

Contemporary Palestinian Art, its Start and Environment Influence

Despite the universality of human civilization, one can speak of an independent art, heritage and history of any one people, based on the particular characteristics which determine their identity as the result of a specific historical sequence.

Contemporary Palestinian art cannot be isolated from the historical development which has shaped the Palestinian people, and all the upheavals which have affected Palestine. Of particular impact were the repeated invasions, the last of which was the Zionist invasion, bringing constant attempts to obliterate the civilization and cultural features of the Palestinian people. Continuous invasion affected the cultural, social and political continuity in Palestine and subjected it to instability and various distortions as is the case in many Arab and 'third world' countries, while Europe experienced a rich development on this level.

The start of the Palestinian plastic art movement

The stage prior to 1948

Aside from drawings in churches, the Islamic ornaments and the popular art heritage from ancient times, the plastic art movement in Palestine started relatively late. With the beginning of this century, it took the form of handicrafts as well as oil paintings, generally landscapes and portraits. At this stage, the movement was weak in terms of productivity and exhibitions, due to the small number of painters, and especially of ones who studied art.

The crystallization of the movement

The stage after 1948

The modern Palestinian art movement crystallized in the middle of this

century, after the 1948 war and the Israeli occupation of significant parts of the Palestinian homeland, which forced thousands of Palestinians into exile, displacement and starvation. At this time, a few pioneer artists began to record the human plight of the Palestinian people in their works of art. Ismail Shamout can be considered a pioneer in this respect. He was one of the thousands exiled into refugee camps. In those difficult circumstances, he started his art work with images of the daily details of his people's suffering. Shamout's early works dealt with the subjects of the Palestinian people's exodus and suffering in exile...the massacres committed by the Zionist gangs and the simple tents under whose roof the refugees lived in misery. Amidst this desperation, he also depicted the hope of salvation, the reversal of the exodus, and the return to the homeland of sweet memories.

Shamout's graphic realism played a great role in establishing the basis of contemporary Palestinian art. Later on, many artists used the same style and subject matter, namely Taman el Shamout, Tawfiq Abdul Al, Mustafa Hallai, etc. Together, these artists formed the basis for this movement as it existed until the 1967 rise of the armed Palestinian revolution, which these artists professed in many of their works.

The above concerns mainly the subject matter of the Palestinian art at this stage. With regards to artistic style, classical realism was dominant, combining reality with artistic features. The dominance of this style is due to several factors: For one, the Palestinian art movement was still young and was not yet affected by modern art. Secondly, the dramatic nature of the subject matter imposed by the Palestinian experience demanded such a style. Thirdly, the Palestinian people were most able to grasp a realistic portrayal of their situation.

The rise of the armed revolution

The stage after 1967

The rise of the armed Palestinian revolution deeply affected the various aspects of Palestinian life - cultural, social, political and even psychological. The people who had suffered so much aggression and displacement now moved into the stage of defending their right to live and return to their lost homeland. The Palestinian art of this stage was characterized by the following features.

First: The appearance of new symbols more defiant, assertive and radical than those previously employed, such as the fedayeen and gun to symbolize the revolution; the horse as a symbol of ascent; the kaffiyeh as a symbol of Palestinian identity; the dove for peace; blood for sacrifice; and the woman representing the land and fertility.

These symbols recurred in most artistic works appearing in the revolutionary stage which we can call the stage of hope. Of course, within this commonality of symbols, we can see different modes of application in accordance with each artist's style.

Second: In this stage, a great number of Palestinians studied at art academies, which enriched the movement. Related to this, new styles, trends and schools like symbolism, impressionism, cubism and surrealism began to influence Palestinian art.

Third: In order to confront the Zionist theft and plunder of Palestinian heritage, there was renewed employment of traditional Palestinian ornamental and popular art.

Fourth: This stage was characterized by the spread of Palestinian art from the local level to broader scopes through exhibitions in Arab and foreign countries.