

**INTRODUCTION TO “REVOLUTIONARY
PAINTING AND THE PALESTINIAN
REVOLUTION,” BY MOHAMMED CHABAA,
AND “PALESTINIAN ARTISTS AND THE
BIENNIAL,” FROM TONI MARAINI’S
“BAGHDAD 1974: A SUMMARY OF THE
FIRST ARAB BIENNIAL OF FINE ARTS”
(BOTH 1974)**

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In 1974, the Department of Arts and National Culture of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) sent artwork to Baghdad as the Palestinian submission to the First Arab Biennial. *Intégral*, an influential Moroccan cultural journal, published a special edition on the exhibition, in which Moroccan painter Mohammed Chabâa (1935–2013) reviewed the Palestinian entries with disdain and disappointment. Chabâa argued that painting in the Palestinian context should serve strictly documentary purposes, yet in Baghdad, he was faced with a corpus that was burdened by nostalgia and fantasy. Why, he asked, was the majority of the Palestinian exhibition inspired by folklore? “To establish the parameters of popular patrimony? To assert the Palestinian character? To revive the traditions and morals of a Palestinian Palestine?”¹ Chabâa insists in his review that to fixate on these themes is to approach Palestine “as a tourist,” to inevitably alienate oneself from the profound “reality” of Palestine, even if one has “directly experienced a certain Palestinian reality.”² Chabâa ends his manifesto-like review with the assertion that Palestinian art should be “a rich and effective tool of

¹ Mohammed Chabâa, “Révolution palestinienne et peinture révolutionnaire,” *Intégral: Revue de création plastique et littéraire*, no. 9, “Spécial biennale arabe de Baghdad” (December 1974): 41.

² *Ibid.*

Revolutionary propaganda”³—a tool that the Palestine Liberation Organization’s delegation had seemingly failed to sharpen.

By the time Chabâa aired his grievances about the Biennial in “Revolutionary Painting and the Palestinian Revolution,” the guerrilla tactics and charismatic leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had captured global attention. “Palestine” had become synonymous with revolution, as artists and intellectuals throughout the so-called Third World mobilized that nation and its struggle as a universal symbol of anti-imperialism.⁴ Given the contemporary image of the PLO and the centrality of its cause to nonaligned, anticolonial solidarity movements, it may seem odd that the art of its delegation was characterized as sentimental, superficial, and undedicated to the exigencies of propaganda, but Chabâa was not alone in his critique. Italian art critic Toni Maraini (b. 1941) contributed “A Summary of the First Arab Biennial of Fine Arts” to the same issue of *Intégral*, and while her overview of the exhibition is more generous in its assessment of the Palestinian contribution, it echoes many of Chabâa’s concerns. Perturbed by the lack of written explanations, for example, Maraini argues that text should have been provided to inform the visitor “to what extent, or from what perspective, ‘naive’ landscapes and ‘folkloric’ scenes can be considered *combat art*.”⁵

Though both texts are animated by a belief in the political significance of art, Maraini’s style varies considerably from Chabâa’s. Whereas Chabâa’s strident critique reads more like a manifesto than an exhibition review, Maraini assumes a tone of stoic reportage, giving us a

3 Ibid.

4 That Palestine had begun to take pride of place in anticolonial imaginaries during the 1960s, and especially following the 1967 Israeli victory in the Six-Day War, is evidenced in journals such as *Tricontinental*, published by the Organization for the Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America; *Intégral*; and *Souffles-Anfâs*, a Moroccan cultural periodical that began publication in 1966 and quickly achieved prominence in avant-garde circles throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Black Power publications in the United States also turned their focus to Palestine, especially after the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee publicly declared support for Palestine in 1967. Besides the Black Panthers, a Palestinian delegation was the only non-African group invited to participate in the Pan-African Cultural Festival of 1969, and Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish was awarded the Lotus Prize for African and Asian Literature in the same year, pointing to the potent symbolism of the Palestinian struggle for self-sovereignty (or simply, sovereignty) among nonaligned nations. For more on the rhetorical and ideological deployment of Palestine in North African cultural politics, see Olivia C. Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonialization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

5 Toni Maraini, “Baghdad 1974: Première biennale arabe des arts plastiques: Un compte-rendu,” *Intégral: Revue de création plastique et littéraire*, no. 9, “Spécial biennale arabe de Baghdad” (December 1974): 11.

succinct account of the Palestinian contribution alongside a critical but measured analysis. Chabâa maintains a narrow focus on the context of the Palestinian revolution, whereas Maraini goes so far as to compare Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj to Bosch and Goya in order to situate her argument in broader art historical terms. Nevertheless, explicit in both texts is the idea that combat art is the natural, if not the only, form of creative expression appropriate to Palestinians, and that any successful version of such art necessarily must forcefully engage with Palestinian “reality.” The precise definition of “combat art” is left up for interpretation—as is that of “reality,” for that matter—but such art is implied to involve didactic, militant imagery of fighters, rather than the soft, constructive work of folk idioms.⁶

What both Maraini and Chabâa fail to acknowledge, however, is that folk idioms were not diametrically opposed to combat, or even separate from it, in the context of 1970s Palestine. Both essays draw from the ideological frameworks of anti- and postcolonial Moroccan art, in which folk culture figured as a starting point for the elaboration of a liberated visual language. In the wake of colonial rule, Moroccans reclaimed traditions and idioms that had been subjugated, belittled, and regulated by the all-encompassing reach of the French bureaucracy.⁷ Indigenous visual traditions played a major role in newly independent Morocco, where they enacted a reclamation of cultural heritage alongside that of the Moroccan state. In Palestine, though, the “folkloric” elements that Chabâa and Maraini critique were not yet free for this kind of celebratory repossession. In fact, they were—and continue to be—central to the Palestinian struggle against erasure in ways both rhetorical and concrete. As I will demonstrate, the Zionist project appropriated elements of Palestinian material heritage from its earliest days, ensnaring everything from clothing to graphic arts in a vicious discursive web

6 Maraini likely borrows the term “combat art” from Martinican anticolonial theorist and psychologist Frantz Fanon, who published his hugely influential *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. The theory of cultural decolonization set forth in this book, which refers to “combat art,” was widely embraced by Moroccan intellectuals in the orbit of *Intégral* and its predecessor, *Souffles*. For more on Fanon’s impact on these circles, see Harrison (2016) and J. Holiday Powers, “Articulating the National and Transnational: Exhibition Histories of the Casablanca School” in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* no. 42–43 (November 2018). For more on this in the context of the 1974 Biennial, see Alessandra Amin, “Mother Figure: Art and the Palestinian Dream-State, 1965–1982” (doctoral dissertation, UCLA, 2022).

7 For more on the development of Moroccan visual culture under French rule, see Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912–1956* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005).

around legitimacy, indigeneity, and imperialism. If, for Maraini and Chabâa, folk idioms were the antithesis of “combat art,” for Palestinians they were weapons in a battle that began with the entrenchment of Zionism in Palestine during the early 20th century.⁸

That Maraini and Chabâa take issue with the search for “popular patrimony” in the “folkloric” and “naive” seems strange, at first glance, given those artists’ history of association with the Casablanca School. The term denotes a literal place, the *École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca*, but is also used to refer to a cluster of artists and intellectuals in its orbit during the 1960s and 1970s. The ascent of well-known modernist Farid Belkahlia to the position of director in 1962 ushered in a new era for the Casablanca School, which offered both Mohammed Chabâa and Toni Maraini positions as core faculty members. Chabâa taught calligraphy and later founded the institution’s graphic arts department, and Maraini, who had only just finished her undergraduate degree, taught the history of art. Together with the artist Mohammed Melehi, the artists began a major project of pedagogical reform. Whereas previous arts education in Morocco, rooted in European academicism, had been made in the image of the metropole by French colonial forces, the Casablanca School rebuilt its curriculum around the Moroccan cultural patrimony—valorizing artisanal practices like pottery, jewelry, and textile arts, as well as traditional, workshop-based models of pedagogy.⁹ Indeed, whatever their Biennial reviews might imply, both Chabâa and Maraini acknowledged and even championed the importance of folk traditions in the decolonization of national art.

Further understanding of the Casablanca School’s ethos softens the apparent contradiction between its commitment to indigenous aesthetics and the views expressed in the *Intégral* reviews. In “On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language,” published in the Arabic daily *al-‘Alam* in 1966, Chabâa laments that “some [Moroccan] intellectuals now associate representational painting with Moroccan reality, unaware of the fact that the essence of our art was not and will never be representational.”¹⁰

8 For a more thorough discussion of this phenomenon, see Amin (2022).

9 For more on the development of the Casablanca School, see J. Holiday Powers, “Moroccan Modernism: The Casablanca School (1956–1978).” Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2015.

10 Mohammed Chabâa, “On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language” (1966), trans. Karim James, in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Abu Zeid. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah A. Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 264.

Casablanca School figures noted the absence of figural representation from Islamic and Berber art, arguing that, given a heritage dominated by “abstraction and symbol,” it was impossible for Moroccan artists “to be authentic in [their] work by orienting [themselves] toward representation in painting.”¹¹

For Chabâa, then, revolutionary national painting *must* be rooted in reality, but reality did not necessarily equal realism as a mode of representation. In fact, the artist considered the geometrical, nonrepresentational legacies of Arab and Berber visual cultures “more realist and expressive of [Moroccan] historical mentality than any image that depicts a scene from everyday life.”¹² It was therefore a “mistake,” he argues in the 1966 essay, to assume that “[political] commitment comprises ‘representational’ painting, and the personification of the feelings and problems that the people are subject to in their bitter struggles.”¹³ After all, according to Chabâa, the expressive “language” of plastic arts is fundamentally different from the narrative “language” of literature; painting should not be asked to perform the function of a newspaper or a novel, for literary and visual expression occupy essentially separate lexicons.¹⁴ This philosophy seems at odds with Chabâa’s assertion in his critique of the 1974 Biennial that Palestinian painting should serve a “strictly documentary purpose.” As Palestinian visual culture also lacks roots in figurative art, Chabâa might ostensibly critique “documentary” modes of representation as regressive, derivative, and inauthentic—unless by “documentary,” the artist means something other than the essentially mimetic recording of reality. Perhaps he envisions an art that more clearly *attests* to Palestinian experiences rather than *depicting* them as such, evoking the emotional and psychological valences of the struggle through forms derived from Islamic geometry rather than personifying them in figurative painting.

Intriguing though such an idea may be, it is not clear that Chabâa’s *Intégral* review really does use “documentary” in any unconventional sense. Indeed, the only work he deems appropriately representative of Palestinian reality is Shammout’s *Green Fist* (1974), a figurative depiction of a *feda’yi*. He dismissed Mustafa Hallaj’s surreal, abstracted compositions, on the other hand, as lacking a “link” to the material

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 266.

13 Ibid., 265.

14 Ibid.

conditions of Palestinian life. Furthermore, while he insists on the development of a symbolic “vocabulary” based in historical and contemporary culture, he neglects to note that Hallaj came closest by far to creating such a language (Maraini, however, refers to it as a “code”). In the paradoxically coherent chaos of Hallaj’s image-world, motifs and figures drawn from ancient Canaanite and Islamic sources allude to the violence and absurdity of contemporary Palestinian life. Though the artist himself stopped short of calling his work systematically symbolic, his outlook on art’s purpose was strikingly similar to Chabâa’s. In 1975, only a year after the Biennial, he observed to art historian Izzeddine al-Munasira,

the role of the Palestinian artist, who carries his ancient cultural heritage within him . . . is inseparable from armed struggle. In the circumstances to which the Palestinians are exposed, circumstances of self-denial . . . and the suffocation of their historical heritage, memory, presence, and future, this past awakens in that same Palestinian artist, in every fiber of his being and every form of his work.¹⁵

Chabâa’s positioning of Shammout and Hallaj as exemplifying two polar extremes of both commitment and quality speaks volumes about what he desires from Palestinian art. Indeed, the Documents translated here demonstrate that both he and Maraini hold Palestinian art to high standards of clarity and didacticism, implying a much different path to “reality” than that espoused by the Casablanca School.

Though she does not give explicit examples of art that meets this standard, Maraini shows her hand in highlighting another omission from the Biennial. In a portion of her review not translated here, Maraini expresses disappointment at having found no exhibition of political posters, particularly those pertaining to Palestine. She was surprised that there was not “at least one room dedicated to poster art . . . not least because it represents a first-rate solution to the ideological problem of communication through images (immediate, intelligible,

15 Quoted in ‘Izzadine al-Munasira, “Mustafa al-Hallaj (ra’id fann al-nahet w fann al-grafik): Hafâr al-hiyâ w al-jedhûr w al-ihtirâq w fatna al-hûwâs al-khamis,” [“Mustafa al-Hallaj (Pioneer in Sculpture and Graphic Arts): Engraver of Life, Roots, Fire, and Enchantment of the Five Senses”] in *Mawsû’at al-fann al-tashkîlî al-Filasînî fî al-qarn al-’ishrîn: Qirâ’at tawthiqîyah târîkhiyah naqdiyyah* (Amman: Majdalâwî lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzî, 2003), 152. Translation my own.



Tamam Al Akhal. *The Camp No. 1*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 47 × 102 cm.

and effective messaging).¹⁶ A cursory look at the “immediate, intelligible, and effective” imagery of contemporary Palestinian posters—with the understanding that Chabâa and Maraini’s goal was to produce “combat art”—yields a visual field dominated by straightforward symbols of armed struggle, especially images of militants brandishing Kalashnikov rifles. Many of these posters were designed by the artists whose work the critics found lackluster in Baghdad, and perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of the works exhibited in the Biennial employed the same militaristic iconography.

Two oil paintings by painter Tamam Al Akhal that appeared at the Biennial—one of which is reproduced in the *Intégral* special issue—constitute a particularly salient example. Entitled *The Camp No. 1* and *The Camp No. 2*, the paintings stretch across a long horizontal canvas in an angular, irregular shape vaguely reminiscent of a spider’s web. In the foreground, masked *fedayeen* keep vigilant watch, shoulders tensed, each wrapped in a *kufiyyeh* and ammunition belts. Behind them are people of indeterminate gender, their veils indicating that they are *muhajabeen*, militants, or both, flanked by women in white *abayas*. The figures meld into a field of fractured shapes and colors that, however abstracted, is plainly evocative of a refugee camp. In Al Akhal’s paintings, the bodies and clothing of people blend seamlessly into cloth tents, narrow alleyways, utilitarian housing structures, panels of corrugated metal, and, of course, the iconic rifles of the Palestinian freedom fighter.

Certainly, these images cannot be called didactic in any direct sense, nor do they communicate with the ease and efficiency of a political poster. It is nevertheless curious that Al Akhal’s work did not garner

16 Maraini, “Baghdad 1974,” 8.

any positive attention from Chabâa—who ignores it entirely despite its engagement with precisely the sort of “Palestinian reality” that interested him, in a visual language not entirely removed from abstraction—and that Maraini chooses to categorize it as an instance of “serene realism.” Al Akhal’s “fine, well-balanced little paintings,” Maraini notes, exemplify this stylistic trend alongside the “naive” landscapes of Ibrahim Ghannam, Jumana Hussayni’s “hieratic statuettes and her dreamscapes,” and Laila al-Shawa’s “meticulous, almost embroidered” images of knights and cityscapes. According to the critic, all these works share “a tendency toward . . . a poetic rendering of the visual,” as opposed to the “tormented realism” exemplified by the work of their counterparts Mustafa Hallaj and Ismail Shammout.

What might have prompted someone, especially someone so invested in the idea of “combat art,” to compare the sober militarism of Al Akhal’s canvases to Ghannam’s soft, bucolic scenes of peasants harvesting wheat? Certainly, sexism may have played a role—Maraini identifies three out of four exhibiting female artists as painters of “serene realism,” compared to one of nineteen men—but it does not fully explain the disconnect between Al Akhal’s iconography and the gentle vocabulary Maraini used to describe it.¹⁷ The visual paradigms of nationalism and oneiric femininity in which Maraini’s “serene realism” is entangled are far too complex to elaborate here, but the slippage between images of fighters and farmers undermines the distinctions she and Chabâa draw between folk art and combat art.

After all, the resurgence of folk idioms in the art of this period was directly linked to the same material reality that inspired images of *feda’yeen*. When in 1975 Mustafa Hallaj bound cultural heritage to armed struggle, he was not simply speaking metaphorically; like the land of Palestine itself, Palestinian aesthetic traditions were under constant threat of expropriation and required active protection.

In the era of the Biennial, Palestinian artists responded to a history of cultural conquest that had begun nearly seventy years earlier with the

17 The exact number of Palestinian artists at the biennial remains unclear; Toni Maraini’s overview of the exhibition notes 23 Palestinian participants, of which 4 were women, while the official exhibition catalog lists 21 (seventeen men and four women). Comments made by Ismail Shammout in “Nadwa al-Adad: Ara’ fi Ma’arid al-Sennatain al-Awwal” [“This Issue’s Forum: Opinions on the Arab Biennial”] (*Attashkili al-‘Arabi* no. 2., 1975) suggest that this catalog was incomplete due to late submissions, so Maraini’s is likely the more accurate figure.

establishment of Bezalel Academy. Founded by European Zionists in 1906, Bezalel's central purpose was to foster the development of a national Jewish style in the fine, decorative, and applied arts. Boris Schatz, the Lithuanian sculptor who established the school, bemoaned the inability of such a style to develop in the diaspora, where the Jewish artist was forced to "gradually estrange himself from his people, without even realizing it himself."¹⁸ Only "under the blueness of the Palestinian sky," Schatz asserted, could Bezalel's students "bring forth a new spirit and show the whole world that the Jewish people, too, are possessed of a national taste and a Hebrew imagination."¹⁹ On a practical level, the goal of developing a distinctively Jewish visual language for the ascendant nation was accomplished by combining stylistic elements of contemporary European art movements, notably Jugendstil, with those appropriated from traditional Palestinian handicrafts.²⁰ Beginning with the establishment of Bezalel, Zionists used local folk idioms to connect themselves to their environment, deploying such idioms to bolster the myth of Israel as a timeless, inalienable Jewish homeland and to obscure the realities of colonialism. The excavation and display of archaeological artifacts were also used to connect Zionists to their new environment; the recovery of relics purportedly linked to a Hebrew past went hand in hand with the destruction of Palestinian antiquities in the campaign to Judaize the Holy Land.²¹

As is evidenced by the histories of Bezalel Academy and Zionist archaeology, the fledgling Israeli state leaned heavily on visual culture to corroborate its claims to the land. The extent to which this was perceived as both offensive and threatening is illustrated by *Palestinian National Art*, a book published by the PLO's Department of Arts and National Culture in 1978. Although it was written by Ismail Shammout, who is perhaps the best-known Palestinian easel painter of his generation, the book contains no trace of objects traditionally categorized as "art" by Western criteria. In lieu of paintings and sculptures, embroidery, glasswork, baskets, and ceramics fill its pages. The didactic and

18 Boris Schatz, *Bezalel: Programm und Zweck* (Jerusalem, 1906), 22. Translation my own.

19 Ibid.

20 For more on the development of a "national style" in Bezalel's early days, see Nurit Shilo Cohen, "The 'Hebrew Style' of Bezalel, 1906–1929," in *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994).

21 For more on the relationship between antiquities and imperialism in Israel/Palestine, see Nadia Abu el-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

polemical tone that dominates Shammout's canvases is wholly absent from the *images* displayed here, but the *text* that accompanies them is direct in its condemnation of Israel and its assertion of the Palestinians' right to their homeland. Following a very brief explanation of the Palestinians as a national entity, it laments that "the Zionist-imperialist conspiracy has not confined itself to expropriating the land, displacing most of its people and obliterating its villages," but "has consistently endeavored to steal the Palestinian national heritage and to claim possession of that heritage or efface it altogether because it is an integral part of the Palestinian cultural struggle."²²

What follows is a sketch of Palestinian national art that includes only "handicrafts . . . music, songs and folk dancing."²³ As Shammout well knew, "fine arts" were also important and influential in Palestinian national culture, but here he chose to focus only on the forms of creative production under threat of Zionist appropriation. The bilingual book is effectively a glossary of different kinds of crafts and performances, each of which is explained with regard to its form, function, and regional variations. These descriptions give way to examples of Israeli abuse, including the use of a *thobe* as an El Al Airlines stewardess uniform and as an example of "traditional Israeli dress" for foreign diplomats.²⁴ The text identifies folk culture as a hotly contested ground and makes an unequivocal claim for the Palestinian ownership of the objects and practices it describes.

As *Palestinian National Art* demonstrates, the perceived potency of Palestinian folk idioms in the 1970s lay at least as much in their challenge to Israeli cultural conquest as in their ability to unite a people around a shared heritage. This differentiates the Palestinian context from that of most other decolonizing countries, including Morocco, where the recuperation of indigenous visual traditions was not integral to territorial claims. For Chabâa, Maraini, and their contemporaries, the

22 Ismail Shammout, *Palestinian National Art* (Beirut: Department of Information and Culture, Palestinian Liberation Organization, 1978), 7.

23 Ibid.

24 The Palestinian *thobe* and the embroidery, or *tatrîz*, that traditionally adorns it have been sources of inspiration for Israeli fashion brands since the 1950s, when Moshe Dayan's wife, Ruth, founded the government-sponsored design house Maksit and began making use of traditional Palestinian patterns and fabrics in a Bezalel-like quest to develop explicitly Israeli aesthetics. In 1966, Aviva Israeli (Miss Israel) won "best native costume" at the Miss Universe pageant in a *thobe*-like dress. For more, see Reem Farah, "Heritage is to Art as the Medium is to the Message: The Responsibility to Palestinian Tatrez," *Third Text Online*, 28 January 2021.

constructive act of cultural regeneration was only part of the artist's role in the struggle against Western hegemony, and the destructive potential of art served a separate but equally important purpose.²⁵ Chabâa often spoke of painting in military or even violent terms, and indeed, the tone of impatience in his assessment of the Palestinian work at the Biennial suggests that the Palestinian artists should have moved on to a more radical visual language by this point in history. However, this critique assumes that the reclamation of folk idioms by Palestinian artists was necessarily constructive, rather than combative, which neglects considering the veritable battle in which those idioms were then embroiled.

25 For more on the relationship between visual arts, cultural decolonization, and *Souffles*, see Clare Davies, "Decolonizing Culture: Third World, Moroccan, and Arab Art in *Souffles*/Anfas, 1966–1972" (Essays of the Forum Transregionale Studien, February 2015), https://www.academia.edu/12995961/Decolonizing_Culture_Third_World_Moroccan_and_Arab_Art_in_Souffles_Anfas_1966_1972.