Ferren also met his future wife, the daughter of Paris-based Chilean artist Manuel Ortiz de Zárate. After briefly returning to the United States, Ferren moved to Paris, remaining there for nearly a decade and beginning his career as a transnational abstract painter.⁴⁰

Occasionally enrolling in courses at Paris's various academies, Ferren ascribed his art education to informal debates with other artists around the cafés of Paris. Marrying into a well-connected artistic family, Ferren was thrust into Paris's avant-garde art circles, spending his time with Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, André Derain, Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, Joan Miro, Max Ernst, André Breton, and his self-declared, closest artistic companion, Jean Hélion. According to legend, it was Ferren who stretched the canvas for *Guernica* and introduced Picasso to photographer Dora Marr. Represented by Pierre Matisse, Ferren exhibited successfully in Paris both independently and as a member of the group Abstraction-Creation and the Association of Modern American and English Artists. These connections document not only Ferren's intimacy within modernist circles, but also the transnationalism that forged modernism, despite claims of its beginnings in Paris. Among the artists cited above, only Derain, Léger, Breton, Hélion, and Marr were French; the rest constituted the expat community that forged Paris's cosmopolitan artistic circles, similar to Beirut during the 1950s and 1960s as artists from the Arab world, Europe, and the United States—Ferren among them—made their home among the cafés and galleries of the Lebanese capital. New York, in other words, never stole modern art from the French capital, to paraphrase one of the most well-known publications on Cold War modernism. Rather, modernism, as a political and aesthetic philosophy, was forged among a collective of artists who together exemplified the movement's transnational roots. The forthcoming world war would only further constitute modernism as an artistic movement of mobility and exchange.

In 1939, Ferren found himself in New York City, newly divorced and, because of the war, unable to renew his visa. Despite his previous transatlantic success, Ferren experienced a sense of artistic isolation, which he ascribed to his absence from the difficulties his American peers had experienced in the 1930s throughout the Great Depression. Seeking an alternative route, he unsuccessfully applied to the US Army and Navy—rejected from the former for being uneducated and the latter for being an abstract painter and, presumably, subversive. Soon after, however, Ferren was overheard speaking fluent French at a dinner party and was quickly recruited by the Office of War Information (OWI), where he served from 1943–45. Stationed in Algiers, Ferren wrote letters home scattered with Arabic phrases, and his personal papers include official documents outlining the subtle strategies of propaganda. Whereas Ferren's identity as an artist threatened his governmental work—he claims to have kept it a tight secret—his involvement with the OWI most probably kept him off Dondero's lists of subversive artists during the McCarthy-era purges, from which Ferren is conspicuously absent.⁴¹

Ferren's work with the OWI, for which he received a Bronze Star, remains the most probable factor flagging him as a candidate for the USIA Artist-in-Residence Program. The USIA initiated the program when a request came from Beirut for an American painter rather than American artworks, reviving an idea that had been proposed by Nelson Rockefeller two decades earlier. The program was quickly approved by President Kennedy.⁴² There was no application process, and in two biographical interviews conducted in the late 1960s, Ferren recalled that the award of the USIA residency came as a complete surprise. He had never won any sort of official artistic recognition and had

failed in six attempts to win a Guggenheim Fellowship, despite letters of recommendation from Picasso, Brancusi, and Kandisky. When Ferren received the call to go to Lebanon, his response was, “Where’s Lebanon?”⁴³ However, the artist’s letters home while stationed in Algiers are sprinkled with commonly used Arabic phrases praising Allah and thanking God. Moreover, a letter to Ferren from his then wife, dated November 22, 1943, discusses “the Lebanese situation,” which Ferren had apparently explained in a previous letter. She writes, “The impossible situation the French had been put into in the Lebanese situation—anyway it seems settled for the time being and the Americans seemed to realize in the end that the French had handled it in the only possible way.”⁴⁴

The letters refer to the Lebanese Crisis of November 1943. In recognition of the November 26, 1941, declaration that Lebanon would be free under the French government, elections were held in 1943. When new officials assumed their posts, they voted on November 8, 1943, for a complete abolishment of the French Mandate. In response, the Free France government detained nearly all Lebanese heads of government. This provoked an international crisis as American, British, and Arab governments pressured the French Committee of National Liberation, stationed in Algiers, to release the Lebanese government officials. When they were eventually released on November 22, 1943, Lebanon finally threw off the political and military yoke of France. As Ferren was stationed in Algiers at the time, his comment “Where is Lebanon?” suggests that the artist sought to publicly feign ignorance in order to downplay his previous OWI service, which, paradoxically, is precisely what made him the ideal candidate for the USIA residency in Lebanon.

Equally important as Ferren’s OWI service was his fluency in French, both linguistically and artistically. America’s global assertion was played in the Middle East in terms of a struggle against both communism and French cultural authority. Ferren articulated the aim of the USIA program as being “to promote American culture and to counter the dominant French influence in the visual arts.”⁴⁵ As discussed in previous chapters, France’s influence in Lebanon is traced to the second half of the nineteenth century with the presence of missionaries. Then considered part of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon came under French political authority in the aftermath of World War I. Under the French Mandate, the official language was changed from Turkish to French rather than Arabic, and the national education curriculum privileged Lebanon’s historical ties with France over its regional relationships. Such political affiliations played out in the field of the visual arts as well, as documented in the case of the francophone journal *La Revue du Liban*. French influence continued into the middle of the century, as the majority of Lebanese artists received government scholarships to Paris and the first university art school, l’Académie libanaise des beaux arts, remained entrenched in French pedagogy despite its 1943 establishment by local Lebanese artists.

Importantly, Ferren was not the first American to attempt to counter French influence in the visual arts. The previous chapter documented the efforts of Chicago artist Maryette Charlton, who established the fine arts department at the American University of Beirut in 1953. A decade later, Ferren arrived in the Lebanese capital. An important year, 1963 represented the height of both the USIA’s cultural activities (numbering over 12,000 employees by the middle of the decade) and Beirut’s role as a regional artistic hub.⁴⁶ The city had witnessed its first public exhibition in 1930, and by the mid-1960s, nearly 30 galleries and cultural centers crowded the small area of Ras Beirut, where Ferren established his studio (Figure 3.2). During his stay, he participated in the Lebanese capital’s dynamic cultural life. He delivered lectures in English and French based on his “Epitaph



Figure 3.2 John Ferren in his Beirut studio. Reproduced in *Ferren, Beirut '64: Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren*, Centre d'art contemporain exhibition catalogue, Beirut, 1964. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Finday Galleries.

for an Avant-Garde”; attended meetings of the Lebanese Artists Association; participated in roundtables debating the state of a national Lebanese art; and gave a number of interviews in the English, French, and Arabic dailies. One of these interviews is noticeably authored by the USIA, with the interviewer beginning by unabashedly asking for Ferren’s thoughts on Khrushchev’s attack on modern art.⁴⁷ At the close of his ten months, the artist held a solo show at the elite gallery, Centre d’art contemporain, located on the ground floor of the old presidential palace on Qantari street. Specializing in European prints and engravings, the gallery was established during the early 1960s by architect Pierre el-Khoury.⁴⁸ Characterizing his residency as “a PR job,” Ferren stopped in Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, and India to deliver lectures on American abstraction, concluding his international tour in London, where he opened an exhibition of his recent work at the USIA gallery there.⁴⁹

In an interview years later, Ferren reflected on his time abroad as “the best year of my life.” Locally, his Beirut exhibit received extensive coverage in the form of rave reviews that singled out the American’s shocking use of “loose brushstrokes and brilliance of color (Figure 3.3).”⁵⁰ Ferren’s radicality can be understood through the artist’s own description of Beiruti painters. For an article in *Newsweek*, Ferren reported, “They’re seeing painting mainly through European eyes but they’re also getting bogged down in folklore. I stressed the parallel between their situation and ours. We broke from Europe. They might too, and develop their own motivations.”⁵¹ In many ways, Ferren’s comments are suggestive of what art historian Paul Roger Fisher has characterized as an essential component of expat discourse of American artists living in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century—a discourse constituted through both a vocabulary and geographical hierarchy.⁵² In Fisher’s study, the discourse is geographically separated between Europe and the United States. Yet Ferren—himself an American artist in Paris in the years preceding World War II—brings that discursive construction of the art world to Lebanon.

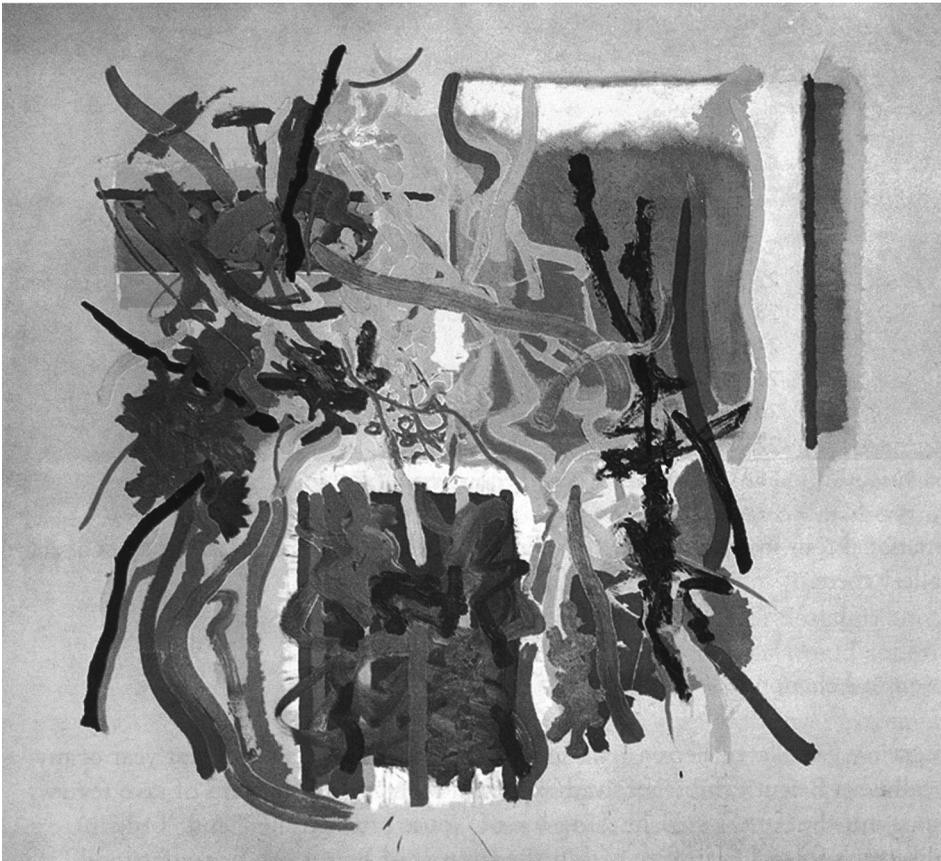


Figure 3.3 John Ferren, *Jounie*, 1963. Oil on canvas. 59 1/16 × 64 9/16 in. Collection unknown. Reproduced in *Ferren, Beirut '64: Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren*, Centre d'art contemporain exhibition catalogue, Beirut, 1964.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Finday Galleries.

Ferren's remarks further underscore the newly defined role for American art in the second half of the twentieth century. Promoting strategies of innovation and progression, Ferren assured Lebanese artists of their own national voice through a divorce with Europe and an embrace of American ideals. Moreover, despite the apparent dismissive tone of the article's title, "Middle East Squiggle," art was clearly a significant means through which the United States strengthened its diplomatic relationship with the Lebanese government and served a strategic role among competing French claims to cultural authority. Indeed, this near obsession with establishing and justifying an American art—a national visual language rooted in culture and geography—is consistent throughout exhibition catalogues produced under MoMA and USIA. In one USIA catalogue, organizer Lois Bingham introduced *Highlights of American Painting*:

Unusual directness and clarity of vision interpreted with a corresponding simplicity of statement are the underlying characteristics of American Art.... No country can be said to have an art of its own until the work of its artists shows a native strain. During the last two centuries of American history our artists have gained in self-confidence and are drawing inspiration from their home environment rather than depending upon foreign movements for guidance. None the less, American artists owe a major debt to European masters.⁵³

Bingham concludes the exhibition essay in similar terms:

It is noteworthy that in all the various movements and individual styles developed in American art, variety, even diversity, is markedly apparent. This in itself is a characteristic: as in all periods of history, art reflects the traits of its people.⁵⁴

Bingham's narrative acknowledges Europe's importance to the development of American art, as does Ferren in his comments to *Newsweek*. Certainly, this was a conventional art historical trope. In an earlier 1947 USIA catalogue for *Advancing American Art*, Hugo Weisgall writes:

The influence of Europe will be readily apparent to the observer; some will use this to scorn American art. How inept is such criticism: American culture derives from Europe and there are fewer differences between the United States and some European countries than between various countries in Europe itself. In the days of technological advances can the United States be aesthetically isolationist? It is not the source of art that creates its significance. It is the strength and individuality of the artistic expression that establishes its validity.⁵⁵

In each of the above quoted statements, Europe is acknowledged, and, in Weisgall's words, such artistic exchange is impossible to avoid. Yet the terms of that exchange are critical to art historian Fisher's reflections on earlier nineteenth-century artistic itineraries that created national traits through a geographical hierarchy. The paternalistic (in this case, nationalistic) hierarchy is dismantled only when the United States—or in Ferren's case, Lebanon—is able to establish one's own artistic integrity and individuality, two terms that are consistently mobilized throughout the Cold War decade of the 1960s to embody American art and political values. Those terms, however, must be qualified, and in this context, they are qualified visually. Ferren's residency in Beirut did not aim for a

direct translation of aesthetics. Instead, it sought less of a visual or aesthetic effect and more of an ideological sway through the introduction of cultural values discursively attached to the visual language of abstract expressionism.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the United States vied for primacy in the Middle East against the competing agendas of communism, socialism, and pan-Arab nationalism. Ferren's official presence in Beirut underscores Lebanon as a strategic node for asserting American influence in the region and art as a potential medium for doing so. Ferren certainly understood this tension between art as a means for both cross-cultural understanding and strategic diplomacy. To avoid local accusations that he was a spy, Ferren repeatedly claimed that he was on an arts scholarship, and later he suggested to the USIA that his solo exhibition in Beirut take place outside the auspices of official sponsorship.

Broadly speaking, there are two perspectives on the effectiveness of art's role in cultural diplomacy during the Cold War decades of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Within diplomatic histories, the visual arts receive minimal treatment. This is partly the result of bureaucracy. Former USIA employee and historian Richard Arndt characterizes art's significance as dependent upon "erratic market movements of inter-museum interchange, random migration of artistic talent, the whim of private and corporate donors, and the taste of exhausted cultural diplomats, formal and informal."⁵⁶ Art historians, on the other hand, have argued that the visual arts served as a "weapon of the Cold War," to borrow the well-worn phrase of Eva Cockroft.⁵⁷ The story of Ferren accounts for both these perspectives on art's diplomatic effectiveness. From the American standpoint, Ferren "ignited" the art scene of Beirut.⁵⁸ Art historical narratives of Lebanon, on the other hand, record the American artist's presence with the mere mention of his name, deployed only to assert Beirut's cosmopolitan status.⁵⁹ Foregrounding Ferren's presence in Beirut, this chapter argued that a national art is rhetorically asserted precisely at the moment when concise demarcations of formal languages and their national origins are most fragile.

On an individual level, Ferren's experience in the Middle East registered formally upon his return to New York. Attracted to "the spherialized decoration" of Islamic architecture, Ferren translated the visual encounter into a pared-down doubled arch, labeled as a mandala by critic Louis Finkelstein.⁶⁰ Indeed, the almond shape appears throughout much of his post-Beirut work (Figure 3.4). In terms of local influence, Lebanese perspectives stand in stark contrast. According to young Lebanese artists active at the time, Ferren had minimal interaction with Beirut's art scene. Farid Haddad, a graduate of AUB's art department and the first Arab artist to be awarded a Fulbright-Hays foreign grant in 1972 to study at the Art Students League of New York, for instance, remembers the overwhelming feeling that he was seeing something truly novel upon his first visit to New York's MoMA in the spring of 1968, four years after Ferren's stay in Beirut.

Haddad had visited New York City en route back to Beirut after spending the academic year at Rollins College as the recipient of a Florida Rotary Club international student scholarship for one academic year between 1967 and 1968. Remarkable in Haddad's recollections is that the Lebanese art world was represented by a blinding European tradition, even within AUB's department:

For about seven formative years (including three at AUB), I was subjected to European figuration and abstraction that were prevalent in that domain, and it was impossible

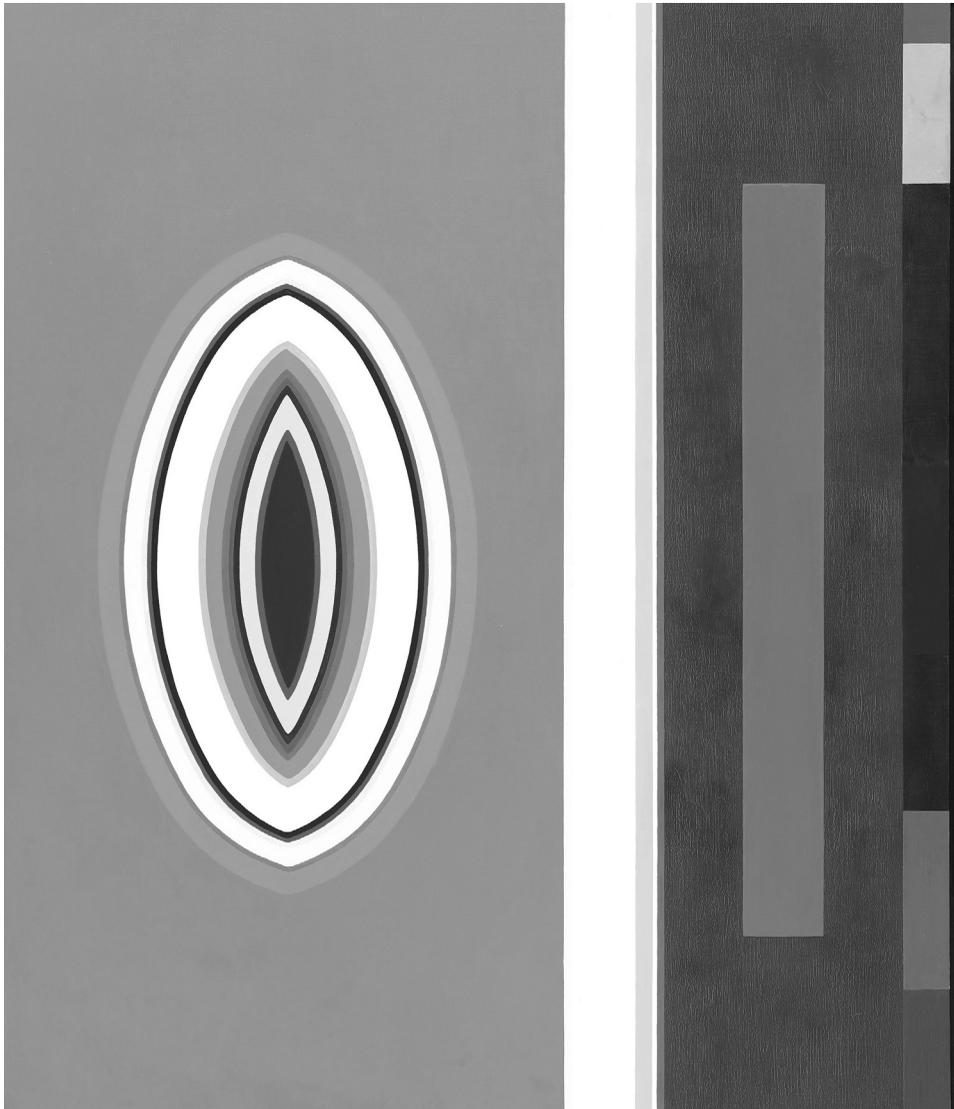


Figure 3.4 John Ferren, *Peace*, 1965. Acrylic on canvas. 72 × 60 in. Finday Galleries Collection. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Finday Galleries.

for me and others to make this transcontinental jump to this side of the Atlantic. Europe, and in particular France insulated Lebanon from any cultural advances other than its own. Much of what was modern or contemporary in America during the 1950s and 1960s seemed very distant.⁶¹

Allowing for indulgence in both nostalgia and official rhetoric, the reality of Ferren's role within Lebanese modernism would appear to be somewhere in the middle of the two extremes offered by American and Lebanese histories.

At the time, Beirut's art world was extremely intimate, and as popular society pages attest, exhibition openings were the places to see and be seen. Newspapers occasionally listed as many as nine openings on a single Friday night, and reviews often reported two to three hundred visitors. Yet not all art lovers were created equal; critics policed openings, singling out "champagne sippers" and those exhibits that brought together "cocktails and pottery."⁶² This excitement over the visual arts in Beirut was relatively novel. The first dedicated commercial contemporary art gallery, Gallery One, had opened in 1961.⁶³ In such a context, artists were eager for exposure to new artistic expressions and camaraderie. Visual artists partnered with writers and poets to produce cultural journals, and galleries were established as spaces for social and political gatherings rather than financial profit.

As a foreigner, Ferren would have been immediately identified in Beirut's small yet diverse artistic community. His status as an American would have awarded him as much authority as it did suspicion. Despite the claims of Lebanese art historical narratives, Ferren was, in fact, included in a number of forums with the most prominent Lebanese artists at the time; he served as an honorary jury member for the annual salon and participated in at least two roundtables that were published in the city's most widely read francophone newspaper. Reviews of his solo exhibit appeared in the Arabic, French, and English dailies—many of which commented more on his presence as an American and its indication of Beirut's cosmopolitan status than on the paintings themselves. The intimacy of Beirut's art scene further suggests that Ferren's isolation is more myth than reality.

My intention here is neither to diminish Ferren's influence in Beirut, as Lebanese historical narratives have, nor to recount the failures of American abstraction abroad. In fact, a modernist aesthetic of displaying large-scale painted canvases is evident in photographs documenting the 1971 launch of AUB's collection of contemporary art—a project brought to an abrupt end by the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Instead, I want to highlight the ways in which Ferren's story shares much about art's role as a cultural diplomat during the Cold War decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Accounting for the moment during which American ambitions in the Middle East region were clearly at stake requires that we recognize the politics that both allowed for and framed even the most seemingly mundane of cross-cultural encounters and their subsequent historiographies. Moreover—and perhaps more interesting and difficult to determine—is what the interaction between Ferren and the Lebanese art world suggests about the ways in which modernism, with all the complexities of its historical trajectory, was both resisted and reformulated along its travels. In other words, the Cold War brought together different yet related genealogies of American, European, and Lebanese modernism that are more revealing when examined together than in isolation and suggest that the encounter between Lebanese and American artists was more complex than one between metropolitan and marginal centers of artistic production.

Finally, the conviction that if Lebanese artists broke away from an overbearing European influence—as American artists had previously done—then the Lebanese would find an authentic vernacular art is revealed as already compromised; it is precisely Ferren's francophone identity that rendered him useful in espousing a supposedly national American aesthetic overseas. In this case, the decision to represent American ideals via an artist rather than an art object perhaps offers an additional factor in what may be considered a disappointment from the standpoint of diplomatic strategy. Indeed, Ferren was both the first and last artist-in-residence sponsored by the USIA. Furthermore, these debates around modern art's ability and inability to espouse national ideals was not limited to

American art abroad but equally concerned artists and critics in Lebanon during the mid-1960s. The next chapter surveys local debates over the universalist assumptions of modernist abstraction during these years, a decade in which several of Lebanon's leading artists expressed a dedication to abstraction as a truly modern language.

Notes

- 1 Significant portions of this chapter were previously published in the journal, *American Art*. See Sarah Rogers, "The Artist as Cultural Diplomat, John Ferren in Beirut, 1963–64," *American Art* (Spring 2011), 112–23. © 2011 Smithsonian Institution.
- 2 Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).
- 3 Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information on Ferren is gathered from the John Ferren papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; these include transcripts of oral histories conducted by Dorothy Gees Seckler and Paul Cummings in 1965 and 1968, respectively, and an interview by Irving Sandler recorded on February 2, 1936. I thank the late Rae Ferren for granting me permission to view the transcripts of these oral histories.
- 4 Art as a form of diplomacy has a long history. Medieval art scholarship on portable objects, exchanged as diplomatic gifts, is one instance; the Ottoman Empire's gifting of photographic albums to Europe and the United States to claim its modernity to an international community is another. In all these instances, a particular aesthetic is mobilized to speak to a specific set of values. For an example from the Ottoman Empire, see Zeynep Çelik, "Photographing Mundane Modernity," in *Camera Ottomana: Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire, 1840–1914*, eds. Zeynep Çelik and Edhem Eldem (Istanbul: Loc University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations): 154–203.
- 5 Ferren, interview by Sandler.
- 6 John Ferren, "Epitaph for an Avant-Garde," *Arts* 33 no. 2 (November 1958): 24–25, 68.
- 7 In her study of the graphic design of revolutionary posters during this period, Zeina El Maasri offers a compelling counter study to modernism's supposed avoidance of narrative. In El Maasri's argument, the posters deployed established visual iconography, such as the figure of resistance, to speak across geographies and revolutionary discourses throughout the Global South. See her, "Art Is in the 'Arab Street': The Palestinian Revolution and Printscales of Solidarity," in her *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 163–210.
- 8 Charles Frankel, "Cultural Contest," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 29, no. 3, Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East (March 1969): 142.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 142–43.
- 10 Kirsten Scheid details the role of a virtual French audience in asserting Lebanese modernist Saloua Raouda Choucair's formal language when she first exhibited in Beirut after studying in Paris. See her "Distinctions That Could Be Drawn: Choucair's Paris and Beirut," in *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, exhibition catalogue, edited by Jessica Morgan (London: Tate Museum 2013): 41–55.
- 11 As quoted in "Visiting Artist Holds Talk on Abstract Art," *Pakistan Observer*, February 4, 1964, 4, col. 2. John Ferren papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 12 Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 15.
- 13 Elizabeth Holt, "Bread or Freedom: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and the Arabic Literary Journal *Ḥiwār* (1962–67)," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44, no. 1 (2013): 83–102.
- 14 John Ferren, "The Ideas of the Avant-Garde," lecture notes, John Ferren papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 15 Patricia Hills, "'Truth, Freedom, Perfection': Alfred Barr's *What is Modern Painting?* As Cold War Rhetoric," in *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy*, eds. Greg Barnhisel and Catherine Turner (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010): 251–76.

- 16 Hills, "Truth, Freedom, Perfection," 264.
- 17 Ibid., 256.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 260.
- 20 Hon. George A. Dondero, "Modern Art Shackled to Communism," Congressional Record, proceedings and debates of the 81st Congress, First Session, pg. 1. George A. Dondero Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 21 Ibid., 3.
- 22 David Craven, *Myth-Making in the McCarthy Period: Abstract Expressionist Painting from the U.S.*, exhibition catalogue (London: The Tate Gallery, 1993).
- 23 On this revisionist history, see Max Kozloff, "American Paintings during the Cold War," *Artforum* 11, no. 9 (May 1973): 43–54; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12, no. 120 (June 1974); Jane de Hart Mathews, "Art and Politics in Cold War America," *American Historical Review* 81 (February–December 1976): 762–87; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- 24 The MoMA had previously (in 1933) established the Department of Circulating Exhibitions, which by 1952 had organized over four hundred off-site exhibitions throughout the United States, Canada, and abroad. See Helen M. Franc, "The Early Years of the International Program and Council," in *The Museum of Modern Art at Midcentury: Home and Abroad*, eds. John Szarkowski and John Elderfield (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995): 112.
- 25 "Official Exposure of U.S. Art Abroad," *New York Times*, July 16, 1965.
- 26 According to letters exchanged with Nancy O. Kefauver, advisor on fine arts for the Art in the Embassies Program, located in the Lloyd Goodrich Papers, there was discussion among the curators who served as committee members or as advisors as to which art was most appropriate for the program's stated mission. In a letter authored by David W. Scott, director the National Collection of Fine Arts at the Smithsonian Institution and one of three members of the executive selection committee (alongside Goodrich and Kefauver), to Rexford Stead at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida, and member of the National Accessions Committee, Scott contemplates selecting "shockers" to send abroad while acknowledging that contemporary art such as de Kooning's *Woman* would "probably do more for us abroad than one by, say George Fuller or Thomas Dewing." Lloyd Goodrich Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 27 Emily Genauer, "Still Life with Red Herring," *Harper's Magazine* (September 1949): 88–91. I thank Kate LeMay for sharing this article with me. Dondero wrote a response to Genauer's essay, "Is Harper's Magazine Biased?" in Congressional Record (Thursday October 13, 1949), np. George A. Dondero Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 28 Ibid., 89.
- 29 See Crave, *Myth-Making in the McCarthy Period*, 7–8.
- 30 Mary Niles Maack, "Books and Libraries as Instruments of Cultural Diplomacy in francophone Africa during the Cold War," *Libraries & Culture* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 67. Maack, however, qualifies this increased support during the Kennedy years with a notation that culture nonetheless remained an asset whose importance was difficult to convince Congress of. In many ways, this lack of consensus on the role of culture and, in particular the visual arts, underscores the importance of private individuals and non-governmental institutions such as MoMA in mobilizing the arts abroad.
- 31 Ferren, interview by Cummings, June 7, 1968, 38.
- 32 Ferren, interview by Seckler, June 12, 1965.
- 33 The act or process of painting was one of the ways abstract expressionism was coded by discourse. The most well-known example of such efforts is photographer Hans Namuth's 1950 short film documenting Pollock painting on glass. The film sought to demystify Jackson Pollock's drop method yet resulted in an explosive fight between Namuth and Pollock that night at dinner. Such initiatives to explain abstract expressionism, or rather assert its validity as art, include an article on Ferren, "Ferren Paints A Picture," that combines text and several photographs documenting

- Ferren's process of working. See Lawrence Campbell with photographs by Ken Whitmore, "Ferren Paints A Picture," John Ferren papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ferren, interview with Cummings, June 7, 1968.
- 36 On masculinity in the discourse of American abstract expressionism, see Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, eds. Helaine Posner and Andrew Perchuk (MIT Press, 1995): 31–42.
- 37 Memorandum of Conversation, Farewell Call of Ambassador Nadim Dimechkie of Lebanon to the President, July 10, 1962, National Security Files, Country, Box 138A, Folder B, 10a, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.
- 38 See Virginia M. Mecklenburg, "Abstract Roundup: Making and Marketing Postwar Modernism," in *American Abstraction at Midcentury: Modern Masters* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museums, 2008), 17–69.
- 39 "Middle East Squiggle," *Newsweek*, April 13, 1964, 26, in John Carswell Papers, File AA/6, Library and Special Collections, American University of Beirut, Lebanon.
- 40 Curator Marshall Price contends that Ferren's art historical obscurity is a result of his transnationalism. See Price, "Identity/Crisis: John Ferren's Early Transnationalism," lecture, "Dialogue in South and North American Abstraction," April 10, 2010, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ, typescript in author's possession.
- 41 In his interview with Cummings, Ferren claimed to have been rejected for service by the US Navy because of his profession as an artist and therefore assumed to have subversive politics. Ferren, interview by Cummings, 27. Yet following his OWI work, Ferren is not listed as a dissident artist on Dondero's lists. George A. Dondero Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 42 Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, 3rd ed. (Pontomac Books, 2007), 373. Arndt does not specify from which institution or individual in Beirut the request came.
- 43 Ferren, interview by Cummings, 38.
- 44 John Ferren papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 45 Quoted in Ann Gibson, "'Mind Is Not Banished and Neither Is the Heart': John Ferren and the Dangers of Classical Abstraction," in *The Abstract Spirit: John Ferren (1905–1970)* (New York: Stony Brook Foundation, 1993), n.p.
- 46 Leo Bogatt, *Cool Words, Cold War: A New Look at USIA's Premises for Propaganda* (Cairo: American University Press Journalism History, 1995), xxiv.
- 47 Interview published in *As-Safa*, March 18, 1964. Transcript in the John Ferren papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 48 I thank Waddah Faris and Farid Haddad for the information on Centre d'art contemporain. In an earlier publication on Ferren's work in Beirut, I had mistakenly attributed Centre d'art contemporain to the direction of Brigitte Schedadé, who founded Centre d'Art gallery in December 1970 in the area of Ain Mreissé. In October 1973, she relocated her gallery to a larger space and garden in the same area, naming it Centre d'art II.
- 49 Ferren, interview by Cummings, 38.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 "Middle East Squiggle," *Newsweek*, April 13, 1964, 26, in John Carswell Papers, File AA/6, Library and Special Collections, American University of Beirut, Lebanon.
- 52 Paul Roger Fisher, "Itineraries in the Art World: The Cult of Europe and Transatlantic Careers in High Culture, 1865–1920" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1993), 8.
- 53 Lois A. Bingham, *Highlights of American Paintings, Selected by the American Federation of Arts, U.S. Information Agency* (Washington, DC: USIA, 1958), 9. For a detailed discussion on the exhibition as marking a shift in USIA exhibition policy when the agency began to publicly declared its sponsorship, see Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 84–87.
- 54 Ibid., 11.
- 55 Hugo Weisgall, *Advancing American Art*, exhibition catalogue (Prague: USIS, 1947), n.p.
- 56 Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings*, 378.
- 57 Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism," 39.

- 58 Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings*, 373.
- 59 One exception is Michel Fani's study, in which he characterizes Ferren as both American and francophone and compares the artist's dual cultural identity to Lebanon itself. See Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de la peinture libanaise* (Paris: Éditions Michel de Maule, 2013), 176–77.
- 60 For "sphericalized decoration," see Ferren, interview by Cummings, 38. Louis Finkelstein, "John Ferren's Mandorla," *ArtNews* 65, no. 4 (Summer 1966): 34.
- 61 Farid Haddad, email correspondence with author, March 17, 2008.
- 62 This was the title of el-Khal's review of well-known Iraqi artist Nuha al Radi's 1972 exhibit at Contact Art Gallery. Helen Al-Khal, "Cocktails and Pottery," *Monday Morning* 1, no. 27 (December 18–24, 1972): 41.
- 63 Silvia Naef notes one previously established gallery that opened in 1939 based on an article published by André Bercoff, "Vingt ans de la peinture libanaise," in *L'Orient littéraire*. I have been unable to identify any further references to this gallery. See Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe: l'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996), 142.

4 Abstraction's Universalist Claims

Local Debates on the Practice of Art

Introduction

In a 2011 interview, Palestinian painter Tamam al-Akhal (b. 1935), artistic collaborator and wife of painter and art historian Ismail Shammout (1930–2006), asserted that the authenticity of her and her husband's work lay in its use of the figure.¹ Culturally, the human form represented the Palestinian people; aesthetically, it documented the labor involved in the process of production, a way of working instilled in the couple during their Beaux-Arts training at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo during the early 1950s. The husband and wife team are internationally recognized for their large figurative works, which, in many ways, serve as a visual chronicle of Palestinian history (although it is important to note that their oeuvre is, in fact, much broader and includes a range of conventional art historical genres—still lifes, portraits, and nudes). Al-Akhal's claim to artistic authenticity emerged through a comparison of her work with abstract painters working in Beirut during the 1960s, a period during which the couple lived and worked in the city.² For al-Akhal, complete abstraction—the layering of color on canvas, to paraphrase her description—deployed a method derivative of Europe and lacked a dedication to technique as a laborious process. Her testimony unearths a paradox: figuration as an embodiment of a collective subjectivity expresses the identity it desires to visualize, whereas figuration as a representational strategy denies a European Beaux-Art genealogy. To discursively construction an art form as authentic, the form's genealogical origins must always be repressed.

Al-Akhal's comments offer exceptional insight into how formal properties must always be coded by discourse. This chapter begins to identify the ways in which modernist abstraction as an artistic language was made meaningful in Beirut during the decade of the 1960s, with a focus on the context of the international Cold War and its significance as a moment that ushered in unprecedented international artistic traffic—a result of World War II and the ensuing efforts to effect public diplomacy through cultural forums, as was detailed in the previous chapters. The chapter takes 1964 as a key year in which several of Lebanon's leading artists expressed a dedication to abstraction as a truly modern language alongside a series of exhibitions, manifestos, and critical press reviews that fiercely debated the universalist assumptions of modernist abstraction. At the 1964 Salon d'Automne, held at Beirut's Sursock Museum, artist Shafic Abboud received first prize for his abstract painting *Child's Play* (now part of the museum's permanent collection). The result was a series of debates in the Lebanese press over the public's ability to understand modern abstract art and, in turn, abstraction's relevance to defining a national Lebanese art. Later that year, painter Stélio Scamanga (b. 1934) penned a manifesto-like exhibition statement, "Toward a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract."³ As documented in the previous chapter, 1964 was also the

time when the Lebanese capital assumed significance in American diplomatic plays for regional influence amid the competing cultural claims and ideological positions of the Cold War.

Focusing on a select number of exhibitions and press reports dating to the early 1960s, this chapter will contextualize the different aesthetic visions within the competing ideologies and political alliances of the Cold War, growing concerns over Lebanese nationalism, and art's role in representing national ideals. Throughout the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, debates about abstraction in the Arab world—and throughout the Global South more broadly—materialized across art criticism, exhibition reviews, and artist's statements, interviews, and manifestos.⁴ In the aftermath of colonial independence, these engaged conversations focused on the role of art in forging a national identity and, in particular, on the possibility of modernist abstraction (in contrast to figuration or a visual language explicitly rooted in cultural heritage) to encapsulate the abstract ideal of a decolonized national collective. Rather than seek out local artists who reflect national trends or transnational artists positioned between locales and artistic languages, the present chapter focuses on the rhetorical devices deployed to create those categories.

The Sursock Museum and the Launch of the Salon d'Automne

The Sursock Museum (Figure 4.1) announced its inauguration with an open call to contemporary artists for its fall salon. The museum—housed in an Achrafieh villa—had been bequeathed a decade earlier upon the death, in 1952, of Nicholas Ibrahim Sursock to the municipality of Beirut to serve as the city's first fine arts museum.⁵ For the Sursocks, a well-known Greek Orthodox family that rose to prominence during the nineteenth century, the bequest was the culmination of a long, self-fashioned effort as patrons of the arts.⁶ Earlier, during the nineteenth century, several family members had commissioned portraits from Daoud Corm—Khalil Bey Sursock in 1882, Moussa Sursock in 1897, Anastasia Dagher Sursock in 1897, and Mahjet Sursock in 1892.⁷

Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock summarized his desire for a national museum of sorts in Lebanon:

As I love fine art and long for its development, particularly in my homeland, Lebanon.... As I wish for this country to receive a substantial contribution of fine art works, and that my fellow citizens might appreciate art and develop an artistic instinct ... I, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock ... set up in the form of *waqf* [trust] all of [my] estate ... in order that this property and its contents form a museum for arts, ancient and modern, originating from the territory of the Republic of Lebanon, other Arab countries or elsewhere, as well as a space where Lebanese artists' work shall be exhibited ... it being understood that this Museum shall remain eternally and perpetually ... This ensemble will be entitled the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum, and shall be handed over to the *mutawalli*, who will be the President of the Municipality of Beirut, regardless of which political regime exists at the time.⁸

The Sursock Museum was important because previous to its official opening in 1961, Beirut's infrastructure for the visual arts was mainly in commercial galleries and the cultural centers established during the previous decades. Before the reign of the independent gallery system, foreign cultural centers were the main venue for public visual arts exhibitions. During a three month period in the winter of 1955, the UNESCO Palace hosted a



Figure 4.1 Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of The Sursock Museum Collection, Beirut, Lebanon.

young Yugoslavian artist and a small exhibit of Indian painting, the Spanish Cultural Center presented a show of Goya's watercolors, a collection of contemporary color lithographs was on view at the British Consulate and the Italian Cultural Institute displayed the work of a young Italian artist living in Beirut. These centers also sponsored film festivals, musical concerts, and literary events. But by the late 1960s, the art scene in Beirut had radically shifted. The small area of Ras Beirut (located between the American University of Beirut and Hamra Street, the city's main commercial street) was now crowded with galleries—over twenty by some counts—and these same international institutions, which had before focused almost exclusively on cultural production from each center's country of origin, now began to invite local Lebanese artists to participate.

In addition to the cultural centers, private homes and hotels hosted exhibitions in addition to sponsorship by the Lebanese Artist's Association for painters and sculptors, founded in 1952.⁹ Similar to the Sursock Museum, the association began hosting an annual spring exhibition for contemporary art in 1954 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, within which the association established an agency. The proceeds from the spring salon would fund scholarships for artists, and the state would purchase the top three awarded works (outright gifting was not permitted, according to the ministry), which constituted the ministry's collection. The Ministry of Education also commissioned works during this period, although unfortunately, there are no remaining records of the ministry's

collecting practices.¹⁰ Unlike the ministry, however, the Sursock Museum maintained detailed archives related to their exhibitions and collections. These archives record the lavish excitement across the city over the museum's inauguration.

A Home for the Arts

The 1960s were a key decade for the visual arts in the press. Newspapers began to feature art criticism, and the cohort of new on-staff art critics took notice of the Sursock villa's long-promised opening as an art museum. The reviews of the opening, which was covered extensively in French, English, and Arabic press outlets, identify two central tropes: the arrival of a much-needed home for Lebanese art, and the display in that new home (through the salons) of Lebanese art's various trends.

The first trope characterizing the inaugural reviews of the Sursock Museum is its role in providing a long overdue home for Lebanese art. The notion of a domestic home as a microcosm of the nation-state is a conventional trope in early nationalist discourses. The assumed category of Lebanese art, which both issues forth and propagates the nation-state, needs a physical home to materialize the abstract concept of both Lebanese art and the nation-state. For the critics of the inaugural exhibition, the physical building was that place. Without a national museum for art, the Sursock Museum naturally filled that necessity. And just as the nation-state requires an art form, so too does that art form require an institution. Following Kirsten Scheid's study on early modern art in Lebanon, I configure the press, the paintings, the critic, and the viewer not as assumed entities but rather as constituting one another at the same time in which they assume both their existence and necessity. Furthermore, whereas the word for home in Arabic (*dar*) is often used for arts organizations in the region (Darat al-Funun, or Home for the Arts in Amman, Jordan, for example), the term also has a historical resonance within the context in that there is an assumption that all national arts are rooted in the geography. The stakes of the Sursock Museum, then, were nothing short of those of the nation-state—and a francophone one at that.

Characterizing the first Salon d'Autonne exhibitions as "a general summary of our artistic production," the francophone publication *La Revue du Liban* was indicative of the second trope found throughout the various publications that covered the salon.¹¹ The first is the role of the salon in capturing an overview, or summary, of artistic tendencies—aligned with the Sursock Museum's stated aim of the salon to showcase contemporary art in Lebanon. A second, similar—if not slightly more poetic and suggestive—terminology is found in a review published in the francophone press, *L'Orient Littéraire* by Jalal Khoury. Here, Khoury chooses the word *panorama* to encapsulate the art works on display.¹² In its historical origins, the term *panorama*, meaning a complete view or an unbroken (often three-dimensional) view of an area, dates to the end of the eighteenth century. A little over a half century later, after the introduction of the daguerreotype in 1839, the panorama came to be associated with landscape and empirical desires to survey a geographical or urban terrain, with photographers often collaging multiple images of a view into a single image. As art historian Rosalind Krauss has argued, nineteenth-century photographic landscapes have since been overlaid with art historical discourse so that we read the photographs in terms of artist, oeuvre, career, and genres such as the landscape.¹³ Yet at the time, photographs of landscapes were commonly thought of as "views," and the photographs were integral to commissioned projects that often had systematic ambitions. Relevant to the present chapter is Krauss's insistence on landscape photography, including

panoramas, as integral to Enlightenment empirical classification systems of knowledge in the nineteenth century.

The choice of the term *panorama* for a review of the first Salon d'Automne thus rhetorically situates this mode of framing the arts within the rubric of the nation-state. Moreover, Krauss's insistence on reading photographs of the landscape not within art historical terms but rather within their historical context, acknowledges the ways in which photography, since its deployment as both a technique and genre, assumed a documentary status. The photographic project in the late nineteenth century was then one of capturing an already existing geography, not an expression of an ideological and aesthetic positioning of the photographer and his or her chosen vantage point. In situating the panorama within its nineteenth-century historical context, we might then consider its rhetorical use for Lebanese art similarly: both deploy the term in reference to a preexisting landscape. In other words, the anonymous reviewer for *L'Orient Littéraire* assumed the category of Lebanese art to be already formed—a preexisting landscape—not forged by a curatorial selection or in the making through various exhibition practices that set themselves forward as merely *presenting* Lebanese art. This rubric of organization—that of the nation-state—is then further subdivided into tendencies that comprise a national art. The reviewer for *L'Orient Littéraire* continues on to assert that “all the tendencies” of Lebanese art are represented—diversity within unity.¹⁴ Again, it is as if the categories already existed and the Sursock Museum was to be commended for representing them, not forming them.

Similarly, press reviews of the inaugural salon assume a “we” in the readership that conjures up the genre of landscape, fitting for nationalist suggestions at work in these first reviews.¹⁵ Mobilizing the possessive pronoun “our,” the anonymous author of *L'Orient Littéraire* uses language to forge a link between the reading community, presumed to be a national collective, and the production of art. Similar to the earlier authors of *La Revue du Liban* discussed in Chapter 1, the article claims a collective in the very process of its establishment. In other words, the rhetoric forges a community of readers that is always already in place, as Benedict Anderson has argued in his influential study on the role of print capitalism in producing the nation as an imagined political community.¹⁶ Anderson's observation bridges to Elizabeth Thompson's contention about Mandate Lebanon and Syria, discussed in Chapter 1, in which the press simultaneously “created” and “represented” a community of “like-minded people.”¹⁷ Newspapers, for instance, which largely operated by middle-class men as politically biased family businesses, targeted the literate urban elite population.¹⁸ In the case of *La Revue du Liban* and its coverage of the first Salon d'Automne, the rhetorical strategies that were deployed claimed artists as integral to the national community who therefore produce works of art that reflect a circular logic of belonging. The panorama as integral to the genre of the landscape further reinforces this national community in the process of becoming.

Anthropologist Kirsten Scheid has argued that throughout the 1930s and 1940s, artistic activities in Beirut converged around the genre of landscape. Although landscape painting was not a novel genre and had been practiced and exhibited since the first decades of the twentieth century by Daoud Corm, what singles out the decade of the 1930s as significant in Scheid's study is that it was at this moment that the genre became integral to the national becoming of Lebanon. Scheid does not consider landscape paintings as representative of a predetermined geography, but rather as “social agents.” She writes of landscape paintings then as “specifying and enabling particular ways of relating to the ‘natural surroundings.’”¹⁹ Moreover, specific to the use of the term *panorama* with regards to Lebanese art, Scheid observes that one of the factors contributing to the landscape genre's significance at this

moment was the predominance of press reports written about Lebanese views so that a subject position for viewing the landscape as a source of tourism and pride could be formulated. The role of the press here in forging this collective is significant, as is the yoking together of landscape as a premise for the collective of art viewers and nation-state. And it is precisely those stakes that were at the root of the volatile response to the 1964 salon two short years later.

Child's Play at the 1964 Salon

By its fourth iteration in 1964, the salon had become a critical forum in Beirut's art world, featured in press notices and critically reviewed in Beirut's Arabic, English, and francophone press. This same year, the museum added a first-place financial award to its gift of acquisition of the award-winning entries. The committee in 1964 comprised art critics André Bercoff and Victor Hakim; architects Wasek Adib and Pierre Khoury; and AUB professor of art Arthur Frick. On December 15, in front of an audience of some two hundred visitors, Beirut's Sursock Museum awarded first prize for its Salon d'Automne to Paris-based Lebanese painter Shafic Abboud for his 1964 abstract painting *Child's Play* (Figure 4.2).

In certain ways, Abboud's painting is representative of his larger body of abstract painting: thickly applied paint that calls attention to materiality (Abboud mixed his own pigments) and a delicate overlay of color without any reference to geometrical shape or compositional focal point that moves the eye continually over the surface. The committee also acknowledged a sustained local interest in abstraction by honoring John Hadidian's abstract painting (Figure 4.3) and Viola Kassab's sculptural abstraction.

Abboud had already participated in the previous two salons at Sursock Museum, however, the 1964 salon, was particular in sparking a set of impassioned critiques against abstraction. In one such review, Dorothy Parramore, the critic for the English newspaper the *Daily Star*, dismissed the salon outright as being "a joke."²⁰ Some reviews were less critical and acknowledged the high quality of the works selected. Reviews in the Arabic newspapers such as *al-Anwar* and *al-Hayat* were less harsh but noted that this year's salon favored abstraction and the French school of painting while ignoring the Eastern tradition, represented in the abstract paintings of artists Adel Saghir (1930–2020) and Saïd Akl, who while selected for the salon did not receive awards.²¹ The selection committee fired back in the press that they had chosen works from those submitted and that criticism of the committee and the selection process was biased and targeted against committee members themselves.

Perhaps most striking in the press's criticism was its language. Gone were the inclusive pronouns *our* and *we* that had characterized the reviews from previous salons and which reaffirmed a community of readers as the national collective. By 1964, that cohesive collective had fragmented. Instead reviews speak of a derivative French school among Lebanese artists in contrast to "our Beirut school," and the Eastern strain of abstraction that is conveyed as rooted in "our traditions."²² Moreover, the abstract works honored were criticized as being derivative "copies" of Western art, indicating a lack of confidence in Lebanese heritage. When president of the Sursock's selection committee, Lady Yvonne Cochrane Sursock, announced that next year's committee would include foreign artists, the backlash was immediate, and the discourse quickly coalesced.²³

This overwhelming response to the salon was remarkably different from the response of the salons of the previous two years. For those critical of the salon, the core issue



Figure 4.2 Shafic Abboud, *Child's Play*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 100 cm. The Sursock Museum, Collection, Beirut.
Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of The Sursock Museum Collection, Beirut, Lebanon.

concerned the ability of abstraction to speak for a Lebanese art and, in turn, the public's ability to find this art meaningful or even understandable. Yet as indicated previously, abstraction was already a popular and acknowledged artistic mode of production. Later that year, painter Stélio Scamanga penned his manifesto-like exhibition statement "Toward a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract." The collection of the Ministry of Culture, which acquired works from the Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts' own spring salon, includes a significant number of abstract compositions on canvas from the early decade of the 1960s. The ministry's collection (a few of whose works are noted below), indicates, too, that established and emerging artists were doing more than just exploring abstraction; this body of work suggests several strains within abstract painting. As the authors of the reviews of the 1964 salon make clear, not all abstraction is considered equal. Critics are explicit in outlining two categories of abstraction: those works derivative of the

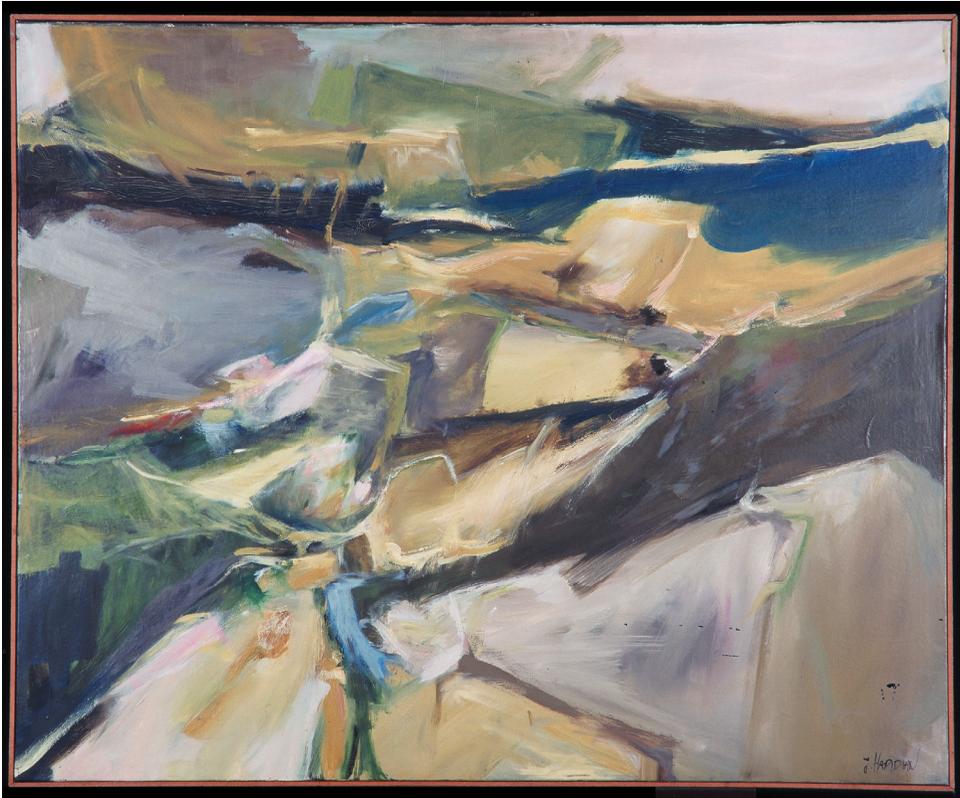


Figure 4.3 John Hadidian, *Torzaya*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 97 × 117.5 cm. The Sursock Museum Collection, Beirut.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of The Sursock Museum Collection and Katia Hadidian.

French school that neglect a Lebanese heritage, and those expressive of an Eastern abstract heritage that is rooted in the region. How then can we begin to understand the intense debates over abstraction launched by the 1964 Salon d'Automne? The remainder of the chapter seeks to answer that question.

“I Am Uncultured!”

Two days after the Salon d'Automne's opening and award ceremony, poet and theater critic Jalal Khoury published a fiery reprisal of the exhibition: “Remarks on the Autumn Exhibition: I Am Uncultured!”²⁴ Reacting to what he labeled “a muddle of colors and pasty surfaces,” Khoury slams the salon as representing “a distant, clumsy echo of various European styles.”²⁵ That Khoury wrote his critique in French and published it in the francophone press rather than in Arabic for an Arabic press didn't seem to undercut the arguments for its author. The premise sustaining Khoury's review is two-fold. The salon, Khoury contends, had an obligation to be representative of Lebanese art, and the works selected did not visually evince being rooted geographically in Lebanon. He opens with the following scenario:

If one were to randomly select a citizen of the world and lead him blindfolded into the middle of the Surssock Museum, would he know where he was? Would the few paintings that constitute the Autumn Exhibition suffice to provide him with the key to the artistic mystery, causing him to say: I am in Beirut, Lebanon, for these works express a way of life, a sensibility, and a heritage proper only to Lebanon?²⁶

Khoury continues by explaining that abstraction is not only “uprooted and derivative,” but it also precludes an ability to understand its meaning except to its champions. “It’s a closed caste that has assumed the right to impose its views and verbiage on others,” an argument that was labeled earlier in the review as “an absurd hermeneutics.” Those viewers and critics courageous enough to question abstraction, in Khoury’s view, would be labeled “uncultured and vulgar.”²⁷ Khoury’s choice of the subtitle “I Am Uncultured!” stands as a brave declaration of his position: a willingness to publicly sacrifice his own cultural capital in exchange for calling out abstraction’s elitism. Moreover, Khoury’s choice of the term *caste* is a telling example of the ways in which art is charged with building social stratifications based on notions of purity, rather than the rhetorical devices deployed that put art into the service of those stratifications.

Despite Khoury’s volatile commentary, abstraction was far from a radical novelty in Beirut circa 1964. In both painting and sculpture, abstraction had been in public circulation for over two decades, witnessed in the work and exhibitions of known artists, such as Saloua Raouda Choucair. Furthermore, a number of artists were experimenting with different forms of abstraction during the mid-1960s. A cursory selection of paintings in the Ministry of Education’s collection underscores both the popularity of abstraction among different artists and the variety of strains of abstraction that were being activated at the time: Jean Khalifé 1964 untitled painting (Figure 4.4); Amine el-Bacha’s 1964 painting, *Composition no. 10* (Figure 4.5); and Saïd Akl’s 1964 mixed media work, *Totem* (Figure 4.6). Press reports from the Surssock’s annual salon the year before also give passing mention to abstraction as a current aesthetic trend alongside expressionism, calligraphy, and naïve art. The inclusion of reproductions of the visual arts in the catalogues for the annual summer Baalbeck Festival further acknowledges abstraction’s growing popularity. While the 1961 catalogue for the festival did not include the visual arts, the 1962 catalogue reproduced abstract works by Akl and Abboud, and Abboud’s work was selected for the cover the following year. By 1964, abstraction was an established, viable artistic language among Beirut’s intimate art world, and Abboud himself had become a well-known abstract painter in both Beirut and Paris.

Abboud’s Abstraction

By the time of the 1963 cover of the Baalbeck Festival catalogue, Abboud had secured a place as one of Beirut’s established artists who moved back and forth for stretches of time between Paris and Beirut, including a period teaching at l’Académie libanaise des beaux arts (ALBA).²⁸ Born in 1926, Abboud spent his childhood in the Beirut neighborhood of Ashrafiyah. On weekends, he would travel with his family to a village near Bikfaya, a weekend home to an artistic community where the Beirut-based French painter Georges Cyr, visiting his friend, poet George Schehadé, could be found painting landscapes on an easel outdoors. By the age of fifteen, Abboud was painting alongside the future founder of the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, César Gemayal, who also had a home in Bikfaya. The young artist recalled also seeing the portraits and landscapes by



Figure 4.4 Jean Khalifé, untitled, 1964. Watercolor, gouaches and white pastel on paper. 57 × 48 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.

Gemayal and Lebanese painter Khalil Saleeby that hung on the walls of his aunt's home. Abboud would hold his first exhibition on the walls of an Orthodox Church in his birthplace of Mhaidseh. Some of these early paintings still survive in private collections and document Abboud's landscape painting *en plein air*.

Despite his childhood artistic interests, Abboud, at the encouragement of his family, went on to study engineering, yet complimented his studies with two years of courses at ALBA. Abboud eventually abandoned engineering, and in October 1947, he left for Paris to pursue a career in art. His paintings from these years in Paris exhibit a loosening of his brushwork and a developing interest in the materiality of paint on canvas, suggested by the build-up of color and brushstroke that indicate a push toward abstraction.



Figure 4.5 Amine el-Bacha, *Composition No. 10*, 1964. Oil on wood. 24 × 35 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.
Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.



Figure 4.6 Saïd Akl, *Totem*, 1964. Mixed media on canvas. 27 × 41 cm. Collection of the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.
Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission the Ministry of Culture, Beirut.

Returning to Beirut in 1949, Abboud held his first show in December of the next year at the Centre d'études supérieures. A review published in *L'Orient* sets the stage for the trope of Abboud as being trapped between influences.²⁹ Titled "Shafic Abboud: The Fight between Two Influences," the review outlines the different influences on Abboud's work. Unlike the later reviews from the 1964 salon, in this review, Abboud is depicted as retaining an attachment to Lebanon via his choice of subject matter, as in *Les Kurdes* (1950), which is characterized as having "the precious tones of an old tapestry."³⁰ Even the titles, according to the reviewer, express a relationship with "the history of his country": *The Fortune Teller*; *The Sheik*; and *The Kurdish Family*. As early as 1953, however, Abboud was also creating complete abstractions, although a geometric reference remains in these early works. It was not until the mid-1950s, when Abboud was back in Paris, that his work does away with the suggestive geometric shapes and exhibits the modernist abstractions for which he is now celebrated. What I want to underscore in this cursory trajectory of Abboud's early work is that these early works, in retaining an identifiable subject matter—whether through choice of title or figurative subject matter—allowed reviews to highlight a Lebanese heritage as being influential on Abboud's work. But by 1964, Abboud's modernist abstractions presented no visible linkages to Lebanon and thus fostered accusations of being derivative of the French school.

Within a decade, Abboud had firmly situated himself with Paris's international artistic community, serving on abstract-art committees and having achieved artistic and commercial success between the two capitals of Paris and Beirut. Indeed, a review of his work before 1964 highlights Abboud's success and his research-based practice. Exhibiting at the Beirut gallery Domus in 1959, Abboud showed a series of small tempera paintings. The review in *Action* in June of that year found criticism only in Abboud's use of titles (*Sensual Pleasure*; *Passionately*; and *My Village*), which were seen by the reviewer to invoke allusions that refused a complete divorce from the figurative.

Considering Abboud's artistic maturity and abstraction's popularity, *Child's Play* thus would seem immune from provoking such fiery responses as that of critic Jalal Khoury's. Indeed, Khoury never mentions Abboud by name, yet the critic's description of "muddled colors and pasty surfaces" nonetheless suggests Abboud's encrusted surface. For Khoury, his criticism is couched in technique, or more specifically, the lack of technique in abstraction. This privileging of painted surface grounds Abboud's work within an artistic language of modernism. Archival photographs from Abboud's Paris studio further document the painter's committed engagement with paint as materiality and color as pigment rather than as vehicles for representation. In contrast to calligraphic abstraction or an abstraction that alludes to organic, and thus readable, form, Abboud's *Child's Play* requires rhetorical devices to render it readable. While the year 1964 was indeed both potent and pivotal, several historically contextual factors coalesced during the entire period of the early and mid-1960s in Beirut that raised the stakes for the visual arts, and thus offer insight into Khoury's impassioned rhetoric.

The Press

In 1963, the francophone newspaper *L'Orient* convened and published a transcript of a roundtable with the artists and critics Saloua Raouda Choucair, Aref El-Rayess, Saïd Akl, Mounir Najm, and Nicolas Nammar, the former president of the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors; and critics Joseph Abou-Rizk, Amal Naccache, André Bercoff, and Nazih Khater.³¹ The Italian painter and professor at Syria's School of

Fine Arts Guido La Regina, who had held a solo exhibition at the Sursock Museum in 1963, and American artist-in-resident John Ferren were also present as observers, according to the paper.³² The transcript, titled “How Can the Lebanese Painter Live Today?”, opened with the observation that Lebanon was in the process of witnessing the development of a Beirut school of art, and the roundtable sought to determine its common aesthetic denominators, with a focus on the material conditions that would enable the formation of a definitive national art: “For a long time, people have been rambling on about Lebanese art, its structures, its elements, the possible existence of a ‘Beirut School,’ and the common aesthetic denominators of such a school.”³³

The central focus of the roundtable was the material conditions structuring the possibility of a national art, including the relationship of Lebanese artists to Europe and the relationship among artists, the public, the state, and critics. From the outset of the roundtable, artist El-Rayess and critic Khater agreed on the supportive relationship between the public and the artist. Indeed, a move to Europe resulted not from a need for a public or a market, but rather—according to El-Rayess—from a richer intellectual comradery than one found in Lebanon. For many of the artists and critics participating in the roundtable, Lebanon’s art market was premised on social relationships rather than aesthetic value. Moreover, without a proper infrastructure—defined in the article as a network of art galleries, museums, and critics—the public was unable to distinguish between “true” and “serious” artists and painters “of less authenticity.” What remained, according to roundtable participants, was a need for clear critical standards. In other words, a national art had to be defined from a critical apparatus and from boundaries—an eerie echo of the geographical boundaries of the nation-state and the region that at that very moment were under extreme pressure from internal, regional, and international forces. In certain ways, then, the call for an identity-based art practice, rooted in the geography and tradition of the nation-state, as vocalized by Khoury, and the premise of the roundtable, may have been characterized as something other than that of a nascent nation-state, whose linkage with art history during its birth has been well documented by art historians. Instead, the rhetoric from Beirut in the mid-1960s invokes a particular claim within the politic pressures of the Cold War that exacerbated a fraught and false choice between a national identity and regional identity and threw into question what such a national identity might look like in relation to an Arab region.

This assessment is articulated in a second press report from April of that year, when American Lebanese artist Helen al-Khal and her husband, poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917–87), opened Gallery One. At the opening’s press conference, al-Khal distributed a statement to journalists that read, “An art movement is rising in Lebanon today. There is thus an urgent need to establish a permanent exhibition space for the works of this movement.” In a conscious assertion of the gallery’s inaugural efforts to institutionalize the art market based on quality, al-Khal articulated Gallery One’s aim: “to bring order to the existing chaos in art exhibition and pricing.”³⁴ Echoing the roundtable, the press conference claimed an important moment for the visual arts. It also expressed the need to develop an infrastructure that would assure artistic quality. Moreover, Gallery One framed the space of the gallery not as a commercial space, but rather as an engaged institution that activated the art being produced and provided a framework for a Lebanese art movement.

Critics, artists, and gallerists were thus engaged together in the process of actively formulating the categories and characteristics that would enable some sort of defining characterization of Lebanese art, including the status of artists and artistic production. And as the authors of the reviews of the 1964 salon made clear, although abstraction was already a

popular and acknowledged artistic mode of production in Beirut, not all abstraction was equal. Critics were explicit in outlining two categories: those works derivative of the French school, and those expressive of an Eastern abstract heritage. Although seemingly natural categories rooted, as they claimed to be, in geography and cultural traditions, they were instead, at this moment, in the very process of being actively constructed.

Scamanga's Oriental Abstraction

In addition to the 1964 salon, a second historically critical exhibition was held later that year: Stélio Scamanga at Galerie d'amateur. In a manifesto-like statement written by the artist in French and translated into English and Arabic to accompany the exhibition, Stélio Scamanga characterized his abstraction—an entanglement of shapes and curves—as one defined by a light interior to the painting, in contrast to Western abstraction, which developed from an Albertian perspective that used mathematical proportions to translate three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface. Scamanga's abstraction was a new dimension, defined by neither movement nor depth (Figure 4.7 and Figure 4.8).³⁵

What is especially fascinating about Scamanga's text, in addition to its conceptual ambitions to theorize a new dimension for abstraction, is his positioning of Western and Eastern art. Western painting and the Albertian perspective is the stage against which Scamanga situated his theory of the abstract. Moreover, the paintings themselves retain an allusion to form and shape, which is acknowledged in the text as well. In other words, despite a radically new theory of abstraction, the works remain suggestive of the material world, even as the viewer's eye moves dynamically through the composition, foregoing a middle ground. In a 2018 publication on his paintings from this period, Scamanga himself labeled these works as representing an Oriental abstraction and an Oriental space, titling the series *Arabesque*, a further nod to his dynamic abstraction's proposed roots.³⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Scamanga's 1964 exhibition fared much better in the press than did the Surssock salon. Writing in the francophone newspaper *L'Orient*, established art critic Joseph Tarrab characterized Scamanga as displaying “the authenticity of the oriental painter, freeing himself from the occidental domination.”³⁷ Tarrab located Scamanga's radical gesture in an abstraction that rejected the superficial appearance of heritage found in the incorporation of Arabic calligraphy, or “decorative plastic elements of the Orient.” Scamanga's novelty was staged as a flat-out rejection of the artistic traditions of the Occident, a characterization of Scamanga's work that would continue throughout the next decade. The binaries of East–West and Occident–Orient are tropes among Lebanon's most established art critics. Writing in *An-Nahar* in 1970, Nazih Khater champions Scamanga on the basis of “the denial of the Occidental art, and the adoption of that of the Orient.”³⁸ The paradoxical insistence on framing Scamanga's art in relation to what it is not sheltered his abstraction. Moreover, the manifesto provided a philosophical centering for the work, which served as a frame for reading the visual. Important to the argument here is that this frame located the visual abstraction within a localized heritage of the arabesque and presumed Oriental motifs.³⁹

In a 1970 review of Scamanga's work, critic Cathy Latta contrasts the artist's meaningful “oriental” abstraction with that of “half-baked abstraction.”⁴⁰ Latta writes,

For the art lover who likes his art straight, who is willing not to want to make compromises by mixing the objective and abstract, this will be a highly satisfying exhibit



Figure 4.7 Stélio Scamanga, *Arabesque*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 70 cm. Private Collection. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Stélio Scamanga.

which steps beyond the slap-dash of half-baked abstract expressionism that proliferates on the Beirut art scene.

Once again, the art world is divided into art goers and artists who are “true” and those who are “unthoughtful.”⁴¹ The intellectual process is refused in abstractions, such as those of Abboud, that insist on their own materiality. A decade later, Scamanga’s abstractions would no longer require such rooting in heritage. By 1974, Scamanga’s abstractions could exist as a, “strange, unknown land,” in the words of artist and critic Helen al-Khal.⁴² Reviewing Scamanga’s seventh solo show in Beirut at Delta International, al-Khal made no reference to the arabesque or Oriental abstraction in Scamanga’s work, instead characterizing it as “creating its own separate world, its own other dimension,” and later, “its own inner light, its own infinite existence,” which achieves expression through movement and color.⁴³ Abstraction has been rescued from references outside the materiality of paint as pigment on a canvas.

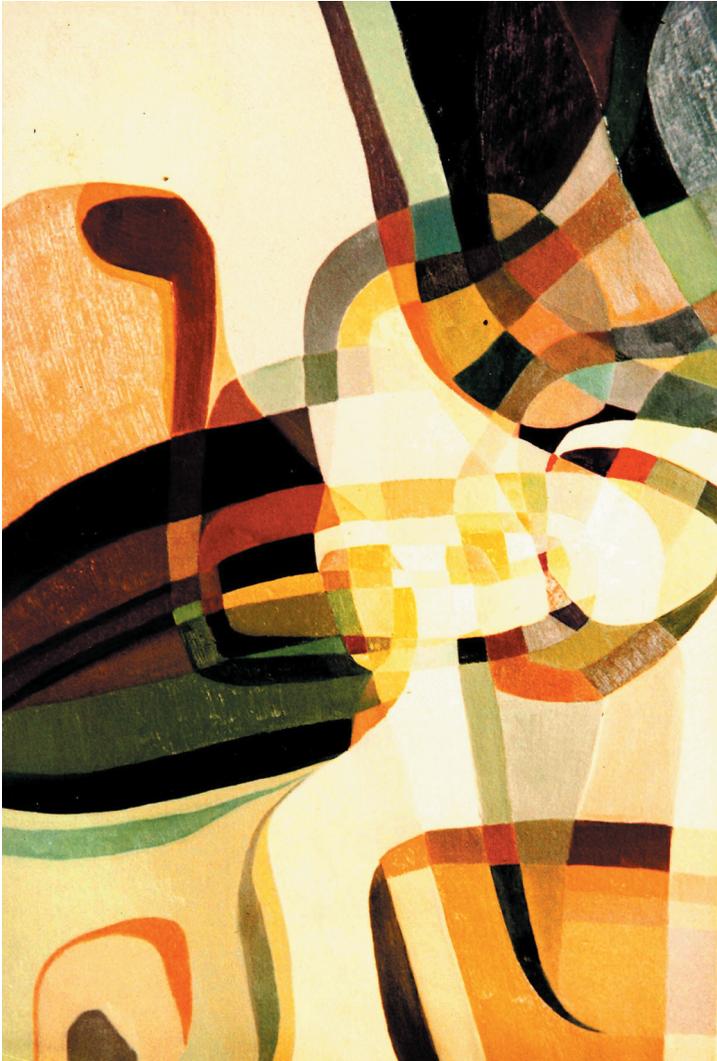


Figure 4.8 Stélio Scamanga, *Arabesque*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 100 × 60 cm. Private Collection. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Stélio Scamanga.

This category of a “Beirut school” is reiterated in the reviews from the 1964 salon. A public consensus cohered around the possibility—and importance—of such a category. And yet the terms of such a category are not visually evident within the artwork itself. Paradoxically, then, the visual evidence for or against representing a “Beirut school,” or Lebanese art, is located in genealogy: French School or Lebanese heritage. What is it, then, that renders Akl’s abstraction, say, more “Beiruti” than Shafic Abboud’s paintings? Abboud’s abstractions are remarkable in their refusal, with the exceptional of titles, to reference the material world. His abstractions, in other words, are quite literally painted materiality without reference to shading or geometrical shapes. Akl’s, like other abstractions

popular in 1960s Beirut, clings to a visual reference. This returns us to Tamam al-Akhal's description of abstraction with which this chapter began. There is the need for a visual reference that directly links the content to abstract concept of the nation-state. Like the geography of the landscape during the national becoming of the 1930s, the visual as such is required to materialize a concept that is already assumed to exist. When the referent is ambiguous, as it always is with modernist abstraction, the artwork is dismissed, or disqualified, because of its purported genealogical origins. In al-Akhal's comments, "the layering of color on canvas," to borrow her description, deployed a method derivative of Europe and an artistic process. Certainly in 1964, that abstraction needed to be wedded to a reference, and more particularly, to a reference to Lebanon. How, then, might we understand this shift in abstraction's ability to speak?

Khoury's Cold War Rhetoric

Khoury's rhetoric suggests that his critique took place within this fervent debate over modernism's ability to forge an international visual language in an era of unprecedented nationalism. In dismissing abstraction as an elitist, highbrow art form, Khoury's characterization resonates with abstraction's precarious beginnings in the United States during the early decades of the Cold War. Most prominent among such initiatives to dismiss abstraction as esoteric was the campaign of Republican US congressman George Dondero of Michigan, who, as we saw in Chapter 3, repeatedly and vehemently yoked abstraction to leftist and communist parties in his public speeches and publications. Similar to Khoury, Dondero characterized abstraction as "shockingly mysterious and elusive," an art that assumed "a posture of superior intellect" and "expressed a belief in nothing."⁴⁴ As art historians of the period have documented, by the 1960s, the highbrow/lowbrow debate around postwar abstraction had become a familiar topic in American mass media.⁴⁵ Important to the arguments presented here is that Khoury's rhetorical devices acknowledge an international context for Cold War abstraction. Speaking of the viewer who dares voice his discontent with abstraction, Khoury writes, "He'll quickly be labeled uncultured and vulgar, sent off to rejoin the pack of other vulgar types from all countries, united in their common lack of culture."⁴⁶ In refuting the universalist claims of modernist abstraction, Khoury paradoxically created a global citizen united in his or her refusal to acknowledge a particular kind of art. The stakes of art remain those of forging a collectivity.

Despite Khoury's fiery rebuke, his dismissal of modernist abstraction in Lebanon as a visual language derivative of an already passé European aesthetic is far from novel. Critics and artists at the time and art historians today have traced similar genealogies. Describing the Lebanese art scene in 1963 to *Newsweek Magazine*, John Ferren stated, "They're seeing painting mainly through European eyes but they're also getting bogged down in folklore. I stressed the parallel between their situation and ours. We broke from Europe. They might too, and develop their own motivations."⁴⁷ Strategic to his role as American cultural diplomat in Beirut, Ferren underscored the newly defined role for American art in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the call to Lebanese artists to break free from a European influence in order to develop their own national aesthetic is a well-worn trope that works to resist the historical legacy of the French Mandate and Abboud's own training and involvement in French artistic academies and discourses. It also speaks to literary scholar Aamir R. Mufti's insight into the logic of indigenization during the Cold War: in order to enter into global literature, authors outside the Euro-American center were forced to write their particularities.⁴⁸

This is not to dismiss Khoury's impassioned critique of abstraction, but rather to argue that a national art is discursively asserted precisely at the moment when the boundaries of artistic languages and their origins are most porous. As we see in the rhetoric constructing a framework for Abboud's and Scamanga's art, the claims on abstraction relied on genealogies to stage a position—certain abstractions were rooted in a proposed Oriental or national lineage whereas other abstractions signaled a belated derivative of Europe. Unfortunately, such binaries continue to plague the study of modernism in the Arab world, and those of us in the field begin our studies with the burden of asserting that modernism in the region is not belated and does have some sort of historical, if not aesthetic, significance to offer conventional histories of modern art.

However, abstraction was equally in need of rhetorical devices to render it meaningful in its Euro-American contexts. Despite the precarious beginnings of abstraction in the United States—yoked as it was to leftist politics during the notorious cultural campaigns of Joseph McCarthy and George Dondero—by the early 1960s, the formal languages of modernism had survived a stunning turn of fate. Accused as it had been of subversion and worse, abstraction was awarded a reprieve, enjoying an invigorated popularity by the combined efforts of the mass media, such individuals as the Museum of Modern Art's Alfred Barr and the Whitney Museum of American Art's Lloyd Goodrich, and, finally, government agencies. Framed as a representation of the individuality and freedom posited by the US government as national values, abstract expressionism in particular marked the ascent of American art on the global stage. As we considered in the previous chapter, the case of John Ferren is one example where we see those efforts at cultural diplomacy through abstraction in Beirut.

Conclusion

Rather than conceptualizing modern art as a development that occurred at a certain moment in time, located in a distinct geographical space, and crystallized in a particular art work, this chapter considered modernism as a series of fractious debates materialized across artists' canvases, manifestos, exhibition statements, and critical reviews in the press. Significant to the Cold War are the more banal, bureaucratic procedures often seemingly removed from modernism's interrogation of institutional constraints and expectations such as acts of cultural diplomacy. Within this historical context that ushered in unprecedented international artistic traffic, modern art can never be understood as an isolated national narrative. Moreover, the post-World War II interest in abstraction resulted in the need for discursive interventions. Examining those divisive rhetorical devices gives way to the complexity of social anxieties that defined the political moment of the Cold War.

This is not a story that seeks to frame Beirut as a locale central to conventional narratives of modernism. Nor does it present an alternative or addendum to centralizing histories of European and American modernisms. Its intention, instead, is to locate Beirut as a site across which modernist abstraction was made meaningful during the decade of the 1960s, and that meaning is constituted within concerns over art's role in representing national ideals within the international Cold War cultural context. The Cold War as a historical moment begs for a dialectical approach that challenges the rubric of the national—not just in reference to Lebanon but equally to France and the United States—as a means for marking art. A historical lens that accounts for the movement of artists, ideas, and artworks across and between multiple geographical centers and ideological and aesthetic positionings refuses

Khoury's caste system, as well as notions of genealogy and origin, and instead considers how and when those claims are made, thereby offering a historical understanding of a truly global modernism. The next chapter considers abstraction's counterpart, figuration, in the work of Palestinian artists Tamam al-Akhal and Ismail Shammout, two of the most well-known Palestinian artists accredited with bringing international visibility to the plight of the Palestinian people through both their individual oeuvres and their work with the Palestinian Liberation Organization during the decades of the 1960s, when they were living in exile in Beirut.

Notes

- 1 Interview with author, September 20, 2011, Amman, Jordan.
- 2 For two decades beginning in the 1960s, the couple lived in exile in Beirut and were actively engaged in the city's burgeoning art community. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, they relocated first to Kuwait and later to Amman, Jordan, where they settled. Palestinian visual artist and art historian Kamal Boullata classified Palestinian artists living in Beirut during the 1960s as either figurative or abstract. Whereas the former was produced primarily by artists living in the Palestinian refugee camps, the latter was directed toward the Ras Beirut gallery public. See his "Artists Re-Member Palestine in Beirut," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 4 (summer 2003), reprinted in his *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi Books, 2009), 123–59. Boullata's argument is examined in the next chapter.
- 3 Artist Farid Haddad shared a copy of the manifesto with me. The manifesto has since been translated by Jeanine Herman and reprinted in Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Arab Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018): 209–11.
- 4 For the case of Algeria, for instance, see Hannah Feldman, "Abstract Anxieties and Algerian Abstraction," *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, eds. Suheyly Takesh and Lynn Gumpert (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2020): 87–105. For the debate's terms post-1967 transformation, see Anneka Lenssen "The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964–70," in *Art Margins: The Longevity of 1967 in Art and Its Histories* v2, no. 2 (June 2013), 43–70.
- 5 Between the years 1953 and 1957, the villa served as a hospitality palace for royalty and dignitaries on official visits to Lebanon. The president of Beirut's municipality, designated as museum supervisor, assigned a fourteen-member committee as the administrative council. On the history of the museum and its exhibitions, see Sylvia Agémian and Saad Kiwan, *Musée Nicolas Sursock: Le Livre* (Beirut: Nicolas Sursock Museum, 2000).
- 6 On the rise of the Sursock family, see Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth Century Beirut* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 85–102.
- 7 The Corm and Sursock families were united in marriage in the 1960s.
- 8 Quoted in Agémian and Kiwan, *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre*, 20–21.
- 9 Founding members included César Gemayal, Omar Onsi, Moustafa Farroukh, Youssef Ghossoub, Rachid Wehbé, Saliba Douaihy, Elie Kanaan, Nadia Baydoun, Halim al-Hajj, Samir al-Attar, Michel Basbous, Shafic Abboud, Farid Awad, Mounir Eido, Aref El-Rayess, Fouad Haddad, Jean Khalifé, Saïd Akl, Adel Saghir, Yvette Ashkar, and Nicholas Nammar.
- 10 The collection numbers over three thousand works, the majority of which are in extremely poor condition. Until recent years, the collection was stored in the ministry's Hamra Street offices with a select number of works hung throughout the president's official residence and other official state residencies. There are no remaining records for the collection. See Taline Boladian, "A Collection in the Making," conference paper delivered April 27, 2019, at BeMAA Conference, Rice University, Houston, Texas.
- 11 "Au Musée Sursock," *La Revue du Liban* (November 25 1961), n.p., from the archives of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon. My gratitude to Yasmine Chemali and Rowina Bou-Harb for granting me access to the archives through digital files.
- 12 Jalal Khoury, "Aujourd'hui, Jour 1 du Musée Sursock," *L'Orient Littéraire* (November 11, 1961), n.p., from the archives of the Nicholas Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon.

- 13 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985; reprinted 1999), 131–50.
- 14 Khoury, "Aujourd'hui, Jour 1 du Musée Surssock," *L'Orient Littéraire*, np.
- 15 On the role of landscape painting as cultivating the notion of a Lebanese nation state to be viewed, see Kirsten Scheid, "Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005), 223–95.
- 16 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 17 Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 211.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 19 Scheid, "Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon," 224. For further study of Scheid's methodological approach to the social and material agency of art, see her, "The Agency of Art and the Study of Arab Modernity," *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* v.7 (Winter 2007), 6–23.
- 20 Dorothy Parramore, "Surssock Museum Selections Described as 'Disappointing,'" *Daily Star*, 1964, n.p., from the archives of the Nicolas Surssock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon. As late as the year 2020, Parramore still recalls her disappointment with the 1964 salon. Telephone correspondence between Farid Haddad and Dorothy Parramore, August 2, 2020. I thank Farid Haddad for sharing his conversation with me.
- 21 See reviews from 1964 fall salon from the Nicolas Surssock Museum Archives, Beirut, Lebanon. All exhibition announcements and reviews from the different presses in Beirut are archived and digitalized according to year.
- 22 Dallal Hadidi, "Mātat Madrasa Paris 'Ashāt Madrasa New York," [The Paris School is Dead, The New York School Lives] (December 20, 1964), 14. Nicolas Surssock Museum Archives, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 23 Stèlio Scagmanga recalls writing a petition to the Surssock Museum in the mid-1960s protesting the, "the habit of the museum, for inviting French critics from Paris. We told them that we have Lebanese art critics capable of doing this task; While the French will judge with their French eyes and mind!" Correspondence with author, June 28, 2020.
- 24 Khoury's piece, published in the francophone periodical *Magazine*, was translated from the French into English by Patrick Lyons for the first time in MoMA's primary document series published in the spring of 2019 and launched at Beirut's Surssock, where Abboud's painting, now part of the permanent collection, was on display at the time of publication's launch. See Khoury, "Remarks on the Autumn Exhibition: I am Uncultured!," in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Primary Documents*, 208–9. Originally published in French as "Propos sur le Salon d'Automne: Je suis inculte!" *Magazine*, no. 417 (December 17, 1964): 21. On the relationship between visual arts and audience in the context of Cold War Syria, see Anneka Lenssen, "Distance Greater than Between these Walls: On Ideals and the Constitution of an Audience," in *Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection*, eds. Sarah Rogers and Eline Van der List (Amman, Jordan: Suha Shoman/Darat al-Funun, 2013): 93–96; 137–51.
- 25 Khoury, "Remarks on the Autumn Exhibition: I am Uncultured!" 208.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Biographies on Abboud include Omar Al Kaissey, "Chafic Abboud," in *One Hundred Years of Plastic Arts in Lebanon, 1880–1980*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Chahine (Beirut: Richard Chahine, 1981); Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de la peinture au Liban* (Éditions de l'Escalier, 1998): 8–16; Issa Makhoulouf, *Shafic Abboud, Retrospective* (Paris: Institute du monde arabe, 2011); Pascale Le Thorel, *Shafic Abboud* (Milan: Skira, 2014). The biographical information in this section is culled primarily from Le Thorel's study.
- 29 Quoted in Le Thorel, *Shafic Abboud*, 18.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 31 "Comment Vit Le Peintre Libanais?" *L'Orient* (November 9, 1963), np.
- 32 On the presence of La Regina within Syria and the post-1967 artistic debates around avant-garde practices in relation to revolutionary goals, see Anneka Lenssen, "The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964–70."
- 33 "Comment Vit Le Peintre Libanais?" *L'Orient* (November 9, 1963), np.

- 34 "Opening of Gallery One: A First Art Institution of Its Kind," trans. Mandy McClure, reprinted in Lensen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Primary Documents*, 206–8. Originally published in *al-Nahar*, April 18, 1963.
- 35 Stélio Scamanga, "Toward a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract," translated from the French by Jeanine Herman, reprinted in *Modern Arab Art: Primary Documents*, 209–11.
- 36 Stélio Scamanga, *The Oriental Abstraction: The Ultimate Abstractions* (Geneva: Stélio Scamanga 2019). Sent to the author, May 31, 2019. The author thanks Scamanga for providing this material from Geneva to Shelburne, Vermont. Artist Saïd Akl also uses the term arabesque in relation to his modernism. Farid Haddad, correspondence with author, August 3, 2020.
- 37 Quoted in *Scamanga: The Oriental Abstraction*, 21.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 These categories continue in contemporary criticism, which sub-divides abstraction to include an Oriental abstraction. See Fayçal Sultan, "L'art abstrait et les tendances modernes, 1950–1975," in *Art in Lebanon: Modern and Contemporary Artists, 1880–1975*, eds. Nour Salamé, Marie Tomb and Amin Maalouf (Beirut: Wonderful Editions, 2012).
- 40 Cathy Latta, untitled, exhibition catalogue (1970), n.p. Private Papers of Stélio Scamanga, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 41 American University of Beirut art professor Arthur Frick characterized the public in similar categories. Personal correspondence with the author, December 2011.
- 42 Helen al-Khal, *Daily Star*, 1974, n.p. Private Papers of Stélio Scamanga, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 See "Modern Art," Remarks of Honorable George A. Dondero, Capitol Building, Washington, DC., Occasion of International Fine-Arts Council, Gold Medal of Honor Presentation (February 14, 1957), George A. Dondero Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 45 Russell Lynes, "Everyday Tastes from High-Brow to Low-Brow," *Life Magazine*, April 11, 1949.
- 46 Houry, "Remarks on the Autumn Exhibition: I am Uncultured!" 208.
- 47 "Middle East Squiggle," *Newsweek*, April 13, 1964, John Carswell Papers, File AA/6, Library and Special Collections, the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, 26.
- 48 Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

5 Figuration, International Alliances, and Palestinian Art in 1960s Beirut

The Painting of Tamam al-Akhal and Ismail Shammout

Introduction

The black-and-white film captures a young woman wearing a keffiyeh, perched on a large rock in the mountains. Surrounded by cedar trees, she plays the guitar, and with a beautiful ache in her voice, beckons to her audience, “Can’t you hear, the urgent call of Palestine?” Recorded in English in 1973, the ballad, sung by aspiring Palestinian Egyptian singer Zeinab Shaath, is one of hope for recognition of the Palestinian people. The refrain, direct in its question, beckons its listeners for action, to help those in need—the suffering Palestinian children whose photographs are interspersed throughout the film recording of Shaath singing. The song is interrupted only once by brief footage of Palestinian poet Kamal Nasser declaring to the camera in English that Palestinians have lost everything and want the world to know that they are fighting for a cause, and to differentiate between Jews and Zionists so that the Palestinians and Jews may live together. A caption informs the viewer that on April 10, 1973, the Israeli government assassinated the activist poet in his West Beirut apartment, where he lived in exile. The film returns to Shaath’s voice echoing, “Let us do or die,” as it closes with a black-and-white photograph of children standing in front of a wall graffitied with the message, “We fight Israel because they occupy our land.”¹

Produced in 1973 by Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout, the short film was recorded in the Lebanese mountains outside Beirut. Shammout had been living in the Lebanese capital since 1956 with his wife and artistic collaborator, Tamam al-Akhal, and since 1965, he had served as the inaugural Director of Arts and National Culture for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Shaath’s musical recording represents one of the many projects in which the PLO mobilized cultural production, from film and music to graphic design, to forge international political and military alliances with liberation movements across the globe.² Moreover, support for the Palestinian cause was to be garnered through various appeals that assumed cultural, emotional, and political dimensions. Although much scholarly work has been dedicated to the PLO’s revolutionary film unit, researchers and curators Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti have also documented, in their groundbreaking exhibition and accompanying publication, *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums in Exile*, the fundamental role of the visual arts in building relationships between the PLO and artists’ and activists’ organizations in Japan, Poland, Chile, and Italy throughout the 1970s.³ These international leftist networks were necessary, as the aspirations for a Palestinian nation-state were being fought from exile, first in Amman and later in Beirut, and throughout PLO offices across the globe. This chapter builds on the extensive research of Khouri and Salti by tracing the political mobilization of the arts on behalf of the Palestinian cause to the previous decade of the 1960s. Rather than focus on institutional initiatives such

as exhibitions, museum collections, and formal organizational alliances, the chapter turns to an examination of aesthetic language. Focusing on the work of Ismail Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal, it argues that figuration, as opposed to abstraction, served a central role in communicating Palestinian history and humanizing the Palestinian people.

Within an art world informed by the deployment of modernist abstraction in American cultural diplomacy in arts and American University of Beirut's pedagogical philosophy of personal expression in the arts, figuration still remained a prevalent mode of artistic expression in Cold War Beirut. In the paintings of Shammout and al-Akhal, figuration conveyed their Beaux-Arts training at Cairo's School of the Fine Arts (1950–54) and Shammout's further training at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome (1954–56). The figure also embodied Palestinian subjectivity. Figuration humanized the subject of Shammout and al-Akhal, enabling the paintings to warrant an emotional response—a visual language that could forge transnational alliances.

The chapter offers a close critical analysis of the role of the paintings of Shammout and al-Akhal in speaking for a displaced and disenfranchised Palestinian population in ways not possible by a supposedly universal abstract formalism, which, as the previous chapters argued, always required discursive grounding. Moreover, the genealogy of figure, rooted in the European Beaux-Arts tradition, must repress its own legacy in order to speak to a Palestinian collective. Central to the book's main argument is the insistence on a dialectical approach to the nation-state as a rubric for art historical analysis. Just as the cosmopolitan Lebanese capital of Beirut is a fitting site for critical reflection on the notion of a purported pure national artistic tradition, so too is a body of paintings that forge a national Palestinian collective in exile.⁴

The Urgent Call: Mobilizing Solidarity

Shammout and Shaath filmed *The Urgent Call of Palestine* in the summer of 1972, when Shaath was on summer vacation in Lebanon visiting her mother's extended family. The short music film represents a transnational collaboration between Palestinian artist Shammout living in exile in Beirut, sixteen-year old Palestinian Egyptian singer Shaath, and Indian writer Lalita Panjabi, who was living in Cairo at the time. Panjabi gave a copy of her poem to Shaath's sister, who worked at an English radio show in Cairo that featured arts and culture. Zeinab Shaath set the poem to music and performed it live on her sister's radio show. The recording caught the attention of numerous pro-Palestinian groups, who began inviting Shaath to perform at various festivals. It was at one of these festivals in the mountains of Lebanon that Ismail Shammout heard Shaath perform. Then serving as the inaugural director of the Department of Arts and National Culture of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, based in Beirut at the time, Shammout developed and filmed the short film along with a 45 rpm recording of four songs of original music composed and sung by Shaath to Arabic poems translated into English.

In a 2017 interview with curator and visual historian Rona Sela, Shaath reflected on the success of the recording:

This is a great way for people to hear about the Palestinian cause, I can do that, this is the best way I can help. This encouraged me to make more songs in English to reach people outside the Arab world so they can understand what Palestinians are going through. It was a great way to help my cause. After searching, I found a book with English translations of poems written by famous Palestinians.⁵

Shaath's recollection underscores the critical ability of cultural art forms to engender political support. She continues, "I feel that I made a difference because people were able to understand the Palestinian story better through my songs than from a speech."⁶ Moreover, Shaath is explicit in the goal of narrating the Palestinian experience to audiences outside the region. This potential of cultural production to convey experience and therefore garner empathy is nowhere more evident than in Israeli censorship of the archived recording, part of a long history of violent and repressive confiscation of all artistic expression that references Palestine or utilizes the colors of the Palestinian flag.⁷ Important to this chapter is the acknowledgment that the particular linguistic and formal language of cultural expression is critical to its ability to register with different local, regional, and international audiences—the very agenda of transnational solidarity strategies. Scholar Jérôme Bazin, for example, has examined the different iconographic languages of images of solidarity to distinguish between those paintings that seek to speak to the populations that endured suffering and, alternatively, those works that raise awareness of suffering by addressing the so-called rest of the world.⁸ *The Urgent Call of Palestine* registers its transnational alliances with the postcolonial independence movements of the 1960s through its lyrics, mobilization of song, use of the English language, and the figure of Kamal Nasser, whose words justify resistance as a result of political, economic, and military occupation. The film also works to humanize the Palestinian community through the photographs of children, as do the lyrics that characterize the Palestinian plight as something wholly distinct from terrorism, which was precisely how the United States and Israel labeled the PLO.⁹ Through these strategies, the short recording is able to address audiences versed in and attuned to the necessary liberation violence of independence movements worldwide.¹⁰

Shammout's task of bringing awareness of the Palestinian plight to international audiences did not, however, begin with his involvement with the PLO. At his first exhibition in 1953 in Cairo during his time at the Fine Arts Academy there, Shammout received acclaim in the press for one of his most well-known compositions, *Where To?* Discussed in detail later in the chapter, the painting portrays an elderly figure, his face fatigueridden and worn by despair (Figure 5.1). He carries a small, fragile child, collapsed on his shoulders, while another young boy trails behind. A third, older boy holds the man's hand, his facial expression asks achingly, "Where to?"

Life-size in its image and immediate in its emotional call, the painting iconizes on canvas the 1948 expulsion of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli Army. The subject was one Shammout himself experienced as a young boy, and critics of the 1953 exhibition did not fail to yoke the painting's subject to its creator. Writing in the Arabic newspaper *al-Adib*, critic Harun Hashim Rashid singles out *Where To?* from among Shammout's other exhibited paintings. Rashid describes meeting the young artist: "I read in his face a splendid reflection of the struggle and the resistance, and of true faith in our right as a people to life, and in our right to live in dignity and freedom."¹¹ He continues, "Everything in Shammout's exhibition indicates that the Palestinian cause is alive in her sons' hearts, and that is the spring from which they draw inspiration to make their accusations."¹² What the critic reads in the visual representation is embodied in the face of the artist. Anchoring the painting to the reality of lived experience, Rashid enables the representation to convey Shammout's own suffering to the viewer. As the remainder of this chapter argues, this intimate connection between experience and representation would work together with their use of figuration to award the art of Shammout and al-Akhal its realism throughout their long careers.¹³ Two of the most celebrated artists in the region, Shammout and al-Akhal have received surprisingly little scholarly attention



Figure 5.1 Ismail Shammout, *Where To?* 1953. Oil on canvas. 125 × 95 cm. Collection of the Artist. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.

outside of standard biographies, the majority of which are autobiographical.¹⁴ The following section returns to the early biographies of these two artists to consider the ways in which experience is written on the artist's face and the canvas.

From the Mandate to the Nakba

Born in 1930 in the city of Lydda, Ismail Shammout spent his childhood years living under the British Mandate (1920–48). Prior to the mandate, the territory was part of the

Ottoman Empire, and before the second half of the nineteenth century, a neglected far post. Not until the second half of the nineteenth century, when Jerusalem and its environs received an influx of missionaries, foreign consulates, photographers, and tourists, did the empire invest in the future capital of Palestine.¹⁵ Americans and Europeans traveled to the Holy Land to identify Judeo-Christian biblical stories in the material realities of the landscape—what has been termed *geo-pity*.¹⁶ Because these French, British, and American tourists required the amenities of paved roads, hotels, and other services, the Ottoman Empire recognized the economic potential of the area and allocated significant funds for its development.

This mid-nineteenth-century activity resulted in a vast visual archive of lithographs, daguerreotypes, photographs, and postcards. Early French and British pioneers of daguerreotypes and photography such as Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey (1804–92), Auguste Salzmann (1824–72), Maxime Du Camp (1822–94), Francis Bedford (1816–94), and later, Francis Frith (1822–98) all visited Ottoman Palestine and produced work for documentary, aesthetic, religious, and commercial purposes. For Westerners, this visual archive would service the cultural hegemony of European imperial ambitions, as scholars of photography of the Middle East have argued following the 1978 publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.¹⁷ Vast, empty landscapes, devoid of local population, served to justify a land waiting to be inhabited and developed. Crumbling architecture and monuments demanded to be restored and preserved. By the time of the mandate, those imperial ambitions had been transformed into reality as the British took control of the area after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the end of World War I, and the failed promises of independence to the Arab forces on the part of the French and British.

The events in the days following the 1948 declaration of the State of Israel are fiercely contested. Israeli officials claim that Palestinian residents fled from their home. Palestinian families and neighbors recount horrific memories of being forced out of their homes at gunpoint and made to march without food or water—an estimated 750,000 Palestinians—into exile. Ismail Shammout was 18 years old when, on July 12, 1948, his family of nine—along with 25,000 residents of the agricultural town on Lydda—were forced out by gunpoint and took refuge in a village north of Ramallah. After several nights outdoors, followed by sheltering in a nearby girls’ school, Shammout’s father moved his family to the Khan Younis refugee camp, alongside the nearly 35,000 Palestinians who took refuge in 1948 in that camp in Gaza, near the Mediterranean coast.

Describing the expulsion as being like a “river of people,” Shammout recalls residents assuming that this was a typical round-up, like the many before that had occurred when mandate authorities forcibly gathered residents in the town square to search homes for weapons.¹⁸ This time, however, soldiers with weapons lined up the residents and forced them to walk for hours without food or water. Shammout painfully recalls a younger sibling becoming dehydrated and Shammout momentarily leaving his family to collect water from a nearby farm. When he returned to the destitute Palestinians, Israeli soldiers put a gun to his head and ordered him to dump the water. Shammout’s recollections underscore both the brutal conditions of the Nakba for so many Palestinian refugees and the Palestinians’ intimate knowledge of the land.

Tamam al-Akhal experienced a similar radical disruption to her childhood in Palestine when her family was forced from their home in the seaside town of Jaffa. In her 2016 autobiographical account, al-Akhal recalls a child’s intuitive sense of impending change as she experienced a growing sense of tension among her neighbors in the face of a growing armed presence of Israeli and British forces.¹⁹ Like many other Palestinian refugees, al-Akhal and

her family took refuge in Beirut, Lebanon, where she lived until 1953, when she left to pursue her artistic education in Cairo.²⁰

Despite the violent 1948 transformation of reality for all Palestinians—those who fled as refugees and those who remained under Israeli occupation—the visual depictions of Palestine by non-Palestinians, particularly Israelis, remained trapped in imagery of a timeless, empty landscape, a land waiting to be occupied. The reality, of course, was far less simplistic. A 2012 short film written by Hatem Alsharif and directed by Nora Alsharif poignantly captures a young Shammout's artistic aspirations. The film opens with the voice of an Israeli soldier demanding "*Yella, yella*," Arabic for "Let's go," before switching to Hebrew to scold the stream of Palestinians trudging through the desert, their faces listless in the heat as they struggle to carry whatever belongings they had managed to pack before the expulsion. The rifle of an Israeli soldier butts the small suitcase that the teenage Shammout carries on his head. As the suitcase falls to the ground, opening to reveal a tattered book of the paintings of Michelangelo, the Israeli soldier commands Shammout to hurry up and pick up "his garbage." The film then cuts to black before the second scene opens on Shammout in the early morning, before the sun has risen, preparing small cakes to sell with his younger brother, Jamil, at the nearby Khan Younis train station. As the two brothers set out by foot, daily life in the camp begins as woman hang clothes on the clothing line. It is within the surreal mundaneness of daily life in the camp that Shammout's dream of being an artist unfolds—at extraordinary risk.

On the walk together to the train station, Shammout shares with his younger brother the story of Italian Renaissance artist Michelangelo and his frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Beginning his story with "*Kan ya makan*," the phrase that opens fairy tales in Arabic (conventionally translated into English as, "once upon a time"), Shammout recounts an imagined tale of the life of the artist, suggestive of Shammout's own aspirations. When his brother questions Shammout's characterization of Rome as the most beautiful city, the aspiring artist replies that he has seen the city in a magazine, promising to bring his brother to visit when Shammout travels to Rome for his art studies. Shammout's knowledge of Michelangelo and the epicenter of the Italian Renaissance through books and magazines suggests the active circuit of aesthetic ideals and trajectories during the mid-twentieth century. Shammout's tale is interrupted by a successful trip to the train station, where the brothers manage to sell all their treats. Not until the train pulls away from the station do the customers discover that the supposed sweets are covered in corn flour rather than sugar. In an insightful commentary on the realities of life in the refugee camps, Shammout asks rhetorically to his disgruntled customers, "How would we be able to find sugar?" The two brothers then embark on the return home, and Shammout resumes his story of Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel. The allegorical tale of artistic aspirations is violently interrupted when a Bedouin arrests the brothers' movement with his frantic warning that the brothers have unknowingly wandered into a minefield.

The remainder of the short film charts a highly dramatic yet slowly unfolding journey as Shammout painstakingly lifts each foot, delicately pressing it into the sandy ground as his younger brother carefully follows in Shammout's footsteps. The tension is further heightened when a bleating goat runs through the field past the brothers, hits a mine, and explodes. Rattled, the two brothers push on to the deep ditch that demarcates the end of the minefield. Another Bedouin appears, and the two men help the brothers out of the ditch and onto safe territory. The relief is palpable, as is the comradery of the four characters, a metaphor for the Nakba and the Palestinian community's tense, fragile survival and its ability to persevere through a life-threatening journey. The film's audience is

aware of Ismail Shammout's eventual artistic success. The history of Palestine, however, would face a longer struggle to achieve its national aspirations. It is precisely this long struggle for Palestinian independence that Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal visually narrate on their canvases, securing their role as among the most internationally recognized regional artists.

Artistic Beginnings

Two years after arriving at the Khan Younis refugee camp, with \$30 saved from teaching art in the refugee camp, Ismail Shammout traveled to Cairo to enroll at the School of Fine Arts (later renamed the College of Fine Arts).²¹ The school had opened four decades earlier, on May 12, 1908, under the patronage of Prince Youssef Kamal. The first academy of its kind in the Arab world, it was tuition free and open to students of all nationalities and religions. For the first time, aspiring artists of the region no longer had to travel to Europe to pursue a career in the visual arts, although many of its graduates furthered their training abroad, most often in Rome first and Paris later. Although the first teachers were predominantly French and Italian, Middle East scholar Dina Ramadan has characterized Prince Youssef Kamal's initiative as an indigenous one, distinct from the British Mandate control of government institutions.²² The school thus represents not only a significant initiative in the region but also an important moment in Shammout's life.

By 1953, Shammout had produced nearly 60 paintings, watercolors, and drawings, which he exhibited at what has been identified as the first exhibition of fine arts in the Khan Younis refugee camp. One of the works included was *Where To?*, a painting Shammout produced during his time at the School of Fine Arts and one that he would exhibit in Cairo the following year at a student exhibition. Shammout invited two fellow Palestinian students to participate as well, including Tamam al-Akhal, whose own experience of the Nakba as a young child took visual form in her work. Together, the two young artists would deploy their training in the European academic *Beaux-Arts* tradition, of which the figure is central, to humanize the story of the Palestinian community, which in many ways began with Shammout's *Where To?*²³

A large-scale canvas—particularly for an art student living away from his refugee home in the metropolis of 1950s Cairo—*Where To?* is a poignant composition. The central figure of an elderly man fills the life-size composition. He stares ahead, beyond the borders of the canvas, with a furrowed brow. On his shoulders, an emaciated youth collapses on his father's head. The boy's lips, parted with thirst, echo Shammout's vivid recollection of thirst on the family's expulsion from Lydda. Two brothers walk on either side of the elderly figure. The one behind looks down, whereas the second stares up at his father's depleted face, asking, "Where to?" The father's distant gaze holds no response. The fading cityscape in the distance is a glimmer of what is left behind. The dull brown landscape is barren save for a lone tree, compositionally offsetting the minaret of the town in the distance, a symbol of the community left behind. The entire composition emanates the despair of the central figure's body—the downtrodden facial expression, the taught neck muscles, and the tight grip on the walking cane.

The painting speaks to a crisis in authority: the father figure no longer able to assure his children of a secure future, let alone an immanent destination for the flight of the refugee. The promises of security under the nation-state have created both the figure of the refugee and the borders that will refuse the possibility of resettlement in any protected, holistic form. The purportedly temporary crisis of the refugee is debunked in

Shammout's painting, both through its unanswered question and the broader crisis in the family unit, apparent in the absent figure of the mother—a visual metaphor for the lost motherland of Palestine—who assures continuation of the population.²⁴

The crisis in the family runs throughout Shammout's work on the Nakba throughout the 1950s. In the 1954 painting *We Will Return* (Figure 5.2), the central figure is once again an older male figure, who protectively shelters a younger boy with his arm. The boy looks up to the elder, who does not meet the youth's gaze in assurance but rather glances backward at the trail of figures fleeing with their belongings. The central figure's

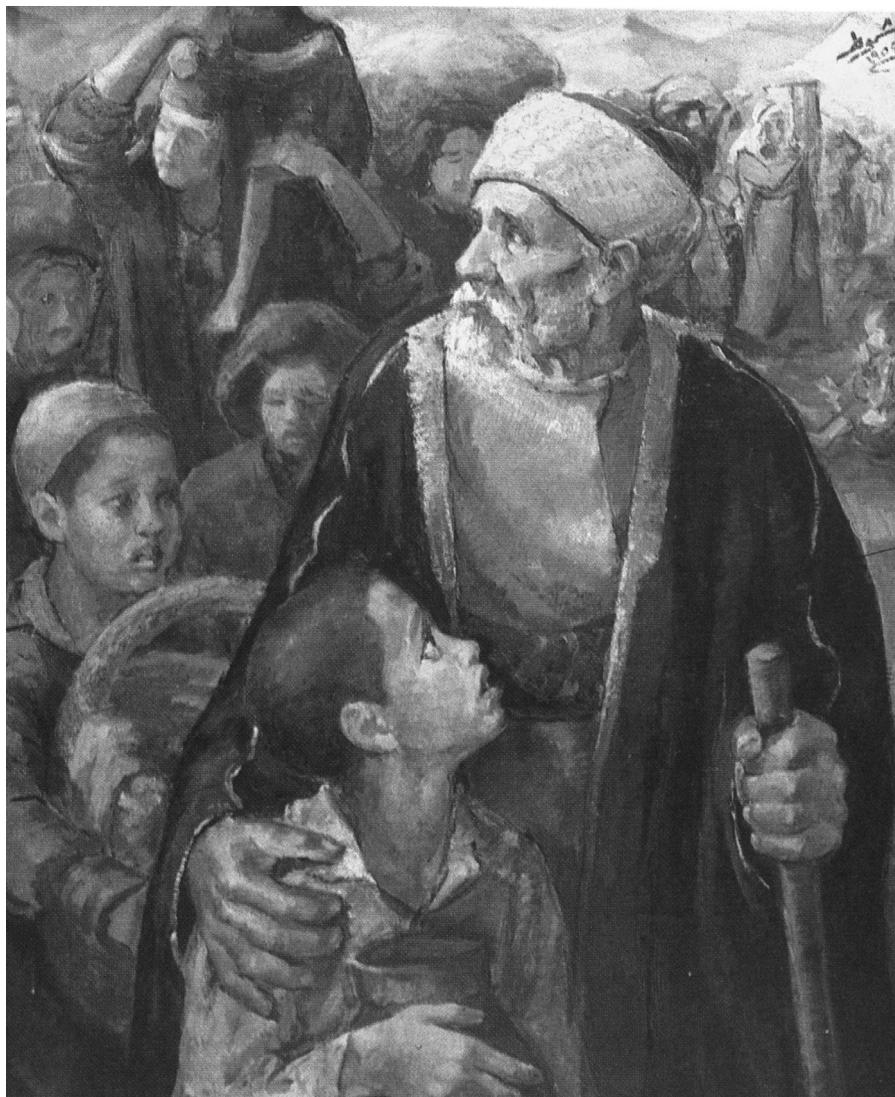


Figure 5.2 Ismail Shammout, *We Will Return*, 1954. Oil on canvas. 94 × 78 cm. Collection of the Artist.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.

expression harkens back to that of *Where To?* Despite the decidedly more hopeful title of *We Will Return*, Shammout's choice of color palette, facial expressions, and overall composition suggests a less-than-secure future. This crisis in the patriarchal figure, either in the form of vulnerability or absence, is further suggested in the 1957 work *Here Sat My Father* (Figure 5.3), in which a small boy stares longingly at an empty wooden stool. In the background, a small house stands next to one missing a roof. The destruction of the physical home stands as a visual allegory for the missing father of the post-Nakba generation.

Together, these paintings underscore the emotive narrative for which Shammout is celebrated. Their focus on the male or father figure as suffering the crisis of the

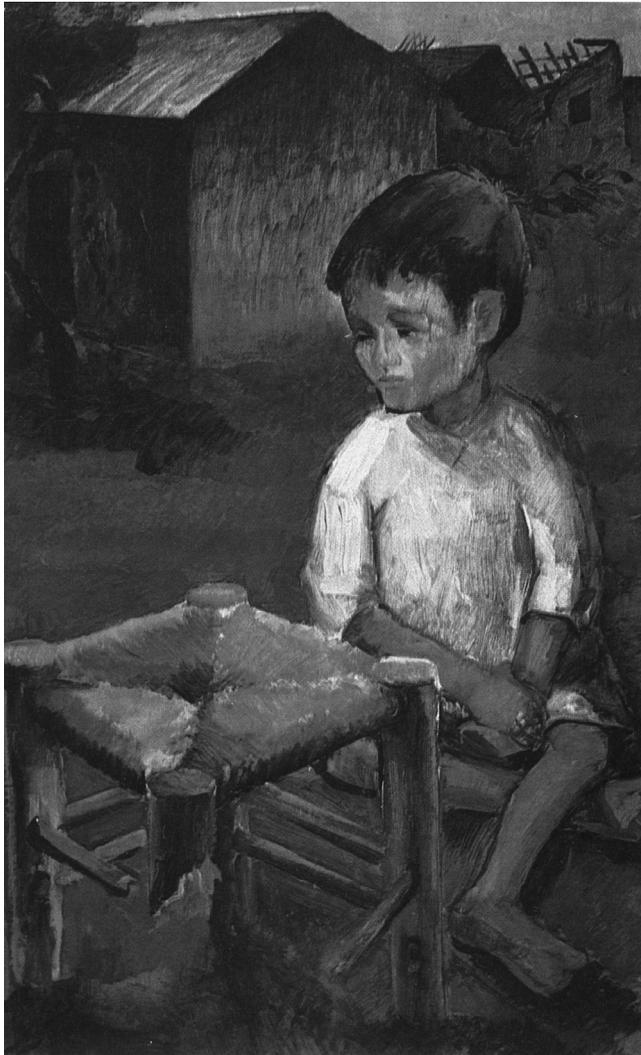


Figure 5.3 Ismail Shammout, *Here Sat My Father*, 1957. Oil on canvas. 90 × 60 cm. Private Collection, Kuwait.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.

Nakba—underscored by the glaring absence of the mother figure—stand in marked contrast to later paintings by Shammout and others of his artistic generation who privilege the female figure as the symbolic mother of Palestine who births the nation-state through the figure of the male resistance fighter and serves as the allegorical continuation of the Palestinian community. Even in paintings that feature couples, such as Shammout's 1962 *Newlyweds on the Border* (Figure 5.4), the male resistance fighter, signaled through his rifle, is accompanied by the young Palestinian female figure, dressed in traditional Palestinian embroidery. Indeed, Shammout's larger body of work includes multiple scenes that stress the importance of community continuation and an intimate relationship to the land and agriculture.

This iconography of community endurance develops throughout Shammout's long career. In a later 1997 work, *Madonna of the Oranges* (Figure 5.5), Shammout transforms the artistic icon of the Italian Renaissance—the *pietà* of the Madonna cradling the baby

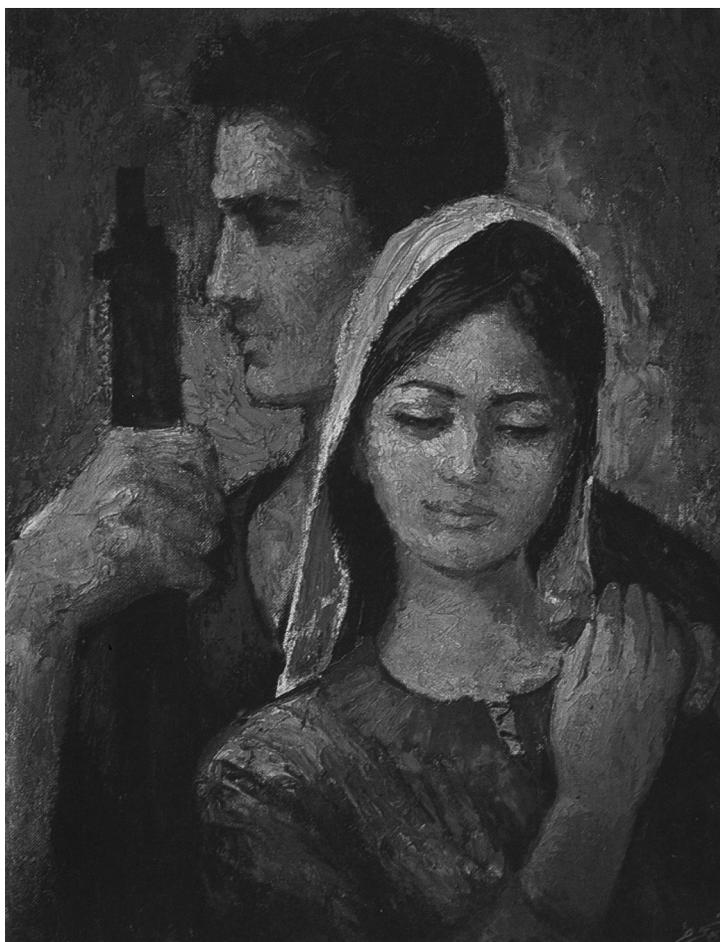


Figure 5.4 Ismail Shammout, *Newlyweds on the Border*, 1962. Oil on canvas. 60 × 50 cm. Private Collection, Beirut.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.



Figure 5.5 Ismail Shammout, *Madonna of the Oranges*, 1997. Oil on canvas. 100 × 80cm. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Jesus—into a young Palestinian mother. Delicately draped in a white shroud, the Palestinian Madonna stands proudly in an orange grove. With her young daughter at her side, the mother lovingly carries her sleeping baby. The three figures are framed by a lush tree, ripe with bright oranges, a reference to the oranges of Tamam al-Akhal's hometown of Jaffa. In the background, a man and young boy harvest the fruit. Portraying a joyous moment

of hope, Shammout signals the continual flowering of nature and future generations of Palestinians through both the abundance of oranges and the youthful generation.

The iconography of the Palestinian community endurance is most often visualized in post-Nakba art through the female figure who births the nation-state and the rituals that structure life and give material form to the abstract concept of the nation-state.²⁵ In the early paintings of internationally recognized Palestinian artist Suleiman Mansour (b. 1947), for instance, the figure of the female figure is immediately recognized as Palestinian through her embroidered garb and loosely draped headscarf. In an untitled work dated to 1988, the beginning of the first intifada, the Palestinian people literally flood out from between the female figure's legs while other figures harvest the bounty of the land and the sea, and produce stonework and create music (Figure 5.6).

Shammout's figures from his earlier Nakba works, on the other hand, are representative of both the Palestinian national community and individuals enduring through the Nakba. Such a difference could result from a radical historical difference between the immediate post-Nakba period of the 1950s and the works of Mansour and Ghaben decades later. Historian of Palestinian revolutionary cinema Nadia Yaqub outlines a trajectory of Palestinian painting from "unresolved loss and political indirection" in the early paintings of the 1950s to more overtly symbolic work in the 1970s and 1980s, when Palestinian traditions, heritages, and memories formed the basis on the national project.²⁶ Those historical and political shifts can be traced through a trajectory of Shammout's work as a history visually narrated. The depiction of the young boy and his father who leave the land without any future security, compared to the young mother who does laundry with her daughter, suggests the establishment of a post-Nakba life routine in the 1976 painting, *Life Goes On* (Figure 5.7). In all Shammout's body of work, it is the figure that delivers the narrative thrust.

The Origins of Realism

In many respects, the beginnings of modern art in Palestine can be traced through the figure of Shammout himself. He is both its protagonist and the narrator of its history as one of the most prolific writers, alongside his wife and artistic collaborator, Tamam al-Akhal.²⁷ Shammout's and al-Akhal's first-person-subject position of the history they visually narrate is a critical component to the art criticism of their work, awarding authenticity to artistic renderings of history. Take, for instance, Abdul Qadar Daher's opening characterization of the couple's work:

Theirs was no exercise in the abstract. They had the distinction of being unsolicited players in the drama. A dubious distinction perhaps, but one which rendered them able to impart a sense of realism in their work. No models were needed to draw the terrified throngs in the infamous, To the Unknown, as the painter was physically one of those forced into exile. No overlooking vista was required to scan the cramped and inhuman concentrations of refugees in their Palestinians.... Refugees since the Shammouts, children and adults alike, were part of that pitiful landscape. All the painters needed was to unfold the wraps of their own memory and the images would come readily alive, their colors and hues indelibly engrained, their lines and shadows forever etched.²⁸

Abdul Qadar Daher's characterization of the Shammouts' joint artistic endeavor opens the 2000 exhibition catalog of their paintings, *Palestine: The Exodus and the Odyssey*.



Figure 5.6 Sliman Mansour, *The Village Awakens*, 1987. Oil on canvas. 116 × 97.5 cm. Collection George Al'ama, Bethlehem.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of George Al'ama and Sliman Mansour.

The paintings chronicle both artistic practice and a history of the Nakba, as brief textual explanations accompany the reproductions. An example is the text accompanying al-Akhal's 1999 painting *The Rift* (Figure 5.8): "The Israeli occupation divided cities, towns, and villages. Families were separated ... and brides unable to cross over the divide to join their bridegrooms. Palestinians in enemy camps were tortured."²⁹ The extensive caption explicates the three main iconographical scenes in this large-scale painting



Figure 5.7 Ismail Shammout, *Life Goes On*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 70 × 50 cm. Private Collection, location unknown.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.

measuring 165 × 200 cm. A gaping ravine divides the composition diagonally into two banks of land. On the right stands a bride, dressed in her wedding dress and holding a bouquet. On the left, a cluster of male figures and small children vertically align the side of the composition. One muscular nude male body dangles from a jail cell near the top of the canvas, the figure's hands in chains. Below him are young boys also with their hands chained and a crouching nude male whose face is hidden behind arms and legs baring heavy metal chains.

The scene depicted does not portray a singular historical event but rather daily life under occupation: a community whose attempts to propagate—represented through the figure of the bride—are thwarted, the occupation abstracted through the landscape of the ravine that



Figure 5.8 Tamam al-Akhal, *The Rift*, 1999. Oil on canvas. 165 × 200 cm. Collection of the Artist. Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.

separates the composition. The occupation embedded in the physical landscape in turn violently interrupting society. The humiliation of the male figures stands in stark contrast to the anticipated joy of a wedding day. The painting's dark palette reflects the terror and despair of its subject and stands in stark contrast to the bride's white dress. Toward the center of the composition, a hand emerges from the land, as if the land had swallowed a figure, a last desperate cry to be saved.

Accompanying the text and painting are detailed reproductions of the painting's main iconographical elements: the bride; the crouching, chained male figure in the bottom left-hand corner; a second chained male figure whose body is torn by barbed wire; and the landscape of the ravine with a hand reaching out. The inclusion of these four focused details reveals the presence of al-Akhal's brushstroke on the surface of the canvas. Although figurative, the painting moves away from the conventional polished surface of nineteenth-century Beaux-Art paintings toward a modernist application of paint, which both explicitly acknowledges the hand of the artist and dissolves identifiable objects into abstracted form. Take, for instance, the hands of a partially hidden male figure, placed behind the dangling torso. From a holistic view of the painting, the intertwined fingers are clearly identifiable as two hands of an imprisoned figure. Yet isolated from the composition, those same intertwined figures lose their readability as fingers. This painterly detail situates al-Akhal's work within her knowledge of artistic traditions and an active mobilization of those visual

languages of a modern art that speaks at once to both an aesthetic tradition and the very historical conditions of Palestine, which are the subject of those aesthetics.

The layout for *The Rift* also includes four smaller reproductions that document the painting throughout its production, serving as a window onto al-Akhal's artistic process throughout the publication. The first image shows a preliminary sketch on canvas in which the bride in the right-hand corner of the canvas is isolated from the rest of the composition, not by a ravine as in the final version but rather spatially; the remainder of the composition is crowded yet divided by various figural groupings. On the upper left-hand side, the male torso hangs from the upper corner, as in the final painting. Moreover, the crouching male figure in the bottom is also present in the sketch. The body positions—one elongated and the second in a fetal position—balance each other compositionally and suggest the importance of compositional unity to al-Akhal's work; a characteristic also present in Shammout's paintings and an important element of their Beaux-Arts training. Unlike the final painting, the sketch includes many more figures behind the two male prisoners in addition to a grouping of soldiers and school children, whose location in school is evident in a later iteration of the painting in which their school uniforms have been painted. The right-hand corner also shows multi-room scenes in a home in the bottom right-hand corner. As the four sketches chart the progress of the painting, viewers are aware of al-Akhal's own reworking of the final painting, which is a simplified version that edits out several of the figures in the prison and the home scene, the soldiers, and the school children. As a result, the composition is defined not through figural groupings but rather through a spatial divide. In this way, the painting's subject of Palestinian life assumes both a literal representation and a conceptual one; the empty middle ground—the focus of the composition—is defined not by action or figural groupings but rather by a divide between two figural groupings. The occupation is represented, then, not by the Israeli soldier but rather through the effects of the occupation on the Palestinian community.

This compositional editing process from sketch on canvas to final oil painting is documented throughout the book, an integral element of what the publication shares. A second painting from 1998 portrays one of the many villages and towns violently expelled by the Israeli Army in 1948. *Uprooting* (Figure 5.9), however, is not a generalized scene but rather depicts the artist's hometown of Jaffa. Similar to al-Akhal's later paintings, the composition includes multiple related scenes: an architectural alleyway crowded with figures leaving their homes in the upper right-hand corner; the shoreline of Jaffa in the upper left-hand corner; and the central focus of the composition a crowd of figures—despair written on their faces—promulgated forward by a violent sea into the bottom of the composition. The drama of the events of April 28, 1948—the inclusion of the date in the title serving as a form of historical record—are registered not only on the distorted faces and movement of the crowded figures and horses, but also through the wave, which crashes and breaks in the center of the composition, serving to divide the land scene from the sea scene and to heighten the dramatic moment of the composition. Indeed, the fate of the crowd is uncertain, as some struggle to reach the end of a boat, risking being subsumed by the crashing waves. The overcrowded boats closer to the shoreline are no less at risk, and arms flail in the air. Similar to the previously detailed painting, the central focus of the composition is absent of figures—the spewing white of the wave's crest here recalling the deep ravine in *The Rift*.

In addition to documenting Shammout's and al-Akhal's process of working, the decision to include reproductions of individual paintings at different stages of production suggests the methodology of the artistic process, one that stands at the heart of



Figure 5.9 Tamam al-Akhal, *Uprooting*, 1998. Oil on canvas. 165 × 200 cm. Collection of the Artist.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of Tamam al-Akhal.

the Beaux-Arts tradition and is reinforced by al-Akhal's own statement contrasting her method of painting with abstraction as a method in which color was dabbed onto the canvas.³⁰ Al-Akhal's labors are various and variously displayed—her striving for compositional unity, her physical engagement with the work as we see her climbing a ladder to reach the canvas stretched on the wall of her studio, her conceptual adjustments of the original sketch. As in the example of the painting *The Rift*, the changes—the majority of which are edited-down compositions—underscore a shift from a composition dominated by figural compositions toward one that becomes increasingly conceptual. The figures, such as the bride and imprisoned male figures, narrate the post-Nakba Palestinian history just as much as the empty space marking the center of the composition and delineating the divide between the imprisoned male figure and the female bride.

Artists and art historians Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon have argued that histories of Palestinian art conventionally work to locate the origin of Palestinian art before 1948, a justifiable counterargument to the premise of the declaration of the State of Israel and accompanying denial of Palestinian land and people.³¹ As the most significant event in Palestinian history, the Nakba serves as a central origin for modern history. Indeed, in Shammout's story, the Nakba serves as starting point for his artistic production, suggested not only through conventional biographies, including the short film *Ismail*, but also in the title, *Palestine: The Exodus and the Odyssey*.

The publication's emphasis on process in a book whose title suggests the historical narrative undergirding the practice and oeuvre of Shammout and al-Akhal raises several critical aspects to this body of work within the context of Palestinian art and within debates around aesthetic languages in the vibrant and engaged art world of Beirut during the 1960s. The historical is first represented in terms of a Palestinian journey (the exodus and the odyssey) and secondly in the artistic career trajectories. The project of historical narrative at the heart of the Shammouts' artistic project is underscored with the words of Abdul Qadar Daher, which introduce the paintings and captions. As Daher makes clear, this is not a history imagined but rather a history rendered through the act of witnessing: "Theirs was no exercise in the abstract."³² In Daher's observation, the abstract references both the historical conditions and contexts visualized in the subsequent paintings and the artistic practice and aesthetic languages at work. As Daher's subsequent sentence clarifies, Shammout's and al-Akhal's participation within the very history rendered artistically "imparts a sense of realism in their work."³³ As with Daher's dual use of the word *abstract*, Daher's "realism" at once refers to aesthetics and history. The artists' bodily presence within the painting's historical subject and the realism of their artistic language are at once yoked together and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, it is precisely the act of witnessing and transcribing that to canvas that would render Shammout's work meaningful for its Palestinian and international audiences.

Palestinian artist and art historian Samia Halaby describes the potency of Shammout's *Where To?* when exhibited in the Khan Younis refugee camp in 1953, where the painting, resonating intimately with its audience, was able to convey its immediacy, its tragedy, and its hope as a collective emblem.³⁴ Similarly, Shammout's and al-Akhal's body of work served as a medium for forging transnational alliances in what Cold War historian Paul Thomas Chamberlin describes as "the broad complex of liberationist forces scattered throughout the international system of the Cold War world."³⁵ Yet like all art forms, the realism of Shammout and al-Akhal can never have such a transparent genealogy. As the next section details, studies of Shammout—less critical attention has been awarded individually to al-Akhal—often read his paintings within a hybrid model that situates Palestinian themes and iconography within traditional European compositions.

Multiple Genealogies

One of the few publications on Palestinian artists working in Beirut during the mid-twentieth century is Kamal Boullata's essay "Artists Re-member Palestine in Beirut," originally published in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies* in the summer of 2003.³⁶ Boullata's contribution is foundational in acknowledging and mapping out the role of Palestinian artists living as refugees in Beirut. Boullata's essay highlights the diverse practices and aesthetic languages among different artists, outlining two groups: camp artists and urban refugees. Camp artists, such as Ismail Shammout—one of Boullata's examples—deploy narrative figuration as a strategy, and their work, which often did not find its way into the city's galleries and exhibition spaces, found meaning addressing not the cultural elite but "the common people" in its desire to speak to and represent the nationalist cause.³⁷ In contrast, the urban refugees, according to Boullata's characterization, practiced "a more experimental and often personal aesthetic, without explicit reference to the artist's political position."³⁸ The audience for these artists was comprised of the cultural elites of Ras Beirut and constituted the city's avant-garde.

For Boullata, neither set of artists and art forms are considered to be superior. Boullata's aim is rather to underscore the ways in which Palestinian art thrived and continued to develop outside of Palestine. Important for the present study is the characterization of Shammout's figuration as representing an art of the people and for the people, aligned with Cold War transnational alliances of postcolonial liberation movements. And whereas Boullata acknowledges Shammout's training with Palestinian artist Daoud Zalatimo (1906–2001), known for his realistic renderings and his years of study at Cairo's Fine Arts Academy and the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, the Beaux-Arts emphasis on figuration remains absent from Shammout's artistic genealogy.³⁹

Anthropologist Kirsten Scheid, one of the most prolific scholars on the body in modern and contemporary Arab art, has argued for both the fragility of the body within contemporary politics—those bodies subjected to colonial and imperialist government control—and the nude in modern art of the Arab world, particularly among Lebanese artists.⁴⁰ In her essay “Between the Promise of Life and Its Fragility: The Arab Body in The Khalid Shoman Collection,” Scheid identifies three strategies for understanding the ways in which artistic practice makes use of the Arab body: conflation, emergence, and absence.⁴¹ In her discussion of Shammout's 1984 painting of a heroic yet deceased resistance fighter titled, *The Sea and Us* (Figure 5.10), Scheid argues that Shammout's formal strategies enable art to “defeat the discourse of the aesthetic philistine and, at once, insert the modern Palestinian into the canons of artistic culture.”⁴² In her reading

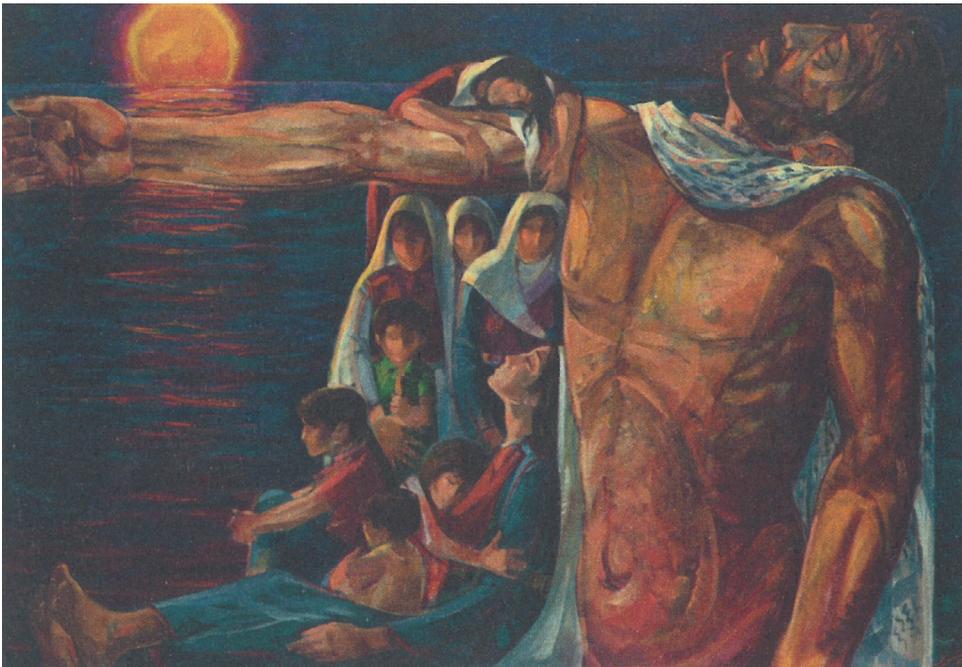


Figure 5.10 Ismail Shammout, *The Sea and Us*, 1984. Oil on canvas. 110 × 70 cm. The Khalid Shoman Collection, Amman.

Source: Courtesy and reproduced by permission of The Khalid Shoman Collection and Tamam al-Akhal.

of the painting, Scheid elucidates the body of the martyr as the underlying structure of the composition. As his oversized, muscular body fills the right side of the composition, his muscular arm stretches straight across the canvas, providing support for the female figure draped over his shoulder, and define the horizon line of the composition with the sun setting over the water above.

As Scheid aptly notes, Shammout has appropriated the deposition scene and inverted it, thereby deploying the figure of the male sacrificing for the community—witnessed in the Palestinian women and children sheltered under the male figure’s arm—and the women and children as carrying on the Palestinian community to “marry” references to the conventions of Renaissance art with the Palestinian narratives of martyrdom.⁴³ The classical Renaissance aesthetic is further referenced, according to Scheid, in the idealized body—a clear reference to Shammout’s Beaux-Arts training—as well as the use of linear perspective. For Scheid, Shammout’s combination of classical formal strategies with the particulars of Palestinian iconography enables the work to carry meaning for an audience outside of Palestine and the region at large and resonate with international audiences. The painting is thus one of a sacrificed present and a hopeful future. This dual element is characteristic of both Renaissance religious paintings and Palestinian paintings of this moment during the first intifada. Moreover, the Palestinian narrative of struggle and liberation is one that is recognizable from earlier paintings of the resistance years of the 1960s. The idealized body registers as a symbol of that hope. Scheid writes,

For although the Palestinian community that Shammout undertook to represent in bodily form was fragmented and dispersed, tortured and tormented, his act of painting brings it into a single solid mass, rising up through *its* suffering. In particular, his use of a revered European tradition of figuration calls forth the possibility of imagining a ‘real’ Palestinian nation, paramount in dignity and recognizability to the European fatherlands of fine art.⁴⁴

Scheid is not the only scholar to elucidate Shammout’s strategic incorporation of European art. Discussing Shammout’s 1953 *Where To?*, art historian of the Renaissance Kerr Houston situates the painting within European paintings with which Shammout would have been familiar. The first artist Houston identifies is Pablo Picasso, himself an artist in exile in Paris and one significant to artists throughout the region.⁴⁵ Houston points to Picasso’s 1903 work *The Tragedy* as one of the paintings through which Shammout inserted himself within the transnational alliance of modernism. Houston further explains that several of Shammout’s colleagues at the School of Fine Arts, such as Egyptian painter Hamed Owais (1919–2011), expressed an interest in Picasso’s formal language as a model for challenging conventional academic conventions. European artistic conventions were also a component of art history courses at Cairo’s School of the Fine Arts. For Kerr, this reference to Picasso’s *The Tragedy* situates Shammout’s painting within a longer art historical iconography of displacement, a strategy that serves both an aesthetic and political front. On the one hand, Shammout’s references position him as an artist within a supposed universal art history; Shammout’s practice of referencing canonic paintings is itself a tradition of Beaux-Arts training, a strategy that establishes Shammout’s aesthetic aspirations.⁴⁶ On the other hand, as Scheid argues, Shammout’s explicit art historical referencing enables him to communicate the Palestinian Nakba to a broad international audience, couching a historical experience that might otherwise be considered foreign or a distinctly political issue in an aesthetic language.

Shammout's references include not only Picasso, but also Michelangelo. In his analysis of *Where To?*, Houston suggest an iconographical allusion to Michelangelo's 1508 fresco of the deluge for the Sistine Chapel. As discussed earlier, the short film *Ismail* identifies Michelangelo as a basis for Shammout's artistic aspirations. In the film's opening scene, the Israeli soldier pushes Shammout so that the suitcase he balances on his head is knocked over. Inside the few precious belongings Shammout carries with him is the book *Michelangelo*.⁴⁷ For Kerr, the reference to Michelangelo's deluge scene is evident in the figural grouping (one figure carrying another on his back) and a more general iconography of exile. Furthermore, as Kerr notes, The Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, where Shammout studied in 1956, stood only a mile from the Vatican, which housed the Sistine Chapel.

For Kerr and Scheid, Shammout's iconographical appropriation of previously established artistic traditions from the Renaissance express Shammout's artistic aspirations and engagements. Those individual artistic objectives served the additional task of claiming a space for the Palestinian Nakba within a longer history of exile. Boullata highlights a different aspect of Shammout's training; his early study with Palestinian artist Daoud Zalatimo and at Cairo's School of Fine Arts grounded Shammout in a regional artistic practice. At the core of each of these artistic genealogies is an emphasis on the Beaux-Arts tradition. Despite the tradition's own varied configurations and contexts—from nineteenth-century Paris to twentieth-century Cairo—the priority of figuration remained consistent. Figuration was also the artistic language that awarded diplomatic success to Shammout's and al-Akhal's paintings in a way never possible with abstraction, which, in the words of Lebanese theater and art critic Jalal Khoury, could only ever obscure a national art. Yet the transnational Cold War networks of artists, academies, print material, and aesthetic languages resisted the possibility of a purely national language, despite discursive attempts to insist on definitions of a national art, whether it be American, Lebanese, or Palestinian. Moreover, as the art and critical reception of Shammout and al-Akhal demonstrate, a varied genealogy that expresses an open appropriation to different artistic conventions and iconographies is precisely what enables art to speak across perceived boundaries—political, cultural, linguistic, and artistic.

Conclusion

Conventional histories have narrated the Cold War along a set of binaries, namely East and West and capitalism and communism. Over the past decade, however, a new generation of historians have documented both the Cold War's global dimensions and its more violent histories that unfolded across South East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Paul Thomas Chamberlin argues in *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking The Long Peace* that the Cold War could be labeled as such because the conflict between the great powers were fought as proxy wars throughout the postcolonial world.⁴⁸ Chamberlin thus sets out to consider the Cold War from a radically different geographical and, in turn, historical perspective. Significant to the present study is Chamberlin's assertion that the Cold War forged transnational connections that strategically linked postcolonial struggles across national borders. Indeed, Chamberlin theorizes the Third World not as a geographic space but rather as a political project.⁴⁹ Politics and liberation struggles are thus politically expansive and map a different geography than that of the nation-state. This chapter, in conjunction with previous chapters, underscored that the Cold War's transnational political alliances worked together with an equally transnational aesthetic modernism,

one in which the rubric of the nation-state can never trace a genealogical origin, despite its rhetorical assertion by critics, institutions, and government diplomatic efforts.

This chapter mobilized Chamberlin's scholarship on the Palestinian Liberation Organization within the context of the Cold War and the ways in which the PLO was central to creating a global network of liberation struggles to frame the artistic production of Ismail Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal. However, rather than examine Shammout and al-Akhal's official work with the PLO, this study focused on the couple's use of figuration within both their own training and the broader international context of the Cold War. Within the European Beaux-Arts tradition, the figure represents an ideal whose individual subject position is subsumed.⁵⁰ Yet in the paintings of Shammout and al-Akhal, the figure must assume three simultaneous subject positions: personal witness, cultural identity, and universal ideal. The first is Shammout and al-Akhal themselves as first-person witnesses to the history depicted. In order to speak to a nationalist cause, the figure must also take on the role of the larger Palestinian collective, in which subject positions of gender and nationality are privileged over other positions such as class. Yet those specificities must also gesture toward a purported universal aesthetic ideal. In each of these gestures, one of the varied genealogical origins must be repressed. Palestinian artist and art historian Samia Halaby acknowledges that Palestinian liberation art sought to avoid all references to Western art, as a symbolic refusal of imperialism.⁵¹ Yet as Scheid and Houston highlight, Shammout appropriated iconography from Renaissance imagery as a means of inserting Palestine into the Western artistic conventions. Moreover, a symbolic refusal of imperialism must avoid an acknowledgment of Beaux-Arts artistic training, just as American modernist abstraction must avoid its own transnationalism in its efforts at Cold War diplomacy. Acknowledging the varied contexts and contingencies of artistic language is not an exercise undertaken to mitigate aesthetic or political value. Instead, this study sought to highlight the always already transnationalism at the heart of artistic productions. As a cosmopolitan capital in the global south during the Cold War, Beirut offers a contested terrain in which new ideas, forms, and practices are configured, demonstrating that the genealogies of modern art can never be understood as isolated, national histories, but rather participate in an ever-contingent global modernism.

Notes

- 1 *The Urgent Call of Palestine*, directed by Ismail Shammout, <https://vimeo.com/254845168>.
- 2 The title of a 2014 London film festival, "The World Is with Us," highlights the strategy of forging an international network of support for the PLO through the PLO's own patronage of art and culture. See <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/16/palestinian-revolution-artists-film-posters-exhibition>.
- 3 See Mohanad Yaqubi, "The Militant Chapter in Cinema," *Sweet Sixties: Specters and Spirits of a Parallel Avant-Garde*, ed. Georg Schöllhammer and Ruben Arevshatyan (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013): 248–60; and his "Revolutionary Film: The Palestine Film Unit," in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: Museum of Modern Art): 333–34; Nadia Yaqub, *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas, 2018); and Azza El-Hassan's documentary film, *Kings and Extras: Digging for a Palestinian Image* (2004).
- 4 The role of Palestinian artists, and their inclusion in histories of modern art in Lebanon is also documented Zeina El Maasri's chapter, "Art Is in the 'Arab Street,' The Palestinian Revolution and Printscapes of Solidarity," in her *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 163–210. Whereas El Maasri focuses on revolutionary posters, including Shammout's own work in graphic design, this chapter turns its attention to the paintings of Shammout and al-Akhal.

- 5 Rona Sela, interview with Zeinab Shaath, <http://www.ronasela.com/en/details.asp?listid=85>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 “The Closure of Gallery 79,” press statement, published in English and Arabic, reproduced in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 426.
- 8 Jérôme Bazin, “Seeing Images, Seeing Far: What Do Images Tell Us about Solidarity in Popular Democracies?,” in *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity and Museums in Exile*, eds. Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2019): 225.
- 9 On the problematic deployment of the visual arts and exhibitions as a humanizing gesture in the Middle East, purportedly removed from politics, see Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* (2008): 651–81.
- 10 The decisive text on the necessity of violence in national independence movements is Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, reprint 2005, 1961). In her study of Palestinian cinema during the late 1960s and 1970s, Nadia Yaqub notes the importance of the PLO films in providing an alternative to the more “spectacular” acts made visible by the media such as plane hijackings. See her *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 3.
- 11 Harun Hashim Rashid, “Exhibition of a Palestinian Artist,” originally published in *al-Adib* 12, no. 9 (September 1953), 72–73, translated into English by Anna Swank and reprinted in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 157–58.
- 12 Ibid., 158.
- 13 In her examination of Syrian modernism after the 1967 war, Anneka Lenssen uses the term, expressive realism to describe an “ethos” that positioned artistic process within liberation discourses of the moment and sought an art premised in experience rather than imagination. See her “The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964–1970,” *Art Margins, The Longevity of 1967 in Art and Its Histories* v2, no. 2 (June 2013): 64.
- 14 Autobiographical accounts include Ismail Shammout, *Art in Palestine*, trans. Abdul-Qader Daher (Kuwait: Al-Qabas Printing Press, 1989); Ismail and Tamam Shammout, *Palestine: The Exodus and The Odyssey* (Amman, Jordan: Al-Ekbal Printing, 2000); Tamam al-Akhal, *A Story for Each Painting: Ismail Shammout* (Amman, Jordan: Palestine International Institute, 2011); and Tamām al-Ākhal, *Al-yad tarā wal-qalb yarsum: sīrat Tamām al- Akhal wa Ismā’īl Shammūt [The Heart Paints What the Hand Perceives: The Biography of Tamam al-Akhal and Ismail Shammout]* (Jerusalem: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2016).
- 15 One of the earliest and most well-known is the Palestine Exploration Fund, founded in 1856 in London with a mission to study the Levant. It is still in existence. See <https://www.pef.org.uk/>.
- 16 See Kathleen Stewart Howe, “Revealing the Holy Land: Nineteenth Century Photographs of Palestine,” in *Revealing the Holy Land: The Photographic Exploration of Palestine* (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1997).
- 17 See Keri A. Berg, “The Imperialist Lens: Du Camp, Salzmann and Early French Photography” in *Early Popular Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (April 2008): 1–18; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950* (New York: Columbia University, 1988); Nissan Perez, *Focus East: Early Photography in the Near East, 1839–1885* (New York: Abrams, 1988); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “A Photographer in Jerusalem, 1855: Auguste Salzmann and His Times,” in *Photography at the Docks: Essays on Photographic Histories, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 150–69. In the wake of Edward Said’s 1978 publication of *Orientalism* and postcolonial studies, scholars have begun to write histories of local photographers. See Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Issam Nassar, “Familial Snapshots: Representing Palestine in the Work of the First Local Photographers,” *History & Memory* 18, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 139–55. On the relationship between this photographic work and local Palestinian painting, see Nisa Ari, “Spiritual Capital and the Copy: Painting, Photography, and the Production of the Image in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine,” *Arab Studies Journal* 25, no. 2 (2017): 60–99.
- 18 The short film *Ismail* (2013) is based on Shammout’s biography and begins with his expulsion from Lydda. *Ismail*, dir. Nora Alsharif. Greyscale Films/Bumpy Road Films Production, 2013. 28 minutes.
- 19 al-Akhal, *Al-yad tarā wal-qalb yarsum: sīrat Tamām al- Akhal wa Ismā’īl Shammūt* (Beirut: Institute of Palestine Studies, 2016), 7–29.

- 20 Literature on Palestinian refugees is prolific and incorporates a diversity of perspectives. For a grassroots archive established in Beirut in 2002 that narrates the history of the Palestinian refugee community through its own words and with a focus on both the hoped-for return and the material realities of life in the camp, see <https://www.nakba-archive.org/>. See also cofounder of the Nakba archive Diana Allan's ethnography of Palestinian refugees living in the refugee camps in Beirut, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
- 21 Haithem El-Zabri, "Ismail Shammout: Artist, Activist, Legend," online obituary. https://ifamericansknew.org/cur_sit/shammout.html.
- 22 Dina Ramadan, "Cairo's School of Fine Arts and the Pedagogical Imperative," in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents: 72–73*.
- 23 More specific than the figure to the Beaux-Arts tradition is the genre of the nude. On the nude in modern art of the Arab world, see Octavian Esanu, ed., *Art, Awakening, and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2018); and in particular, Kirsten Scheid's contribution, "Necessary Nudes: *Hadatha* and *Mu`asara* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese," 17–43.
- 24 On the Palestinian woman as a national allegory in Palestinian painting, see Vera Tamari and Penny Johnson, "Loss and Vision: Representations of Women in Palestinian Art under Occupation," in *Discourse and Palestine: Power, Text, and Context*, ed. Annelies Moors, Toine van Teeffelin, Sharif Kanaana, and Ilham Abu Ghazaleh (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995): 163–72; and Tina Sherwell, "Imagining the Homeland: Gender and Palestinian National Discourse," in *After Orientalism: Critical Engagements, Productive Looks*, ed. Inge E. Boer, Sudeep Dasgupta, and Isabel Hoving (New York: Rodopi, 2004): 123–46.
- 25 On the importance of the peasant in Palestinian national iconography, see Ted Swedenberg, "The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier," *Anthropological Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1990): 18–30.
- 26 Nadia Yaqub, *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution*, 41–45.
- 27 Shammout, *Art in Palestine*; Ismail and Tamam Shammout, *Palestine: The Exodus and The Odyssey*; Tamam al-Akhal, *A Story for Each Painting*.
- 28 Abdul-Qader Daher, "Introduction," in *Palestine: The Exodus and Odyssey*: 107.
- 29 Ismail and Tamam Shammout, *Palestine: The Exodus and The Odyssey*, 91.
- 30 Interview with author, September 20, 2011, Amman, Jordan.
- 31 Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon, *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 2. On works that seek to document Palestinian artistic production before 1948, see Samia Halaby, "The Landscape of Palestine in Arabic Art," in *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry*, eds. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Roger Heacock, and Khaled Nashef (Bizeit: Birzeit University Publications, 1999): 175–90; Kamal Boullata, "Innovation in Palestinian Art," in *Neighbors in Dialogue*, eds. Beral Madra and Ayşe Orhun Gültekin (Norgunk Publishing House, 2005): 101–13 and his *Palestinian Art: From 1850–the Present* (London: Saqi Books, 2009); and Faten Nastas Mitwasi, *Reflections on Palestinian Art: Art of Resistance or Aesthetics* (Bethlehem: Diyar Press, 2015).
- 32 Shammout, *Palestine: The Exodus and the Odyssey Palestine*, 107.
- 33 Shammout, *Palestine: The Exodus and the Odyssey*, 107.
- 34 Samia Halaby, *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20th Century* (New York: H.T.T.B. Publications, 2001), 18.
- 35 Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.
- 36 Reprinted in his *Palestinian Art*, 123–59.
- 37 Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 124.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 39 Boullata also excludes the artistic achievements of al-Akhal, including her collaboration with Shammout.
- 40 See her "Between the Promise of Life and Its Fragility: The Arab Body in the Khalid Shoman Collection," in *Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection*, eds. Sarah Rogers and Eline van der Vlist (Amman: Khalid Shoman Foundation, 2013): 193–207, 249–54; and "Necessary Nudes: *Hadatha* and *Mu`asara* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese," *International Journal of*

- Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 203–30, reprinted in *Art, Awakening, and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Octavian Esanu (New York: Routledge, 2018): 17–43.
- 41 Scheid, “Between the Promise of Life and Its Fragility,” 195.
 - 42 Ibid.
 - 43 Ibid., 197.
 - 44 Ibid.
 - 45 Picasso’s artistic avant-garde modernism transcended borders. In the Arab world, he is a figure whose originality is expressed in mobilizing a diversity of artistic traditions. See Anneka Lensen and Sarah A. Rogers, “Articulating the Contemporary,” in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, vol. 2, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History, 2017): 1328.
 - 46 Art Historian Thomas Crow uses the term *emulation* to characterize this academic tradition. See his *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
 - 47 Tamam al-Akhal worked closely with the directors on the biographical aspect of the film. Interview with author, Amman, Jordan, August 2012.
 - 48 Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War’s Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 2.
 - 49 Ibid., 5.
 - 50 As T. J. Clark has argued, the reason Manet’s *Olympia* was controversial at the 1865 French salon was precisely because class could be read on her naked body. See T. J. Clark, *The Painter of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
 - 51 Samia Halaby, *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20th Century* (New York: Samia Halaby, 2001).

Conclusion

This book has offered a study of alliances that produced a series of homes for artistic practice that were not, in themselves, rooted into place by Cold War-era configurations of nation-states and presumed cultural proclivities and interests. Perhaps appropriately, then, questions of positioning and place—contemporary ones of struggles for representation as well as historical ones bearing on the frames of the discipline—have informed the coordinates of the book at every stage. This set of questions moreover has haunted the study of modern and contemporary art of the Arab world for some time.

At the 2008 annual conference of the Historians of Islamic Art Association (HIAA), held that year at the University of Pennsylvania, a heated debate unfolded over lunch at a nearby Philadelphia restaurant following a panel on contemporary art and its institutions. As one of my wise advisors, Arindam Dutta, revealed when I was a young graduate student, the real content of a conference always happens outside the confines of official panels—in informal hallway discussions, or in this case, in a restaurant. The 2008 HIAA conference was no exception. The animated conversation took place among graduate students of modern Arab art and Nasser Rabbat, advisor to some of us present and organizer and chair of one of two HIAA contemporary panels that year. At the time, the study of modern art in the Arab world was newly emerging, with only a few select graduate students and even fewer scholars—Nasser Rabbat and Nada Shabout notable among them—willing to supervise dissertations and master's theses in a nascent field with little promise of tenure track positions. The debate at that now forgotten Philadelphia restaurant concerned where—in which field—the emerging study of modern art in the Arab world could stake a claim: within Islamic art history or modernism?

For some at that lunch, Islamic art history could be expected to welcome the study of modern and contemporary art, evident in HIAA's unconventional inclusion that year of two contemporary panels. Modern art in the Arab world, therefore, would not have to prove itself as a valid field of study because the regional relationships and area expertise were already in place and the inclusion of modern and contemporary represented no more than a temporal stretch. For others of us, the methodologies and histories of Islamic art held less relevance than modern art for this promising field. From our perspective, the exclusion of modernism outside of Euro-American capitals within conventional histories of modern art represented the discipline's role in naturalizing hegemonic cultural values indicative of the discipline's nineteenth-century European roots. In order to engage critically with this legacy, the study of modern art in the Arab world needed to push the discipline to recognize a transnationalism modernism, which historicized traffic between the Global North and South, an agenda distinct from alternative modernisms or a more inclusive and expanded canon (whether that expansion be temporal or geographical). In

other words, the canon and the discipline required critical reconfiguration, and the study of modern art of the Arab world offered a possibility to engage with the field not just historically but also methodologically. Years later, as those young graduate students positioned themselves and their scholarship professionally, the debate played out through a diversity of strategies as these newly minted scholars took positions as global modernists and Islamists and within Middle East studies.

The conversations at the 2008 HIAA conference seem now to have marked a turning point in the field for a study such as this one. They reflected, in many ways, the historiography of the previous decade, which centered on two pioneering English-language publications: Wijdan Ali's 1997 *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*, based on her 1989 exhibition catalogue, *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*; and Nada Shabout's 2007 *Modern Arab Art: The Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, both of which have been discussed throughout the chapters of this book.¹ The parameters of Ali's history, organized by country, are the religious, cultural, and political presence of Islam, inclusive of but extending beyond Arab countries to include Turkey, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Pakistan. Ali traces a genealogy for modern art within Islamic aesthetics, most evident in what she identifies as calligraphic abstraction, whereby modern and contemporary artists rework and reinvigorate traditional Islamic calligraphy. Productive in Ali's argument is the temporal push of the study of Islamic art into the modern and later contemporary period, whereas most college courses in Islamic art history conclude before the Ottoman Empire. Not until prominent Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar published the 1983 inaugural editorial for *Muqarnas* did the academic field of Islamic art history as taught in universities consider the implications of studies of Islamic art excluding the modern and contemporary periods, as if artistic production in the Islamic world abruptly ended with the beginning of the Ottoman Empire in the late thirteenth century.²

Nada Shabout's groundbreaking publication *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, situated in response to Ali's work, argues that modern artists in the Arab world forged a cultural and political Arab identity within the context of pan-Arabism, inclusive of but distinctive from Islam. The work of those artists therefore must be situated within debates around Arab cultural identity, which did not preclude the term Arab from designating a political strategy. In Shabout's argument, artists' negotiations with modernity took place from the position of an Arab rather than Islamic subject position, and that position was neither homogenous nor circumscribed by ethnicity but rather approached more fluidly with respect to cultural, linguistic, and political subject positions.

The 2018 publication *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* proposed a shift in the terms of the debate once again.³ A collection of primary documents, translated into English from Arabic, French, and Italian, the volume underscores significant transnational engagements within aesthetic and political debates among artists across the region. Focusing on the discourse of art, rather than material objects, the collection documents the efforts of artists and critics living and working in the region and abroad throughout the twentieth century, deeply invested in dialogues with artistic ideals at home and abroad as represented in a vast array of manifestos, press reports, artists' collectives, and radio addresses, all of which unfolded across a multiplicity of languages and geographies. As outlined in the editors' introduction, authored by co-editors Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and myself, the term *Arab world* designates a geopolitical terrain, traced to the mid-nineteenth-century Arab Renaissance and the forging of an Arab imaginary.⁴ Importantly, the introduction refrains from mobilizing *Arab* as a definite term, but rather acknowledges that the region is heterogenous, inclusive of a diversity

of ethnic groups, sects, languages, and religions. This dialectical approach to terminology alongside a discursive approach to aesthetics underscores modern art in the region—the choice of the preposition *in*, rather than *of*, a further refusal of genealogical possession—as deeply invested in examining the formation of modernist aesthetic philosophies within and across national, regional, and transnational identities.

This book has positioned itself within this study of modernism for three critical reasons. The first is that the protagonists of this story—Maryette Charlton, John Ferren, Shafic Abboud, Jalal Khoury, Stélio Scamanga, Ismail Shammout, and Tamam al-Akhal—explicitly engage with questions of modernity in relation to the visual arts. In cursory terms, modernism is characterized as an artistic negotiation between the present moment and the conventions of the past. Moreover, that negotiation assumes different forms and appropriates various relationships with past artistic conventions.⁵ Second, the protagonists of this history cannot be fixed to a stable, unchanging subject position, whether that be national, religious, linguistic, political, cultural, or otherwise. Whereas conventional art historical narratives of modernism may claim that New York “stole” the concept of modernism when exiled European artists fled to the United States during World War II and the US government deployed modernist abstraction for its own propagandistic purposes, this study contended that acknowledging the physical movement of artists and art objects as a constitutive piece of modernist history requires also accounting for the discursive construction of such geographically national focused narratives that tend to preclude regions critical to Cold War histories, such as the Middle East. Finally, in situating studies of modern art in the Arab region within a transnational or global modernism, rather than in Islamic art history, the book enacts a strategic disciplinary intervention. As art historian Zehra Jumabhoy underscores, conventional understandings of the term *postcolonial* assume a temporal discourse, an “after” in history, whereas decolonization offers a potential method as “an approach to the past and an attitude towards the modern.”⁶ The work of decolonizing the discipline then would enable the potential agenda of Nada Shabout when she writes, “I do know that I would be happy to abandon having to assert Arab modernity and focus instead on writing its history.”⁷

Any such study of modern art in the Arab world can never shy away from colonialism, and thus issues of political, cultural, and military power, resistance and agency, and the role of artistic production within those structures must take center stage in art history. This is precisely the kind of historical *and* structural work the discipline must undertake in order to begin the process of decolonizing. Furthermore, in moving away from art histories of the Global South to be considered as alternative histories to canonical Euro-American narratives, we must make a corresponding move toward understanding the integrated structures that enact an always unequal process of globalization. Recognizing the necessity of considering material realities otherwise assumed to be removed from, or outside of, the framework of aesthetics, this study adopted a three-pronged approach that accounted for individuals, formal languages, and institutions, and pedagogies.

Some of the most significant, groundbreaking scholarship for the study of modern art has demonstrated that factors often considered irrelevant do in fact inform art historical narratives, and, moreover, that the disciplinary silencing of those factors as somehow external to art only naturalizes conventional narratives. One such pioneering consideration of the role of factors “outside” of aesthetics can be traced to Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”⁸ First published in *ArtNews*, the essay constitutes a critical intervention in the discipline by contending that socio-economic norms governing institutional and social behaviors rather than aesthetic value

accounts for the disproportionate number of male artists compared to female professionals. Nochlin's essay, and the subsequent publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* less than a decade later, elucidate the political potency of literary and artistic production not only as underwritten by politics but also as a medium for naturalizing dominant cultural values. Moreover, by attending to the discourses that render art meaningful, we can identify the ways in which art does the work of ideology.⁹ As the chapter on John Ferren's residency in Beirut argued, it was recognition of art's ideological work that enabled abstract modernism to first face challenges as un-American and later be deployed by US government agencies to speak for the purported American values of freedom of expression and democracy. As discussed in the Chapter 1, studies of Cold War ideology in the Middle East such as Elizabeth Holt's on literary magazines have argued that artists, writers, and poets in Beirut also understood aesthetics and ideology to be intertwined: even when touting "art for art's sake," these cultural actors understood that aesthetic philosophy as part of a particular liberal ideology of autonomy.¹⁰ In turn, the fact that such "work" was understood to require direction and management makes it important to consider the seemingly mundane bureaucratic procedures such as Cold War government artists' residencies, college curricula, and the Palestine Liberation Organization's 1964 establishment of a cultural department as a component of modernist art history.

This study was premised on the conviction that the history of modernism is an integrated one that can never be circumscribed geographically, in the same way that nineteenth-century art history charted itself along nationalist discourses.¹¹ A book about modern art in Lebanon, or anywhere else, can never be about Lebanon only. And, as shown here, cross-regional entanglements were underscored by a historical moment characterized by the mobilization of art as a form of cultural diplomacy and a geographical centering defined by its cosmopolitanism. Art historian David Bindaman, for example, has proposed that decolonizing the discipline may involve expanding the rubric of the nation-state to include its empire as well, to "*re-colonize the history of art*," as he terms it (emphasis in original).¹² In line with Bindman's suggestion that national geographical boundaries encompass political boundaries such as those of empire, this study considered how the notion of a national art was discursively constructed, whether that artistic language be presented as Oriental abstraction or American abstract expressionism. Moreover, the national geographical boundaries of Lebanon, or Palestine, or the United States must also account for political boundaries and the impact of those on aesthetic languages and artistic debates.

My approach is not novel. It is a strategy mobilized by many scholars who work on modern art in a colonial or postcolonial context; the conviction that an art form is reducible to national, religious, or ethnic explanations has been challenged repeatedly in the field of African art, for example. Such studies have instead examined material culture in those instances when strict circumscribed categories are revealed to be discursively constructed rather than predetermined, or, alternatively, when they focus on those case studies when such terms lose their stability.¹³ Methodologies such as these work to examine the Euro-American canon of modern art through an interrogation of conventional art historical values such as *zeitgeist* and aesthetic value, which have been used to explain a constructed selection process.

Anthropologists of art such as Kirsten Scheid have also mobilized methodologies to understand art as socially constituted.¹⁴ As discussed throughout this book, Scheid's scholarship focuses on modern art in Lebanon, yet her approach is not to identify local artists who represent a national artistic production but rather to examine the way in which art and society are mutually constituted processes of production. The starting

point for Scheid's study is the commonly held assumption in Lebanon that the country suffers from a lack of modern art. Such commentary, held equally among Lebanese students and the general population, aligns artistic practice with local identity formation, whether that be national, ethnic, or cultural. Throughout her scholarship, Scheid imagines alternative approaches so that art production becomes less an index of civilization and more a material production through which artists and social actors negotiate possible identities.¹⁵ As such, Lebanon during the 1930s and 1940s, a period in which national identity was in the process of active formation, enabled the interrogation of broader disciplinary methodologies and biases in which certain artistic production was privileged over others.

The present study focused on a later period in Lebanon's art history. During the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanon's national identity was in a moment less of ambiguity (to borrow Scheid's characterization of the first half of the twentieth century) than of boundary formation as the Cold War incited discursive strategies of nation-states to stake out their identities more firmly. Yet those boundaries were contingent on a number of factors. Some were material realities like passports, border control, and government. Others were symbolic: national anthems, flags, and cultural production. This book argued that the symbolic realm, and artistic production in particular, is a revealing realm through which to examine the workings of nationalist ideology from different subject positions.

On the one hand, the history of both the disciplines of art history and the Cold War necessitate a critical consideration of how art, within the symbolic realm, might challenge the very notion of a national art. Similar to the choice to use the phrase *in the Arab world* rather than *of the Arab world* in the title of the MoMA primary documents publication, this study argued that modern art in Lebanon is not an exclusively nationalist study. On the other hand, this is not a claim that asserts Lebanon's cosmopolitanism, itself a well-worn trope, as documented in Chapter 1. Instead, the collective whole of the book aimed to distinguish between cosmopolitanism as a rhetorical device and cosmopolitanism as a material reality—as a rhetorical device during the 1920s and 1930s, fashioned at the hands of certain Maronite Christian nationalists, that sought to forge a national identity that obscured its political and cultural attachment to France in the aftermath of the mandate; and as a material reality in which Lebanon, and more specifically its capital, Beirut, emerged as a regional cultural capital, home to refugees, politicians, journalists, artists-in-resident, and substantial expat communities among various socioeconomic divides during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s.

Without over privileging the figures of Maryette Charlton, John Ferren, Ismail Shammout, Tamam al-Akhal, Shafic Abboud, Jalal Khoury, and Stélio Scamanga within the history of modern art in Lebanon, their presence nevertheless acknowledges a more inclusive modernism, as does tracking their own aesthetic pedigree, which folds modernist ideals from Bauhaus Germany, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and Beaux-Arts academies in Paris, Cairo, and Beirut into the story of modern art in Lebanon. Modernism's transnationalism and Beirut's cosmopolitanism are not only embodied presences; they also constitute a movement of artistic ideals and languages. Shammout's and al-Akhal's deployment of figuration, a result of their Beaux-Arts training, enabled their work to embody the Palestinian collective and speak to international political alliances among liberation movements worldwide. This contrasts with abstraction's purported universalism and its later use as a form of American cultural diplomacy abroad.

Yet both figuration and abstraction had to repress some element of its genealogy in order to achieve those goals—for figuration, it was its Beaux-Arts origins in the French

Academy; for American modernist abstraction, it was its affiliation with Paris before World War II exiled artists predominantly to New York City (where the New York School of Art established another root). Debates around abstraction in Beirut during the 1960s underscored abstraction's purported foreignness, but as the discussion of Jalal Khoury's criticism underscored, that debate often redeployed the same Cold War terminology that had framed modernist abstraction in the United States among critics such as Congressman George Dondero. Abstraction among Lebanese artists such as Shafic Abboud and Stélio Scamanga is further similar to Charlton, Ferren, Shammout, and al-Akhal in that tracking an individual artistic trajectory demonstrates the ways in which training in various contexts also aided in the movement of ideas and aesthetic languages.

And over all these artists is cast the shadow of exile—on the German Bauhaus artists and teachers who influenced the department of education at MoMA under the leadership of Alfred Barr and Victor D'Amico; on the artistic vision and pedagogical approach of Chicago-based artist Maryette Charlton and the inaugural department at the American University of Beirut; and on the Beirut residency of Ismail Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal in the aftermath of the Nakba. Indeed, exile has been theorized as a central tenet of modernism in critic Raymond Williams's 1987 seminal essay "When Was Modernism?"¹⁶ Whereas Williams theorized modernism as a historical rubric, he assumed a geographical parameter of Euro-America. This publication hoped to interrogate that assumption, using a historical approach to argue for an understanding of modernism as a series of aesthetic debates, formal languages, and discursive constructions that are not geographically confined. Modernism did not originate in Paris, travel to New York, and then belatedly make its way to the Global South.¹⁷ As the trajectories of the book's protagonists make clear, modernism was not *a* movement but rather *in* movement. Movement was constituted not only physically, though the bodies of artists across geographies and within institutions, but also discursively, through the debates and discourses around figuration and abstraction, nationalism and universalism, local and foreign.

As reiterated throughout this book, the aim is not to recover a forgotten artist, modernist masterpiece, art department, or government artist-in-residence program. Nor is it to assert Beirut as a neglected cultural capital in the history of modern art or an example of a cosmopolitan city, situated between East and West, before a long civil war (1975–90) cruelly betrayed those visions. Instead, the present study has a more disciplinarily invested ambition. As the title of a 2020 survey conducted by Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price and published in the *Association for Art History* makes clear, the discipline is still in need of decolonizing.¹⁸ In the wake of the 2020 pandemic and nationwide protests for racial justice, including the call to critically examine the history of the Confederacy through the removal of monuments, the humanities, including the discipline of art history, are more integral to pedagogy than ever. If we are to heed the call to decolonize the discipline, we need college and university courses and scholarship in the discipline to not only move away from a Euro-American centrality, but also—and more importantly—to critically examine issues of power, authority, and resistance integral to that centrality and its resistance. We might find little refusal to the claim that the study of modernism is not an aesthetic history divorced from Cold War politics. However, the study of modern art in the Arab world, as Nada Shabout reminds us, still requires explanation and justification, not yet integrated into an imagined global modernism. Whereas the field has witnessed, in the form of exhibitions, publications, and college curricula, the inclusion of modern art in Africa, the Middle East, and South East Asia, the discipline continues to struggle with understanding the relationship between seemingly distinct vast geographies.

To challenge the conviction that artists in the Global South are derivative or belated, some art historians have suggested concepts of interculturality. Yet this model nonetheless maintains two poles across which, or in between which, artists live and work; the diaspora assumes a geographical origin that is not of the current locale, for instance. The present study sought to interrogate the very premise of two positionalities that result in two distinct genealogies.

Taken together, the five chapters in this book pose the argument that artists, pedagogies, formal languages, and agendas are always more complicated, and thus infinitely more intellectually and critically promising. Beirut's cosmopolitanism is at once discursively constructed, as evident in examinations of art reviews and reproductions in *La Revue du Liban*, and a sociopolitical reality, as evident in recollections of artists, intellectuals, and journalists living in the Lebanese capital during the 1960s. Tracing the presence of American artist Maryette Charlton at the American University of Beirut involves a consideration of German Bauhaus artists and architects working in exile in the United States, the philosophy of the education department at the Museum of Modern Art, and the pedagogical vision promoted at Beirut's l'Académie libanaise des beaux-arts. Similarly, Beirut, Lebanon, and American abstract expressionist John Ferren were chosen in 1963 as the locale and first artist-in-residence for the USIA's inaugural diplomacy program. Yet to frame this encounter as strictly an American in Beirut would be to lose sight of Ferren's service in the Office of War Information in Algiers and his experiences among and exposure to Paris's avant-garde artists in the years before World War II, during which time Ferren found himself stuck in New York City, unable to return to Paris because of the war. As detailed in Chapter 4, when Lebanese painter Shafic Abboud received first prize at the Sursock Museum's fall salon in 1964, the artist, then living abroad in Paris, sparked a contestation over the presence of foreigners and the supposed foreign language of abstraction in Lebanon. A close examination of Jalal Houry's review in response to Abboud's award revealed the terms of the debate firmly rooted in US Cold War conventions concerning art and elitism. The final chapter moved from a focus on the discourse around abstract art to an examination of figurative paintings, an equally prominent art form in Beirut during the 1960s. Chapter 5 considered the importance of the figure in the paintings of Palestinian artists Ismail Shammout and Tamam al-Akhal, whose prolific body of work are no less valid in speaking to Palestinian history because of the artists' Beaux-Arts training. In fact, it is very much part of Palestinian history that the arts in the refugee camps were an important activity and enabled aspiring artists to afford formal art training in Cairo, at an institution that represents a historical achievement and was considered an indigenous effort despite an inaugural faculty of foreigners. Moreover, it was the Beaux-Arts training that enabled the figuration that speaks to the Palestinian cause and that created transnational alliances, yet another example of the forged connections across geographies, nationalities, ethnicities, languages, and political positionings.

To conclude the book with a chapter on two protagonists living in forced exile surfaces a paradox that ran throughout the study. On the one hand, to consider modernism as a history of practices in movement is to implicitly celebrate resistance in the creative act and to preclude privileging one aesthetic language as visually representing modernity, or as staking a claim to a fixed position or singular subjectivity. In the chapters presented here, figuration engages the modern condition of Palestine just as much as Ferren's or Abboud's abstract paintings, as too does Charlton's pedagogical approach, rooted as it was in an exiled German Bauhaus. On the other hand, the condition of exile is not only a

material reality of modernism, but a very real condition of the contemporary. The majority of those stories unfortunately are not ones of the celebratory “escape” from convention so as to achieve artistic ends but rather of destitution, suffering, separation, and all too often, death. The worldwide persistent status of refugees and statelessness worldwide signals a continued investment in border policing. To speak of the discipline of art history alongside the real-world issue of refugees may seem a stretch, or even unrelatable. Yet as this book argued, artistic production and its discursive remaking have a history of doing other ideological work. As we work toward a future without the violent material realities of policing people and borders, perhaps art history can undertake a sustained task of its own so that its future students can imagine a discipline—or a world—in which the task at hand is no longer asserting the historical narrative of modernity one wishes to write.

Notes

- 1 See Wijdan Ali, ed., *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, exhibition catalogue (London: Scorpion Publishing Ltd., 1989), and her *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); and Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Shabout’s argument is situated in response to Ali’s framing of her study around a continuation of Islamic artistic production. In contrast, Shabout argues that modern artists of the region embraced Arab as a cultural and political stance in negotiating their relationship to modernity.
- 2 Oleg Grabar, “Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art,” *Muqarnas* (1983): 1–14.
- 3 Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).
- 4 On the development and terms of the concept of the Arab imaginary, see Ussama Makdisi, “The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World,” in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 28–34.
- 5 On the case of the Arab world, see Anneka Lenssen and Sarah A. Rogers, “Articulating the Contemporary,” *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Finnbar Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History, 2017), 1314–38.
- 6 Zehra Jumabhoy, as quoted in “Decolonizing Art History,” edited by Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price in *Art History* 43, no. 1 (February 2020): 24.
- 7 Nada Shabout as quoted in “Decolonizing Art History,” 46.
- 8 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), reprinted in her *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 145–78.
- 9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
- 10 Elizabeth Holt, “‘Bread or Freedom?’ The Congress for Cultural Freedom, CIA and the Arabic Literary Journal *Ḥiwār* (1962–67),” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44, no. 1 (2013): 83–102.
- 11 Francesco Ventrulla, “Decolonizing Art History,” edited by Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, *Association for Art History* (2020): 56.
- 12 David Bindman, as quoted in “Decolonizing Art History,” 10.
- 13 See examples Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016) and Krista Thompson, “A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 6–31. I thank Anneka Lenssen for drawing my attention to Thompson’s essay.
- 14 Kirsten Scheid, “Necessary Nudes: *Hadatha* and *Mu’asira* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 2 (2010): 203–30; “Missing Nike: On Oversights, Doubled Sights, and Universal Art Understood through Lebanon,” *Museum Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2009): 99–118; “The Agency of Art and the Study of Arab Modernity,” *Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (Spring 2007), 6–23; and *Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State* (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005).
- 15 Scheid, *Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon*, 6.

- 16 Originally a lecture delivered by Williams at University of Bristol in 1987 and reprinted in Raymond Williams, "When Was Modernism?" in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, eds. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (London: Phaidon, 1996): 23–27.
- 17 Geeta Kapur is a critical response to Williams' framing of modernism as a specific historical epoch that accounts for colonialism. See her *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Southborough, MA: Tulika: reprint. 2000).
- 18 Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, eds. "Decolonizing Art History," *Association for Art History* (2020): 8–66.

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Index

Note: *italicised* page references indicate illustrations. The suffix 'n' indicates a note.

- Abboud, Shafic 45, 90–3, 96, 97, 98, 130, 132, 133, 134; *Child's Play* 14, 82, 87–9, 88, 93; *Les Kurdes* 93
- Abou-Rizk, Joseph 93
- abstract art: American 14, 40, 61–81, 62, 98, 99, 104, 124, 130, 131, 132–3; criticism of 64, 65–6, 87, 89–90, 95–6, 98, 133; cultural diplomacy and 61–81, 98, 99, 132; Eastern influence 87–90, 95–8, 131; European influence 75–6, 87–90, 93, 94–5, 97, 132–3; perceived elitism of 53, 90, 98; *see also* modernism; universalism
- abstract expressionism 14, 40, 52, 53, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 75, 79n33, 95–6, 99, 131
- Aburish, Said K. 30, 31
- Adib, Wasek 87
- Akl, Saïd 5, 23, 87, 93, 97–8; *Totem* 90, 92
- al-Adib* (Arabic newspaper) 105
- al-Akhal, Tamam 1, 2, 14, 82, 98, 100, 103–27, 130, 132, 133, 134; *The Rift* 115–18, 117; *Uprooting* 118, 119
- al-Anwar* (Arabic newspaper) 24, 87
- al-Bustani, Butrus 47, 49
- al-Hayat* (Arabic newspaper) 87
- al-Khal, Helen 4–5, 6, 7, 11, 24, 94, 96
- al-Khal, Yusuf 7, 94
- al-Kulliyah* (English-language magazine) 24, 45, 52
- al-Solh, Riad 30
- Ali, Wijdan 9, 10, 129
- Alsharif, Hatem and Nora 108
- American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) 46, 49
- American Federation of the Arts 45
- American University of Beirut (AUB) 1, 2, 4, 13–14, 34, 39–60, 43, 44, 45, 61, 65, 66, 75–6, 77, 104
- Amherst College 46
- An-Nahar* (Arabic newspaper) 24, 95
- Anderson, Benedict 22, 26, 86
- Anderson, Rufus 49, 50
- Arab nationalism 5, 13, 19, 23, 50
- Arabic language 4, 9, 11, 12, 15, 18, 23, 24, 27, 33, 50, 70, 71, 85, 95, 108, 129; art in the Arabic press 4, 14, 24, 38n82, 71–2, 77, 85, 87, 89, 105, 125n7; Bliss's knowledge of 47, 49, 50
- Arndt, Richard 75
- Art in Embassies Program 66–7
- Association of Modern American and English Artists 70
- authenticity 8–9, 10, 11, 19, 52–3, 55, 77, 82, 94
- avant-garde 1, 32, 33, 40, 54, 63, 65, 70, 71–2, 120, 127n45, 134
- Baalbeck International Festival 4, 90
- Barr, Alfred H., Jr. 54, 61, 64–5, 66, 69, 133
- Bauhaus art school 53–4, 55, 64, 132, 133, 134
- Bazin, Jérôme 105
- Beaux-Arts tradition 1, 13–14, 40, 54–5, 82, 104, 109, 117, 118–19, 121, 122, 123, 124, 132–3, 134; *see also* l'Académie Libanaise des beaux-arts (ALBA)
- Bedford, Francis 107
- Beirut, cosmopolitanism of 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7–8, 11–12, 13, 18–38, 104, 124, 132, 133, 134
- “Beirut school” of art 87, 94, 97
- Beqaa Valley 22, 23
- Bercoff, André 87, 93
- Bindaman, David 131
- Bingham, Lois 74
- Bliss, Daniel 40, 46–50
- body, the, in Arab art 116, 117, 118, 121–2
- Boullata, Kamal 11–12, 120–1
- Boutros, Alexis 40, 41, 42
- Breton, André 70
- Britain 29, 46, 48, 67, 72, 83–4, 107
- British Mandate (1920–48) 106, 109
- Buehr, George 43, 45
- Cairo 30, 104, 107–8, 109, 121, 132; School (then College) of Fine Arts 41, 82, 104, 105, 109, 122, 123, 134

- Calder, Alexander 43, 44, 45, 61
 calligraphic art 9, 10, 90, 93, 95, 129
 capitalism 7, 22, 48, 62, 86, 123
 Carnegie Endowment International Center,
 New York 45
 Carswell, John 39, 43, 45–6, 54, 61; *Plastic
 Art* 55
 cedar trees 20–1, 21, 22, 24, 25–6, 25, 27–9, 103
 censorship 3, 7, 13, 31, 64, 69, 105
 Centre d'art contemporain 72
 Chahine, Richard 12
 Chamberlin, Paul Thomas 6, 7, 120, 123, 124
 Chamoun, Camille 32
 Chamoun, Zelpha 43, 44
 Charlton, Maryette 1, 2, 13–14, 34, 39–60, 43,
 44, 45, 63, 65, 71, 130, 132, 133, 134
 Chiha, Michel 5, 23
 children's art 53, 54
 Choucair, Saloua Raouda 45, 90, 93–5
 Christianity/Christians 5–6, 20, 22–3, 26, 27, 29,
 30, 42, 47, 48, 49, 50, 132; *see also*
 missionaries
 CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) 7, 31, 32–3
 Civil War (1975–90) 3, 45–6, 77
 Cockroft, Eva 75
 Cold War as globalized conflict 3, 6, 7, 13,
 123–4
 collective, artistic 5, 19, 70, 82, 83, 86–7, 98, 104
 communism 3, 7, 32, 51, 64, 65–6, 67, 71, 75,
 98, 123
 Congress for Cultural Freedom 32–3, 61
 Contact Art Gallery 4
 Cook's *Tourist Handbook to Palestine and
 Syria* 18, 31
 Corm, Charles 5, 23, 26, 27, 35n26
 Corm, Daoud 4, 23, 24, 40, 49, 83, 86
 Corm, George 45
 cosmopolitanism 5, 8, 26, 131, 132; of Beirut 1,
 3, 4, 5, 6, 7–8, 11–12, 13, 18–38, 104, 124,
 132, 133, 134; cosmopolitan nationalism 5–6,
 20–2, 23–4, 25–6
 Craven, David 66
 Creswell, Robyn 5, 7, 31
 cultural diplomacy 3, 6, 32–3, 61–81, 82, 98, 99,
 104, 131, 132
 Cyr, Georges 90
 Czechoslovakia 31, 67
- Daher, Abdul Qadar 114–15, 120
Daily Star (newspaper) 24, 87
 Damascus 26, 49
 D'Amico, Victor 53, 65, 133
 de Gaulle, Charles 29
 decolonization 83, 130, 131, 133
 Derain, André 70
 Dewey, John 53
 Dodge, William E. 47
- Dondero, George Anthony 64, 65–6, 67, 69, 70,
 98, 133
 Druze community 22–3, 48
 Du Camp, Maxime 107
 Dutta, Arindam 128
- East-West binary 31, 34, 42, 69, 95, 123
Eastern Times (anglophone newspaper) 24
 Écochard, Michel 42
 economy, laissez-faire nature of 3, 5, 13, 23–4,
 31, 69
 Eddé, Émile 29
 education 40, 47, 48, 49, 50, 71
 Egypt/Egyptians 4–5, 6, 9–10, 11, 12, 19, 20, 25,
 31–2, 45, 47, 48, 104, 122; *see also* Cairo
 Eighth Street Club 61
 Eisenhower Doctrine 6, 20, 32
 el-Bacha, Amine: *Composition No. 10* 90, 92
 el-Khoury, Pierre 72
 El Khoury, Bechara 29–30
 El Maasri, Zeina 7–8, 31, 33, 124n4
 El-Rayess, Aref 93, 94
 English language 18, 43, 45, 50, 71–2, 95, 103,
 104, 105, 129; art in the anglophone press
 4–5, 24, 45, 72, 77, 85, 87
 Ernst, Max 70
 Europe 18, 26, 30, 40, 48–9, 51, 70, 73–4, 94,
 107, 130; artistic influence of 9, 12, 14, 19,
 20, 22, 25, 54–5, 73, 75–6, 77, 82, 89, 98, 104,
 109, 120, 122, 128; Lebanon's relationship
 with 5–6, 10–11, 12, 19, 23, 27, 29, 47;
see also Beaux-Arts tradition; France;
 Germany
 exile 64, 100, 103, 104, 114, 122, 123, 130, 133,
 134–5; *see also* Nakba, the
- Fabian, Johannes 10–11
 Fani, Michel 12
 Fanon, Frantz 9
 Faris, Waddah 4
 Farroukh, Moustafa 26, 40, 42, 56n18
 Fawaz, Leila Tarazi 47–8, 49
 Ferren, John 14, 61–81, 72, 93–4, 98, 130, 131,
 132, 133, 134; *Journie* 73; *Magnificent* 61;
Peace 76; *Yellowstone Yellow* 61, 62
 figuration 3, 14, 75–6, 82, 100, 103–27,
 132–3, 134
 Finkelstein, Louis 75
 Fisher, Paul Roger 73
 France 48, 57n31, 64, 67, 68, 70, 99, 107; colonial
 policies 23, 42, 57n18; French artistic influence
 26, 29, 42, 55, 57n18, 71, 74, 98, 133–4; French
 authors and artists in Lebanon 26, 47, 90, 109;
 French heritage of abstract art 75–6, 87–90, 93,
 94–5, 97; French Mandate (1920–43) 5–6, 13,
 20–30, 34, 40, 57n18, 69, 71, 86, 98; relation-
 ship with Lebanon 5–6, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29,

- 30, 42, 54, 71, 132; *see also* French language; Paris
- Frankel, Charles 63
- freedom of expression 13, 40, 52, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, 131
- French language 15, 18, 23, 26, 27, 29, 49, 63, 129; art in the francophone press 4, 14, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 40, 71, 72, 77, 85, 87, 89, 93–5; becomes official language 24, 71; Ferren's fluency in 14, 63, 69–70, 71–2, 77
- Frick, Arthur and Fay 43, 45–6, 52, 87
- Frith, Francis 107
- Galerie d'amateur 95
- Gallery One 4, 7, 77, 94
- Gauguin, Paul 4
- Gemayel, César 40, 41, 42, 90
- Genauer, Emily 67
- genealogies 1, 3–4, 7, 29, 42, 53, 77, 82, 94, 97–8, 99–100, 104, 120–4, 129, 130, 132–3, 134
- “gentle crusade” 50, 64
- Germany 30, 53–4, 64, 132, 133, 134
- Ghaben, Fathi 114
- Ghazir 49, 50
- Girault de Prangey, Joseph-Philibert 25, 107
- Goodrich, Lloyd 66, 69
- Grabar, Oleg 129
- Grant, Catherine 133
- graphic design 7–8, 31, 39, 78n7
- Greater Lebanon 19, 22, 23
- Greater Syria 5, 18, 22, 23, 24, 47, 48, 49
- Gropius, Walter 54
- Guilbaut, Serge 1, 3
- Habash, George 51
- Haddad, Farid 75–6
- Hadidian, John: *Torzaya* 87, 89
- Hakim-Dowek, Carol 22
- Hakim, Victor 24, 87
- Halaby, Samia 120, 124
- Hamra Street, West Beirut 5, 31, 34, 84
- Hanssen, Jens 49
- Héliou, Jean 70
- Hills, Patricia 64–5
- Historians of Islamic Art Association (HIAA) 128–9
- Hoff, Margo 43
- Hoffman, Hans 69–70
- Holt, Elizabeth 7, 33, 64, 131
- Hon, Gordon 119
- House Un-American Activities Committee 65
- Houston, Kerr 122, 123, 124
- Hoyeck, Youssef 25
- Hoyek, Elias 49
- Hudson, Suzanne 53
- individualism 13, 40, 52, 62, 67, 69
- Iraq/Iraqis 12, 19, 23, 31, 45, 51
- Islamic art 9–10, 14, 19, 75, 128–9
- Ismail* (short film) 119, 123
- Israel 31, 46, 51, 103, 105, 107, 108, 119
- Italy/Italians 1, 26, 35n17, 49–50, 69, 83–4, 93–4, 103, 108, 109, 112–13; *see also* Rome
- Jabra, Jabra Ibrahim 8–9
- Jafet Art Gallery 43, 44, 55
- Jaffa 18, 107, 113, 118
- Jesuits 47, 49–50
- Jordan 31, 51, 72, 85, 103
- Jumabhoy, Zehra 130
- Kamal, Prince Youssef 109
- Kandinsky, Wassily 70
- Karnouk, Liliane 9–10, 11
- Kassav, Viola 87
- Kaufman, Asher 22, 27
- Kefauver, Nancy P. 67
- Kennedy, John F. 67, 69, 70
- Khalidi, Rashid 6, 7, 31
- Khalifé, Jean: *untitled* 90, 91
- Khan Younis refugee camp 107, 108, 109, 120
- Khater, Nazih 4, 24, 93, 94, 95
- Khoury, Kristine 103
- Khoury, Jalal 85, 89–90, 93, 94, 98–100, 123, 130, 132, 133, 134
- Khoury, Pierre 87
- Khrushchev, Nikita 72
- Krauss, Rosalind 85–6
- La Regina, Guido 93–4
- La Revue du Liban* (francophone weekly) 20–2, 21, 24–5, 26, 27, 31, 34, 42, 57n18, 71, 85, 86, 134
- La Revue Phénicienne* 23
- l'Académie Libanaise des beaux-arts (ALBA) 4, 40, 41–2, 52, 54, 55, 71, 90, 91, 134
- landscape genre 12, 40, 55, 85–7, 90
- Latin America 67, 103, 123
- Latta, Cathy 95–6
- Le Jour* (francophone newspaper) 23, 24, 26
- Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts 56n15, 90
- Lebanese Artists Association 72, 84, 93
- Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts 88
- Lebanism 22–3, 27
- Léger, Fernand 70
- Lenssen, Anneka 3, 11, 129
- Levi-Strauss, Claude 66
- liberation movements 3, 7–8, 103, 121, 123, 132
- literature 21–2, 34, 62; world 7, 33, 98
- L'Orient* (francophone newspaper) 4, 24, 40, 93–5

- L'Orient Littéraire* (francophone newspaper) 85, 86
- Lydda, Palestine 51, 106–7, 109
- Makdisi, Ussama 12, 48, 50, 64
- Makhoul, Bashir 119
- Maklout, Ibrahim and Emile 24–5
- Mansour, Sliman 114; *The Village Awakens* 114, 115
- Maronite Christian community 5–6, 20–4, 26, 27, 29, 30, 47, 48, 49, 132
- Marr, Dora 70
- Matisse, Pierre 70
- McCarthy, Joseph 69, 70
- Michelangelo 108, 123
- Miro, Joan 70
- missionaries 40, 46–51, 64, 69, 71, 107
- modernism 1, 3, 7–8, 11, 12–13, 31, 61, 67, 77, 93, 99, 128–35; American 33, 40, 53, 64–7, 68–9, 77, 99, 130, 132, 133; French 1, 68, 70, 77, 132, 133; and tradition 8, 9–10, 18, 24–5, 42; *see also* abstract art; universalism
- Monday Morning* (magazine) 4, 11, 24
- Mondrian, Piet 70
- Montminy, Tracy 43
- Motherwell, Robert 61
- Moukhtar, Mahmoud 10
- Mount Lebanon 20, 22–3, 25, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50
- Mourani, Philippe 25; *Le Cèdre du Liban* 20–1, 21, 22, 27
- Mufti, Aamir R. 98
- Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York 40, 43, 53, 54, 62, 65, 66, 67, 74, 75, 132, 133, 134
- music 24–5, 32–3, 41, 84, 103, 104, 114
- Muslim community 22–4, 27, 29, 30, 42, 48
- Naccache, Amal 93
- Naef, Sylvia 12, 19–20, 22
- Najm, Mounir 93
- Nakba, the 106–15, 119, 122, 123, 133
- Nammer, Nicolas 93
- Nammour, Cesar 12
- Nasser, Gamal Abdel 6, 20, 31–2
- Nasser, Kamal 103, 105
- nation-states 1, 6, 7, 10, 13, 19, 54, 85, 98, 104, 123–4, 128, 131, 132; Lebanese 5, 11, 20–1, 25–6, 29, 85, 86–7, 94, 109; Palestinian 103, 109, 112, 114
- national identity 3, 9, 14, 19, 31–2, 83; Lebanese 23, 25, 26, 69, 94, 132
- National Pact (1943) 29, 30
- nationalism 67, 74, 85, 86, 98, 131, 132, 133; Arab 5, 19, 23, 50, 75; cosmopolitan 5–6, 20–2, 23–4, 25–6; Lebanese 3, 5–6, 14, 19, 20–2, 23–4, 25–6, 27, 34, 83, 120, 132; Palestinian 103, 109, 112, 114, 120, 124; *see also* pan-Arabism
- Near East College Association 45, 47
- New York 13, 27, 39, 45, 47, 53, 61, 68–9, 70, 75, 130, 133; *see also* Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York
- Nochlin, Linda 130–1
- Office of War Information (OWI) 14, 69, 70, 134
- oil 6, 51
- Onsi, Omar 40, 41; *Landscape* 41
- Ortiz de Zárate, Manuel 70
- Orwell, George 33
- Ottoman Empire 5, 18, 19, 22, 35n31, 42, 46–50, 55, 71, 106–7
- Owais, Hamed 122
- Pakistan 63–4, 72, 129
- Palestinian community 1, 3, 14, 31, 51, 82, 100, 103–27, 132, 134
- Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) 14, 100, 103, 104, 105, 124, 131
- pan-Arabism 3, 6, 9, 19, 20, 31–2, 75, 129
- Panjabi, Lalita 104
- panorama 85–7
- Paris 1, 55, 67, 70, 122, 123, 132, 133; Lebanese/Arab artists and scholars in 9, 10, 20, 24, 26, 40, 69, 71, 87, 90, 91, 93, 109, 134
- Parramore, Dorothy 24, 87
- pedagogical approaches 3, 7, 14, 34, 40–2, 52–4, 65, 104, 133, 134
- Penrose, Stephen 39, 51
- Phoenician in Lebanon 4, 5, 6, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27
- photography 25, 51, 70, 78n4, 85–6, 107
- Picasso, Pablo 70–1, 122; *Guernica* 70; *The Tragedy* 122
- poetry 5, 7, 21, 23, 26, 31, 68–9, 103, 104
- press, art in the 3, 4–5, 13, 14, 20, 22, 24–6, 40, 43, 82–3, 85–90, 93–5, 99, 105; anglophone 4–5, 24, 45, 72, 77, 85, 87; Arabic language 4, 14, 24, 38n82, 71–2, 77, 85, 87, 89, 105, 125n7; francophone 4, 14, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 40, 71, 72, 77, 85, 87, 89, 93–5
- Price, Dorothy 133
- print capitalism 22, 86
- propaganda 32, 63, 68, 70, 130
- Rabbat, Nasser 128
- Ramadan, Dina 109
- Ras Beirut 71, 84, 120
- Rashid, Harun Hashim 105
- realism 19, 64, 65–6, 105, 114–20
- Renaissance art 108, 112–13, 122, 123, 124
- rhetorical devices 13–14, 40, 53, 61, 64–5, 75, 83, 86, 90, 93, 98–9, 123–4, 132
- Riedel, Bruce 31

- Rockefeller family 40, 62, 66, 70
 Rome 9, 40, 58n46, 69, 104, 108, 109, 121, 123
 Rothko, Mark 61
 Rubin, Andrew 7, 33
 Ryman, Robert 53
- Saghir, Adel 87
 Said, Edward 107, 131
 Saleeby, Khalil 91–2
 Salon d'Automne 14, 82, 83–5, 86, 87–90, 94–5, 134
 Salti, Rasha 103
 Salzmann, Auguste 107
 Sandler, Irving 61
 Saudi Arabia 51
 Saunders, Frances Stonor 32, 61
 Sayigh, Rosemary and Yusef 45
 Scamanga, Stélio 14, 34n10, 82, 88, 95–8, 130, 132, 133; *Arabesque* 95, 96, 97
 Schehadé, George 68–9, 90
 Scheid, Kirsten 12, 20, 24, 56n18, 85, 86–7, 121–2, 123, 124, 131–2
 Seggerman, Alex Dika 10
 Seips, Elizabeth and Peter 39
 Sela, Rona 104–5
 Shaath, Zeinab 103, 104–5
 Shabout, Nada 3, 9, 128, 129, 130, 133
 Shammout, Ismail 14, 82, 100, 103–27, 130, 132, 133, 134; *Here Sat My Father* 111–12, 111; *Life Goes On* 114, 116; *Madonna of the Oranges* 112–14, 113; *Newlyweds on the Border* 112–13, 112; *The Sea and Us* 121–2, 121; *We Will Return* 110–11, 110; *Where To?* 105, 106, 109, 120, 122, 123
Shi'r (poetry quarterly) 7
 Sidon 22, 48, 49, 51
 Singerman, Howard 53–5
 social realism 19, 64, 65
 soft power 32, 33, 40, 50, 63; *see also* cultural diplomacy
 Soviet Union 6, 13, 30, 31–2, 51, 65–6, 67, 72
 Srour, Habib (1860–1938) 4, 40
 St. Alban's Naval Hospital 67
 St. Joseph University 49
 Suez Canal 31, 32
 Surssock Museum, Beirut 82, 83–5, 84, 86, 87–90, 93–4; *see also* Salon d'Automne
 Surssock, Nicolas Ibrahim 83
 Surssock, Lady Yvonne Cochrane 87
- Syria/Syrians 11, 18, 19, 26, 29, 30, 31, 42, 48, 49, 51, 86, 93–4; *see also* Greater Syria
 Syrian Protestant College (SPC) 46, 47, 49, 50; *see also* American University of Beirut (AUB)
- Taher, Salah 4–5
 Tanzimat reforms 48
 Tarrab, Joseph 24, 95
 Thompson, Elizabeth 20–2, 86
 tourism 18, 31, 34, 69, 86–7, 107
 Traboulsi, Fawwaz 7–8
 transnational alliances 7, 70, 99, 103–27, 134
 travel guides 18–19, 34
 Tripoli 22, 48, 49
 Turkey 45, 129
- UNESCO Palace 4, 83–4
 United Arab Republic 31, 32
 United States: abstract art in 14, 61–81, 62, 98, 99, 104, 124, 130, 131, 132–3; CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) 7, 31, 32–3; Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) 33; United States Information Services (USIS) 61; *see also* American University of Beirut (AUB); cultural diplomacy
 United States Information Agency (USIA) 14, 61, 62–3, 67, 72, 74, 75; Artist-in-Residence Program 14, 61, 62–3, 64, 67, 68–9, 70–1, 77, 134
 universalism 3, 7, 14, 19, 63–4, 65, 68, 78, 82–102, 104, 132
The Urgent Call of Palestine (short music film) 103, 104–5
- VanDeMark, Brian 47, 51
 Vasari, Giorgio 1, 12
- Weisgall, Hugo 74
 Williams, Raymond 133
 Winegar, Jessica 11
 Winslow, Hall 45
 Woodward Foundation 66–7
 World War II 29, 34, 64, 70, 82, 130
 World's Fair pavilion, 1939 26–9, 28
- Yaqub, Nadia 114
 Youngerman, Jack 43
Youth of the Cedar (newspaper) 26
- Zalatimo, Daoud 121, 123



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