

Seminar 3: Modernism and post-modernity in the Arab art world



Structure of this seminar

1. Modern Arab art and the Arab 20th century
 - Egypt
 - Iraq
 - Palestine
2. Arab art of the 20th century, Western modernity and post-modernity; the End of History and the current world order

Egyptian Modernism: neo-pharaonic style



Early 20th Century: Neo-Pharaonic Style inspired by European neo-classicism, associated with the awakening of Egyptian nationhood and detached from Arab, African or Islamic identities.



Mahmud Mukhtar 1891 – 1934: Egypt Awakening (1919) and Untitled Sculpture

Statue of Saad Zaghloul by Mahmoud Mokhtar in Alexandria (1926)



Artists support the struggle for independence spearheaded by the Wafd Party



Cultural policy of (non-sovereign) Egyptian government: 1925 government starts purchasing art and supporting artists; 1929: establishment of the Egyptian Academy in Rome. Art education in the school curriculum.

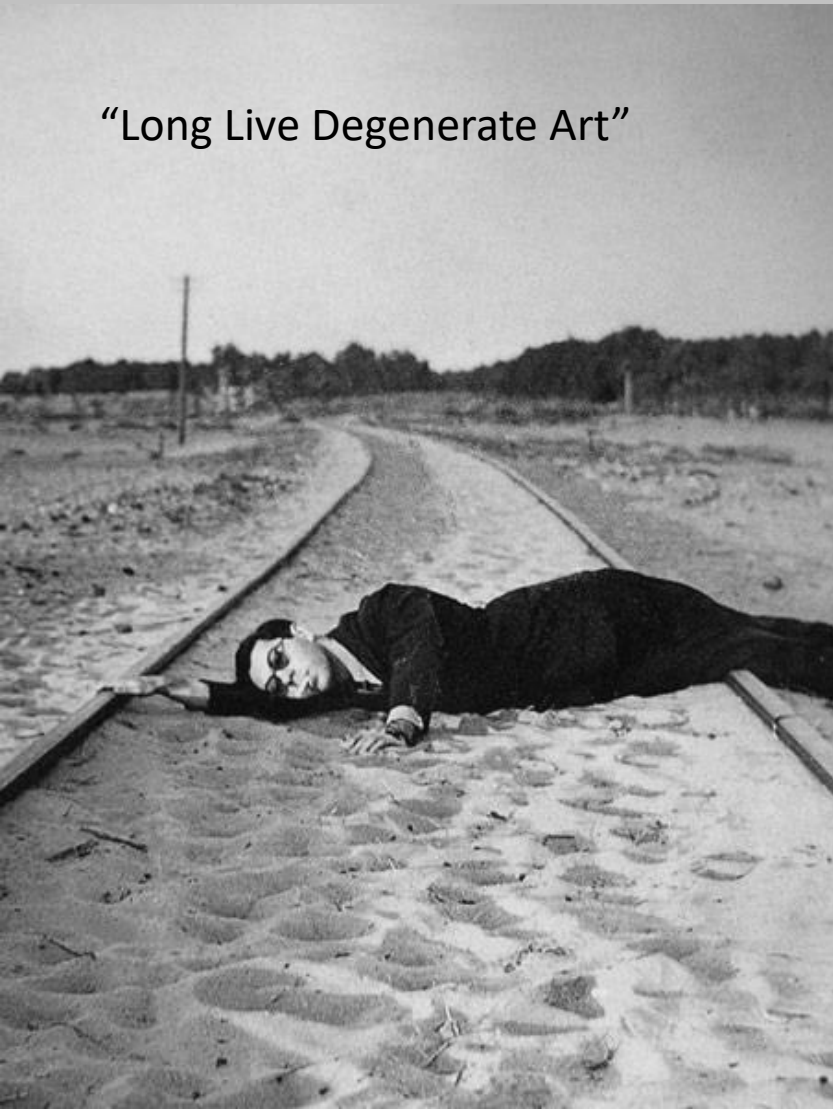




Experimentation with new European art currents (Egyptian art as part of the European artistic sphere)

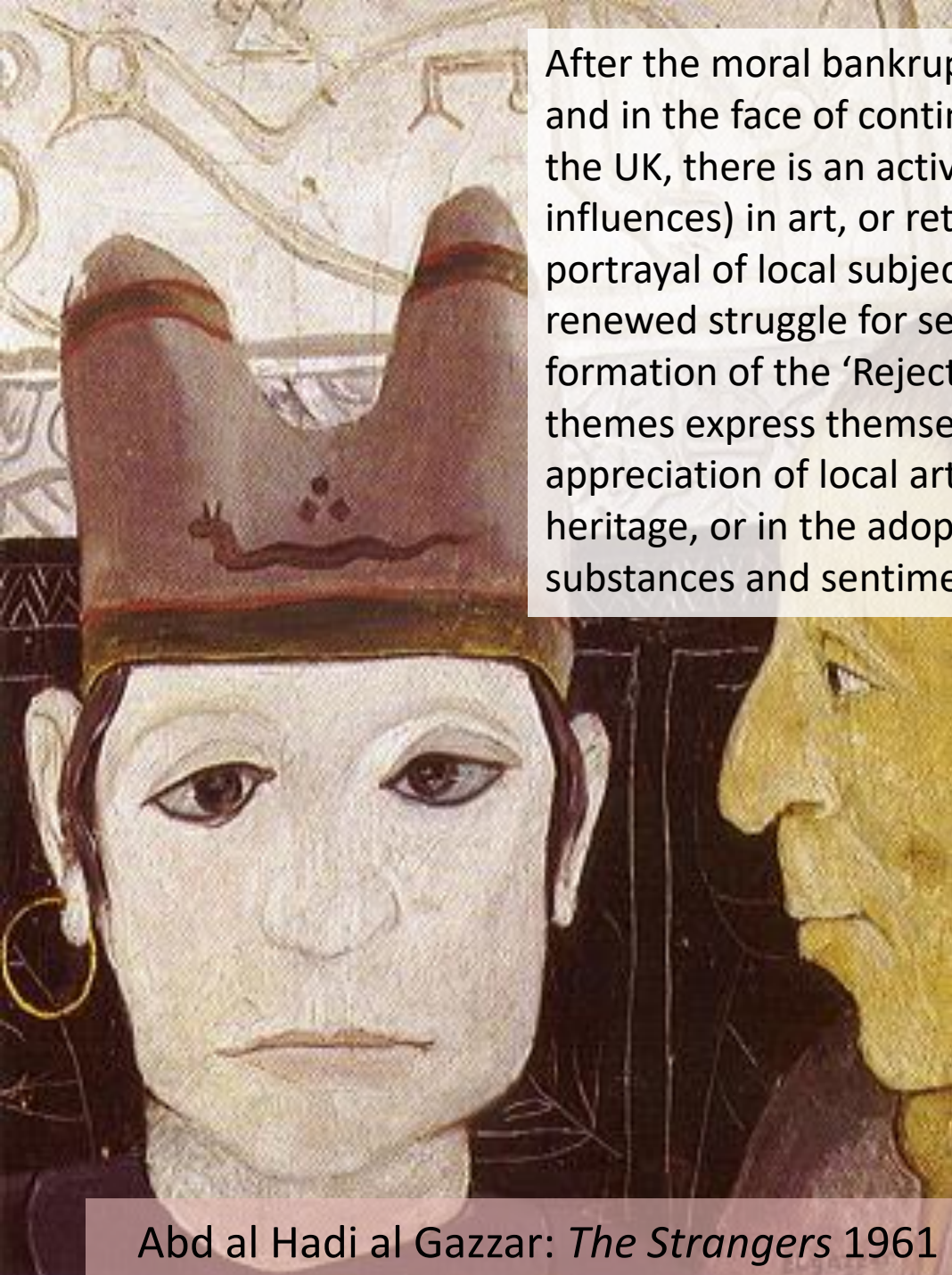
Manifesto of Egyptian surrealism, 1938
Art and Freedom movement, 1939
(*Al Fan Al Hur*)

“Long Live Degenerate Art”

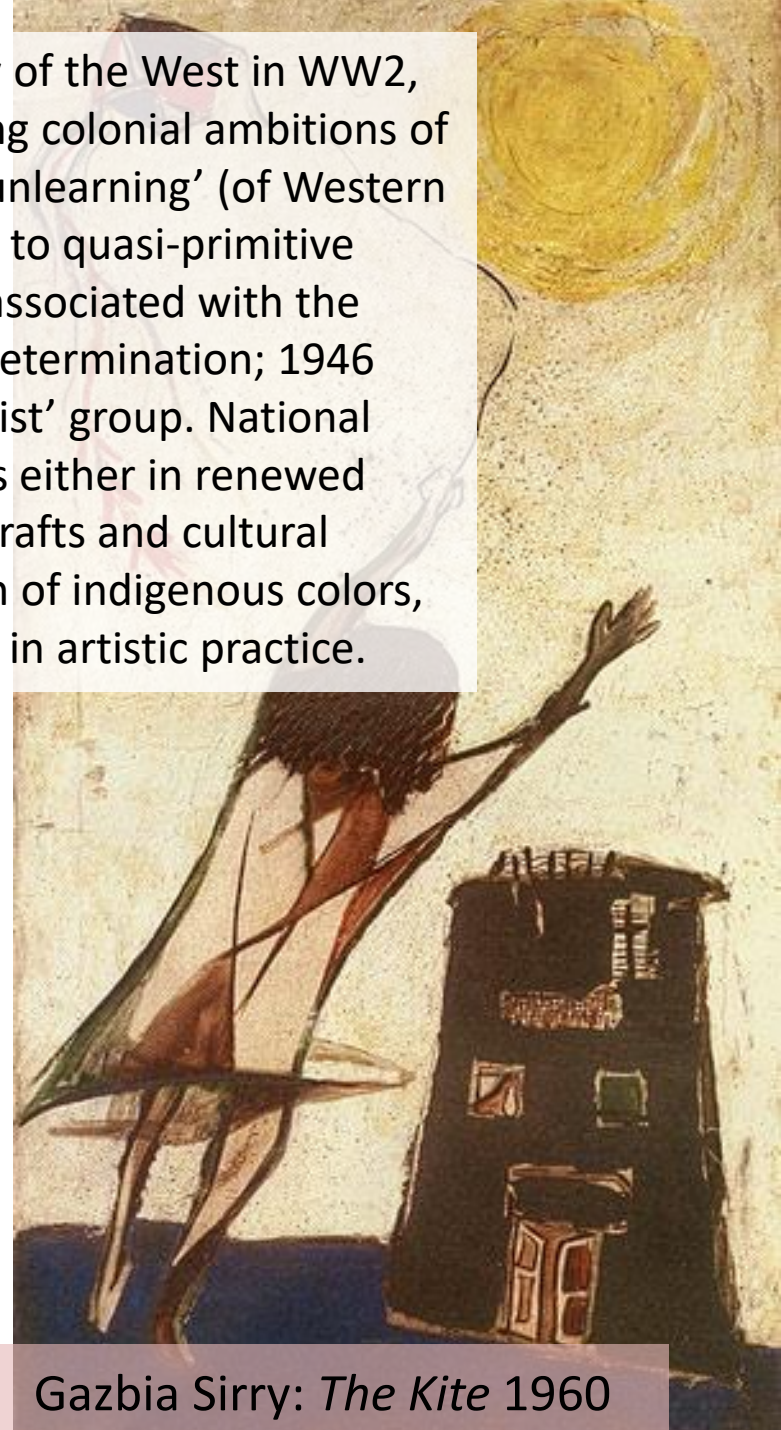


above: Ramsis Younan: *Untitled* (1943)
left: Georges Henein, 1939

After the moral bankruptcy of the West in WW2, and in the face of continuing colonial ambitions of the UK, there is an active 'unlearning' (of Western influences) in art, or return to quasi-primitive portrayal of local subjects associated with the renewed struggle for self-determination; 1946 formation of the 'Rejectionist' group. National themes express themselves either in renewed appreciation of local arts, crafts and cultural heritage, or in the adoption of indigenous colors, substances and sentiments in artistic practice.



Abd al Hadi al Gazzar: *The Strangers* 1961



Gazbia Sirry: *The Kite* 1960

Nasserism
and Arab
Nationalism
(late 1950s
and 1960s)




Rejectionism
leads to Egyptian
abstract
expressionism
(heyday late 50s
and 1960s) which
coincides with
Nasserism, pan-
Arab nationalism
and 'asila'

'Asila' = search for
authenticity in
art, by looking
for *Arab* roots for
modern art – in
the belief
modern art = a
universal
language

Munir Canaan: #`13 et Fleche, 1955

1967

An abstract painting featuring a grey background with various shapes and colors. A large, dark, angular shape is prominent in the upper right, with a white outline. Below it, a large white shape with a black outline is visible. To the left, there's a black-outlined shape filled with white brushstrokes. On the right side, a vertical black line with a blue triangle at the bottom is present. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

Post-Nasser: stagnation, academic art rules,
young artists flee the country

1987-2011: Abstract expressionist painter Farouk Hosny, Minister of Culture, attempts to resurrect the official cultural scene but he ends up by reinforcing the bureaucratic stagnation of the sector.

Nearly became DG of UNESCO in 2009 (lost to Irina Bokova)

1931 first exhibition

1936 establishment of a Fine Arts institute

Development of modern art in Iraq:

1: Ottoman military training in arts

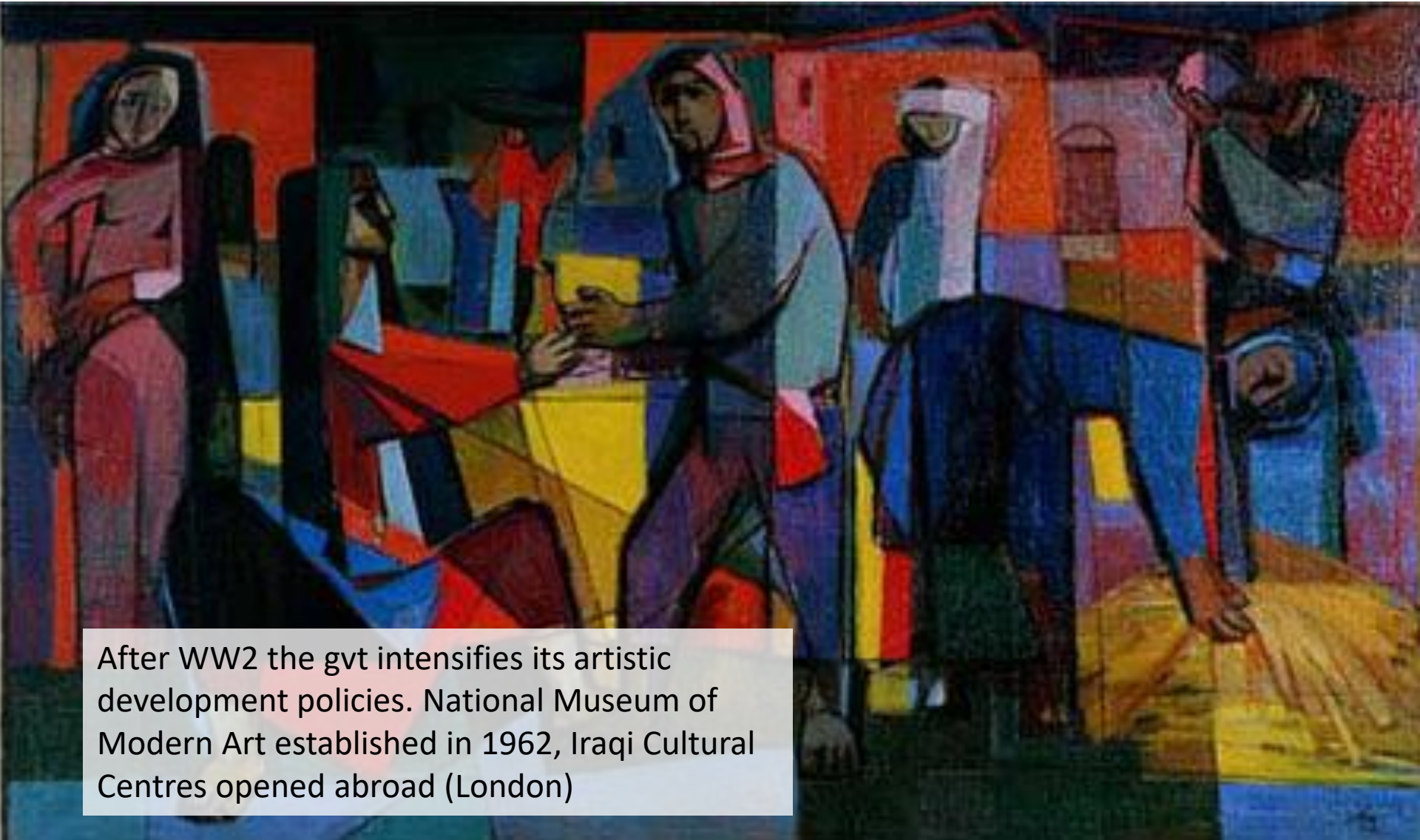
2: National policies of Iraq after 1921 to stimulate cultural development

3: Influx of Polish artists in WW2



Abdul Qadir al Rassam: A Military Encampment on the Banks of the Euphrates, 1920s

In 1950 Faiq Hassan establishes the Société Primitive / Al Ruwad (the Pioneers)



After WW2 the gvt intensifies its artistic development policies. National Museum of Modern Art established in 1962, Iraqi Cultural Centres opened abroad (London)

Faiq Hassan: At the Market, 1951

1951: Jewad Selim establishes the Baghdad Group of Modern Art



Many groups formed. Pan-Arabism and nationalism inspire many of them to search for local roots and authenticity in art.

Jewad Selim: A couple, young man and wife, 1953

Jewad Selim: Monument to Freedom, 1961



After the 1967 defeat of Nasser, Baathists seize power in Iraq (1968) and partially take over the pan-Arab agenda. Support of modern art intensifies. The 1970s are the heyday of Iraqi art, with a complex art world, many artists, media, galleries, government-sponsored exhibitions etc...

New Vision: Maturity of the Iraqi art scene in the late 1970s



Dia Azzawi: Red Sky with Birds, 1981

The politicization of the art scene in the 1980s causes many artists to flee Iraq, while the government's cultural policies get ever more heavy-handed. Opening of the Saddam Arts Centre in 1986. Young people become less interested in arts (and flee conscription).

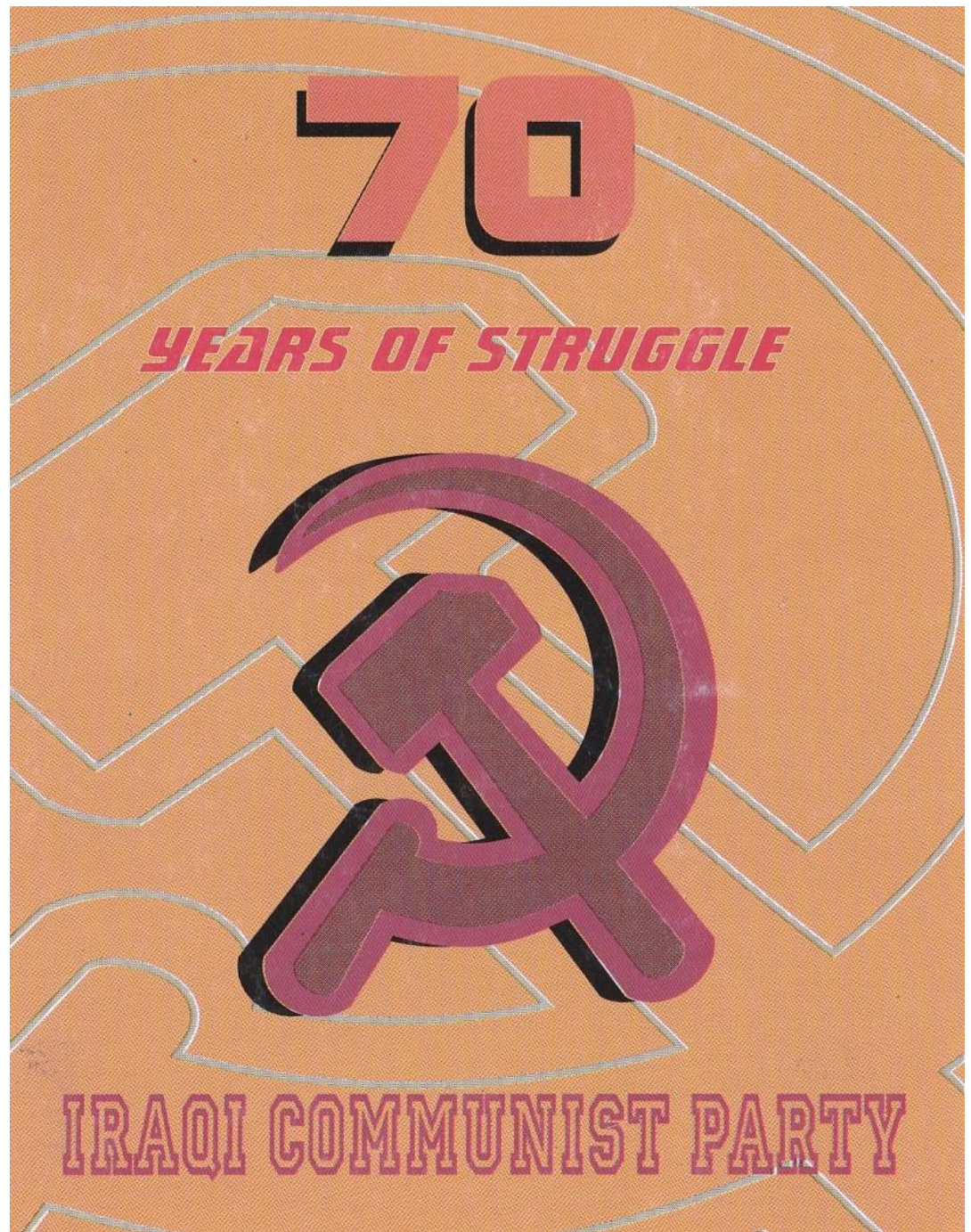


The Gulf War and the sanctions strangle the Iraqi art scene, while the post-2003 reconstruction finishes it off.

Example of Book Art: Rafa al Nasiri

Throughout the years, and until today, the Iraqi art world remains a bastion of the **Iraqi Communist Party**

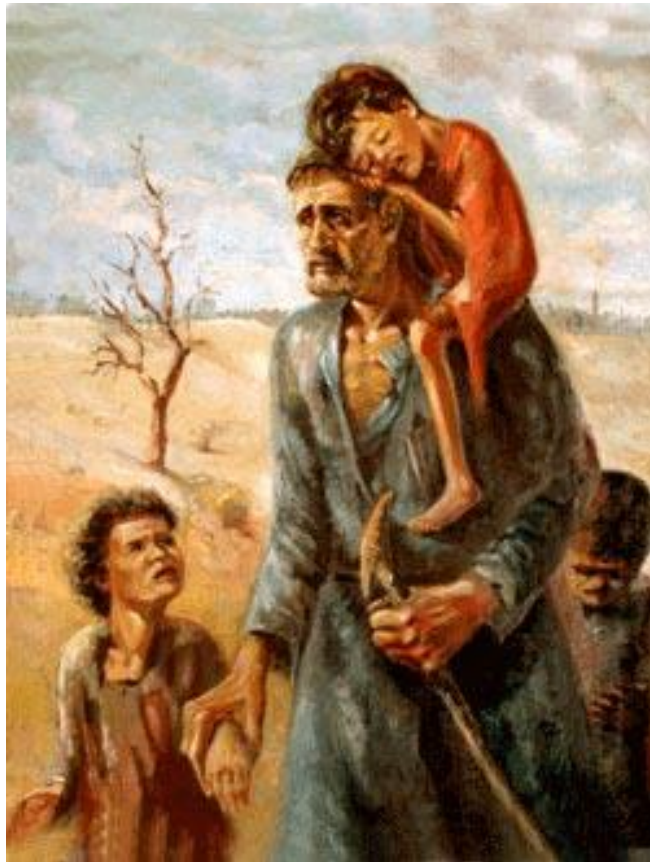
(cover of a folder for a group exhibition of modern art, found in Baghdad in 2007)



Modernism in Palestinian Art in the service of the national cause

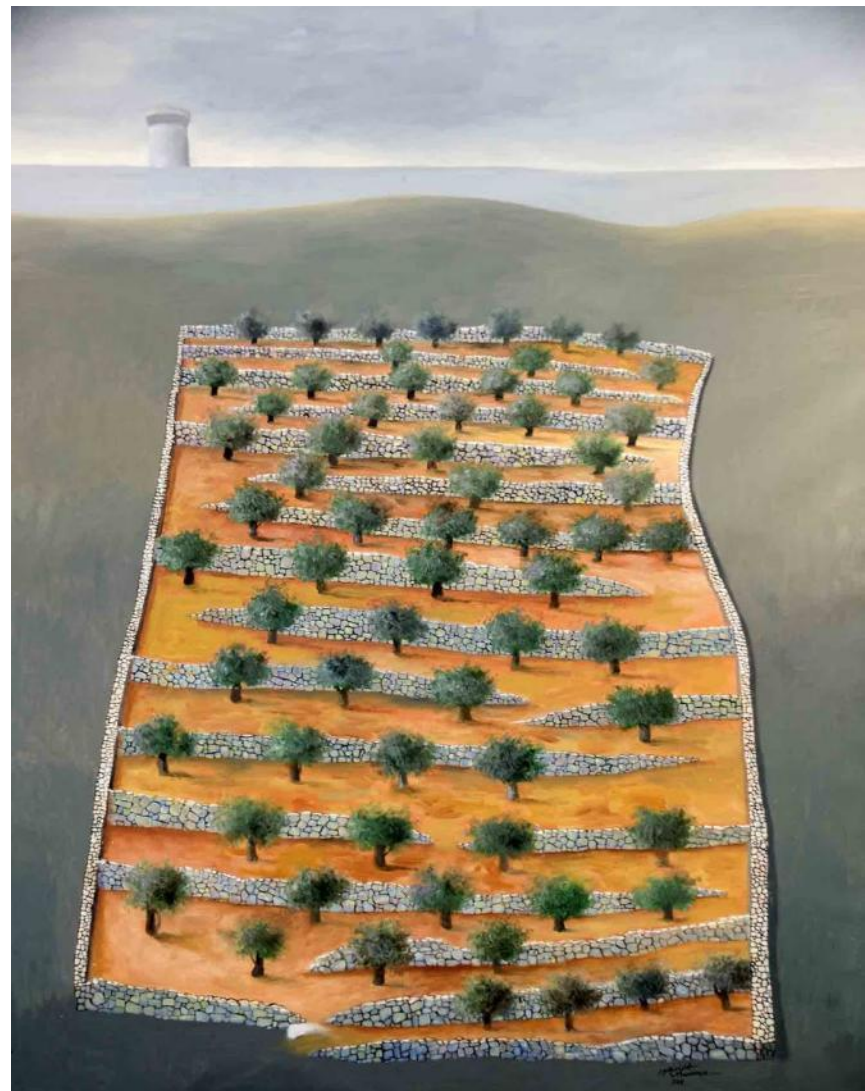
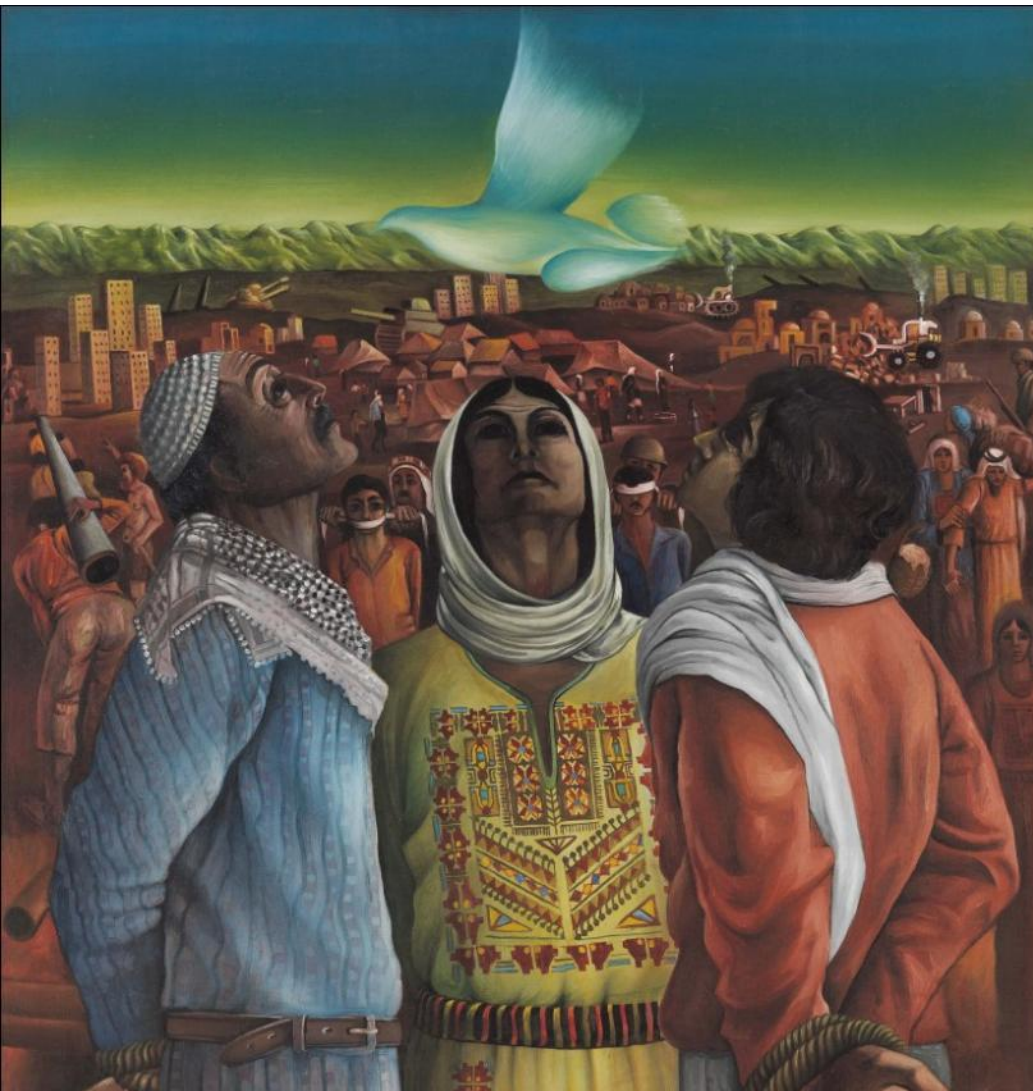
Palestine/Jerusalem was not one of the artistic centers of the Arab world before 1948, but enjoyed high levels of education and thus of art appreciation.

The Nakba (1948) and subsequent displacement create the setting and the narrative for Palestinian modern art. Obsessions with place, history, human rights, nationhood...



Ismail Shammout: Where to? 1953... and part of the Palestine: Exodus and Odyssey Murals, 1997-2000

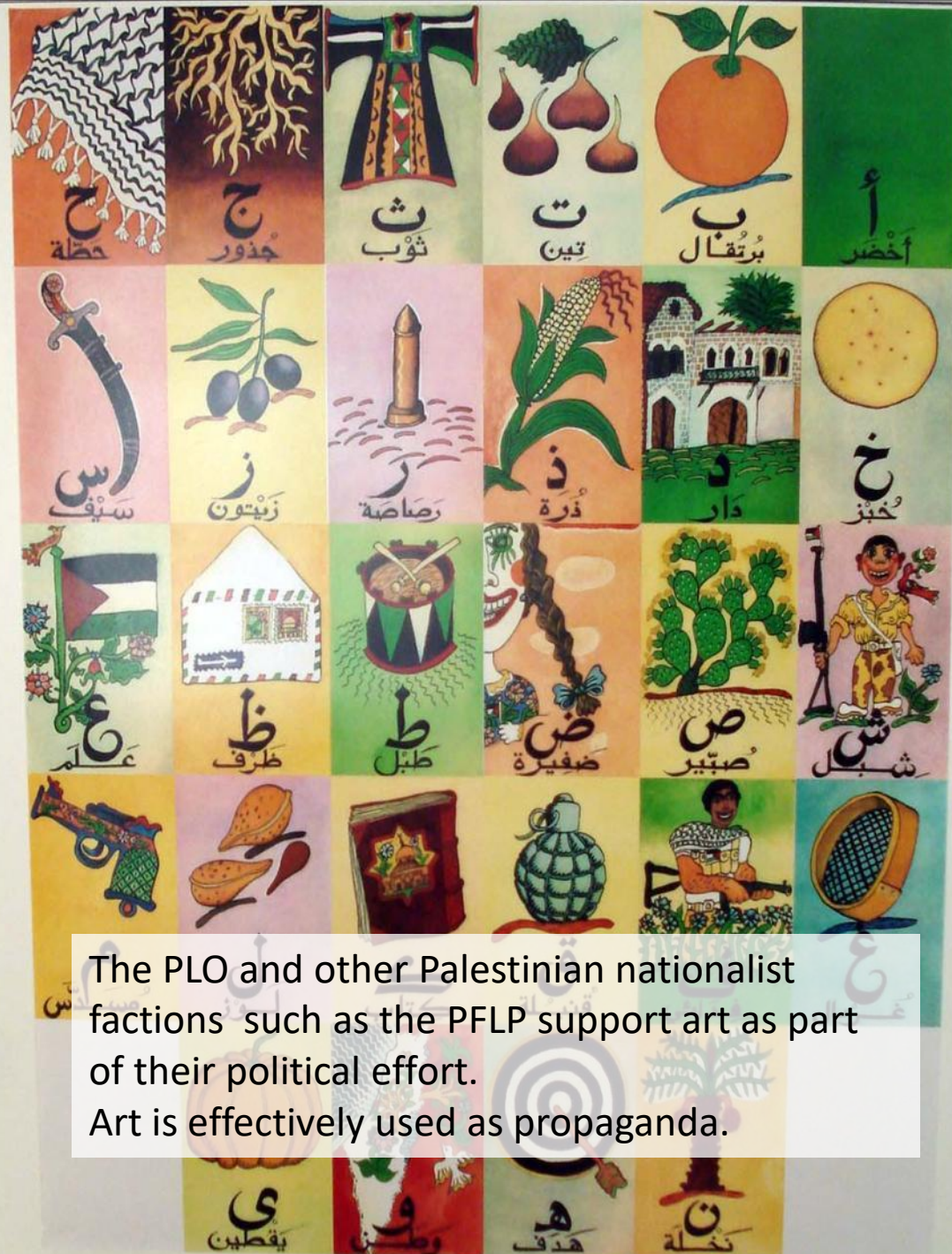
Sliman Mansour: Perseverance and Hope 1976; depiction of Palestine, 1980s



The Palestinian community is divided and scattered (Israeli Arabs, West Bank & Gaza, Arab world refugee camps, West...).

Art becomes an important tool for constructing a national narrative that bridges these gaps.

Wide dissemination of
Palestinian art through
reproductive techniques



The PLO and other Palestinian nationalist
factions such as the PFLP support art as part
of their political effort.
Art is effectively used as propaganda.



Palestinian artists in the diaspora (Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Gulf countries, Libya etc.) interact intensely with local art scenes, often helping them develop.

The Palestinians thus become the most **tangible expression of pan Arab identity**: problematically so.

One by one the Arab regimes sacrifice the Palestinian cause to realign themselves more favorably on the geopolitical scene.

This incidentally creates a rift with their populations, which in their majority support the Palestinian resistance against Israel.

Historical milestones influencing the development of 20th century Arab art

- The demise of the Ottoman Empire & the rise of nationalism (e.g. pan-Turkism) 1914-1923 and establishment of 'nation-states'.
- The Bolshevik revolution & the spread of Marxism
- The moral bankruptcy of the West in WW2 & continued colonialism
- The Palestinian Nakba 1948
- The Egyptian revolution 1954 & Nasserism (Suez canal crisis)
- The brutal but successful Algerian liberation struggle 1954 – 1962
- The Arab defeat in the 6-days war (1967)
- The rise of the Baath Party in Iraq (1968) and Syria (1970)
- The first oil crisis (1973) and the rise of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf
- The Lebanese civil war (1975+)
- The Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel (1978)
- The demise of Arab nationalism and the rise of political Islam (1979+)
- The first Gulf war and the sanctions on Iraq (1991+)

Analytical summary: Modernism in the Middle East

- The ideals of enlightenment and modernism, and the avant-garde role of the artist, also struck root in the Middle East.
- Emergence of modern art in the early 20th century in Egypt, Iraq and Iran
- Modern artists in the Middle East were presented with two options:
 - either integrate the Western art scene (and move to the colonial metropolises) : art pour l'art
 - develop the national art scene as a service to the modernizing forces of their society.
- After 1979, with the authoritarian shift of most Arab regimes, and their realignment one by one with Western interests, the political role of artists was much reduced, and the Middle East art world lost its modernist dynamics

Parviz Tanavoli: Heech (fiberglass), 2006 (British Museum coll)



Understanding 'Modernity'

- Modernity: attempt to understand and manage worldly affairs by the use of reason (Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes...)
- Rousseau, by arguing that human nature was malleable not essential, opened the way for new politics focused on changing or improving the human being
- “Modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past” (Giddens 1998, 94).
- Secularism and disenchantment are characteristics of modernity (Weber)
- Lyotard: modernity is a cultural condition characterized by constant change in the pursuit of progress. Postmodernity then represents the culmination of this process where constant change has become the *status quo* and the notion of progress obsolete. Lyotard further argues that the various metanarratives of progress such as positivist science, Marxism, and structuralism are defunct as methods of achieving progress.

Arab disenchantment with modernity:

- Arab leaders abuse this discourse; the impetus seems lost after 1967.
 - The West is more interested in supporting Arab autocrats than in true socio-cultural progress in the Arab world (Algeria 1992 and many other examples)
 - Where modernity has brought the West, as transmitted by global media, does not appeal to all Arabs
- => Islamism ('Political Islam') appears as an ever more plausible alternative, especially after 1979 Iran.

Abdullah al Muharaqqi, Bahrain



Postmodernity
can describe a
phase beyond
modernity or an
individual
response to (and
within)
modernity

What about
Postmodernity
in the Arab
world?

Raeda Saadeh

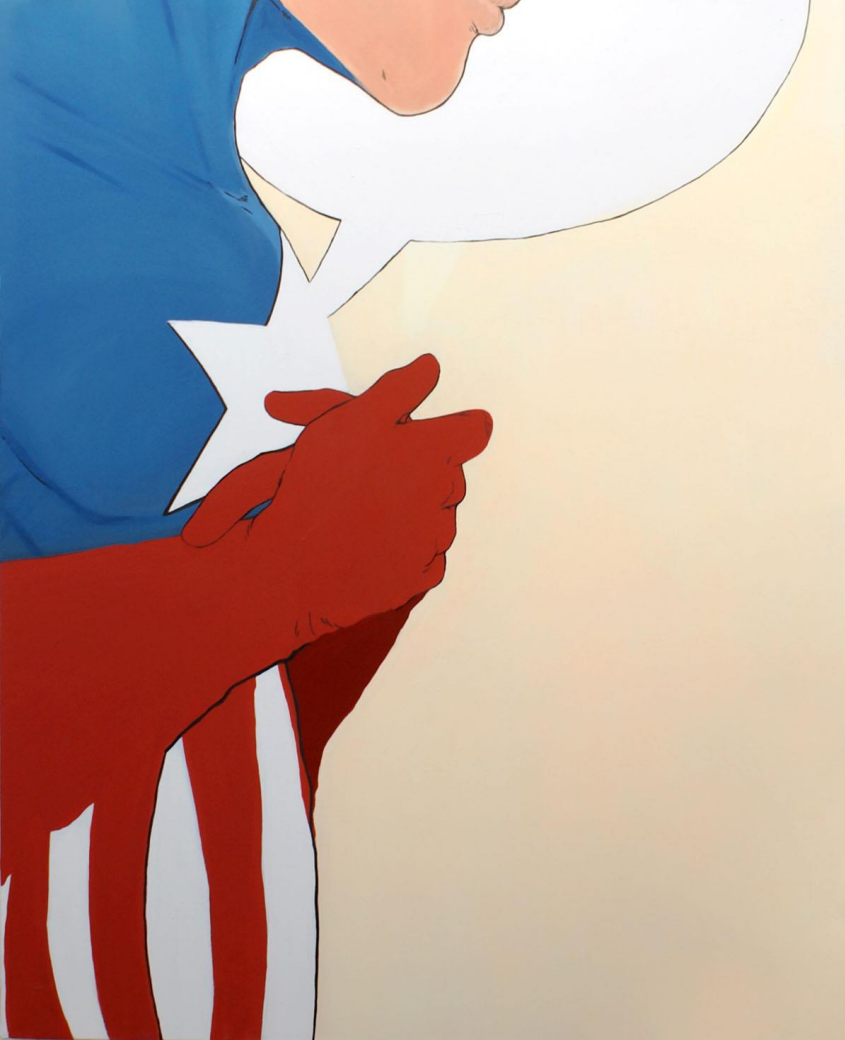


End of History?

- The post-modern ideology does not spread throughout the Middle East
- People in the Middle East can find no comfort in the idea of the End of History and the abandonment of collective ideals of progress.
- It is at this point, when the West 'betrays' the ideals of modernism, that competing ideologies such as political Islam became popular.
- Western idealists send the following message to the rest of the world: you can only become like us, that is your end goal in history.
- 'Third World' becomes 'developing nations'
- But: With the rise of the Asian tigers another, non-Western path to development emerges

No End of History in the Middle East

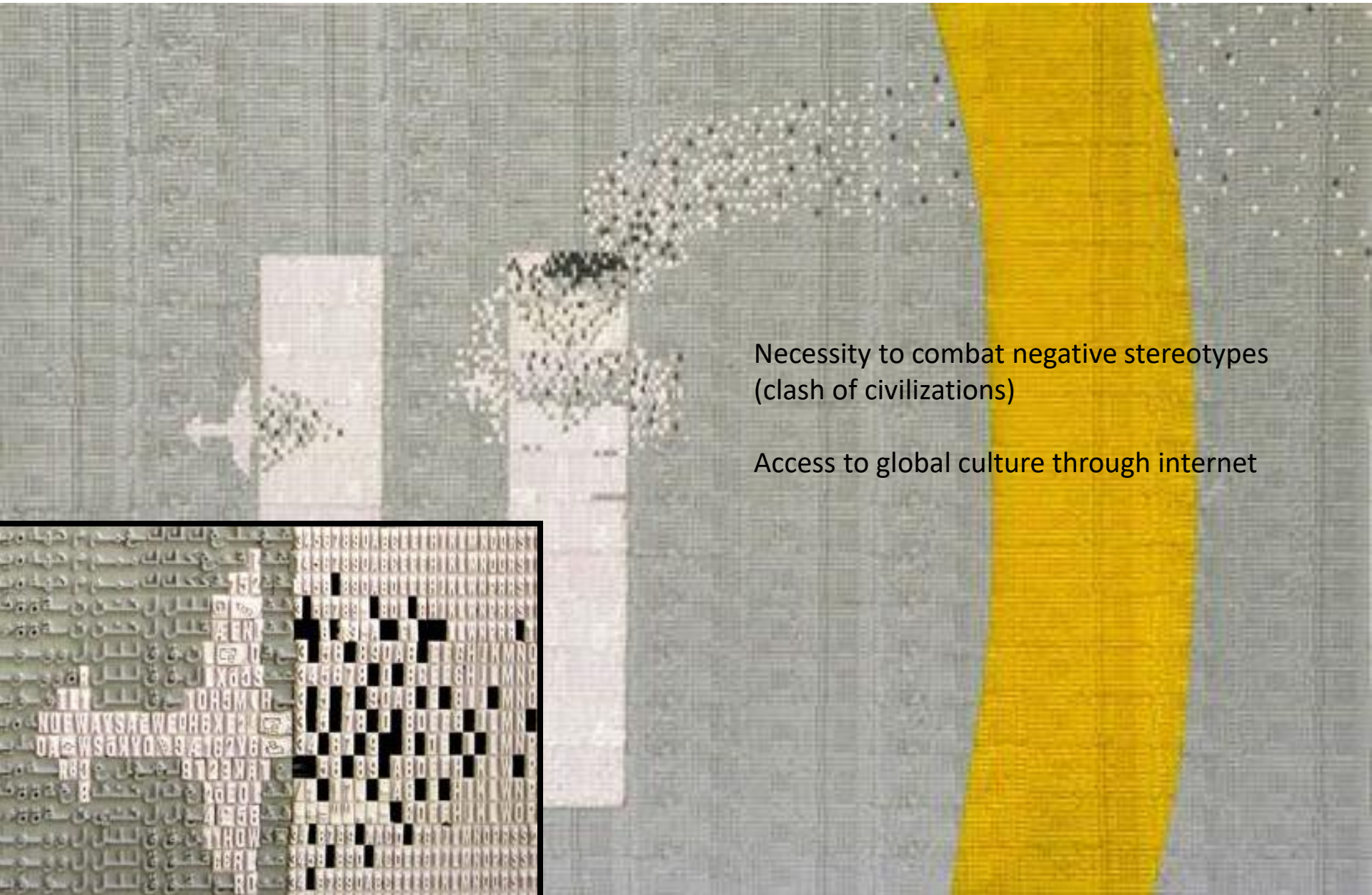
*Fereydoun Ave: Rostam
in the dead of Winter, 2009*



Achraf Touloub
(Paris)



9/11/2001: Wake-up call. Muslims worldwide and Arab world in particular under attack

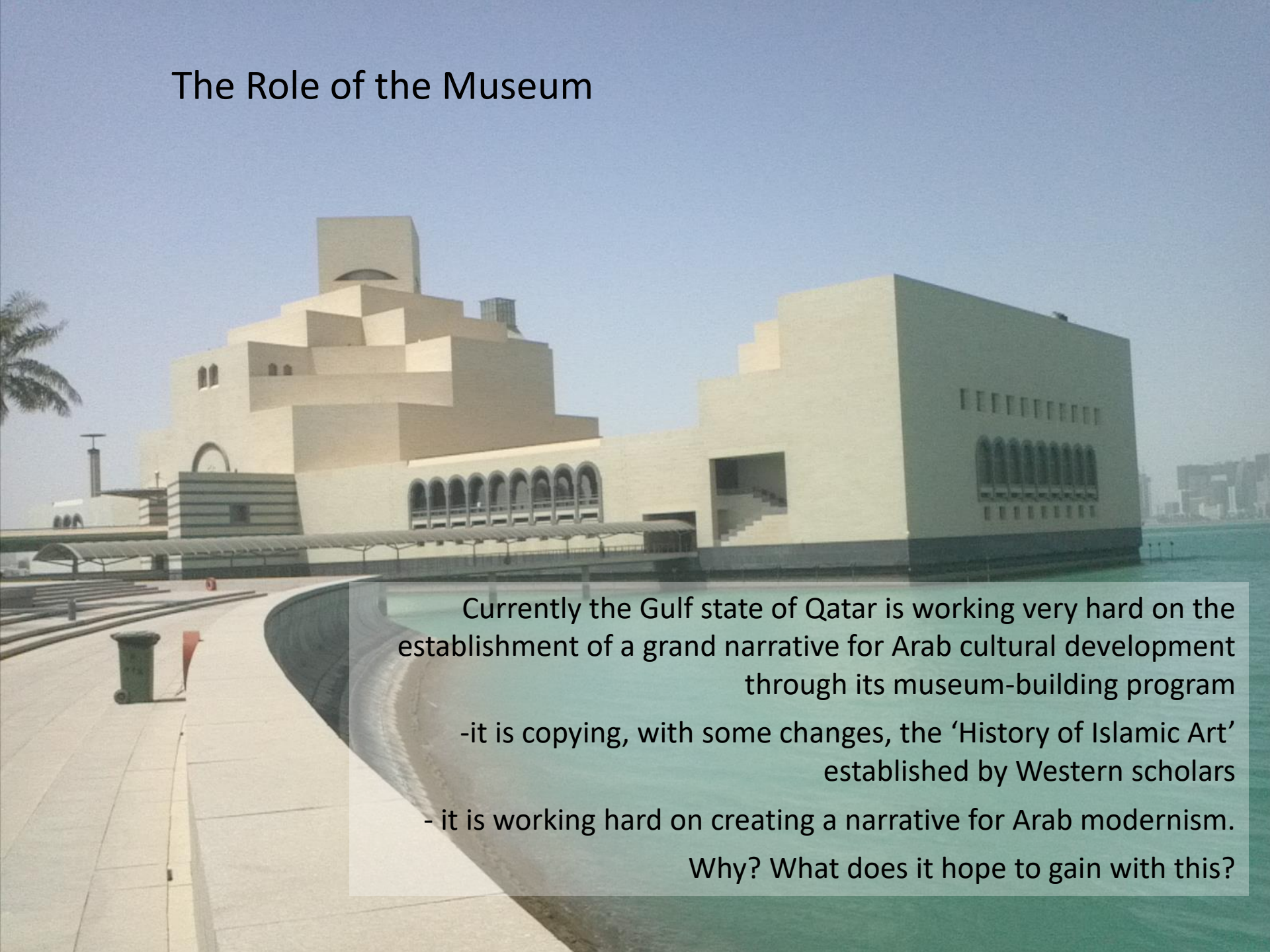


Necessity to combat negative stereotypes
(clash of civilizations)

Access to global culture through internet

Abdulnasser Gharem: Pedestrian Crossing II, 2008 (inset: detail)

The Role of the Museum



Currently the Gulf state of Qatar is working very hard on the establishment of a grand narrative for Arab cultural development through its museum-building program

-it is copying, with some changes, the 'History of Islamic Art' established by Western scholars

- it is working hard on creating a narrative for Arab modernism.

Why? What does it hope to gain with this?