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Reshaping Narratives: Women Artists from West Asia and North Africa in Western Museums

by Farah Taleb

PhD in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

The University of Edinburgh

2023
Thesis Declaration

I, Farah Taleb, hereby certify that this thesis is my own work, expect where indicated by referencing, and the work presented in it has not been submitted in support of another degree or qualification from this or any other university or institute of learning.
Abstract

The last three decades saw an increase in the number of group and solo exhibitions of modern and contemporary artists from the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) in western museums. The exhibitions sparked many debates among artists, curators, and art historians. These exhibitions were often presented as part of the growing tendencies of globalism in the art world. However, like many exhibitions featuring non-western artists, they were met with accusations of exoticism and neo-orientalism. The debates surrounding the displays and perception of modern and contemporary art from the region were further amplified by the politically charged climate following the events of September 11. This brought the questions of cultural divergence to the forefront. Applying postcolonial and feminist theories, this study aims to examine these issues, analysing the conflicting viewpoints and the impact of curatorial approaches on the perception of art and artists, with a specific focus on women artists.

Women artists from WANA represent the intersection between different groups and identities that have been marginalised and exoticised by art history and its narratives. As non-western artists and as women artists, they were excluded from the narratives of modern art. As artists from WANA, the perception of their work is constantly challenged by the politically charged context. As women from WANA, their identity has long been overburdened with stereotypes that were further perpetuated by Orientalist art. In this study, I explore the work of four Abstract women artists whose reception has been hindered by discourses of universality and exclusive narratives of modernism. By examining the politics of display and the associated political discourses, I demonstrate how western museums tend to exhibit the works of artists within the confines of Orientalist narratives, thereby overshadowing the voices of the artists. This is especially true in the case of women artists. Women artists and art addressing gender issues are significantly visible in recent exhibitions. However, this study argues that the spaces dedicated to women artists remain limited risking the construction and perpetuation of stereotypical tropes surrounding women artists and their art. Moreover, the reliance of discourses on controversies and dichotomies overlooks the artistic and aesthetic contributions and the extensive history of women artists’ practices and their impact on art scenes. This study not only emphasises the diverse range of styles, themes, and approaches found in the artworks of women artists, but it also highlights the significant role these artists have played in shaping art scenes in various societies.
Lay Summary

This thesis examines the recent exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from West Asia and North Africa (WANA) in western museums, especially the representation of women artists. Long awaited recognition for these women artists from WANA in the western context has brought several problematic aspects. As the popularity of exhibitions on the theme of women from WANA grew, so too did the knowledge that such art provides about them. This is particularly problematic because these exhibits centred on many stereotypical images of these women from the east. Museum curators who may be attempting to diversify their displays and open the spaces for groups that are usually marginalised, they continue to view the artists primarily through an identity prism. What these exhibits constantly miss in the case of women artists from WANA is their role and contributions as artists. Women artists, in almost every art scene, have faced many challenges and discriminations based on their gender. In the western context, they were completely written out of art history while in WANA, the situation manifest differently. Locally and regionally, although these women artists did face many challenges, they were recognised as pioneers of modern art because they introduced styles, developed techniques, and explored various themes which is lost in their interest in interest political debates. This study highlights the diversity and contributions of these transnational women artists, which rarely appear in exhibitions and discourses.
Acknowledgement

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Terminology and geography

This study explores art from the Arab World, Iran and Turkey and uses the term West Asia and North Africa (WANA) to outline the geographical parameters. Terminology and geography remain part of the problematic aspects in relation to the exhibitions and studies of the region, widely known and referred to as the Middle East or the Middle East and North Africa. With the growth of postcolonial and decolonial studies, the term Middle East has been criticised as a colonial and imperial construct. Therefore, I use the term West Asia and North Africa in this study as a decolonial and more nuanced label. However, many curators and museums use the term Middle East and North Africa to define their collections. The term has also been used in many studies both within and outside the region, hence it will occasionally appear in this study.

The term Middle East was first used in British correspondences in the early twentieth century. Following the first World War (WWI), the geographical boundaries of what is called the Middle East today started to take form but the spread and institutionalisation of the term itself came during the cold war era. Nonetheless, its definition and geographic mapping remained a source of debate. In western politics and academia, the definition changed and continues to change constantly. Today, it is used as geopolitical notion referring to a heterogenous multi-ethnic, multi-cultural region and includes nations and countries stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan. The inclusion and exclusion of countries, however, varies. As Stephan Stetter noted ‘the middle east is constructed wherever it is communicated’.

While some museums’ curators note that the term comes with considerable colonial connotations, they justify the use by necessity for the lack of other suitable terms, which could be understandable. As Pinar Bilgin notes, it is often referred to the exceptionalism of the Middle East as its borders are not ‘natural’, however, ‘there are no ‘natural’ borders as such.’ the Middle East is a construct, but so are many other regions. However, the problematic aspect is not merely the use of the term by curators and museums, but the lack of a clear definition geographically and historically. In many exhibitions and collections, the addition and exclusion of countries seems random.

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Hence, some exhibitions include artists from China, Japan, Senegal or Azerbaijan with no clear justification. What seems to be the common denominator here is the artist’s Muslim religious identity. One aspect has been often visible in the definition of the Middle East is the link to Islam. As Nikki Keddie suggested the Middle East refers to the area that is ‘roughly equivalent to the area of the first wave of Muslim conquest plus Anatolia.’ And while the definition and mapping vary today, the countries included within most definitions are often Muslim-majority. However, approaching countries and societies as entities that could be arbitrarily grouped and categorised is reminiscent of colonial attitude that museums still maintain. And using terms such as middle eastern, Muslim, Arab interchangeably is a residue of orientalist narratives.

These approaches seem remarkably similar to attitudes that the artist Rasheed Araeen described facing upon arriving to Britain in the late 1960s. Araeen recalls asking a professor at Slade School of art how he realised certain artwork was his own, and the answer was ‘Aren’t you Arab.’ As Araeen denied noting that he is from Pakistan, the professor noted ‘Oh, it’s all the same. You are Muslim.’ One could imagine a different scenario where in an exhibition of modern European art, artworks by Brazilian and Korean artists are added because they are Christians. In 1998, John Clark defined these approaches ‘Orientalistic miasma,’ which manifested through ‘talking about the “periphery” or the “Third World”’ with little sense of its history might be other than what fits into metropolitan schemes, however progressivist, with little knowledge of its geography and even less of its languages and cultures. Today, more than two decades later, these approaches remain present in many museums and curators’ narratives.

Furthermore, besides the non-continental nature of the Middle East, what differentiate it from other constructed region is that ‘pejorative discourses about this place are wide spread and readily accepted.’ This acceptance is due to the current political contexts and to the lingering of orientalist and colonial discourses that produced and spread many misconceptions and stereotypes about the region. And as this study shows, many of these misconceptions remain unchallenged in the museums’ exhibitions and narratives. Hence, it could be said that no alternative term has been widely agreed on, and the term Middle East is convenient and widely recognised. However, that does not

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5 Nikki R. Keddie, "Is There A Middle East?,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 4, no. 3 (1973), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800031457.
8 Clark, Modern Asian art, p. 261.
explain the ambiguity in definition and the unchallenged concepts of inherent colonial interpretation that sees the region as unified based on some assumptions, and at the same time, separates it from both International and Global South narratives.

Another label that continues to be challenged and discussed is that related Arab identification. The Arab World consists of twenty-two countries, covering three main regions: the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant and North Africa or ‘Maghreb’. These countries have a complex history. Many scholars use the term to refer to a form of identity acknowledged and adopted by people and societies which was reflected in the work of many artists. Yet, the label remains a source of debate. In the introduction to the exhibition The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener, held in 2016 at the American University of Beirut, curators Octavian Esanu and Kirsten Scheid discuss the emergence of nude painting in some Arab countries in the early decades of the twentieth century. The curators explore the paintings in relation to the Arab Nahda and the socio-political changes noting that ‘For that generation, to be “Arab” was as much a matter of ambiguity and ambition as was the quest to be an artist, and in fact, both labels required leaps of imagination over local conditions and imperial plans.’

The Arab identity is complicated as it is not anchored in a racial nor an ethnical identity as modern-day Arabs are not necessarily Arab descents. Their Arabism could be considered as a political ideology that emerged in the early twentieth century and intensified in the 1950s and 1960s. As Shabout affirms, they are ‘Arabs by choice.’ In one of the earliest publications discussing these questions, Silvia Naef explored and compared the development of modern art scenes in various Arab countries to the possibility of modern Arab art. As Naef concluded, while each art scene presents some specific qualities, some general tendencies and timeline similarities could be detected. As Naef notes, even without obvious and direct contact between artists in various countries, parallels could be drawn. In her book, Shabout refers to Modern Arab art as a reflection of a cultural identity that the artists acknowledged from the mid twentieth century to the late 1970s. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily reflect definitive set of aesthetics and visual forms that could be applied to all contemporary arts.

Furthermore, many documents and articles included in this study, such as the Syrian Journal articles from the early 1980s (ch.3), further evidence these conceptualisations. The articles refer to Arab Art and bring forward the names of women artists from various Arab countries as pioneers of Arab Art. Hence, while the term might not be fully accurate, it remains an identification that historians

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as well as artists have used for decades and should not be instantly dismissed.\textsuperscript{13} This study will follow these definitions by acknowledging that despite some differences in timelines in the development of art scenes in the Arab world, the parallels and communalities are significant. As not all art scenes could be discussed (due to time and space limitations), examples from different countries would be highlighted as representative of broader Arab art scenes. For example, the first chapter would include a discussion of modern art emergence in Egypt, as the first Arab country where art studies were institutionalised. The second chapter includes artists from Iraq and Lebanon, while the third chapter highlights the works of artists from Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Tunisia…

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Introduction

In 1947, a young Algerian artist called Baya had her first solo exhibition at the Galerie Maeght in Paris. The radiant paintings (fig. 0.1) depicting women, animals, trees, and flowers by the sixteen years old self-taught artist grasped the attention of the city’s artists and intellectuals. The exhibition came after Baya’s work was featured in the 1947 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme (International Exhibition of Surrealism) at the same gallery. For Andre Breton, Baya’s work was ‘the future of painting- a light in the dark aftermath of World War II.’ Breton and the surrealists were known for their ethnographic and tribal fetish. Hence, introducing the exhibition in a special edition of Derrière le Miroir, the gallery’s journal, he highlighted her primitive, naive and childlike style. Born Fatma Haddad in 1931, Baya was orphaned at the age of five. She lived with her grandmother until the age of eleven, when her talent was noticed by Marguerite Caminat Benhoura. The description of relationship between Marguerite and Baya is not consistent in all accounts, although Natasha Boas asserts that Marguerite officially adopted Baya in 1942. Marguerite, a painter herself, was well connected in the French literary and artistic world, hence she introduced Baya to the French art scene.

Breton’s reading of Baya’s work starts with the references to her origin and heritage. ‘An ultra-favourable coincidence indeed allows us, in this brilliant apparition under the anxious November skies of 1947 in Paris—Baya radiant inside and out in all the charms of her land—to grasp and bring together on the one hand, what the Berber imagination today has kept alive of the traditions of Ancient Egypt, and on the other what, according to the observations of Jean Piaget, can be attributed to the sense of participation and magic practices in children.’ While Breton and the surrealists were openly against colonialism, the land, Algeria, then under French colonialism, remains unnamed. The heritage, on the other hand, echoes an orientalist conception of identity: a mix of Berber, Pharaonic, Arab, and a ‘scandalously enslaved’ Muslim that Breton compares to Europe’s Middle Ages.

18 Breton, "Exposition Baya."
stating ‘Yes, she is still armed, it’s true. It’s undeniable that, in her bag of marvels, love potions and spells rival extracts of perfumes from the Thousand and One Nights.’

After the exhibition, Baya continued to work in Paris and was invited to spend the summers practicing pottery and ceramics at the Madoura ceramic studio in Vallauris where she worked next to Pablo Picasso. She returned to Algeria in 1953 where she married a master of traditional music and had six children. Baya stopped painting for ten years. This interruption, assumed to be a result of being confined into the traditional role within a remote town, arose from more complex circumstances. Baya returned to Algeria and stopped painting as the Algerian war of independence intensified, then she resumed painting after independence and her work was exhibited routinely in Algeria. Internationally, in 1982, the Musée Cantini Marseille reintroduced Baya for the first time since 1947 with a solo exhibition Baya: L’Orient des Provençaux. She was then included in multiple group exhibitions in many cities.

Baya’s work was and continues to be hard to categorise. She was exhibited among the surrealists and included in the surveys of naïve artists. Her art was referred to as primitive, outsider art, art brut... but she refused all these labels. In recent studies, Ranjana Khanna classifies Baya as a surrealist while defending her singularity. The French literature on Baya confirms that she was not influenced by Marguerite nor by the French artists, as Khanna notes. ‘She apparently can be exposed to and trained in Europe without being at all influenced or interpellated by what she sees. Her orphan roots, her tradition and her lack of influence are what become important in this imagining.’ These ideas emerged with Baya’s 1947 exhibition. In the essay titled Baya et L’Afrique, the French critic and journalist Émile Dermenghem wonders if Baya would have a career in art, if technique would succeed the pure inspiration and whether this is even desired. Concluding his essay, he asks ‘Should there be a dream of annual exhibition and salons? Wouldn’t be, one might think, more striking and beautiful, to disappear in the anonymous crowd and the ordinary life, after having delivered her extraordinary message.’

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19 Breton, “Exposition Baya.”
The constant references to naiveté, childlike creations, magic, and native heritage by European artists and critics might be understood in relation to Baya’s age at the time. However, these notions recall similar interpretations used by Breton first and the Museum of Modern Art later to interpret the work of Frida Kahlo in 1939.\(^{23}\) What could be seen through these interpretations is not a lack of appreciation of art itself, but the negation of modernity and professionalism of the artist. These views of art, based on essentialised form of identity, negate the artistic agency or the ability develop as an artist. Dermenghem’s concerns over the loss of ‘purity’ in professional training is based on his perception of Baya’s identity as the Other, which was supposed to remain within its primitive, naïve state. Baya was the embodiment of the Other: the primitive, the tribal, the colonial subject, the female, the naïve, the child, the pre-modern. ‘The women who fascinated Breton for their other-worldliness are invoked by him as spirits who can regenerate the modern subject. What he fails to read is the very materiality and modernity of those figures. Romanticizing their difference, he failed to see/read the singularity of their alterity and the hope manifested in latent fashion.’\(^{24}\) As a result of this failure to acknowledge her modernity, Baya continues to be exhibited today, but every exhibition seems like a discovery, a reintroduction. As Khanna argues, Baya ‘tends to disappear from view as her signature is tied to the art-historical terms of naivety and primitivism; the colonialist terms of Arabian mysteriousness and childishness; the psychoanalytic terms of primitive mentality; and post-independence nationalist terms of nativist representation.’\(^{25}\) And Baya is not alone in this trend.

Many women artists from West Asia and North Africa (WANA) travelled to western cities following the second World War (WWII) where they studied, worked, and exhibited. While some of them settled in these cities, other returned to their native countries, but they all continued to work and produce art. The mid-twentieth century was a remarkable period of transnational connections in the art world. Nevertheless, when its history was written, many of these connections were omitted to create an exclusive narrative that included only western male artists. Modern museums’ display came to reflect that exclusivity bringing


forward the work of few selected artists, and the image of artist as a hero was established. The modern women artists from WANA, hence, ‘disappeared’ from the western context until recent times. For the following generations of women artists, the case was not different. While more women artists emerged and their practices diversified, even those who were based in western cities remained unknown until recently.

The interest in the work of modern and contemporary artists from WANA re-emerged by the end of the twentieth century. However, this interest came with its share of controversies and debates. The representation of women artists in particular generated conflicting viewpoints with some artists and curators from the region labelling the exhibitions as exoticising and orientalist while some curators argued that the exhibitions challenge stereotypes. This study examines the approaches and narratives adopted by western museums in displaying and interpreting the work of modern and contemporary art from WANA. Which form of art and themes are western museums choosing when exhibiting women artists from WANA? Which narratives do they display? And more importantly, what and who is excluded? How does that impact the art and artists?

Women artists were some of the earliest, among WANA artists, to attain an international recognition in the wake of the feminist and postcolonial art movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The work of many of these artists like Nil Yalter, Mona Hatoum, Mitra Tabrizian, Zineb Sedira, was informed by feminism, critical theories, and questions of identity. And each approached the themes from a different perspective. They explored various forms of art from video to photography, performance, installations... Today, more women artists from the region are attaining international recognition. They appear in every exhibition, and their work is diverse both thematically and technically. And while the earlier generation of artists were all diasporic, more women artists based in the region are presented. And as western museums attempt to represent more non-western artists from the modern period, women artists are displayed both in group and in solo exhibition. Where is the issue then?

The numbers of women artists from the region in recent exhibitions and displays of western museums have increased. Yet, numbers do not tell the complete story. The issues

continue to be in the politics of representation, the narratives, and discourses. To say that the place of women from WANA in western museums and art history narratives is historically problematic would be an understatement. As women artists, they were denied the ‘genius’ or ‘greatness’ that has characterised the displays of modern art. As non-western artists, they were excluded from the narratives of modernity. And as women from WANA, their place was limited to being the theme, the object of art, but not its creators. But, as they re-entered the museums as artists and creators, these issues surfaced again.

Two observations could be noted in relation to choices and interpretations of art by women artists from WANA. First, choices focus on the artworks made since the 1990s and address gender issues or themes related to women and female body. Second, most exhibitions and discussions refer to the artists’ political and social impact emphasising dissent, provocation, and challenging stereotypes. Which is true, many women artists in the region engaged with social and political discourses through their work and through activism sometimes. However, what is constantly missed in these choices and discourses is that women artists have not only challenged social and political boundaries but also artistic and aesthetic ones, and these practices started decades before the 1990s. The continuous ‘re-discovery’ of women artists from the region by western museums and curators is a symptom of approaches that focuses on their identity as women from the Middle East, and not on their role as artists. Equally, the regional approach and interpretation of their work overlooks the transnational and international aspect of their contributions.

As the following discussions demonstrate, these choices and analysis overlook the historical role women artists played in establishing and developing modern and contemporary art scenes in the region. Women artists, since the early periods of modern art, continuously explored new themes and topics, often becoming pioneers in adopting new techniques and introducing original styles to various art scenes. And since the 1940s, many artistic practices have been informed by feminist discourses and influenced by the artists’ engagement with themes related to gender inequality and female body. Moreover, their work not only engage with issues and themes related to women in the WANA region but also reflects the intricate complexities of various societies and art scenes, both in WANA and in west. As the study and displays of art and its history are moving towards a global history, the artistic creations by women artists from WANA provide many prospects to connect art among geographies and
generations. Revealing these complex notions, however, requires an acknowledgement of the artists’ experiences within their own time and location, which remains absent from the current curatorial approaches.

Hence, as this study argues, in different contexts, women artists played a significant role, and their work was acknowledged. Although the studies dedicated to women artists or women’s art are not frequent, it is rare to find a book of art history from the region that does not include many women artists. But to acknowledge these roles, it is not enough to explore the work of artists outside the confine of their identity as women from the middle east. Acknowledging the history of women contributions in the modern art scenes would first require acknowledging the context within which their practices emerged, as well as the different contexts of modernism. Which remains absent from the museums’ displays and narratives.

Feminism, globalism, and decolonising art history

The absence of women artists from WANA from the displays of modern art in western museums could be attributed to the gender exclusion. Within the history of art adopted by modern western museums, women artists, regardless of their national, racial, and ethnic origins, barely appear. In 1989, the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist art group, created their poster *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* (fig. 0.2) Noting that ‘less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.’ The work came two decades after the rise of feminist art movement. The feminist movement that emerged in the US sought to question multiple aspects of women representation in art. The earliest theoretical work came with Linda Nochlin’s article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* Examining different narratives that informed the construction of art history, Nochlin argued that women artists were hindered by prejudices, assumptions and lack of institutional support. The attributes of ‘greatness’ and ‘genius,’ as Nochlin noted, were reserved to male artists and the contributions of women artists were overlooked. As the feminist studies of art history expanded, different concepts and aspects were questioned and examined, including the narratives of greatness and genius.

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The following decades saw an increasing number of studies and research that aimed to reexamine the history of art and re-establish the names of many women artists who were forgotten and excluded. The feminist approaches to art history, however, were not only about adding some women artists to the existing canon. The feminist art history thought to question the history of art history, ‘broadening the entire field of intellectual endeavour to acknowledge the significance of sexual and other differences amidst the play of many social, economic, ideological, semiotic and psychological factors one might consider.’

One of the criticisms brought against the 1970s feminist movement was its Eurocentric perspective and its neglect of non-western artists. In its early emergence, the movement focused on European and American white artists. Hence, a new wave of feminism emerged, postcolonial feminism, which looked at the intersection of colonial and patriarchal histories in constructing the narratives about women artists. The western feminist perspective and approaches could not be applied in other societies as postcolonial feminists argued. The different historical and social contexts would require different understandings of women’s interests and challenges. Many of these issues still infiltrate the feminist discourses. The MoMA’s first feminist conference, *Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts* in 2007 presented similar issues. ‘After presenting a sophisticated paper, Geeta Kapur was asked by an audience member to speak about "feminist art" in general in India (an unthinkable question for a scholar of American feminist art), and the young expatriate Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu was asked to justify her own invitation to the conference over and against other women artists of color.’

In 1980, the International Festival of Women Artists was organised in Copenhagen in conjunction with the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women and the Non-Governmental Organisations Alternative Conference. The festival brought together the work of women artists from seventeen countries. In the publication discussing the festival and the work of women artists *Women Artists of the World* (1984), Cindy Lyle noted that the greatest problems facing the conference and the participants, as well as the book editors, were those related to ‘Third World Women’ artists. Although the women were present in the

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UN conference, and many of the issues discussed were related to the ‘third world women,’ in the art festival their absence was noticeable. The absence of women artists from these regions was justified by the nature of art in developing countries, where it was often more of ‘an integral part of the daily and religious lives of the common people than is the case of western countries, where art typically is set apart in galleries and museums; thus, women artists in developing countries tend to receive more recognition, appreciation, and material support from their communities than do their counterparts in the west.’ 30

These statements reflect many issues that dominated the feminist discourses of the 1980s. First, the third world countries were scummed together with no nuances or differences, although the book and the festival dedicated distinct spaces and analysis for European and North American artists. Second, it confirmed the hierarchal distinctions between the different art forms by suggesting that those created by third world women were crafts of lesser values. The book included section dedicated to the ethnic and tribal crafts from Borneo presented through an anthropological lens noting that ‘the relationship these women have to their art shows a people suspended between tradition and modernity.’ It also ignored that the first conference took place in Mexico five years earlier where many women artists and feminist art were presented. But most importantly, it disregarded the fact that many women artists, from different parts of the world have diversified their practices and techniques, and not only exhibited locally, but also internationally.

Although, as noted the work of many women artists have been informed by feminism, the region remains outside the global discourses of feminism.31 The feminist exhibitions, despite their attempts to address the issues of representations in earlier feminist discourses, still fall into the pitfalls of ethnocentricity. Even as the exhibitions of art from the region were expanding in the western context, the ‘global’ or ‘international’ exhibitions dedicated to women and feminist art rarely acknowledged the artists or the feminist discourses from the region. The Turkish artist Nil Yalter was a pioneer of the 1970s feminist movement in France. Yet, for decades her videos, installations and photographic work from that period remained

underrepresented in feminist exhibitions and discourses. It was not until 2007 that it was exhibited in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. The women artists from the region were more visible in more recent exhibitions of women artists like *Elles Font l’Abstraction* [Women in Abstraction] (2021) and *Action Gesture Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction* (2023). Both exhibitions focused on the mid-twentieth century abstraction around the world. Although *Action Gesture Paint*, which focused on Abstract expressionism between 1940 and 1970, did not include Fahrelnissa Zeid whose work was one of the earliest to be labelled as abstract expressionism after her London exhibition in 1954 (chapter 2). The exhibition presented the work thematically with no historical context. Opening the exhibition with a large-scale Helen Frankenthaler painting and noting that the exhibition includes her work and the work of American artists like Lee Krasner along with artists from other countries, give the impression again the women artists globally followed the American abstraction.\(^{32}\)

Additionally, failing to grasp the intersection between the feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, the editors noted that ‘When faced with discrimination, the Third World women artists, including those in western countries, often place a higher priority on their struggles against imperialism or racism than they do on their difficulties as women or as artists-issues that they see as secondary in importance.’\(^{33}\) The issues in these statements and many of the feminist discourses in the 1970s and 1980s were inherent from colonial narratives and modern western art history. As Hans Belting notes, ‘Modernism often functioned as a barrier protecting Western art from contamination by ethnic or popular art, and it marginalized local production as unprofessional.’\(^{34}\) Women artists were not alone in the museums’ exclusionary processes. For decades artists from ‘parts of the world where the artifacts of colonial and pre-colonial times were produced’ were absent from museums. This exclusion was not limited to artists outside the western world, but it encompassed the artists based and practicing in western cities and it ‘has many reasons among which the resistance of indigenous contemporary artists to be classified as ethnic is one of the best.’\(^{35}\)

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33 Lyle, Moore, and Navaretta, *Women Artists of the World*.


35 Belting, "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age."
The newly found western interest in the modern and contemporary art from WANA corresponded with the rise of globalism discourses. Since the 1990s more exhibitions of art from non-western artists started to appear in the western context. The exhibitions of non-western artists came after years of critical and postcolonial studies. The artist Rasheed Araeen was one of the leading voices questioning the exclusion of non-western artists noting that ‘It is a common perception in the West that a non-European cannot be an authentic modernist.’ The 1980s and 1990s saw the expansion of postcolonial studies of art history re-examining the centrality of European and American artistic practices. The museums faced a growing criticism for the major role in establishing the universality and the exclusivity of modernism to western art. Hence, museums and curators started expanding the scope of their displays, organise regional exhibitions and include artists from non-western origins in their exhibitions.

However, these exhibitions were faced with a backlash and accusations of exoticising and objectifying artists. The emergence of globalism discourses was thought to redress the issues related to perception of non-western art. However, these problems seemed to grow further. In The Culture Game, Olu Oguibe pointed the problematic aspects that remain prevalent in exhibiting and discussing non-western artists in a western context. Oguibe argued that the new western interest and the exhibitions are masking a renewed obsession with exoticism. ‘The demand for difference’ dominates the western interest in non-western artists as Oguibe observes. Similar criticisms were brought forward in the case of WANA artists. The themes employed in many exhibitions were described as reductive, ‘neo-orientalist,’ ‘exoticising’.  

The exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA were among the latest to appear in western museums. Some artists worked earlier as part of black art movements or appeared sporadically in exhibitions, but no reference to art scenes or artists within the region appeared until the end of the century. The first artists to appear in the western context

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36 Araeen, "How I discovered My Oriental Soul in the Wilderness of the West."
37 Olu Oguibe, The Culture Game (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
were the diasporic artists working during the 1990s. The focus on diasporic artists was concerning for many art historians as the artists based and working in the middle east were ignored. The major concern was that the art was presented as the contemporary Middle eastern/Arab/Iranian/Islamic... art with no reference to the modern art history. ‘An art without history’\textsuperscript{40} or ‘a postmodernism without its relevant modernism.’\textsuperscript{41} In western museums, art and cultural creations from the region existed in ethnographic museums including thousands of artefacts from the ancient civilisations from the Pharaonic to the Mesopotamian, the Persian, Phoenician, Assyrian... as well as departments of Islamic art ending in nineteenth century. Then, fast forward to the late twentieth century with the representation of contemporary artists, almost a century of artistic creation was omitted, which created or rather continued the illusion that modern art did not exist within the region.

Regional exhibitions, as Nat Muller suggests, can be seen as a 'necessary evil.'\textsuperscript{42} On the one hand, they provide a platform for artists from what is often considered the peripheries or Global South, within the predominantly Western-centric international art scene. However, these exhibitions also carry the risk of oversimplifying and essentialising art and artists. When curating and presenting art from a specific geographic region, there is a certain complicity in homogenising and othering, regardless of the writer's or curator's intentions to emphasise heterogeneity. The Middle East and North Africa presents even more complex challenges in this regard, as Muller notes. Historically, the region has been defined as a colonial construct. In contemporary times, it is often portrayed in Western media and discourses through stereotypes and misleading generalisations. Therefore, the challenge lies not only in avoiding the pitfalls of popular misrepresentations but also actively confronting them.\textsuperscript{43} Many recent exhibitions failed to address these challenges adequately, as this study will demonstrate.

In relation to modern and contemporary art from WANA and its perception internationally, these are many disparities between local historians and western curators, as

\textsuperscript{43} Sloman, \textit{Contemporary art in the Middle East}, p. 7.
Nada Shabout notes, with curators still holding a greater power over scholars and art historians. And given the field’s recent emergence, western museums and curators play a major role in the perception and construction of narratives. Given this power, critically analysing, and examining the exhibitions and narratives is necessary. Their recent presentations show multiple issues that this study will examine. Additionally, given the history of museums that continues to be unaddressed, folding into misrepresentations, or repeating some old narratives is a continuous risk. The quests to decolonise museums and address the problematic role they have played in establishing hierarchy between cultures and groups, are new. Museums have responded differently to these demands, although it could be said that the process remains slow in general.

The exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA

It is safe to say that, until the 1990s, the WANA art scenes and artistic practices were virtually unknown to the centres. In London, the curator Rose Issa was attempting to present more artists from region through exhibitions at the Kufa art gallery since the mid-1980s. Issa curated both Arab and Iranian artists, however, these exhibitions remained on commercial art gallery level. In the United States, the art historian and curator Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi attempts to present the work of Arab women artists started in the late 1980s. It was not until 1994 that Nashashibi managed to arrange Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World, the first major exhibition of Arab women artists in the US. Few years later, Suimee Keelan also curated an exhibition focusing on Arab Women’s Art, Dialogues of the Present, inaugurated in London in 1995. In 2001, Issa curated her first major exhibition of Iranian Contemporary Art at the Barbican centre in London.

In 1996, the artist Jayce Salloum curated the exhibition ..East of here.. (re)imagining the ‘orient’ at YYZ Artists’ Outlet in Toronto (a non-profit, established by artists in 1979 the intent of exhibiting work which was not being shown by commercial galleries and institutions.) The little-known exhibition and accompanying catalogue examined the political and cultural relations between the Middle East and the West. The exhibition included mostly installations and photography and video art. With 35 video, television documentaries

44 Shabout, "Are Images global?"
45 “YYZ Artists’ Outlet,” https://www.yyzartistsoutlet.org/about/history/.(Accessed 20/03/2023)
and interview footage, the exhibition brought together some of the earliest video art of the 1990s by emerging artists then, including Mitra Tabrizian, Emily Jacir, Walid Raad, Yasmina Bouziane.

Included in the catalogue Marwan Hassan’s paper Material Visions attempted to ‘re-orient the contradictions between the economics and culture.’ Discussing the intersections between authoritarianism and neo-orientalism, Hassan examines the case of contemporary artists from the middle east as cultural workers with relatively restricted access to capital. The artists from the region, whether based there or in western cities face many challenges and constraints, both political and economic. ‘It is not the imagination of the artist or the production of contemporary art that is impoverished so much as the means of circulation and distribution, and the consequent restraints on access and consumptions.’ Within the global economy of the 1990s, Hassan concludes, the reduction of artworks to ‘the exchange value of a base commodity’ combined with the north Americans nostalgic interest in ancient crafts, left the work of contemporary artists with little interest or attention. These conditions would start to change drastically in few years.

But around the same time these exhibitions took place, a series of staged photography under the title of Women of Allah (1993-1997) (fig. 0.3) grabbed the attention of the western audience. Shirin Neshat, the Iranian born artist based in the US, created the series following her first visit to Iran after the revolution and the eight years’ war with Iraq. Marked by the wave of changes that occurred in the society within her fifteen years away, Neshat started working on her photographs upon her return to the US. The monochromatic series was composed mostly of photographs of a woman, the artist herself, veiled, her face covered in Persian script and holding a weapon. Neshat 1993 exhibition drew a considerable wave of debates mostly focused on the meaning of the veil and the artist’s political opinion and stance from the Iranian regime. Eventually, it became one of the most exhibited series for an emerging artist and for an artist from the Middle East. ‘During the five years of Women of

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46 Jayce Salloum, "..East of Here...: (Re)imaging the 'Orient',” ed. YYZ Artists' Outlet (Toronto, Canada, 1996).
47 Salloum, "..East of Here...: (Re)imaging the 'Orient!',” p. 23.
48 This study discusses some aspects regarding the perception of Neshat's work, but a detailed analysis is beyond its scope. For in-depth discussions and analysis see: Shirin Neshat et al., Shirin Neshat: I will greet the sun again (Los Angeles, California, Munich, Germany: The Broad ; DelMonico-Prestel, 2019); Sussan Babaie, Rebecca R. Hart, and Nancy Princenthal, Shirin Neshat (Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013); Arthur C. Danto, Shirin Neshat, ed. Shirin Neshat (New York, N.Y.: New York, N.Y.: : Rizzoli, 2010).
Allah’s production, Neshat’s photographs were regularly on view in solo and group exhibitions across North America and Western Europe, and were favorites of the biennial circuit, included in those in Istanbul (1995), Venice (1995), Sydney (1996), and Johannesburg (1997), to much acclaim.¹⁴⁹ Today, it is rare to find a museum exhibition or collection of art from the Middle East that does not include some of these early works.

Neshat, born in Iran and immigrated to the US mid-1970s, was hardly the first artist from Iranian or Middle Eastern origins to relocate, study and work in a western city. Many prominent Iranian artists have immigrated since the early 1960s, some even earlier. And although some have managed to establish a career as artists, none received the same attention and interest that Neshat received. Neshat early exhibitions came around the same time Forces of Change was exhibited in the US. Nonetheless, none of the artists or artworks included in this exhibition caught the eye of western audience similarly to Women of Allah. Many of these artists, whose work will be discussed in the following sections, were rarely seen in exhibitions since the early 2000s. This is in no way an attempt at comparing or contesting the merits of the art or artists, but it is a question related to the reasons of this sudden and intense success.

Unlike many diasporic artists, Neshat recognition did not come as part of the feminist nor the postcolonial movements. Yalter, for example, emerged as part of the feminist art movement in France. Hatoum and Tabrizian were engaged with the British feminist and black art movements. There is no question that Neshat’s series Women of Allah, came at a sensitive time and explored a shocking theme, especially for a western audience. The work itself, however, was not as complex or did not have a multi-layered depth, as many critics and the artist herself noted later.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it was hard to ignore or dismiss. If seen through Hassan’s analysis, Neshat’s work was the early signs of the artworks by artists from the region entering the phase of ‘commodity.’

The following years would see the growth of this phase with the art from the region turning into a ‘hot commodity’⁵¹ in the international art market. This growth was partly linked

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⁵⁰ Ehya, "Facing Up to Shirin Neshat's "Women of Allah".
to the growing interest in art within the region, and the rise of the gulf countries as contemporary art centres with biennales, art fairs, new museums’ projects, and collaborations with leading international museums such as the Louvre and Guggenheim. Additionally, the opening of major auction houses like Christie’s and Sotheby’s regional branches broaden the regional art market and provided international connections. But the major impact on the perception and discussions of art from WANA in the western context came after the events of September 11, and the subsequent wars on Afghanistan and Iraq.

The discussions of clash of civilisations, cultural divergence, and Islam and the west, moved the shows and discourses around the art from WANA from the ‘culture game’ to the ‘humanity game.’ Some of the most recurrent aims of the exhibitions were to ‘build bridges between cultures’ and ‘understand Islam and the middle east.’ However, these aims, and their political context sparked more controversies regarding the perception of art from the region. As Shabout indicates ‘a positive review of an exhibition or cultural event will note something to the effect that “the Middle East is not only about terror and terrorism.” Such a statement immediately locates the artworks and events within a non-aesthetic realm.’

Hence as non-western artists are supposed to prove their modernism, authenticity, identity, belonging and such notion, artists who have origins within the region defined as the Middle East are expected also to produce art that proves humanity, liberalism, political dissidence, and critical attitudes. The ‘political,’ a category that artists evoking marginalised identities had to approach cautiously, came to the forefront for artists from WANA. This does not only apply to the discourses surrounding exhibitions, but also to the choices of artworks as those with political content are usually the most exhibited. However, the criticality that was expected from the artists did not seem to apply to the museums and curators. These recent exhibitions coincided with the rise of calls for museums decolonisation and engagement with a critical review of their narratives and collections. The exhibitions of

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52 Oguibe, The Culture Game.
54 Shabout, "Are Images global."
55 Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror."
modern and contemporary art from WANA, as this study argues, took a different direction that continues the impact the perception of art and artists.

Also, within these contexts, the label of modern and contemporary Islamic art started to spread among western curators, critics, and museums, which was met with objections from artists and art historians. One of the earliest appearances of the term came with Wijdan Ali’s publication *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* in 1997. As the title suggests, Ali who identifies as ‘contemporary Islamic artist,’ argued for a continuity of Islamic art with the ‘Calligraphic School of Art.’ The publication was criticised for its ambiguous use of the rubric Islamic and modern, and for not addressing the question ‘what is Islamic art.’ Ali’s publication came at a time when the modern art history studies within the region were scarce. Today, with more studies and publications, the same questions noted by the critics re-appear in relation to many exhibitions using the label of modern and contemporary Islamic art. Although, it should be noted, that the use of the label Islamic in the post 9/11 times, was not only related to artistic reasons but to political circumstances as will be discussed below.

**Museum definition and decolonisation**

The exhibitions and events to be discussed hereafter came at a crucial moment for museums, in relation to the definition and nature of museum and in terms of the external social and political context. In recent years, the question of museums’ role within society, their contribution to social order, as well as their political dimension came to the forefront of debates in the art world. Issues regarding funding, colonial history, inclusivity and diversity, climate change as well as political and activist arts and curatorship became more relevant. In 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) announced a vote on modifying the definition for museums. The one that has been adopted since 2007 stated that ‘A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and

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enjoyment.’ The alternative definition that was subject to vote proposed that ‘Museums are
democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the
futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold
artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future
generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.’

The new definition generated much debate among committees and the decision was
postponed, however, nine members of the council’s committee and executive boarder,
including ICOM president Suay Aksoy, resigned as a result of the controversy. The proposition
of the new definition created a rift among the global museum community. The controversy
was seen as an ideological conflict between the conservative and the reform experts, as the
former see it as an ideological manifesto or statement rather than definition, while the latter
consider that it reflects emerging and relevant changes in museums today that need to be
accounted for.

The topic was revisited again in 2021 but no changes were adopted. It was not until
2022 that a new museum definition was approved, reading: ‘A museum is a not-for-profit,
permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets
and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive,
museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically,
professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for
education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.’ Noticeable in this definition
compared to the one adopted since 2007 is the introduction of terms current discussion on
equality, inclusivity and diversity, as well as the ‘community participation’ which was not a
factor in earlier definitions.

These changes came following decades of critical studies and calls for museums’
decolonisation and examination of their narratives and histories. Paradoxically, while the
campaigns and calls for decolonisation and repatriation of artefacts from different parts of

60 “The Extraordinary General Conference Postpones the Vote on a New Museum Definition,” 2019, accessed
16/05/2023, https://icom.museum/en/news/the-extraordinary-general-conference-pospones-the-vote-on-a-
new-museum-definition/.
guidelines/museum-definition/.
the world were intensifying, the case for Islamic art seemed to be taking an opposite direction. In recent times, many leading western museums received multi-millions worth of funds from private and public institutions—with various connections to WANA and the Muslim world—to expand their collections and spaces dedicated to Islamic Art. In 2003, The Victoria and Albert Museum in London received a donation from the Saudi Jameel Group to develop and renovate its Islamic department. In 2011, The Metropolitan Museum reopened and renamed its department; the renovation work that started in 2003 was largely funded by private donors including Arminian, Iranians, and Turkish foundations and the Iranian American community as the museum’s press release mentions. The Louvre 2012 plans to relocate its Islamic art to a newly designed department received one of the largest single donations from the Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal. In 2015, Los Angeles County Museum announced a partnership with Saudi Aramco’s King Abdulaziz Centre for World Culture to restore and conserve the Museum’s 18th century room from Damascus. It also included a loan of 130 of the LACMA’s Islamic art acquisition to be exhibited in the occasion of the Centre’s opening. The British Museum refurbished its Islamic art, now known as AlBukhary Foundation Gallery.

These projects came following 9/11 and as an attempt to build some understanding of Islamic culture and heritage, and they coincided with the multiplication of exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East region, and the use of the rubric modern Islamic art. In other words, the renovations and renewed displays of Islamic arts came as a reaction to a politically charged context, and they were dominated by apologetical and humanising narratives. ‘Such exhibits not only fail to correct presumed contemporary prejudices (associations with terror, patriarchy, authoritarianism and so forth), but in fact enhance them by reflecting the glories of ‘Islamic’ culture as part of a bygone golden age, or by suggesting that the appropriate environment for religion.’ 62 Within such narratives, the questions related to decolonisation and the western colonial history became secondary, and sometimes inexistent. And the case is not different for exhibitions of modern and contemporary art which started and continue as a reaction to a political context that ignores colonial histories. This obliviousness becomes even more problematic given that many of

these exhibitions and initiatives took place in the US and UK, when the two countries were involved in wars against countries within the region.

Considering that this study focuses on modern and contemporary art, the questions of provenance and restitution are beyond its scope. However, that does not eliminate the discussion of other issues related to decolonisation within ethnographic museums as many have been collecting and exhibiting modern and contemporary art from WANA. One aspect of decolonising museums related to these exhibitions is addressing the museum’s role in establishing hierarchical system of identifying art from different cultures. Within these systems, many artistic creations were essentialised racially and ethnically. The ‘objects’ amassed from the colonies were labelled as minor arts and treated as less aesthetic and artistic then western art. The current exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA, with its focus on formalist unity and ahistorical approach that does not account for differences and nuances echo these systems.

For modern museums, questions of decolonisation cover different aspects, the questions of funding continue to be present. But in relation to narratives and collections, the criticism focuses on the question of Eurocentricity and exclusivity. The calls to decolonise western museums focus on decentring modernism by re-examining the narratives formed during colonial periods and acknowledging different narratives and histories of modernism. Within the history of modern art that is highly spread and adopted by museums today, the transnational connections are limited to the western sphere and exist between European and north American countries solely. One could say that this is natural given that these are western museums. However, these museums do not present themselves as western, but as international and more importantly as universal, reflecting the universal character of modernism.

For the shows and displays of artists from WANA, these questions remain largely outside the discourses. This could be seen in both regional exhibitions, as well as the solo exhibitions of modern artists from the region. The recent shows and interpretations of the work of modern women artists will be discussed as example. Although these artists did accomplish some significant presence and recognition in the local and regional context, in the transnational context of modernism, they remain almost unknown. In 2018, the Grey Art
Gallery at New York University presented Baya’s first solo exhibition in the United States (US). Introducing the exhibition, the gallery’s director Lynn Gumpert notes that although Baya has long been recognised in Algeria, she remained widely unknown on the other side of the Atlantic. Gumpert also notes that this unfamiliarity with the work of artists from the region has halted the efforts of art historian Salwa Mikdadi to organise an exhibition of Arab artists, including Baya, at the Grey in the 1980s.63

However, the audience unfamiliarity with the artists from the region, is not a result of museums and institutions unawareness of these artists. As many of their artworks have been included in museums’ collections since the 1960s. The Grey Art Gallery collection, donated by Abby Weed Grey in 1975, includes two hundred artworks collected during the 1960s and 1970s in Iran, as well as 110 artworks acquired in Turkey. But it was not until 2002 that the gallery’s collection of modern Iranian art was displayed through the exhibition *Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture*.64 Other museums also collected artworks by artists from the region, whether based there or in western cities. These artworks, however, were rarely on display until the early 2000s.

The modern museums practices and policies have alienated and ignored the art from the region for decades to safeguard the myths of modernism and its western exclusivity. Today, regional exhibitions and displays of non-western artists are presented as a way to redress these practices and move towards more inclusive and diverse displays. However, as this study shows, the narratives and discourses about the artists from the region continue to be hindered by homogenising categorisation and identity representation. The ‘Great Middle East Art Rush’ started in the early 2000s with multiple shows every year and slowed down around 2009.65 But since then, very few artists were seen outside the context of regional exhibitions. This is caused by the lack of contextualisation of art exhibited within the museum’s collection and narratives, and museums’ hesitance to engage with the different contexts of modernism, the transnational connections, the artistic and aesthetic visions of artists and their contributions.

63 Boas, "Baya: Woman of Algiers."
64 Gumpert co-curated the exhibition with Fereshteh Daftari and in consultation with Shiva Balaghi, Peter Chelkowski, and Haggai Ram.
Women’s art/Women in art

While the regional displays and exhibitions of modern and contemporary art have attracted criticism and were accused of Othering, the choices of art by women artists and the all-women exhibitions have been even more controversial. Some of the 1990s earliest regional exhibitions were dedicated to showcase the work of women artists. These exhibitions and accompanying books focused on the concept of decentring modern art through the work of women artists and included a diverse range of artistic practices. Yet, their impact remained limited, and the reviews were scarce. The controversies came with the exhibitions that took place after 2000.

Many of the exhibitions dedicated to women artists came at the highest of discourses of cultural divergence and women under Islam. The images of oppressed veiled Afghan women in needing of saving flooded mainstream media in the period leading to the war on Afghanistan. Veiling and unveiling were frequently used in all fields and public discourses. The art world soon grasped the trend, exhibitions, catalogues, and publications with titles referring to the veil became trendy. *Breaking the Veils* (2002), *Veil, Veiling, representation, and Contemporary Art* (2003), *Harem Fantasies and The New Scheherazades* (2003). These exhibitions were co-curated by curators and artists from the region and aimed to address the stereotypes associated with the veil and veiled women. However, the criterion for selection seems to emphasise more and more the political themes and the objectives of exhibitions shifted further towards the goal of ‘fighting stereotypes.’ Nonetheless, the exhibitions were accused of exoticising the artists and the women, spreading stereotypes and essentialising art.

Beside these exhibitions, the image of veiled women became central to representations of women artists. These artworks became the signal of the other: the gendered and the ethnic. The artists were not far from criticism, accused of exoticising, capitalising on a charged issue, crowd-pleasing, playing local informant… The women artists were accused of reproducing the orientalist views on the women from the region. While the art of women from WANA is relatively a newcomer into the western museums, the women themselves, as a theme, are not. Since the nineteenth century and the rise of Orientalist art,

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they have been constant guests within museums’ walls. The literature, travellers’ books, and arts displayed a considerable interest in the lives of “oriental” women. But most of the travellers, writers and artists were men, hence, they were not allowed to enter women’s private space, the *Harem*. The concealed space captivated the curiosity of European men and created what many refer to as an obsession with the Harem and oriental women. Following 9/11, the western interest in the topics related to middle eastern women and women in Islam was revived again. The interest in women artists from the region grew simultaneously, which led to these accusations.

While some artworks might fall into these notions, these critiques do not do the artists justice. The body of work of each artist encompasses broader inquiries, from questions of belonging to orientalism, the meaning of the veil and its perceptions, the limitations on the female body, gender role, social and political issues... Their contemporary exploration of gender issues does, in many cases, present more complex notions and entangled concepts. The curators and museums choices among these diverse artworks are creating misconceptions.

The issues appear particularly when exhibitions emphasise the work of women artists or themes related to women and gender issues. First, in these exhibitions, certain artworks are repeatedly displayed, and they shared few remarkable features: the medium used is mostly photography and the themes included portraits of women, mostly veiled. Shirin Neshat’s *Women of Allah* was the first series with such visual language to receive remarkable attention. But as the western interest grew and more artists started emerging, more artworks sharing similar visual language became predominant in representing the work of women artists and themes of women. All women exhibitions already pose a risk of essentialising the work of women artists, producing stereotype or allusion of feminine sensitivity. The concentration of these images in exhibitions produces an additional effect of essentialising the art of women.

In such displays, the art itself becomes less important, and the discussions turn into a debate of the lives of women under Islam, the stereotypes of women, the social history of women... Twenty years after the debut of her *Women of Allah* photographic collection, Neshat is among the best-known speakers at art venues on all matters pertaining to Iran,
Islam, and women.” The history of art, the context of its production, the individuality of artists, and the roles that women artists play in art scenes seem to all disappear from these discourses. The exhibitions lack a historical contextualisation and no reference to earlier art informed by feminism or addressing themes related to gender and sexuality. Many women artists, based within the region, did engage with issues related to gender since the mid-twentieth century, however, this engagement took different approaches and styles and produced diverse forms of art. Additionally, it included an array of themes that were focused and related to the artist’s own experiences and to local narratives. This history of artistic practices is absent from the exhibitions.

**Non-western art and the Lack of Art Historiography**

It could be claimed that certain problems of defining and categorising the art from the region are tied to the scarcity in the region’s modern art history writings. While there is an extensive number of studies on western art that has already set its narratives, the same could not be said about many non-western art scenes, including WANA, which is true to some extent. However, such an argument displays some inherent misconceptions and some of the main points of divergence in categorising and interpreting non-western modern art. In 1989, Jean-Hubert Martin curated the exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* [Magicians of the Earth] at Centre Pompidou, Paris. The exhibition came as a response to the MoMA’s 1984 *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* exhibition and was presented as the first ‘truly’ International art exhibition as it included artworks by artists from different countries and was divided between Western and Non-Western. It was the first exhibition to juxtapose the art of the ‘two worlds.’ In the publication that accompanied the exhibition, Thomas McEvilley wrote, that the ideal approach would have been for an expert from each community to choose the corresponding artworks ‘thereby highlighting a variety of quality criteria.’ What McEvilley is proposing agrees with some concepts of global art and multiplicity of definitions. His idea is to let each regions’ experts decide what art is to be exhibited in international exhibitions. However, the questions of who would be qualified as

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experts and who would have agency in setting narratives and categorising art remained unanswered.

The more problematic aspect, however, is Martin’s claim that there were no local experts included in the process of choice and curation partly because he did not meet ‘experts of the third world.’ Though, as Maureen Murphy notes the issue was ‘Not that they [local experts] did not exist, but that they did not share his viewpoint of what African art should be according to him.’\(^7^0\) While at the time of the exhibition, in 1989, comprehensive art histories in each regional or local art scene within the ‘third world’ were not available, experts, critics, art historians and curators did exist. However, for most of these experts, what would be identified as modern art is different from what Martin’s definition as ‘third world’s modern art. Most of what is known as the third world, or the Global South has endured western colonialism and experienced a form of western culture hegemony since the late nineteenth century. Hence, what became to be known as modern art within these societies have often been influenced by western art and aesthetics. This art was disregarded by many western curators and experts and considered as derivative of western art. These issues are still lingering in the case of non-western modern art. And are highly visible in the recent exhibitions of art from WANA.

In a talk titled *Islamic Art Now and Then* at the Islamic Art Symposium in 2017, Linda Komaroff, Curator and Department Head of Art of the Middle East at the LACMA, stated ‘In graduate school, I was taught that there was no fixed date for the beginning of Islamic art […] but there was an end date, around the mid-nineteenth century when art of the Middle East was either overwhelmed by the influence of western art or reduced to crafts-like reproductions of earlier classical work. I do not know why it took so long for me to question this idea of end date but have lately come to take a longer view of history.’\(^7^1\) What Komaroff is rightfully referring to here is the misconception of the full decline of art in the Middle East after the weakening of traditional Islamic art practices. This misconception, however, equates the demise of western interest in the art with the death of art in WANA. In other words, in


\(^7^1\) Linda Komaroff, "Islamic Art Now and Then" (Symposium: Islamic art: Past, Present + Future, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2017).
the early twentieth century, the Islamic art’s experts, mostly western, were no longer interested in the art created in the region as it started to shift direction, but art as well as writing about art continued within the region. The issue is that museums as well as many art historians still propagate this idea of the death of the art in WANA through their narratives and displays.

A comprehensive art history of the region has not been written, which could be challenging and pushes western museums to create a narrative that would explain the different artistic practices. However, although the studies of art history and modern art in WANA are limited, they still exist. More importantly, the field has been increasingly growing during the last two decades. In an article about visual modernity in the Arab World, Turkey and Iran, Silvia Naef cites many art surveys that have been produced by art historians in different countries since 1960s. Naef acknowledges that these early accounts might not reach the standards held in western contexts, they still, however, offer insight to the development of art scenes and artistic practices since the early twentieth century.\(^\text{72}\)

Since the 1990s, there have been further efforts to establish a map of modern art history in different parts of the region, by both locally based and diasporic scholars and historians. Like their predecessors, they tend to present the arts separately between the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey. In 1996, Naef questioned the notion of Arab modernity by exploring the evolution of art in Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq. A decade later, Nada Shabout published *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (2007). Hamid Kashmirshekan published *Contemporary Iranian Art New Perspectives* in 2013. Then *Persia reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* was completed and published by Fereshteh Daftari in 2019. These accounts have been interested in presenting a historical and contextual understanding of art scenes and how they developed from the modern period to the contemporary. Additionally, they touch on the concepts of alternative modernities by discussing the transnational connections, the encounter with western art, and the current categorisation of art from the region in relation to the global art world. Furthermore, the art and artists from the region appear in different cultural and art history studies. Salah Hassan, one of the

prominent scholars in modern African art, has written extensively about many north African art scenes, especially the Egyptian and Sudanese, as part of the African modernity.


Additionally, it should be noted that publications that accompanied some major art exhibitions were also edited by scholars and art historians from the region. In 2013, Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba co-curated *Iran Modern* at Asia Society Museum- New York. The exhibition focused on the Iranian art of the 1960s and 1970s. In 2015, Omar Kholeif curated *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary*. The exhibition organised at the Whitechapel Gallery traced the genealogy of modern Arab art through artworks from the Barjeel Art Foundation. What differentiates these exhibitions from many regional museums’ exhibitions discussed in this study, is the curators focus on periodisation and contextualisation of the art. Hence, in *Iran Modern*, Diba traces the roots of modern art in Iran back to the Qajar period and the socio-political as well as the cultural changes that occurred since. *Imperfect Chronology*, on the other hand, was divided into four exhibitions to locate the modern and identify the contemporary art in the Arab World.

Numerous publications since the early 2000s presented more particular studies and approaches. Many of these publications were interdisciplinary studies combining art history with anthropology, social and political studies. *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* was edited by Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert in 2002. The essays included discussed different aspects of the 1960s and 1970s Iranian visual culture. In 2006, Jessica Winegar published her study *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and culture in contemporary Egypt* which

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73 Barjeel Art Foundation is an independent, UAE-based initiative founded by Sultan Sooud AlQassemi to manage, preserve and exhibit an extensive collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art.
included an anthropological study based on fieldwork done at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s. More recently, Zeina Maasri published *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut’s Global Sixties* (2020) discussing the artists’ engagement with politics and the intersections between artistic developments and the historical and political events. Sarah Rogers explored the impact of different national, regional, and international debates and contexts on the art scene in Beirut in *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut* (2021). In *Metrics of Modernity: art and Development in Postwar Turkey* (2022), Sarah-Neel Smith discussed modern art in Turkey and analysed the concepts of global modernisms through the lens of economic development. Other accounts, like Hanan Toukan’s *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan* (2021) have discussed the questions of institutional support, funding, the growing roles of NGOs and international organisations and the emerging role of Gulf countries.

This study will build on many of these publications as they provide a breadth of information and knowledge about the art and artists. Additionally, by engaging with these accounts, it would be demonstrated that although many aspects of art scenes might still be under-researched, the remarkable work that have been completed during the last few decades do provide an array of possibilities could be used to curate, present and analyse the modern and contemporary art from WANA.

Looking at the above-mentioned accounts and their titles, it becomes clearer that one of the main reasons it is hard to find a local account of regional art, is that it is not how the local artists, art historians and curators perceive it. It would be easier to find studies of Arab art, Iranian art, Turkish art that do not join the three art histories as the western institutions do. This recalls the universalist concept of Islamic art, which, as Blair and Bloom note remains specific to the west.\(^{76}\) The focus on unified identity strips the region of one of its oldest and most significant aspect: the multiplicity of religious, ethnic, and cultural groups. The western museums approaches disregard the different identification and terminologies used by artists, critics, and historians of modern and contemporary art from the region. More importantly, it

limits the choices of art and fails to acknowledge the diversity of artistic practices and their origin.

To elaborate here, this is not to argue that the art could or should only be viewed within the narrow concept of nationalism, nor that the modern and contemporary art scenes in the region are separated. These countries do share geography and history, they do also share many aspects of modern history. They share a colonial and postcolonial history with many countries in the global south, all factors which could be translated into a better understanding of the art. Moreover, in an increasingly interconnected world where images and visual creations are easily disseminated, it is imperative to acknowledge and value transnational exchanges. Emphasising the term 'exchange' here to challenge the assumption of a unidirectional flow of influences. The aim is to look at the modernism in art as a global phenomenon, that is not centred only in the west, nor specific to some art scenes, nor divided with no connections. This, however, would happen without neglecting the individuality of artists and the specificity of each context.

From the Modern to the Contemporary

Other aspects of difference are visible between the growing research and studies of art from the region and the recent exhibitions, including the periodisation of art history and differentiation between modern and contemporary arts. The arts in Turkey, Iran, and the Arab world, have gone through multiple phases since the nineteenth century till today. But the mapping of this history and artistic periods, or the concept of it are often absent from western museums’ exhibitions. Some periods are totally disregarded, while other periods seem to appear on the basis of mix-and-match. Such approaches allow the curators to introduce the art created as unified and sharing specific characteristics. In many exhibitions, the mid-century artistic movements such as the Hurufiyia in the Arab world and the Saqqakhaneh in Iran are included as the earliest manifestations of modern art, and as representative of an ‘authentic’ modern art that forms a thread with traditional arts. However, these narratives disregard the previous movements and the complex changes that occurred in each society.

The emergence of modern art in the region has roots in the second half of the nineteenth century which saw a major artistic shift in the region with the introduction of western artistic styles, especially easel painting, and the opening of art academies. The art
created between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is often presumed to be mimicking western styles. Nevertheless, it possessed its own characteristics and reflected the changes within each society.\textsuperscript{77} This period is mostly absent from western museums narratives. Artists such as the Ottoman Osman Hamdi and the Iranian Kamal Al-Molk are not usually considered modern artists. Yet, their role cannot be overlooked as they pioneered the academic education of art in the region.

It could be rightfully argued that the art of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, despite its importance and role, cannot be called modern. What is debatable, however, is considering Hurufiyya and Saqqakhaneh as the earliest manifestations of modern art. This study endorses the approach that traces the emergence of modern art to the movements of the first half of the twentieth century for multiple reasons. First, although the art saw a major shift before WWI, it was still under the direct patronage of the court, the independence from this direct influence did not happen until later period. Second, the discussions about art styles and techniques and the theorisation of aims and expectations also came later. The artists of this period had limited access to audiences, museums, galleries, critics... hence, with no infrastructure and institutions to interpret, forge meanings and reconfigure perceptions, the art could hardly be called modernist.\textsuperscript{78} Third and most importantly, the mid-wars period saw the rise of modern national movements that influenced artists and elicited an interest in creating art movements that would reflect these changes within society. That period saw the emergence of art group in different societies and a growing interest in exploring not only the formal potentials of modern art, but also its social role.

On the other hand, while the division between the modern and contemporary art is somewhat vague and subject to debate even within more established and institutionalised art histories, it still holds significance. In the WANA region, this distinction became more noticeable starting from the 1990s as most of these studies note. This is not a question of chronology, but of a contextual and social reading of art that acknowledges the impact of time and space on artists. The socio-political changes of that era played a pivotal role in

\textsuperscript{77} Wendy M. K. Shaw, Ottoman painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011). also see ; Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art From Kamal-Al-Molk To Zenderoudi."

\textsuperscript{78} Shaw, Ottoman painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, p. 3.
shaping art scenes and perceptions. Consequently, discernible stylistic and artistic changes emerged, accompanied by a significant shift in the intellectual and conceptual foundations of art.

The differences manifest on both aesthetic and contextual levels. A modern artist and a contemporary artist addressing the same theme would produce two very distinctive artworks visually, technically, and conceptually. Contemporary artists, particularly through their use of archives, introduce complex questions that may not have been present for modern artists. This use of archives itself signifies that the artwork operates on a different conceptual level.

A key difference between the modern and the contemporary is the artists’ approaches to identity and society. The modern artists, starting from 1930s emphasised socio-economic inequalities, as the discussion shows. A key theme in their writing is the reference to elite or bourgeois culture and many artworks reflect the social realities. Hence, even though the artworks might refer to cultural and national identity, the conflict of high/low, elite/mass culture is present in the background. For the contemporary artists, these conflicts or tensions are less visible. The eastern/western binary that the modern artists approached through a more universal perspective is utterly different in the contemporary art.

However, museums often employ the term 'contemporary' to encompass all art, without acknowledging these nuanced distinctions. This approach is coupled with a heightened emphasis on contemporary art, while many modern artistic practices remain underrepresented in exhibitions. This focus, combined with an excessive preoccupation with questions of identity and unity, further distances the exhibitions from exploring alternative modernities and taking a critical view of art history. This contrast becomes evident when comparing the curatorial methods employed in the 1990s, which displayed a stronger emphasis on addressing the Eurocentric dominance over art history narratives. It could be argued that contemporary art is more visible and present as it is perceived as global. But as Shaw argues ‘the perception of contemporary art as global depends on artistic modernism’s presumed universality.’ And to this date ‘the universal modern against which the contemporary exists is one that implicitly denotes the West.’

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79 Shaw, *Ottoman painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*, p. 7.
exclusivity of modernism is unchallenged—as is the case of western museums exhibitions discussed here— the globalism of contemporary non-western artists will remain in question.

The other divergence that could be noted is that related to diaspora artists, as most studies mark the diversities, while exhibitions just include all artists under the unifying label. However, many differences could be seen, and these are related to political, economic, and social contexts. Freedom of movement is an example that artists based in the Middle East usually lack. In almost all exhibitions, conferences, or symposiums organisers note that many artists could not attend as they were not granted permissions or visa. These restrictions further segregate the artists and limit their ability to connect outside their local art scenes. The society, the city landscape and different visuals also affect and inspire artists differently. Economic stability is another factor to include, as it not only affects the themes but also the forms and techniques used. For example, there have been lately many studies on how the sanctions have affected Iraqi art scene during the 1990s. Iraqi artists started to create the Dafatir or artist notebooks in the 1960s, however, as the sanctions soared and materials became limited, they became a necessity. Iraqi artists who stayed in Iraq were left with very restricted options to create artworks and develop techniques, which does not apply to artists outside Iraq. Ultimately, the Iraqi art scene, which was one of the leading Arab art scenes during the 1960s and 1970s, became isolated and relapsed due to sanctions. That does not mean that artists did not continue to create, however, their work started to take a distinct path, not only for emotional and intellectual reasons, but for practical necessities.

In Iran, the post-revolution generation of artists was faced with the state’s attempt to impose a unified and homogenised ‘authentic’ identity. While diaspora artists might be aware of these challenges, they are not practicing and producing art within that system. Recently, some studies started to follow the impact of sanctions on the Iranian art scene. These impacts not only include artists immigrating, but also an artistic shift within the existing art scene. Iranian artists today, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to import and export, are increasingly adopting photography and digital art. On the other hand, western

institutions are representing more diaspora artists which limits the opportunities of those living in Iran. Sanctions imposed by western countries on different countries in the region for political reasons are not a topic that exhibitions mention or address. But while commenting on the sanctions might jeopardise the political impartiality that museums assert, neglecting its effect on art is not completely objective. These effects are not limited to political content but exceed it to artistic and intellectual aspects central to each art scene.

These differences are particularly important to note in the case of contemporary artists as the numbers of diasporic artists are growing. This study is not questioning the artists’ belonging to their native countries or the extent of their depiction of these societies. It is however questioning the interpretation of multiculturalism, internationalism, cosmopolitanism within the museums.

One important issue here would be the institutions and the museums’ relation to minorities. This is not only a question of diversity in museum. Transnational artists are the majority among those presented in the exhibitions. Their inclusion could spark the questions of belonging and multicultural societies. Questions that museums in general are not noting or acknowledging. Western cities, especially main cities where major museums are located, are known as cosmopolitan centres, and are increasingly changing in terms of demographics. These artists belong to diverse communities that are growing, most importantly, they are part of the society, but their belonging is consistently challenged by their own beliefs and the mainstream perception. The exhibitions are generally categorising these artists within the department and exhibitions of Middle East without noting any differences between their work and the work of artists based their native countries, or any similarities with the work of artists in cities where they are based, have learned, and lived for decades. Also, museums focus on their work that is related to their origins, seen as a form of nostalgia or criticism as they live in exile. Nevertheless, they rarely include works that depict the ways they navigate the notions of belonging, through their present lives in western societies, challenges, progress or any forms of connections and relations.

Studies on women artists

If the studies of art from the region are still limited, the feminist art history and the studies dedicated to women artists are even more scarce. If one would search studies and
surveys about women artists, only few would be found. Unlike the western context, there are no records of a feminist art movement or groups in WANA. Despite the active presence of women artists since the early decades of the twentieth century, and the involvement of many of them in feminist, social and political levels, they did not form organised groups or movements. Additionally, very few writers and historians in the region addressed questions related to women artists until the late twentieth century.

Salwa Nashahsibi, beside her curatorial work focusing on women artists, was one of the earliest scholars to publish studies about Arab women artists. These studies focused on the social and economic aspects discussing the challenges as well as the support systems available for women artists in Arab countries through education, museums, and various organisations.\(^3\) Recently, more studies on feminist art history and art informed by feminism started to emerge. In 2021, Ceren Özpınar and Mary Kelly edited *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*. The book brought together rich essays engaging with the transnational feminist art history of decolonising art history. The essays varied in content and methodologies, while some employed feminist methodologies, other focused on women artists. The diversity and complexity of the volume evidence the possibilities of analysis and networks that feminist art history could reveal.

Few studies on women artists appeared during the twentieth century in some countries.\(^4\) In 1955, Aimé Azar published *Femmes peintres d’Egypte* [Egypt Women Painters] discussing the work of nine women painters working in Cairo during the first half of the century. This is one of the earliest publications evidencing the recognition of women artists during their lifetime. In Turkey, a study on women artists *İlk Kadin Ressamlarımız* [First Lady Artists of Turkey] was published in 1988. The book included biographical research about women artists in the late Ottoman period with a visual study of their work. In 1987, Helen Khal, a Lebanese American artist and writer, published her book *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*. An artist herself, Khal also established the first permanent art gallery in Beirut in...
1963. Her book was the first study on women artists in Lebanon. Khal interviewed twelve leading women artists working in Lebanon during the 1970s and analysed their work. These artists were from different nationalities, and worked with different materials, from painting to sculpture, mixed media, and pottery. The Egyptian artist Nazli Madkour published her book *Women and Art in Egypt* in 1991, an autobiographical survey of women artists in Egypt.

These books do not present feminist art history, nor do they engage with feminist art theories. Khal and Madkour do refer to the American and western feminist art movements, but they assume a different case in Lebanon and Egypt. In her introduction, Khal refers to the issues of representation discussed by the feminist movements and art historian in the US. But she asserts that women artists in Lebanon do not face the same constraints citing the number of professional women artists, the solo exhibitions dedicated to them and her interviews with critics and experts confirming that the gender of artists does not affect their reviews and reading. Similar views are presented by Madkour. In a more direct response to Nochlin’s question and article, Madkour states in her introduction ‘This present book ... is a statement that we, in Egypt, have had a different story of the contribution of women to the arts, which has not yet been told. Even though our history has been burdened with similar—if not more rigid—attitudes, particular circumstances have allowed the recognition of the modern woman’s contribution in that field. ... The women of Egypt have contributed to aesthetic creativity since the early times in spite of having to bear a heavier share of socio-economic circumstances than their Western sisters.’

Khal and Madkour do not negate the challenges faced by women artists in both societies, they however, object the presumption that the western feminist perspectives on art history are applicable universally. As they both note, women achieved higher levels of socio-economic equality in western societies, and it is assumed that the same applies to the art field. Thus, if western women artists are excluded and overlooked, then women artists in WANA should be in a similar or even worse situation relatively. Paradoxically, as Khal and Madkour state, it was not the case. Indeed, beside these books, many articles and studies

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85 The book ends with a short essay dedicated to Mariam, Doyen of Nudes. A profile of Mariam, the first professional nude model in Lebanon (and the only one for years), acknowledging her valuable contribution to the Lebanese art scene.


87 Özpınar and Kelly, *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*. 
about women artists could be found since the 1950s, although they rarely focused on the identity of artists as women.

Additionally, women artists are regularly present in most local and regional modern art history studies and publications, including those mentioned above. It could be said that many of these studies came after the rise of the feminist movement in art and were influenced by it. However, their inclusion of women artists suggests different explanations. The women artists are not included in adjacent categories or contexts that separates their work from their male counterparts as they represent a significant part of the development of each art scene. Authors rarely refer to feminist methodologies or theories. And in many cases, they do not directly point or address the gender of artists. Moreover, there are many articles and publications from earlier period that highlight the work of women artists, which refute such hypothesis.

This is not to argue that women artists in the region were more creative or represent a special case. Women artists contributed to the field of art and its development in different periods and geographies, however, in many contexts, their contributions were omitted and forgotten. The gendered exclusion in the western modern art history books and canon has been the most discussed and researched, but it is not singular. This applies to certain periods in the region. While artists do appear in studies of modern and contemporary art, these studies often emphasis the art since 1930s or 1940s. However, women artists are rarely mentioned among the previous generations and the early shift of artistic practices. Recently, there have been some studies attempting to address the absence of women from the art history of the nineteenth century. In Iran, during the Qajar period, many women practiced different forms of art, including painting, however, little information is available on their work.88 Most studies related to women in the Qajar period art have focused on the representation on women, however, more researchers are examining archival materials,

some artworks and signatures to reconsider the role of women artists from the art history from the Qajar to the Pahlavi period.\textsuperscript{89}

Were the twentieth century’s art scenes in the region egalitarian spaces? Presumably not. First, beside the many women artists that are known, many others are still unknown and underrepresented. And as the feminist art histories and studies focusing on women artists in the region are growing, more artists will come to light. Second, given the societies patriarchal nature and the many social challenges and constraints faced by women, assuming any form of equality would be flawed. Various factors influenced the recognition of women artists in societies. This study will discuss some of the reasons that might have led to higher visibility of the mid-twentieth century women artists in the region.

The early entrance of women into the fields of art could be understood through the social acceptance and expectations. However, despite the existing discriminations, women artists have achieved presence and recognition since the mid-twentieth century. This presence had many reasons that relate to the socio-political conditions and the rise of discourses of nationalism and modernisation in many societies. The understanding and conception of modernism varied among societies, and the gender roles were significant parts of these discourses. These notions, however, do not come without limitations and negative impact on women artists, and women in general. Yet, women artists have utilised these discourses to assert their space in the modern art scene. As this study will demonstrate, the approaches of women artists have been integral to the artistic changes, and their contributions cannot be overlooked. Despite working within patriarchal societies and facing many challenges as women, they established themselves as artists and influential figures of modern art since the mid-century.

Due to the unstable political situation in many countries in the region, state regulations, ongoing wars and conflicts, research and curating projects would be faced with many difficulties and restrictions. For example, in her study on pioneers of Iranian new paintings, Alice Bombardier refers to the difficulties in finding information about the women

\textsuperscript{89} Marziyeh Ghasemi and Alireza Baharlou, "The Status and Identity of Qajar Female Artists in Regard to Their Signatures (From Fath-All Shah’s Reign to Early Pahlavi Era)," \textit{Tahqiqāt-e Tārikh-e Ejtemā’ī (Social History Studies)} (2023), https://doi.org/10.30465/shc.2023.40137.2329.
artists who practiced and exhibited during the 1940s and 1950s.⁹⁰ This could be a result of the attitudes towards the work of women artists in their early entrance to the professional fields of art, as will be discussed in chapter 3. But it could also be the result of the changes that occurred after the revolution and establishment of the Islamic regime as the artists from previous generations, were casted out by accusations of westernisation and ties with the Shah’s regime.⁹¹ The unavailability of material in English is also another difficulty, as archival material, articles, and studies from earlier period are in local languages, Arabic, Persian and Turkish. However, even within the limited available literature, the diversity of artistic practices among the women artists is remarkable, and it is yet to be shown in western museums’ exhibitions.

Methodology

This study will provide a critical reading of some recent exhibitions of modern and contemporary from WANA in western museums. I will discuss the choices, aims, narratives and discourses generated by exhibitions. The discussion will employ postcolonial and feminist art theories as they intersect in employing critical discourses of modern art history and its canon.

In her discussion of the narratives of modernism employed in the display and collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Griselda Pollock notes ‘As “women artists,” not artists who are women, they are excluded a priori from the category “artist,” which has been symbolically reserved for men.’⁹² Feminist art theories that emerged in the United States during the 1970s sought to investigate the absence of women artists from the canon of western art. This period signalled the start of all-women exhibitions that attempted to highlight the work of women artists from different periods. The concept, however, did not come without obstacles and challenges. As Griselda Pollock noted in 1988, the term woman artist, as well as the exhibitions dedicated to women artists, could be considered ‘tactically necessary.’ But they come with many risks, ‘underlying this tactical necessity may be the impulse to imagine that there is such a unitary ideological category as women’ s art.’⁹³ This

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⁹³ Pollock, Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art, p. 42.
does not only apply to gender, but to any form of grouping based on identity ‘whether it be class, race or gender, any argument that generalizes, reduces, typifies or suggests a reflection is refusing to deal with specificity of individual texts, artistic practitioners, historical moments.’ Hence, the same could be said about regional exhibitions. Any grouping of artists under an identity banner comes with a high risk of essentialising and stereotyping.

The basis in examining the exhibitions then would consider that the all-women exhibitions as well as the regional exhibitions do present risks and challenges as a concept. In a regional all-women exhibition, these risks are even higher. Nevertheless, given the exclusionary nature of art history, its narratives and displays, it could be argued that these exhibitions remain necessary and efficient. Despite their problematic aspects, this study does not contend that regional or all-women exhibitions are inherently flawed nor that they are doomed by Othering. On a practical level, and despite the concepts of globalism, it would be unrealistic to expect a curator to be expert in all contemporary art, especially given the diversity of mediums, techniques and aesthetics existing today. Hence, a regional or more localised knowledge is to be expected. However, the exhibition’s efficiency is conditioned and not guaranteed. As Pollock notes, an exhibition grouping artists based on an identity and assuming unity is destined to generalisation and reduction. The key, then, to avoid generalisation and stereotypes is to constantly challenge the urge to impose unity. Additionally, area studies or exhibitions should not be considered as the aim or purpose. They represent an introduction or a step towards more inclusive objectives. Hence, the other important aspect in these exhibitions would be to challenge the conventional and dominant narratives and hierarchy of art history or ‘the widely held view that modern art beyond Europe and the United States is at best a derivative exercise [which] reflects the implicit assertion of the "intellectual property rights" of the West.’

This is not to say that every exhibition is expected to address all questions related to modernism, alternative modernities, globalism and gender, but it could open some discussions. One problematic aspect of many recent exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA is the lack of such possibilities. Through the curators’ prefaces and

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presentations as well as the discourses and narratives generated, it could be seen that there were little to no discussion on where the art belongs. The discourses of alternative modernities seen in studies of non-western art are often absent. Even the critical studies within the field of Islamic art rarely appear. The main issue that remains prevalent within the collections and exhibitions is not their arguments or discussion of the categorisation and labelling of art, but the lack of it. The decision to include the modern art within Islamic collections, the disregard of the issues concerning the latter’s display, the absence of the dialogue with the global modern and contemporary departments, the lack of art historical contextualising which rarely appears in the exhibitions’ process and displays, all issues that receive little to no attention or discussion.

This study is based on the premises of global modernism, rooted in ideas of decolonising art history and decentering modernism. The assumption of modernism’s universal end continues to be challenged by the Eurocentric view and the imbalanced structure of the art world, as Araeen argued. Although the non-western modern artists were invested in the questions of universality as a significant and consistent concept of Modernism, they were denied both notions of modernism and universality. Andreas Huyssen confirms these contradictions in the studies of modernism ‘Despite the celebrated internationalism of the modern, we still experience obstacles in the very structures of academic disciplines, their compartmentalization in university departments of national literatures, and their inherent unequal power relations in acknowledging what I call modernism at large, namely, the cross-national cultural forms that emerge from the negotiation of the modern with the indigenous, the colonial, and the postcolonial in the ‘non-Western’ world.’ What Huyssen is referring to as ‘modernism at large’ or ‘global modernism’ consider the movement of modernism through time and geography but still looks at it as a global movement. In other words, looking at modernism as a process of circulation of material and ideas, that cannot be bound to one geography. Such approaches blur the boundaries between the dualities and recognises the relations and connections as an overlapping and continuous global process.

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96 Araeen, "How I discovered My Oriental Soul in the Wilderness of the West."
The shift to modern art in non-western societies or the ‘global modernism’ needs to be acknowledged before acknowledging the contemporary art. Failing to do so would lead eventually to sustaining the hierarchy within contemporary art, as Partha Mitter concludes when arguing for the recognition of Indian modern art ‘old ideas will continue to seep out of the fault lines unless we consciously interrogate old ideas and their colonial antecedents and seek to replace them with a more inclusive art history.’\textsuperscript{98} The hierarchy already exists, and as the non-western modern art was seen as derivative from western art, contemporary art, although proclaimed global, will hold similar connotations.

This approach also aligns with the framework of Generations and Geographies proposed by feminist scholars,\textsuperscript{99} and which this study will follow in discussing and interpreting the experiences and work of women artists. Generations and geographies explore the work of artists within their own time and location, while also acknowledging their identity and past. ‘While exhibition catalogues and biographical notes may indicate where an artist was born (with all the baggage of histories, cultures, faiths, politics, languages), where the artist actually works and in what imaginary community of artistic affiliation or relocation they think, is an equally significant shaper of practice and recognition.’\textsuperscript{100} The intersection of time and space also brings the questions related to location and diaspora artists. The differences between diaspora artists and artists based locally are rarely marked by curators. However, these differences do not only account for nostalgia and identity. The different approaches that could be seen in the artists’ work reflect the distinct conditions each live and experience. These approaches become more relevant in the case of contemporary artists working within an increasingly globalised world.

As it will be shown here, women artists, with their diverse approaches and visions provide interesting and valuable material to draw these connections. Women artists entered the art scenes in the early decades of the twentieth century, but it was the 1940s that saw a more concentrated and distinct practices. Working in multiple locations and influenced by a myriad of visual, intellectual, and social concepts, women artists from different periods and

\textsuperscript{98} Mitter, ”Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” p. 544.  
\textsuperscript{100} Özpınar and Kelly, Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today, p. 7-8.
generations could provide the loops to connect different art scenes and show the overlapping global process of modernism.

The concept of global modernism in this study will not be approached as an autonomous, visual, or formalist connection between singular artworks. But as one that is located within a broader socio-political context and intellectual discourses. Hence the artists statements, writings and the critics articles from these periods represent valuable materials to understand how modernism unfolded in different contexts. Additionally, as James Elkins notes that ‘In smaller and developing countries, newspaper art criticism normally serves as art history, so that reviews and exhibition brochures compose the written self-description of the country’s art.’ While this could be seen as reflecting negatively on the process of creating a comprehensive, ‘academic’ history of art, it still allows an understanding of the history and development. And there is no shortage of such publications in many of the region’s countries. The early twentieth century was a period of widespread publications, journals, and newspapers. In most of these, one could find an extensive number of articles discussing art, artists, and their artworks. What could also be found is a map of correspondences, relationships, and networks that varies from the local to regional to international. Some of the earliest in the Arab world, reflect on the nature and purpose of art within society. Other refer to specific movements and exhibitions, some are manifestos and discussions from artists themselves. In 2018, Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout jointly edited Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents. As the title suggests, the publication was a translation of primary documents on art in the Arab World. It included a survey of over a hundred texts varying between journal articles, artists’ manifestos, exhibitions reviews and more since the early 1930s. While there are no similar surveys of translated primary documents from Iran and Turkey, these documents are available and appear in many studies led by scholars, curators, and art historians from the region in effort to map the history of art. 

In this study, I refer to local/regional and to western scholars and curators, keeping in mind that many of the former are diasporic and based in western cities. They however have origins within WANA, and more importantly their main area of studies is focused on different

art scenes in the region. This is not to claim that western curators and scholars have not contributed to the studies and displays of modern and contemporary art from WANA. The use of the term ‘western curators’ will focus on curators associated with major western museums, hence, as will be shown, their approaches and decisions are highly influenced and directed by the museums’ policies, values, and narratives.

It is important to note that the following discussions do not imply a lack of appreciation for modern and contemporary art from the WANA region. The curators’ interest in the work is evident through the exhibitions and introductions. They found a gap within the museums’ collections in relation to modern and contemporary art from WANA and tried to fill it and their role in introducing artists and artworks largely unknown in the west should be acknowledged. However, the questions raised by this study revolve around the narrow lens of identity through which the art is often approached. These approaches often fail to separate the art from the artist's identity and the presumed traits associated with it. Like the interpretations of Baya’s work, these cases overlook the modernity and individuality of the art and artist.

Writing about women artists is a risky undertaking. It could enlist the issues of essentialising, ghettoising and further segregating their work. It also comes with the risk of applying the concepts of exceptionalism and heroism to few artists. The aim of this study is the opposite. The women artists discussed here are not exceptional cases within history, but examples of the many ways women artists contributed to the pushing artistic boundaries. Whether it is gender, race, ethnicity, politics... many factors have worked against women, their artistic practices, and their recognition. One of the ways to overcome these challenges and recognise the contributions of women artists is shifting the paradigms. Within the increasingly globalised art world, acknowledging the role of women artists could be through exploring their contributions outside the existing canon that is exclusively western and male. Hence, this study is not a study of specific women’s art in the region, nor of feminist art. The examples brought forward cover many forms, themes, techniques, and periods that are not constantly related to gender issues or women as themes. This is why, also, the work of some modern male artists is discussed in some cases. The women artists are not presented as a specific category, nor do they form one. The inclusion of male artists and the reference to the
changes in art scenes, the emergence of modern art discourses, helps resituate the work of women artists within the wider context, highlighting their contributions.

Chapters

The first chapter will discuss the notions of Islamic art, modern art, contemporary art and universalism in regional exhibitions and museums’ collections. This assumption of a static identity, from the early Islamic period to the contemporary times, which does not account for the different contexts nor for the artists’ individuality is one of the main issues in the representation of modern and contemporary art from WANA. Regional exhibitions are often presented as an attempt to redress the imbalance in representation and lack of diversity, or a way to reflect the museums’ inclusivity, globalism, and internationalism. However, I argue that, not only these exhibitions fall short of addressing the narratives of exclusivity, but they also reconfirm them. Most exhibitions have followed ahistorical approaches based on unity and visual/formalist interpretations. The issues with such approaches that they fall back into identity as the main lens to view the artists’ works. The essentialised identity, which, in the case of WANA, is the Islamic identity, opens the door for generalisation, ignoring the different contexts and influences and overlooking the art diversity. The work becomes a reflection of an inherent character dictated by overarching static identity.

For women artists who played a significant role in establishing art scenes and introducing new styles and techniques, such approaches are especially corrosive, as they neglect their unique artistic visions and interpret their work as a product of inherent character, as the second chapter argues. Through the work of four modern abstract artists, the discussion challenges the narratives of modernism exclusivity, cultural divergence, and unity. Many abstract women artists from the region have created a remarkable work and had significant contribution in various art scenes and discussing all of their work is beyond the scope of this study. Hence, I had to limit my study to four, and the choice of the artists was based on multiple factors. First, to cover different art scenes, I included one artist from Turkey and one from Iran, then an artist from Iraq and one from Lebanon as examples from Arab art scenes. Second, these artists are pioneers of abstract art in different contexts, and their unique work evidence the diversity of approaches and interests among women artists. Third, the artists adopted abstraction as a main visual language, sometimes including the Arabic letter or techniques from traditional Islamic art, their work has been highly seen through the
lens of identity. However, analysed within the context, the artworks reveal different influences and concepts. The contributions of women artists lie in the distinct and unique approaches they adopted and hence inspired change and development in art scenes. They were some of the first to re-introduce abstraction to modern art scene, when figurative art was the dominant style. This aspect of their work would allow for an interesting discussion of unity and affinities with Islamic arts. Third, the four artists discussed in this chapter had distinct careers and lives, which allows diverse approaches and focuses. Hence, the discussion of the work and career takes different path depending on each artist's work and career. This reveals how, even for artists working around the same time, and within somewhat similar styles, the challenges and interests are different. The singularity of each discussion depends on each artist’s career and work.

The innovative and unique approaches of these four women artists demonstrate the significant contributions of women artists, and the role they played in establishing and impacting art scenes, and that is constantly overlooked by western museums when discussing women artists. Hence, the third chapter will look at the exhibitions and spaces dedicated to women artists, which have been a source controversies and debate. The issue, I will argue, is that the curators focus on the current political debates and ignore the history of feminist art and women artists contributions. The exhibitions highlight the concepts of conflicts and dichotomies, overlooking the nuanced notions in the work of many artists. Additionally, they often highlight the political and social aspects of the art and the provocative roles that artists play. However, they ignore that women artists are not only a force of social and political change, but they are also a major source of artistic and intellectual change.
Figure 0.1 Baya Mahieddine, Femme en Robe Blanche, 1947. Gouache on paper. 89 x 74 cm. Collection of Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut. © Dalloul Art Foundation. https://dafbeirut.org/

Figure 0.2 Guerrilla Girls, Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into The Met. Museum? 1989. Courtesy www.guerrillagirls.com © Guerrilla Girls
Figure 0.3 Shirin Neshat, Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah series, 1994. Black and white RC print and ink, photo by Cynthia Preston. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Brussels. ©Shirin Neshat.
Chapter One Western museums and the “Middle East”

Defining, discussing, or exhibiting modern and contemporary artistic creations from WANA or the region known as Middle East could be complicated and challenging. The questions of art identity, specific cultural influences, affinities with “Islamic art”, influence of “Western art”, audience perception... are few of an extensive list that could face any scholar or curator. The issues start with geography but do not stop there. For each publication, exhibition or study that includes the term ‘Middle East’, one must start with a justification or a definition of the term and work accordingly. The Arab world (Arab countries of North Africa, Levant, and Arabian Peninsula), and Iran are present in most recent definitions. Turkey is not always considered despite being one of the main destinations in the traditional ‘Near East’. Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Cyprus are sometimes added. However, other than the geography questions, cultures and ethnicities are other major questions. As the region includes Arabs, Turks, Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Armenians, Berbers to count some. And although Islam is the dominant religion, other religions, mainly Christianity and Judaism, also exist, with every religion divided into different sects and groups. Aside geography, the definition and labelling of the art itself is another challenge. What I will focus on in this chapter is the notion and definition of modernism in art in recent museums’ collections and exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from MENA. How to define and categorise modern art from WANA? To answer this question, the discussion will cover three topics influencing this categorisation: the affinities with traditional Islamic art and the label of modern Islamic arts, the relation with the global modernism and finally the dividing line between modernism and contemporary art.

In 2006, two western museums, the British Museum in London, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York held their first exhibitions including modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and North Africa. While the exhibitions shared the display of certain artists, they presented somewhat conflicting concepts and arguments. The exhibition Word into Art, curated by Venetia Porter at the BM, focused on the museum’s collection of modern and contemporary art within its Islamic art department. It aimed to show the ‘powerful thread’ connecting Islamic art to contemporary art, as well as the connections among the artists from the region. In contrast, Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking,\textsuperscript{102} curated

\textsuperscript{102} The approaches adopted in Without Boundary triggered additional debates regarding the intersection between arts and politics. Some artists included in the exhibition accused the museum and curators of avoiding the question of politics, despite many of the artworks including political themes. Within the politically charged environment of the early 2000s, these accusations led to further questions regarding the politics of representation and representation of politics. Could any exhibition of art from WANA avoid the political context? Especially given that the western interest in the art from the region was intensified by political events and discourses.
by Fereshteh Daftari at the MoMA, sought to highlight the diversity of artistic practices, and question the growing tendencies to categorise modern and contemporary art from the region under the rubric of ‘Islamic art.’ These exhibitions sparked debates about the labelling of ‘Islamic art’ and the existence of a unified visual language in modern and contemporary art from the region grew progressively. While some museums expanded their collections of Islamic art to include the modern and contemporary practices, more art historians, and curators, especially from the region itself, grew increasingly sceptical of the label and refuted its application. These debates coincided with a broader questioning of the Islamic art studies and museology.

This chapter will address some of the issues related to regional exhibitions, Islamic art label, essentialist identity, universalism, and alternative modernities by discussing the different approaches that have been adopted to present the modern and contemporary art from WANA. One major concept in the exhibitions and debates is unity. The concept of unity within the region stems from the concept of universality of Islamic art. Therefore, the discussion will address the problematic issues related to the rubric of Islamic art and including modern and contemporary art in collections of Islamic art. From the outset, the hierarchical system of western museology and categorisation is still dominant. The foundation of the field of Islamic, as Gülru Necipoğlu asserts, intertwined with Orientalist Eurocentric perspective based on essentialised identity and ‘grand East-West divide.’ Within this division, Islamic art became ‘an exotic non-Western tradition, particularly notable for its aniconism and its decorative impulses’ and categorised as ‘non-historical style.’ The recent exhibitions and collections expanding the parameters of Islamic art to modern and contemporary art do not address this hierarchy, nor attempt to redefine it. Hence, museums are risking importing and solidifying the hierarchy and labelling the modern and contemporary art as cultural objects and artefacts. Moreover, many Islamic art historians and experts are questioning the basis of the field and calling for its reconstruction. Adding the modern and contemporary art is complicating these issues. While the studies of Islamic art are pushing towards abandoning

104 Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches."
the essentialist and universalist approaches, the exhibitions of modern and contemporary art are pushing backwards to re-instate these concepts.

The use of some elements from Islamic and traditional art is usually interpreted by museums as a result of an overarching identity and connection between the past and the present. To present an alternative way to interpret the art beyond the concept of identity, I will discuss the use of script and abstraction as examples. The use of script is usually highlighted by curators as inherent character that proves the connection to Islamic art and the interconnection and unity between the artists from the region. This approach, however, I would argue disregards the historical context as well as the artistic and conceptual differences. As the discussion will show, there are many complex notions and different aims in this use by different generations of artists. Examining the work of early modern artists would show that they did not emphasis these elements, nor did they highlight the national and cultural specificity as much as the next generation did. They were, however, criticised and accused of imitating western artists and lacking authenticity. The following generation of artists, then, felt the need to include some visual language that would highlight identity and respond to the questions of authenticity. Also, seen within the broader socio-political context, that was also the moment of rising decolonial and anti-colonial movements. The encounter with the hegemony and assumed supremacy of western culture pushed artists more into this approach. This is a process that could be seen in many art scenes of the global south or the former colonies.

The 1990s saw the rise of critical approach towards modernism and its exclusive narratives. The concept of alternative modernities sought to examine the Eurocentric perspective and introduce various narratives. However, these discourses remain hardly apparent in the modern museum’s displays of modern and contemporary art from WANA. Like ethnographic museums, the modern and contemporary museums discourses remain preoccupied with the questions of identity and unity. This chapter will discuss the exhibitions at the MoMA through this perspective. The MoMA is a significant example of the dominant exclusive aspect of modern art because its display and narratives have become the ‘norm’ in the general display of modernism.\(^{105}\)

I. The earlier exhibitions and the shift in discourses

As noted earlier, the exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA could be considered as part of a broader attempt to question the Eurocentric perspectives of art history and displays. However, some specific traits could be noticed in the case of WANA. The exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA grew progressively since the early 2000s, specifically after the events of September 11. Before that date, the exhibitions were very rare, but some notable exceptions could be cited. In 1994, Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi organised the first museum’s exhibition of Arab women artists in the United States. *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab world* was curated and designed for the National Museum of Women in the Arts toured the US cities and institutions. In 1999, Siumee H. Keelan curated *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present* in London. The touring exhibition included the work of eighteen Arab women artists. In 2001, Rose Issa curated *Iranian Contemporary Art* at the Barbican centre in London.

The exhibition *..East of here...*, curated by Jayce Salloum, differed from these three exhibitions. Salloum, a contemporary artist himself, focussed on the latest creations by contemporary artists, hence video was the dominated medium presented. The exhibition reflects the critical decolonial discourses of the 1990s, presented as ‘an attempt to remain rooted in the examination of the production of culture, the agency of such, the confines of interventionist alleys, the re-thinking and the re-positioning of subjects and acts to defy, coerce, subvert, disclose, decenter, distress and resurrect, resurface, reconstruct and claim, not again but once, for this moment, first to state it and acknowledge the realities affected and aflamed.’. Influenced by Edward Said’s Orientalism, the highly political exhibitions and the artworks presented dealt with the questions of colonialism, occupation, identity, gender... ‘What we find when we arrive here; pointed inquiries, counter narratives, prosaic camouflage, cross directional and transgressive acts of production, constructions of sexuality, sites of projection and fantasy, mimicry, recuperation, appropriation and the reconstruction of the real, the imaginary and the undecided, private and public representations, manifestations of subjectivity.’

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106 Salloum, “..East of Here...: (Re)imagining the 'Orient'."
Many differences could be noticed between the exhibitions held in the 1990s and those held more recently in western museums, from the aims to the approach to art and the overall discourses. The cultural aspects and the notion of ‘understanding the Middle East’ that are accentuated in the aims of recent exhibitions, were less pronounced earlier. Nashashibi notes that ‘The concept of Forces of Change is rooted in my abiding interest in Arab women’s artistic expression.’ The aim of Dialogues of the Present was to ‘provide a knowledge and understanding of the richness and diversity of Arab women’s contemporary art practice.’ And Iranian Contemporary Art exhibition celebrated ‘the artistic vibrancy of Iranian art’ and with its accompanying publication ‘provided an opportunity to appreciate the scope of developments in recent years, giving an accessible and intriguing account of contemporary Iranian art.’

The discourses of unity and relation to Islamic art seldom appeared in the earlier exhibitions. The diversity of mediums and forms, as well as the multitude of themes, were the focus in these exhibitions in an attempt to draw a more comprehensive map of the art scenes and artists’ contributions. Additionally, the questions of globalism and alternative modernities were considerably visible. The exhibitions were set to question the dominant narratives of art history and its exclusion of non-western artists. In an essay accompanying Iranian Contemporary Art, Daryush Shayegan notes that ‘[Today] the fundamental centre of western aesthetic values has been fragmented […] we are seeing new literary and artistic creations from the sidelines towards the centre, bringing with them a whole range of new sensibilities.’ In their essay interpreting and discussing the work of women artists in Forces of Change, Nashashibi, Laura Nader and Etel Adnan conclude ‘We are long passed the day when ethnocentric notions of art make it necessary to plea for recognition of the art and aesthetics of peoples outside of Europe. Art is not a pristine category of activity untouched by questions of power politics. The art world is decentralizing in the face of global change, and we are all recipients of new gifts.’

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Fran Lloyd questions the perception and categorisation of art and artists and the role identities and assumed differences should play within such process.

‘Questions about positioning are central to the issue of a cross-cultural dialogue. Can such a dialogue ever occur or are we always bound by our positioning within a binary system which privileges one set of cultural values over another? However much we may think otherwise, do we always subtly frame and classify art produced in the diaspora or in non-western countries as other and create a separate sphere of difference for it? or in the postmodern and postcolonial world which supposedly characterises the late twentieth century, do we subsume this difference into a floating sign of sameness which ignore the ways that we as historical subjects are differently located by gender, race and class within its power structures?’

In these exhibitions, the curators attempted to contextualise the work of artists historically and aesthetically and highlight their role within local art scene and in relation to the global art world. These approaches to the practices of artists from WANA are rarely seen following 2000 and were substituted by the discourses of unity and cultural specificity. The critical approach to art history and its marginalisation and exoticisation of non-western artists and women artists was replaced with the essentialised identity discourses. A ‘corrective impulse’ caused by the lack of exposure of Arab art guide many of the exhibitions was noted as the reason behind the rise of displays and exhibitions. But given the lack of critical approach or argument within many exhibitions, and the minimal attempt to establish any connections beyond the regional identity, such claims become uncertain.

In *Dialogues of the Present*, Lloyd states ‘As the title suggests, this book refuses to contain Arab women’s art to an ahistorical, timeless part. It is concerned with the spaces of modernity where art produced by women within Arab countries, and the Arab diaspora is present/ed as part of contemporary art practice.’ To further affirm this approach, Lloyd discusses the artistic practices based on Griselda Pollock’s ‘generations and geographies’ refusing to reduce the complex layers of identities, nor to jump the impact of times on the artistic approach. Lloyd refers, for example, to certain themes that could be seen repeated in

the work of artists from different generations but notes ‘[T]he earlier generations draw from
mythology and a sense of place, whereas the later generation like Al-Ani and Sedira draw
more directly on the autobiographical and establish a more immediate lineage.’

The exhibition was curated in the 1990s, hence, at the early stages of shift towards
the contemporary practices. Nevertheless, curators highlight more the contextual analysis
that accounts for socio-political as well as aesthetic variants, which allows a better
understanding and categorisation of art. As Lloyd noted in Dialogues of the Present, looking
at the work of artists as ahistorical and acontextual would not provide a proper
representation. The following sections propose an approach that would contextualise
modern art and enable its understanding beyond the narrow perspective of identity.
Discussing the use of script would show the different stages of modern art. It would also show
the divide between modern and contemporary art. This would reveal connections among
artists from the region that suppress the obvious formalist characteristics. However, these
connections are not limited to the region, nor do they separate its art from global narratives
based on inherent essentialist identity.

These discourses are lost in the exhibitions and collections to be discussed hereafter,
whether at the BM, LACMA, or MoMA. The result of such loss is not only the disregard of a
critical approach, but the re-inscription of the modern and contemporary artists from WANA
into an ahistorical space where their work exists isolated from its historical context as well
as other artistic practices.

II. Cultural specificity and Internationalism

Many artists, especially contemporary artists, have been sceptical towards the recent
categorisations and regional exhibitions in general. Natalie Bell and Massimiliano Gioni, the
curators of Here and Elsewhere (2014) noted this scepticism. Here and Elsewhere was the first
exhibition of Art from the Arab World at the Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. The
exhibition was one of few exhibitions to directly raise the questions of universalism and
regional exhibition through the exhibition’s catalogue and three round tables with artists. Bell
and Gioni refer to the scepticism around the growing interest in exhibiting art from the Arab

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115 Keelan and Lloyd, Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present. p. 49.
world where ‘the core of that criticism is a dissatisfaction with what is perceived as an institutional mandate to redress the lack of exposure, or an impulse to diversify programming and broaden institutional authority.’116 The curators note that multiple artists declined to participate in the exhibition framed by their origins or identity. The artist Ahlam Shibli stated in response to the curators’ invitation ‘I don’t want my work to be framed by an exhibition that takes the Arab World as its issues.’117 In this regard, Bell and Gioni ask ‘Can art history ever completely let go of artists’ origins or cultural affinities? Is it possible to imagine a history of art that is completely divorced from cultural and social histories?’118

However, Shibli’s objection is not equivalent to ‘imaging a history of art that is completely divorced from cultural and social histories.’ As her art is not completely divorced from cultural and social histories. Most of Shibli’s work investigates identity and belonging in Palestinian context. It is however an objection to be selected for an exhibition based on her identity, not her work and its content and concept. The exhibition and curators’ response do not seem to answer the artists’ scepticism and questions as the exhibition remains centred around identity and geography. The organisation of the artworks within the exhibition followed a geographical division between the Gulf, the Levant and Egypt, and North Africa.119 The curators do not answer what, beyond the Arab identity, brings the work of these artists together and divert it from other contemporary non-Arab artists’ work. Moreover, the exhibition, like most regional included a high number of artworks by artists who are based in western cities or ‘live internationally’120 as the artist entries for Basma Alsharif, Anna Boghiguian state.

Although the curators in Here and Elsewhere bring the issue of internationalism, it is not fully addressed. Bill and Gioni note that ‘Barring instances in which stereotypical qualities can be deployed to enhance the exotic appeal of commodities or artists themselves, the system of internationalism has entreated artists to shed their nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and traditions in a rite of passage that promises access to the global game of contemporary art.’121 What is missed here is that these same questions of internationalism

116 Gioni et al., Here and Elsewhere, p. 18.
117 Gioni et al., Here and Elsewhere, p. 21.
118 Gioni et al., Here and Elsewhere, p. 21.
120 Gioni et al., Here and Elsewhere, p. 250-52.
121 Gioni et al., Here and Elsewhere, p. 22.
only resurface when non-western artists are presented. The contemporary art world demand of ‘origin-free artists’ who have shed any sense of belonging to a specific culture or nationality to avoid being marginalised or tokenised is limited to non-western artists. A western artist is not expected to shed the sense of belonging to a culture or nationality, as his/hers is assumed to be naturally international. The curator Siumee Keelan conveys similar questions, discussing the narratives of art history and its biases toward the Eurocentricity ‘Many have asked, or may wished to ask, why a Chinese person should take a close interest in the work of Arab artists. If I myself were an Arab, and took interest in western art, this question might not arise. It would be considered normal. I wish to challenge the value judgement that assumes if a person takes an interest in art from outside their natural/cultural background then the art chosen must, of course, be western art.’122

In *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, Hamid Dabashi questioned the distinction between regional and international experts. Dabashi refers to the issue of authority in relation to international and regional, or in other term, western and non-western curators, and professionals, asking ‘The very designation of this volume as including ‘the international body of art theorists and historians, together with regional scholars and professionals in the field’ already exposes the problems we face. Who is an ‘international art theorist and historian’? And by what authority, and how, are we to distinguish them from ‘regional scholars and professionals?’’123 According to Dabashi, like the case of art and artists, experts from Western societies, whether on curatorial or academic level, still exclusively retain the title of universality and internationalism.

But, even when artists do create art that is divorced from direct notions of identity, the perception of their art remains limited to that identity. One example is the artist, Tala Madani. Madani’s paintings emerged in the early 2000s depicting middle-aged men (fig. 1.1). In 2006, the expressive grotesque depictions caught the attention of curators and critics. Visually and stylistically, the paintings have little connection with widely exhibited forms or style of Iranian paintings. Despite the artist’ constant objection, the men were always identified as middle eastern, reflecting both the artist birthplace in Iran and the stereotypes

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122 Keelan and Lloyd, *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present* p. 51.
of middle eastern men. But as Madani noted ‘this man is all men, he is a He. If you only think about him in relation to Iranian politics, you’re missing the point, in a way.’ But the more interesting aspect of Madani’s paintings is that they employ a rare perspective on sexuality and gender. As she noted in an interview from 2017, women were always present in her work, through the absence of the female body that became a cliché in western art. The female body has a long history of objectifying in painting. With the rise of feminist movement in art, these representations were criticised both in theory and in practice. However, many artists exploring these themes have focused on the female body. Madani, however, depicts the male body. She explores the notion of gender and sexuality through a humorous depiction of machismo.

a. Transnational artists and belonging

On a parallel side of identity questions arose those related to transnational artists or Diaspora. These recent exhibitions came helpful for western museums as they answered the questions of categorising transnational artists, who in the exhibitions and collections of Middle Eastern art would be identified as ‘diasporic artists.’ These artists, originally from the region, but based in western cities have been overlooked for decades as their art does not fit into the western canon. The conflicts and politically charged context added multiple layers of challenges for the artists. While recently more museums have been eager to showcase the art from the region as part of cultural diplomacy efforts and humanising, that was not always the case. For decades, the artists from the region based in western cities faced rejection based due to the political conflicts.

In a blog written for Guggenheim Museum, Shiva Balaghi, visiting scholar at Brown University and curator specialised in modern and contemporary visual culture of the Middle East, describes the change in political relations between the US and Iran in 2015 and its influence on artists from Iran, with three exhibitions of Iranian artists in American institutions. One of these exhibitions was Parviz Tanavoli’s at the Davis museums, which was his first solo exhibition in an American museum in four decades. Balaghi quotes Tanavoli’s recalling the effect politics had on his career years ago ‘With the background I had in the U.S (United

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States), I expected that the doors would never close on me, because from a very young stage in my career, I had shows in the States. I created a lot of my work in the U.S. I taught at the Minnesota College of Art and Design. I had a following in the public in the U.S. I was known there. Then all of a sudden, with the Iranian revolution and the war and the hostage crisis, they closed all the doors. The relations between the two countries were tarnished, and I couldn’t continue. I lost all my connections. I went into the dark. Tanavoli was not alone in this, many Iranian artists who had left to the US from the early 50s, found themselves in similar situations following the Iranian revolution and the deteriorating relation between the two countries. Although many were based in the US and did not return to Iran, their birthplace and identity was behind their rejection from institutions and museums, apparently for political reasons, even if they did not express political opinions. Similar cases could be seen following 9/11.

This rejection that artists have faced, left many in the state of outsiders. ‘I did not feel I had the licence or the right to make work that examined American culture but, you know, my life evolved a few years ago [...] Having lived in America for so long as an immigrant I felt I had some perspectives to this country and what I like and dislike. It’s not like I was a tourist.’ Stated Shirin Neshat in 2021 regarding Land of Dreams (fig. 1.2), her first body of work dealing directly with the US. Neshat had left Iran to the US, where she has been based in the US, in the 1970s. Though Land of Dreams is not completely divorced from Iranian references, it deals with the ideas of immigrations and fears, themes that are related to Neshat’s experiences in the country. The artist’s statement however reveals some anxieties and uncertainty regarding immigrant artists’ right to engage with their host country discourses, which has been further complicated by museums and institutions’ focus on their exotic identity and native countries.

Within such contexts, it becomes acceptable for Christophe Cherix, MoMA’s chief curator to ‘embrace’ the work of these artists within what he labels as ‘our own culture.’

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which is based on an ethnic and racial definition. Cherix, born and raised in Switzerland, assumes a right to welcome these ‘others’ although many of them might have lived in the country for longer than he did. By labelling artists based on their origins as Middle Eastern, including them in segregated exhibition of art from the region, museums are exoticising these artists and communities, further perpetuating the image of the Other within the same society. Furthermore, they seem at risk of resisting the everchanging aspect of the society and participating in excluding artists from the local art scene in the city where they are based, hence deepening the ideas of segregation and cultural differences. They are also ignoring crucial artistic and stylistic divergences to advance the identity hypothesis.

Collecting modern and contemporary art from the Middle East was not a conventional priority for many western museums. For example, Linda Komaroff, the curator of Islamic art at LACMA, started acquiring modern and contemporary art for the LACMA collection of Islamic art as the curators in the modern and contemporary art department were not interested. Also, the museum management did not have a fund for such acquisitions. But as Komaroff notes, and as could be noticed in many exhibitions, most of these artists are based in western cities. Hence, as a start, their work was excluded from the departments of modern and contemporary art without a discussion or an attempt to explore different options of inclusion. This continues with more museums establishing committees for ‘Middle Eastern art’ but with many of the acquisitions including artworks by artists based in western cities, further segregating them from the context within which they are working.

III. Islamic art, Universalism and Essentialised Identity

Following Daftari’s questioning of the rubric Islamic art, more scholars raised the issue refuting the term. Nonetheless, more museums like the British museum, LACMA, Victoria and Albert Museum and the Metropolitan Museum are including the modern and contemporary art from WANA within their departments of Islamic arts. These decisions are problematic on many levels. First, many of these collections focus on WANA region. But the
Islamic history is not exclusive to the region as it could also be seen in East and South-east Asia as well as parts of West Africa. Western Islamic studies preceding and during the colonial period focused on WANA region given the centrality of Islam within the region’s history. Recently many scholars have raised concerns over these highlighted connections between WANA and Islam: disregarding Islam outside WANA. In these same museums, collections of traditional Islamic Arts are divided and displayed through an order of dynasties. And as the latter in many eras existed beyond WANA, it is common to find artefacts and objects from various parts of the empires. Then why is the recent categorisation focused on WANA? This matter becomes even more problematic given the realities of today’s world: WANA population accounts for roughly twenty percent of Muslims worldwide. Hence, a contemporary art exhibition referencing Islam or ‘Islamic culture’ but focusing on WANA would be disconnected from contemporary situation based on assumptions.

Moreover, these exhibitions and categorisations are overlooking the existing issues in the field of Islamic art. It is noteworthy that these exhibitions rarely engage in significant discussions regarding the definition, concepts, or principals of Islamic art. While aniconism and decorative impulses are frequently mentioned, little attention is given to the broader aesthetics and conceptual underpinnings of Islamic art when interpreting modern and contemporary art. This absence is not surprising, as each art is a product of its time. Attempting to understand or interpret the modern and contemporary art through the lens of traditional of Islamic art concepts and notions would encounter numerous challenges due to

131 On a separate note, the Islamic aniconism or unease towards figuration is a recurring notion in the discussions and interpretations of modern and contemporary art. The traditional discipline of Islamic art mainly references what is considered as ‘official art’, the court, and elite sponsored arts. However, figurative art could be seen in the popular and folk culture of many Muslim societies, whether representing religious themes or folk stories. In Iran, the coffeehouse paintings are a genre that was very popular and closely associated with the storytelling tradition known for depicting scenes from Karbala, as well as scenes from the Shahnameh and known folk tales. These paintings are believed to have roots in the Safavid era but gained significant popularity during the constitutional revolution in the early 1900s. In the Levant region, similar practices could be noticed, the Syrian Abou Sobhi Al-Tinawi, born in 1888 as Muhammed Harb, is one of the most known self-taught artists whose work focused on depicting tales from Arabic folklore, Islamic and pre-Islamic characters. These genres of paintings were not realistic, nor did they always adhere to the strict rules of perspective, in some ways their treatments of figures resembled those in miniature paintings translated into bigger surfaces. An interesting aspect is their inclusion of many figures considered as sacred within an Islamic context, like Imam Ali and Imam Hussein. Nevertheless, they were popular and widely accepted within societies, which questions the entire narrative of Islamic cultures general antipathy towards figurative depictions. This is significant given that the art movements of the mid-century especially the Hurufiya and the Saqqakhaneh movements attempted to bridge the elite and the popular cultures.

132 Keshmirishekan, “Parameters of “Modern” and “Contemporary” Art from the Middle East: An Alternative Art Historical Account.”
the changes that occurred through centuries. Moreover, the collections themselves undermine these supposed connections, as they often highlight contradictions. Many collections emphasise the use of script while excluding artworks that do not incorporate such elements. However, numerous artworks that do feature Arabic or Persian script also include figurative art, thereby challenging the oversimplified association between script, aniconism, and Islamic art.

a. Framing museums exhibitions and collections in relation to Islamic art

In a later revision of Without Boundary’s benefits and dilemmas, Daftari credits the MoMA director, Glenn Lowry for supporting the exhibition. Yet, Daftari and Lowry were not in agreement in their view of the exhibition’s framing and aim. Unlike ethnographic and history museums like the British Museum and LACMA, the MoMA does not possess a collection of Islamic arts as its collections focus on modern and contemporary art. Nevertheless, the questions related to Islam were not absent from the curation’s process. Lowry was interested in highlighting the discourses of ‘Islam and modernity,’ while Daftari’s purpose was to question the application of the term ‘Islamic art’ to modern and contemporary practices. However, ‘The curatorial agenda was not always apparent to critics, who confused the intentions stated in the exhibition catalogue by the curator with the director’s personal assessments published outside the framework of the exhibition, in Art News.’ The divergent approaches noted by Daftari are central to the discussions of collecting and exhibiting modern and contemporary art from WANA. Does curating modern and contemporary art require a specialised knowledge of Islamic art?

Specialists of Islamic art raised questions related to the perception of contemporary artistic production from Muslim societies and the background of curators by the beginning of the 21st century. As Oleg Grabar wrote:

‘The museum that came out of traditional, antiquarian, collecting gave a little attention to the creativity of the past 100 years, in fact even 200 or 300 years. Should this antiquarian preference be maintained? Or should the museum react to the new

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interests of the Muslim population and of those who deal with it and recognise in its collections the existence of active schools of art from Morocco to Indonesia and the often vibrant art done by artists of Muslim origin in New York and Paris? Or should one argue that contemporary arts are global, not ethnic or national?"^{134}

While Grabar seemed hesitant about answering these questions, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom were affirmative in *Mirage of Islamic art*, stating that ‘There is no reason anyone trained to study the ‘Islamic’ art of eighth-century Syria or even fourteenth-century Iran or seventeenth-century India should be any more interested or able-apart perhaps from knowledge of a relevant language-to expound on the art of contemporary Kuwaiti women or Iranian filmmakers than a specialist in the work of Georgia O’Keeffe or Orson Welles.’^{135} Blair and Bloom are accurate in this statement, as the following discussion would show. An Islamic art specialist would possess knowledge of the region, its history and culture that would be helpful in interpreting some aspects of modern and contemporary art. Nonetheless, the interpretations and contextualisation would remain limited. Reciprocally, a modern art historian’s limited knowledge of Islamic art would not highly impact the reading and interpretation of modern and contemporary art. This could be evidenced by the almost inexistence of discussion of definitions, concepts, and principles of Islamic art in the modern artists accounts, as well as most of the accounts and publications from art historians and experts. These discussions are even rare in the exhibitions and collections where modern and contemporary art is categorised as Islamic.

The British Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are two cases of the museums where these questions could be applied. Both museums have considerable collections of traditional Islamic art, and recently they mounted several exhibitions including modern and contemporary art from WANA. Both museums started collecting these artworks during the last few decades. In relation to the questions raised by Grabar, the museums adopted the ethnic approach by expanding their collection of Islamic art. Hence, their curators of Islamic arts also became the curators of modern and contemporary WANA art. The introduction to the LACMA’s exhibition *Islamic Art Now* notes that the contemporary art share

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‘the same DNA with historical Islamic art.’ While the term modern and contemporary Islamic art has mostly been used by LACMA’s curator of Islamic art Linda Komaroff, the presence of the art within the departments of Islamic art suggests that both museums and curators are approaching modern and contemporary art based on the connection with traditional Islamic art. As the introduction the BM’s exhibition *Word into Art* notes, ‘An early decision was to choose work which somehow “spoke” of the region and showed continuity with “Islamic” art.’

Given the globalisation of art and the diversity of mediums, techniques, and themes that artists engage with, such focus would limit the choices and exclude many of them from exhibitions and collections. In the BM collection, ‘works which contained modern examples and interpretations of Arabic Calligraphy were initially favoured over more global, generic forms of contemporary art.’ The LACMA collection, on the other hand, is based on ‘understanding that the ultimate success and relevance of this collection lies in building creative links between the past, present, and future.’ These are not new approaches within western museums and art scenes, nor are they exclusive to artists from WANA. Discussing the work of mid-century modern artists of Muslim South Asia, Iftikhar Dadi notes ‘The predicament Chughtai and Zubeida Agha had faced, in being urged not to lose their ‘oriental’ character, was a demand that non-Western artists continually faced in Britain.’ Additionally, one of the most criticized aspects of the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition was the choice of non-Western artists. Martin focused on ‘traditional,’ ‘religious’ or ‘sacred’ artworks. The critics focused on Martin’s neglect of the works by established and professional artists working with ‘Western’ and ‘Modern’ aesthetics in favour of traditional or cultural creation. Especially focusing on what is assumed to be authentic from a western perspective. Decades later, these ‘oriental,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘Islamic’ characters are still occupying a central place within museums’ standards and criteria.

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139 Komaroff, *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East*.
Commenting on the BM’s collection of modern and contemporary art from WANA, Porter notes ‘The early decision was to choose work which somehow ‘spoke’ of the region and showed continuity with ‘Islamic’ art. Thus, works which contained modern examples and interpretations of Arabic calligraphy were initially favoured over more global, generic forms of contemporary art.’

Hence, in an attempt to evidence the connection between the past and present, and legitimate the inclusion of modern and contemporary art within the collections of Islamic art, the curators would limit their choices to the work that include certain elements. However, not all modern and contemporary artists from WANA opted for such visual language. Many artists who chose the ‘more generic or global forms of art,’ or who find inspiration outside what seems like a mandatory visual language, would be neglected. Additionally, such choices would eliminate the modern art practices, solidifying the notion of ‘art without a history’ one of the main issues that many art historians and scholars have raised regarding the perception of the contemporary art from the region.

b. Islamic art challenges: Universalism and essentialised identity

Many problematic aspects of the linking Islamic art and modern and contemporary art lie additionally within the continuous disagreement within the traditional Islamic art field and museology. In The Mirage of Islamic Art, Blair and Bloom detailed problems concerning the Islamic art studies, many of which are still prevailing. One of these main issues that remains debated is the question of unity of Islamic arts. The concept of universality of Islamic art, goes hand in hand with its segregation from other art historical forms and periods. The history of the field assumes that ‘Islamic cultures exist in a time of their own (or even outside of time).’ Hence they are separated from other arts within the region, and from arts outside the region. This segregation has not only overlooked the overlaps and interaction between different art forms and cultures, but also cemented the concept of a pure, authentic form of art trapped in the past.

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141 Porter, Word into Art: Artists of The Modern Middle East, p. 114
142 Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field."
If there were no agreement on a definition of traditional Islamic art, and its monolithic perception is constantly criticised; how would we agree on a unified modern or contemporary Islamic art? More questions were raised recently in relation to museology and display of traditional Islamic art collections. In a more recent paper, Gülru Necipoğlu examined the different approaches, discourses and concepts of Islamic art field addressing the ‘anxieties over the fragmentation of its traditional “universalism”’.\textsuperscript{145} According to Necipoğlu, Blair and Bloom reflect the concern of many Islamic art experts over preserving the canon and its universality, a framework also adopted by the universal museums of Islamic art. In these approaches ‘the preoccupation with an essentialised Muslim identity privileged formative origins over processes of historical development and stressed artistic unity over diversity.’\textsuperscript{146} On the other hand, she proposes a different approach to Islamic art based on periodisation to counter the essentialist and ahistorical approaches, suggesting four different periods that consider historical, socio-political, and artistic changes.

In the introduction to \textit{A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture}, Necipoğlu and Finbarr Barry Flood note that what would appear as fragmentation poses no danger to a field that was never fully unified. On the contrary, Flood and Necipoğlu argue for emphasising a dialectic ‘between a regional focus and the need to consider how the local connects with translocal cultural flows, forms, and practices.’\textsuperscript{147} Necipoğlu and Flood suggest including the modern and contemporary art within the Islamic art canon. However, this suggestion is based on a critical approach that would consider entirely rethinking the canon instead of simply expanding it. Negating the existence of a unified Islamic art at any period, they advance an earlier proposition by Necipoğlu to consider Islamic art as a ‘multicultural “civilisational” category just like Western art, instead of reifying it as the art of a religion or religious culture propagated by ethnologised peoples.’\textsuperscript{148}

The recent categorisations of modern and contemporary arts, like the traditional Islamic arts, are grouped together based on an overarching identity. But as Necipoglu and Flood note ‘the desire to account for the unity and variety of Islamic art by reference to ethno-religious character traits has occluded the complexity of transregional artistic production in

\textsuperscript{145} Necipoğlu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches.”
\textsuperscript{146} Necipoğlu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches.”
\textsuperscript{147} Flood and Necipoğlu, “Frameworks of Islamic Art and Architectural History,” p. 5.
\textsuperscript{148} Necipoğlu, ”The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches.”
Islamic lands constituted as multiethnic, multilingual, and multiconfessional polities before the advent of modern nation states. And if such grouping is problematic for traditional arts and periods when Islamic empires ruled over regions, it would be more problematic if applied to modern and contemporary eras when these empires no longer exist while national identities are growing. The complexity of local and transregional nuances after the advent of modern nation states is obscured by the concepts of unity and overarching identity advanced by many curators and museums.

Central to these issues of universalist approach is the question of secularisation, an aspect that seems contradicting the essentialised identity concept. In her introduction to *Without Boundary*, Daftari asks ‘should a work be considered Islamic because it refers to an aesthetic practice such as the craft of carpet-making, or because it is infused with the thinking of the thirteenth-century Persian mystic poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi?’ While Daftari’s inquiries were more related to modern and contemporary art, similar questions existed and continue to occur today in relation to traditional Islamic art. ‘What is Islamic about Islamic art?’ has been a recurrent question in the field. In their article, Blair and Bloom note that ‘Despite its name, the academic field of Islamic art has only a tenuous and problematic relationship with the religion of Islam. While some Islamic art may have been made by Muslims for purposes of the faith, much of it was not.’ This notion of secularisation of Islamic art has been cemented further by museums, especially western museums, and curators. And it has been taken even further lately by eliminating the term ‘Islamic’ to avoid engaging with contemporary politics of Islam. However, it has been challenged recently.

If the collections are based on an overarching Islamic identity, which is, ultimately, a religious identity, could it be said that the art is secular? Is this not a contradiction? In a recent publication, *The Religious Plot in Museums or the Lack Thereof: The Case of Islamic Art*...

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149 Flood and Necipoğlu, "Frameworks of Islamic Art and Architectural History," p. 18.
Valerie Gonzalez provides a critical review of current displays of the latter. Gonzalez brings forward the discussions and criticism of the historical tendencies of secularisation of Islamic art and artefacts in western curation. These tendencies that started during the 1970s, intensified recently with the renovated displays of collections in many museums. Gonzalez refers especially to the Metropolitan Museum’s decision to rename their galleries exhibiting Islamic arts and to the new display of AlBuKharay collection at the British Museum. The decentring of religion, or what Gonzalez refers to as the ‘anti-religion’ approaches in curating traditional Islamic art and artefacts, are at the centre of contradiction between western and Muslim curators. Nasser Rabbat, the Aga Khan Professor, and the Director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT expresses similar opinions refuting the Met’s renaming of their galleries of Islamic arts.

In response to the questions of secularisation and understanding the connection between Islam and Islamic art, Shaw proposes an alternative approach that would reconfigure the discipline of Islamic art history. Unlike Necipoğlu’s preference of a secular approach that focuses on periodisation, Shaw proposes a conceptual understanding by integrating the intellectual and philosophical aspects of the art production. Such approach, as Shaw argues would not only provide an alternative interpretation of Islamic art, but of Islam as ‘a complex and flexible intellectual discourse woven in and out various temporal, geographic, cultural, and political contexts.’ Moreover, such approach would reduce the isolation of Islamic art history and reconfigure its interpretation within its social, political, cultural and literary contexts. On the other hand, a literal expansion of the field and its study -beyond the simple modes of political correctness, inclusion and diversity- would provide art history with further intellectual and conceptual discourses related to pertinent issues like visuality, representation, mimesis, and materiality.

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158 Shaw, “The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse.”
The arguments employed by Islamic art scholars seem to answer Daftari’s question regarding what is required to consider a work of art as Islamic: not only the commonalities of visuals, techniques, and aesthetics. The religious aspect of the art is not excluded. However, through such definitions and principles, most of the modern and contemporary arts would not fall within these categories. Rabbat’s argument about the museums’ tendencies to undermine the impact of Islam on traditional Islamic arts on display, could be applied to exhibitions of modern and contemporary arts. Looking at the Met’s new terminology for their galleries, or even on the broader displays of Islamic arts in western museums, the dates indicate a rupture, mainly caused by the rise of Islam and the era of dominance of Islamic Empires. Referring to the ‘later South Asia’ in the Met’s galleries title, Rabbat says ‘However indirectly, the curators are acknowledging that Islam—which came late to the region—is what happened.’\(^{159}\)

Correspondingly, what characterises the early twentieth century is the fall of the last of these empires and the rise of a new dominance: western colonialism. Hence, a new rupture could be recorded. And while the impact of colonialism differed between societies, it would be hard to ignore. More importantly, the rise of nationalism and the move into new systems of ruling where Islamic empires became histories should not be overlooked. In fact, none of the exhibitions ignore this as ‘dismantling and reconstructing identities’ is one of the most repeated notion/themes in exhibitions. Paradoxically, the same exhibitions maintain the concept of unchallenged, unified Islamic identity that has not changed since the seventh century.

The establishment of the canon of Islamic art by Western experts was influenced by a desire to impose retroactive unity on the diverse visual cultures of the Islamic world. This approach is closely tied to the legacy of Orientalism, which tends to categorise and account for variety in terms of timeless ethno-national categories with racial undertones, rather than considering the complex socio-historical and artistic processes at play.\(^{160}\) This desire for unity is also evident in many exhibitions of modern and contemporary art, where there is a

\(^{159}\) Rabbat, "The New Islamic Art Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art."

\(^{160}\) Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches."
tendency to group artists from the region in an ahistorical approach without critically addressing the limitations of the canon.

However, within the field of Islamic art studies, there has been a push towards a more critical perspective that challenges essentialism, non-historicity, and seeks to establish clear standards for what can be considered Islamic art. This criticality and nuanced understanding are not reflected in exhibitions and collections that include modern and contemporary artists under the same category. There is a need for a more nuanced approach that recognises the diverse artistic practices, contexts, and conceptual frameworks within modern and contemporary art from the region. By doing so, the exhibitions can move beyond essentialist narratives and engage with the complexities and richness of the artists' work.

c. Importing the hierarchal history of art

Another problematic notion in the expanding the category of Islamic art to modern and contemporary art from WANA is that it imports with it the existing issues with the art history canon and the approaches to the traditional discipline. The arts labelled as Islamic art and created from the seventh century until the nineteenth century have been exhibited in ethnographic museums mostly through the ahistorical, formalist perception and essentialist concept. These concepts continue to be included in the current displays of Islamic art in museums. Discussing the process of the 2018 opening of AlBukhary Foundation Gallery of Islamic World at the British museum, Porter and Greenwood state ‘We also wanted to express the idea that ‘the Islamic world is not linked to a specific time or place, but rather to a wider concept of contexts significantly impacted by the presence of Islam as a faith, political system or culture.’\(^{161}\)

Examining the discourses of museums, Mieke Bal refers to the existing distinction between ethnographic museums and art museums, and subsequently between art and artefacts. ‘This dispersal of the works of a great innovator of Western art [in modern art museums] seems to represent the exact opposite of the concentration of “ethnic” art in

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Western museums under the deceptive denominator of “artefacts.” Artefact, ‘according to a critic suggests a man-made object charged with cultural meaning, which can, if studied carefully, offer us information on the society in which it has been created. It offers indications on a larger cultural situation, and it only has interest if we are able to “read” it.’ As Bal notes, this description could also apply to a painting. The difference, however, is ‘the possibility of cultural difference’ which artefacts take for granted while artworks suppress. Hence, an artwork is considered through its aesthetics, ‘regardless of what it could tell us, also, about the culture it comes from.’ While ‘the artefact is only readable as culture, no matter what aesthetic qualities it may also have.’

The risk with this approach is expanding the definition of artefacts to modern and contemporary art. The BM curators note ‘We were not interested in simply displaying ‘art’ but wanted to display material culture more broadly. For us, this meant objects that ‘reflect human activity, from the everyday to “works of art.”’ Within these perspectives, the cultural knowledge that the artworks provide would exceed their aesthetic or artistic value. And while it could be said that any artwork would provide some cultural knowledge, within the existing art history paradigms and structures, the modern and contemporary art from WANA would not be seen as art. As mentioned earlier, this does not indicate a lack of appreciation of the art itself, but rather a failure to perceive the art beyond the artist’s identity. Furthermore, the essentialised non-historical view echoes the earlier labels imposed on Islamic art. Within these approaches, Islamic art, along with most non-western art and architecture, were often considered as ‘permanently fixed in a medieval past’ unable to evolve into modernism like western art and architecture. Adopting the same methods when presenting modern art contemporary art would lead to a failure to acknowledge the artist’s modernity.

The last decade has seen the work of many contemporary artists within ethnographic museums. Employing Rancière’s theory, Tolia-Kelly discusses the work of artist Rosanna

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163 Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum."
164 Porter and Greenwood, "Displaying the Cultures of Islam at the British Museum: The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World."
165 Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches."
Raymond performance, curation, and publication at the British Museum as example.\textsuperscript{166} Raymond, self-defined Samoan-English descent, is critical of the misrepresentations of Māori/Polynesian culture and art in museums. The artist’s challenge of taxonomies, as Tolia-Kelly notes, unfolds into two levels. The first concerns art and artistic expressions, mostly presented as ethnic, pre-modern artefact, Raymond challenges these taxonomies that marginalize art and creates hierarchal structure that places western arts above other forms of art. This act of challenge could be seen as a clear example of the \textit{dissensus}.\textsuperscript{167} Through the artwork, the artist is challenging the modes of categorization within the art system that for a long time have labelled the art from outside the Western sphere as artefact and lower form of art. Raymond is, hence, challenging the history of art and its narratives, she is also associating these narratives with the political and social context. Here, the act of challenge is more concerned with the artist herself, the body, and its perception from the colonial to the post-colonial period. The artist’s complex identities and beliefs cannot be ignored as they represent one aspect of the politics of the art.

On the other hand, works like Raymond’s primarily question the categorisation of ancient non-western art as artefacts, therefore, its display in the British museum is reasonable as it directly addresses the museum’s collection and labelling. This critical approach is not seen in the display of modern and contemporary art from WANA. Unlike Raymond’s work, most of the work of artists from the region does not address the categorisation of historical art from the region. Kader Attia, French-Algerian artist is one of the artists who question the hierarchy in art, the genealogy of modern art and architecture while deconstructing the colonial narratives. Paradoxically, his work is rarely included in such exhibitions.

These practices recall a prevalent aspect in the western curation of non-western modern art. For a long time, most non-western artistic production contemporaneous to the modern art (roughly between 1850 and 1950) was considered ethnic/cultural production. Martin’s exhibition, \textit{Les Magiciens de la Terre}, despite the curator’s attempts, was not able to escape many problematic points, starting with its title. ‘Martin did not use the word “art” and


\textsuperscript{167} Tolia-Kelly, "Rancière and the Re-distribution of the Sensible: The artist Rosanna Raymond, Dissensus and Postcolonial Sensibilities within the Spaces of the Museum."
instead applied the term “magic” in order to avoid confusion and criticism about mixing concepts.\footnote{\text{Belting, }"\text{Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age.}"} Hence, instead of addressing the hierarchy of art history, the exhibition cemented it. For Martin, modern non-western art needed to reflect the ethnical identity of the artist to be authentic. Thus, he chose artworks that used local and traditional crafts, exoticized the art and accentuated the artists’ otherness. To some extent, those choices were a validation of the title as the artworks were linked to magic and mythologies. Hence, although on the surface, the exhibition was radical in displaying the work from non-western artists next to the western artists; it preserved the hierarchy and still did not acknowledge the modernism of the former.

While the recent exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA do not use terms like ‘magic,’ ‘artefact’ or ‘objects,’ they still evoke such identifications. A survey of the visitor responses to the \textit{Word into Art} exhibition at the British Museum, included the question ‘Art or objects?’ an unusual question in relation to modern and contemporary art. According to the survey ‘there was a conflict between whether the exhibition was seen as an art exhibition or a museum exhibition.’\footnote{\text{Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, }\text{Visitor responses to the Word into Art exhibition at the British Museum} (2006).} These approaches, therefore, not only risk limiting the artists but contribute to cementing the hierarchy within the modern and contemporary global art. Following Bal differentiation between the ethnographic and art museum, it becomes clearer that linking the modern and contemporary art to traditional artefacts leads to questions regarding the artistic and aesthetic values of the work. Given that Islamic art, within the context of western museums and art history is seen as inferior, by including modern and contemporary art to the same collections without any attempt to challenge or readdress this hierarchy, the museums are participating in cementing the concepts of hierarchy in modern art history.

\textbf{IV. The narratives of modern art: originality and imitation}

Curators frequently emphasise the use of script and abstraction as inherent characteristics that establishes a connection to Islamic art and unifies artists from the region. Nevertheless, I argue that this approach disregards historical context and the artistic and conceptual differences among these works. A deeper look into the early modern art scenes
and to the socio-political contexts that encompassed the rise of both movements suggest different interpretations. In fact, when we examine the works of early modern artists, we find that they did not emphasise these elements nor did they prioritise national and cultural specificity to the extent that later generations did. However, they faced criticism and accusations of imitating Western artists and lacking authenticity. Hence, the re-emergence of these elements in the artistic practices could not be simply understood as continuation of Islamic art. The aim here is not to deny any influence of the latter on modern and contemporary art. But to refute its interpretation as an inherent character and simplified reflection of identity, which denies the artistic and intellectual processes that took place in the earlier decades.

The ‘powerful thread,’ or the connection from the traditional Islamic arts to the contemporary art is not a result of identity, but context and artistic choices as the next two sections would demonstrate. First, evidencing the uninterrupted connection between these two movements and the Islamic art requires the exclusion of the early modern artists whose multifaceted work break this assumption. Second, these interpretations dissolve the differences between the modern and the contemporary.

a. The use of script

*Word into Art* was the British Museum’s first exhibition of modern and contemporary art from WANA. It included mostly work on paper from a collection that the museum started acquiring in the 1980s. The exhibition and the accompanying book focused on the Islamic heritage and identity as the source of the modern art. The exhibition featured many artworks from the *Hurufiyya* movement that started during the late 1940s in the Arab world and the *Saqqakhaneh* movement from Iran. Both movements emerged during the mid-century and employed abstraction, letters, and many elements from local cultural heritages in an attempt to create a modern local art language. The origin of such inspiration is debatable. While the British museum’s exhibition mainly refers to Islamic traditional arts, local art historians and artists present different perspective.

In 1989, Charbel Dagher published one of the earliest studies on the *Hurufiyya* movement. Dagher explored the beginning of the modern use of Arabic script in painting, asking ‘Who was the first Arab Hurufi? We must answer this question if we are to write the
history of Hurufiyya, for the latter was not a movement that emerged from Arabic Calligraphy."^{170} Since the early twentieth century, many art students travelled to European and American cities to pursue their study of art, most of them studied western art history and techniques. Hence, Dagher argues that ‘several of the first Hurufis arrived at Hurufiyya under the influence of Western art (Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky) or while studying at European Art academies.’^{171} In Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics, Shabout indorses a Pan-Arab and sometimes-national specific approaches to modern art in the Arab world and rejects the Islamic attribution.\(^{172}\) The book discusses the mid-twentieth century art movements and Shabout focuses on the secular aspect of the Hurufiyya movement. Shabout argued the concept of Arab art specificity and the differentiation between Islamic and Arab aesthetics lengthily. Keshmirshekan emphasises the national Iranian and Persian attributes in neo-traditionalist approaches exemplified by the Saqqakhaneh School.\(^{173}\)

The writings and publications from the artists themselves can offer further insights. In 1973, the Iraqi art group The One Dimension organised their second exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad. Subtitled Art Inspired by the Letter, the exhibition was accompanied by a publication including discussions and commentaries from the group members. The concepts of Word into Art and Art Inspired by the Letter are clearly similar, the interpretations, however, are different. The publication accompanying the Art Inspired by the Letter starts with a collection of artworks representing the topic, this collection is broadly vast. Starting from Sumerian early script, to examples of Islamic calligraphy of Quran, Chinese traditional calligraphy, to modern artists from different countries: Germany, France, Iran, United States, Lebanon, Iraq… thus, placing the modern practice within a global historical context. Then, Shakir Hassan Al Said (fig. 1.3), considered the group leader discusses the group’s philosophical, technical, and expressive aspects explaining that ‘the pictorial surface and its capacities for expressing the self soon accept the activeness of the linguistic letter by inserting the letter’s world into the world of painting. Incorporating the letter in art is then no longer anything but the cosmic stance of contemplator, for it seeks to expose the unity of

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172 Shabout, Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics.
two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the ‘linguistic’ world of thought and the ‘plastic’ world of sight.’

The perspective that Al Said offers to his, and his contemporaries’ work, does not limit them to questions of identity and nationality, although the group and the movement were not completely disconnected from these notions. The influence of Islamic art and calligraphy is always noted—although they do mostly use the term Arab, and rarely Islamic. They also do refer to the socio-political context, the rise of national and anti-colonial movements, and the need to develop Arab art. Their approaches were not simply based on fusing the Arabic letters into a western style painting, but looked at different aspects and meanings of linguistics, symbols, and visual elements. They also explored the connections between those and the expressions in daily life, as Al Said concludes ‘[...] in painting that is laden with the letter in this way, expression is almost akin to the signs produced by a seismograph. For there is the writing style of the educational stage, i.e., the writing of students in primary school in particular. And there is the writing style of the city walls, which is as replete with anxiety, fear, and spontaneity as it is full of obscure, repressed, and deceptive signals. The One Dimension, then, in including these forms of writing, seeks to express the human self in a state of encounter with the nature as wall, or nature as ground. Therein lies its expressive role in art.’

Correspondingly, the _Heech_ series (fig. 1.4), by Parviz Tanavoli, one of the leading figures of _Saqqa-khaneh_ movement, could be looked at from a formalist point of view could be interpreted as a deconstruction of the letter, reimagining of the written word in three-dimensional form, which was at odds with traditional calligraphy confined to two dimensions. However, the socio-political context offers a more layered complex reading. _Heech_ was a response to the economic and political state of society and culture, a response to the ‘superficial hype and commercialism of the art world.’ As Rose Issa notes, ‘Tanavoli felt an affinity with the artisans whose locks, metal work and rugs he started collecting.’ The artist

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175 Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, _Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents_, p. 359.
176 Daftari, _Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art_.
177 Issa, Pakbaz, and Shayegan, _Iranian Contemporary Art_.

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had started the shift towards the neo-traditionalist style following discovering ‘the poor, southern quarters of Tehran.’

Through Al-Said writings, one could better understand Dagher’s statement denying that Hurufiyya artists are continuing the legacy of traditional calligraphers. The disconnect between the two approaches lies within two distinct aesthetic and intellectual approaches to art. The Hurufiyya movement, as well as the Saqqakhaneh have been largely read formally, or as an affirmation of religious identities. The aesthetic and intellectual ideas, however, are anchored in questions about nationalism, the role of artists in society and the struggle between elite/bourgeois culture and a popular/mass culture. Of course, curators are entitled to their creative approaches and do not have to interpret or display the work from the singular point of view of the artist. While this is true, what is presenting limitation here is not the artist perspective, but the curators’ predictable approaches. As the curator notes in the introduction, the focus on script was ‘not an accident’ but ‘the obvious’ choice as ‘it captures a powerful thread in the art of the region as a whole, encompassing beautiful calligraphy with its ancient roots, and the random graffiti of other artists.’

The choice of script and elements of traditional art and culture were not simple obvious choices for artists, but a result of long artistic and intellectual process. For decades before the emergence of both movements, the artists employed different elements and visual language in their artistic practices.

The BM exhibition obviously included more artists and generations, as it came almost four decades later to Art Inspired by the Letter. However, it did not provide an indication on the differences between those generations and how the use of the script has changed. The exhibition’s catalogue does refer to the Hurufiyya movement, and the Saqqakhaneh as well as the use of script in different western art movement. Nonetheless, it emphasises the use of the script by the artists from the region as the indicator of inherent characteristic. Even the use of Latin script contemporary artists from the region is included within the exhibition and interpreted within the same approach. To assume that the use of Arabic or Persian script has the same origin across all periods obscures essential concepts.

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Modern artists often incorporated traditional elements to counter the questions of authenticity and originality. However, contemporary artists responded differently to discourses of ‘Othering.’ Many artists, when confronted with stereotypical expectations and attempts to confine them in orientalist narratives, intensified their questioning of western modern art narratives and discourses. For example, when faced with her French teacher expectations of Arabic script, the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer defied these conventions by using Roman script. Furthermore, she ‘subverted the macho culture associated with Abstract Expressionism and drip-painting, creating a feminist statement by using a needle and thread – tools traditionally associated with women’s labour.’ These complex discourses and critical views of the exclusive narratives of modernism were rarely seen in the work of modern artists.

Visually, the modern use of the script, especially within the Hurufiyya and the Saqqakhaneh movements has roots in ideas of deconstructing the letter. Letters are seen as visual elements with formal characteristics that allow the formation of an aesthetic value. The process of reshaping these letters and producing new visual compositions is essential part of the artistic process. The final product, hence, does not necessarily carry another message beyond these unlimited possibilities of creation. The contemporary use of the script, however, is completely altered as the following discussion of some the earliest contemporary artistic productions Shirin Neshat’s Women of Allah, and Walid Raad’s The Atlas Group (fig. 1.5), would show.

Women of Allah was created by Shirin Neshat in the early 1990s. Consisting of photographs of the artist herself, covered with Persian script, this series generated conflicting criticism, reactions, and interpretations. When it comes to the concepts and use of script, the work marks a clear shift from the modern approach. Interpreting the script as a reflection of discourses of nationality and authenticity leaves many aspects untouched. The texts in Neshat’s work included mostly extracts of Iranian poetry. When first presented for western audiences, these texts were rarely identified nor translated, which sparked confusion and debates. However, even for an Iranian audience and those able to read and understand the texts, the interpretations will vary.

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180 Daftari, “Introducing Art from the Middle East and Its Diaspora into Western Institutions: Benefits and Dilemmas,” p. 194.
181 See Ehya, “Facing Up to Shirin Neshat’s ‘Women of Allah’.”
The Atlas Group, on the other hand was a ‘project undertaken by Walid Raad between 1989 and 2004 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the Lebanese wars of 1975 to 1990. Raad found and produced audio, visual, and literary documents that shed light on this history. The documents were preserved in The Atlas Group Archive with a selection available on this site.’ The first section of the project, Notebook volume 38, is attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri ‘one of Lebanon's leading historians. The historian donated 226 notebooks, 2 shorts films, and 24 black and white photographs to The Atlas Group in the early 1990s.’ The notebooks include detailed description of events from the Lebanese war, allegedly. The Atlas Group was, however, a fictional foundation. The massive fictional archive ‘produced’ by Raad investigates the narratives of war, archives, trauma, and memory questioning the limits of reality and fiction.

The similarities between these artworks cannot be simply understood in terms of identity and traditions. First, both artists use the script as an element of communication. The visual effects associated with Islamic calligraphy and its later deconstruction are no longer prominent. Furthermore, conceptually, the quest of authenticity or nationalistic characteristics does not provide an adequate analysis both works. These artworks generate more questions than answers. Although unlike many modern artworks, they provide a content, a theme, and a readable script, they leave a trail of contradiction and ambiguity. The ability to read the script, or even understand the meaning and symbolism of many poems used by Neshat do not release her audience from being ‘transfixed, somewhere between the narratives possibilities and conceptual implications of her subject matter.’ The knowledge of Arabic language, or of the historical context of the Lebanese war does not provide the viewer with an ability to discern reality from fiction in Raad’s work. The deconstruction in the work of contemporary artists is not only concerned with the visual elements, but with the narratives and discourses. While the modern artists discourses mostly accepted the narratives of nationalism, modernism and concepts of universalism, contemporary artists challenge these discourses through their work. By delving to these contested territories, contemporary artists implicate their audiences and shift the focus to concepts and perception.

b. Locating the modern

As a main component of Islamic art, abstraction is usually understood as an inherent character in the work of modern and contemporary artists reflecting its connection to Islamic art. This interpretation suggests that modern and contemporary abstract art is solely based on Islamic aesthetics and adopted as a response to the unease with figurative representation, which is not entirely accurate. These approaches negate the artists’ individuality and agency, locating the choices within inherent characters or religious requirements. More importantly, it disregards the earlier movements and artists who did not adopt abstraction. This section will explore the emergence of these movements in Turkey, Egypt and in Iran. It should be noted here that this emphasis of the thread and connection with traditional Islamic arts not only omits artistic periods, but also significant art scenes and artists. For instance, unlike the case of Iran and the Arab world, Turkey did not see the spread of a movement like Hurufiyya and Saqqakhaneh. Hence, modern Turkish artists are usually absent from many exhibitions and narratives.

What seems to continuously be missed in exhibitions and discussions of figuration and abstraction is that the religious discussions were mainly present in the first generation of artists who transitioned from traditional Islamic arts to easel paintings in the late 19th century, which are not represented in any exhibition. For the following generations of artists, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, the discussions often took the opposite directions. These discourses are usually missed because the Hurufiyya and Saqqakhaneh are often presented as the early manifestations of modern art in the region, excluding however, the earlier periods and artists. The two movements were very influential during the 1960s and 1970s, but the discourses of modernism started decades earlier. The artists from these decades continue to be dismissed and overlooked based on the assumption that they were imitating western styles with no authenticity. Their work and writings,

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183 The questions related to the modern artists’ employment of abstraction will be further discussed in the following chapter about Abstract women artists.
184 The Hurufiyya movement started in Iraq, as noted earlier. However, it did spread across the Arab countries. As the art in Iraq was discussed in the previous section and will discussed further in the second chapter, I chose Egypt as example here. Egypt is the first Arab country where art was institutionalised, and it was one of the earliest to see the establishment of artistic groups. Therefore, it provides a significant representation of modern art in the Arab world.
185 Although it should be noted these tendencies were not totally absent from the Turkish art scene. After 1940, many artists who were members of the Group D, turned to folk art and traditional practices.
however, were a main factor in introducing and developing the local modern art scenes. These artists were critical of the approaches their precedents, their academism and tendency towards realistic figuration. Yet, there were also critical of abstraction. The work of these artists, with examples discussed hereafter, breaks the notions of thread, and allows the reading of abstraction not as inherent character but as a result of critical and intellectual approaches.

The narratives of westernisation are particularly spread and influential in the case of Turkey. The young republic established following WWI and the fall of the Ottoman empire saw a major cultural shift. This shift is usually referred to as a form of “cultural westernisation” applied through a series of top-down authoritarian practices with elitist tendencies, which created an assumption of an art that mimics and imitates western styles. Yet, one of the earliest discourses about art and modernism within the region could be detected in 1930s Turkey. Duygu Köksal argues that the Turkish ‘aesthetic modernism’ should not be limited to the westernisation practices, as it ‘carried a radical potential for a critique of bourgeois modernity.’ The establishment of D Group in 1933 signalled the rise of an artistic movement interested in the international modern discourses and practices. The group members, many of whom study at Andre Lothe’s Academy in Paris, adopted cubism as a language that would reflect the modern futurist aspect of the young republic.

Many members of the group wrote for the Journal AR that published articles by artists and critics in the 1930s indicating a rising interest in artistic and aesthetic discourses. The D Group members, as many of their contemporary artists, mostly opposed the political content of art and distanced themselves from political and social themes. Yet, they acknowledged the social role of art. In her discussion with Edouard Roditi, Fahrelnissa Zeid, who exhibited with the group in Istanbul, refers to the members political engagement. That engagement was not always evident through the artworks content, it did, however, manifest through the group’s interest in diversifying their audience and appealing to social classes beyond the

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188 Köksal, "Domesticating the avant-garde in a nationalist era: Aesthetic modernism in 1930s Turkey."
bourgeoisie. According to Zeid, they were ‘considered dangerous innovators and revolutionaries because we insisted on showing our work to the masses, not only to the educated elite, as all painters of the past had done; besides, we attached as much importance to the critical remarks of illiterate workers as to opinions expressed by sophisticated intellectuals.’ Despite the elitist undertones in Zeid’s sharp distinction between the ‘illiterate workers’ and the ‘sophisticated intellectuals,’ the group’s attempt to break the exclusivity of art as a bourgeois interest does signal the emergence of modern discourses around art. Similar movements could be seen across the region.

The late 1930s saw the rise of the Art et Liberté group in Egypt. The artists who joined the group worked in different styles, although the majority were surrealists. The early manifestos by the group displayed a growing interest and concern over the social and political inequality in Egypt as well as the rise of Nazism and fascism in Europe. In their manifesto in 1938 Long Live Degenerate Art, they announced their support, as part of the international artworld, to modern art movements labelled as degenerate. The manifestos and articles by Egyptian surrealists generated an artistic debate between them and the critics of surrealism. The accusations of copying western art movements started as soon as the artists started producing artworks. Critics especially focused on the ‘purely French’ aspect of the movement, and the Egyptian surrealism being merely an imitation of it. The criticism prompted the artist Kamel el-Telmissany to publish an article proclaiming the movement not only as international, but as inherently tied to the Egyptian culture from the pharaonic to Coptic art, folk art and the Thousand and One Nights... El-Telmissany referred especially to the growth of Surrealism across the world, and to the different nationalities of artists involved in the movement in Paris.

In 1939, the Egyptian artist Ramses Younan published an analysis of the objective of art and artists discussing the different movements of modern art. The publication included a response to the publication La Peinture Moderne (1925) by the French artists and writers Amedee Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret known as Le Corbusier. Younan was particularly concerned with the formalist approach to cubism and Ozenfant’s argument that abstract geometry and cubism are the highest forms of modern art. For Younan, Cubism, with

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its rejection of objective reality have rejected ‘subjective reality’ as well. The movement separation from social and political problems and focus on pure aesthetics would lead, Younan argued, to the creation of merely decorative superficial art. Surrealism, he concludes, could be the answer to the modern artist’s dilemma. ‘We need spiritual powers to touch our heart and refashion our psyches. I have no doubt that art is one of the greatest of these powers.’

Challenging the highly formalist reading of Iranian modern art, Katrin Nahidi proposes a socio-political interpretation of cubism in Iran, focusing on the work of Jalil Ziapour in the 1940s. Similar to the Group D in Turkey, and the surrealists in Egypt, Ziapour have been accused of imitating western styles, as well as ‘artistic immaturity’ that failed to fully understand modernism. But ‘Ziapour, probably because he was a militant theoretician, is recognized as playing a larger role in expanding the public’s understanding of modern art.’

Hamid Keshmirshekan considers Ziapour’s art ‘as the practical application of the artist’s proposal for developing a modern visual language on the basis of Iran’s national heritage.’ As Nahidi argues, the cubism that Ziapour adopted was not based on formalist and visual aspects only. Cubism was a multifaceted movement with many strains, the one that Ziapour identified with was linked to Orphic cubism, shaped by the writings of philosopher Henri Bergson. According the Ziapour ‘the painter cannot totally stay indifferent to social themes, because for him and all the people who live in a community it is impossible to run away from the beliefs and the reactions of the others because of the mutual impacts it all has.’ Ziapour co-founded the Fighting Rooster Association in 1948. ‘Chosen for its natural aesthetics along with valor in fight, the fighting cock perfectly symbolized the society’s stated mission to ‘fight against obscurantism and traditionalism detached from the realities of present-day.’ These revolutionary, socialist ideas about art that populated the discourses of the 1940s and 1950s, were crucial in the establishing of later movements.

190 Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents, p. 92.
191 Köksal, "Domesticating the avant-garde in a nationalist era: Aesthetic modernism in 1930s Turkey."
193 Keshmirshekan, Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives.
195 Nahidi, "Cubism in Iran: Jalil Ziapour and the Fighting Rooster Association."
The above statements and arguments from the early modern artists in the region suggest that the socio-political context is important to interpret the art. On the other hand, many of those same artists who were politically engaged in their writings and personal lives, did not produce art as politically engaged, they, relatively opposed it. Younan stated that ‘No matter how closely we analyse it, the external aspect of a painting cannot be a true measure of its artistic value.’ The Egyptians artists refuted national Socialist art deeming it worthless in their manifesto stating, ‘We believe that the fanatical racialist, religious, and nationalistic path that certain individuals wish the modern art to follow is simply contemptible and ridiculous.’ Ziapour was not far from these opinions, as although his writing was saturated with communist language referring to ideology and the need for art to mobilise the masses his ‘true purpose of paintings included anti-representational styles, the satisfaction of spiritual needs and the self-expression of the artist.’ When contextualise and interpreted through the artists’ writings as well as the social and historical events, artworks like Jalil Ziapour’s Zaynab Khatoun (1953) (fig. 1.6) and Ramses Younan’s Untitled (1939) (fig. 1.7) start to acquire more localised interpretation. As movements and generations of artists working at the rise of nationalism and anti-colonialism, their artistic practices were influenced by these changes. But taking each artwork on its own, it might be hard to deduct such claims.

The commonality between these movements in different cities is that they pushed towards the artist’s commitments and responsibilities in society, without excluding the aesthetic and visual aspects. These artists were not imitating nor adopting different styles of western modern art with no clear aims or understanding of differences. While they believed in a universal aesthetic, they also believed that to attain it, they needed to present a distinct original language. They claimed modernism, engaged with its discourses, and criticised many of its manifestations and directions. Their choices of movements and styles incorporate in their art was not arbitrary nor copying trends. It was a result of their consideration of art as an agent for social change, not necessarily in the themes and content it addressed, but through its ability to influence society’s aesthetics and refinement. Hence, they chose a language that they believed could close the gap between the modern art and the folk culture.

197 Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents, p. 91.
199 Nahidi, “Cubism in Iran: Jalil Ziapour and the Fighting Rooster Association.”
and would be accessible and relatable for the society. The national identity or character, therefore, was not the sole reason beyond the inclusion or traditional element or visual language. On the other hand, their choices of the visual style, surrealism or cubism could be seen as both national/local authenticities, as well as reflection and artistic individualism. Notably, abstraction was not the first choice.

Moreover, it could be noticed that the discourses of nationalism and identity were less obvious in their work than they would become with the following generation of artists. The same applies to the use of elements from traditional Islamic art, which would become more visible and concentrated in the following decades with the Hurufiyya and Saqqakhaneh movements. This could be better understood when contextualised. The early generations of modern artists believed in a universal modernism and aimed to be part of it. They were however, met with accusations of imitation and lack of originality, both locally and internationally. At the same time, the national and anti-colonial movements were growing. These two factors, hence, influenced the choices of the next generations of artists.

This phenomenon could also be seen in other contexts. Stuart Hall notes the differences between the first generation of black artists arriving to England following WWII and the second generation that started working during the late 1970s and early 1980s. ‘One immediate contrast is between the attitudes to modernism of these two waves. Broadly speaking, the artists of the first wave came to London in a spirit not altogether different from that in which early European modernists went to Paris: to fulfill their artistic ambitions and to participate in what they saw as the heady atmosphere of artistic innovation in the most advanced center of art at that time.’

The first generation of black immigrant artists in the UK (United Kingdom) did not create art that highly reflected their identity. Their work was however excluded and obscured. The second generation, as a result of this rejection and othering started to include elements and signs that refer to identity in their art as a form of challenge of the hegemonic culture.

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201 Similar features could be seen also in many Asian art scenes where artists engaged with neotraditional discourses following the rise of independence and national movements. see Clark, Modern Asian art, p. 272.
The exhibitions emphasise the link to traditions as an inherent characteristic of the art from WANA, hence this link is presented non-historically and modern and contemporary art are mixed with no clear identification. However, this use of the visual language, especially the script and abstraction, when contextualised historically demonstrates that it is not an inherent characteristic or prerequisite of modern and contemporary art practices. Most of the artworks emphasising identity do have a political aspect and came at a critical time. Thus, it could be seen that the earlier practices of modern art did not necessarily display these elements of Islamic art nor were highly preoccupied with the questions of identity.

V. Modern museum exhibition: Unchallenged histories

The modern art museum displays are not usually marked based on geographical and ethnical categories, but on universalism, one of modernism’s most celebrated notion. Modernism in art is far from being monolithic, nonetheless, some aspects have been dominated in its narratives and museums’ displays. In Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried and Clark, Jonathan Harris discusses and compares the three accounts of modern art by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and T.J. Clark, three of the most influential writers and theorist of modernism and modern art. As Harris notes, the three historians do not agree on the elements or factors that implicate the value or modernism of artworks and artists. They do, however, agree on the paintings and artists who form the canon of modern art adopted by museums of modern art. This display follows mostly a formalist view. Formalist modernism is a dominant approach to art where ‘reference to life outside is excluded because art is an end in itself; despite any expression it involves, it is appreciated for its own sake alone.’ This approach tied the form of art and aesthetic experience became the basis of modern art museums displays. As the narrative relies mostly on the visual aspect, the formalist reading and value of the artwork have been mostly prioritised. Each artwork is seen in relation to the one preceding and succeeding it.

Western art museums participated to the establishing and perpetuating the myth of modernism and its exclusiveness. The MoMA, in particular, has played a significant role in that establishment. In 1936, Alfred H. Barr curated the exhibition Abstract Art and Cubism at

203 Rose, Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism.
the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Barr, the museum’s first director, charted the history of modern art through a diagram that appeared in the exhibition’s catalogue (fig. 1.8). The diagram presented the European artistic movements from 1890 and linked them as successions leading to different abstraction in the 1930s. Among the different ‘-isms’ included appear in red ‘Japanese Prints, Near Eastern Art, Negro Sculpture and Machine Esthetic’. Floating with no historical context, expect their ‘discovery’ by the western modern artists. Until today, Barr’s diagram is one of the most recurring documents in critical, feminist, and postcolonial studies of modern art history and museums displays. This recurrence is not only because the problematic notions in the diagram, but because it would become the model for exhibiting and interpreting modern art, not only at the MoMA, but in many museums.

The MoMA collection of modern painting and sculpture is the ‘world’s largest and most inclusive’ as the museum state. This collection is a result of decades of acquiring artworks by artists from different geographies and periods. However, many, if not most, were never displayed. Since 2000, the museum ‘was more aggressively attempting to redress its history not only with women artists but also with artists from diverse cultural positions.’²⁰⁴ In conjunction with Without Boundary, the museum held a panel discussion moderated by Gavatri Chakravotry, which included presentations and discussion with the artists Shirin Neshat and Walid Raad. Opening the discussion, the museum director Glen Lowry presented the exhibition as ‘questioning the use of artists’ origins as a sole determining factor in the consideration of their art.’²⁰⁵ Then he noted that ‘For us, the exhibition has been an opportunity to examine a number of issues within the practice of our own museum.’²⁰⁶ But these practices remained outside the exhibition scope and were also overlooked within the discussions through and even after the exhibition.

In February 2017, the curators at the Museum of Modern Art- New York took a decision that made the headlines in the art world. They replaced some of the artworks by renowned modern masters like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Francis Picabia and James Ensor with artworks by Ibrahim El-Salahi, Zaha Hadid, Tala Madani, Parviz Tanavoli, Charles Hussein

²⁰⁶ MoMA, “Without Boundary: Meditations on Truth.”
Zenderoudi, Shirina Shahbazi, Marcos Grigorian, and Siah Armajani. This marked the first time in MoMA’s history, Iraqi, Sudanese, and Iranian born artists were exhibited on the fifth floor, among the museum’s permanent collection of ‘masterpieces.’ The museum’s chief curator Christophe Cherix assured the public that they will not be ‘disappointed’ as the popular paintings such as Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, and Matisse’s *Red studio* were still on display. He noted that ‘the idea was to find an inclusive gesture’ after the American president Donald Trump issued an executive order that became known as ‘Trump travel ban.’ The order blocked travellers from seven Muslim countries (including Iraq, Iran, and Sudan) from entering the United States. The MoMA’s rehang was a reaction to this travel ban. The newly hanged artworks were accompanied by a wall text reading,

‘This work is by an artist from a nation whose citizens are being denied entry into the United States, according to a presidential executive order issued on January 27, 2017. This is one of several such artworks from the Museum’s collection installed throughout the fifth-floor galleries to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum, as they are to the United States.’

The MoMA’s decision was welcomed by many art lovers and critics and seen as ‘strong’ and ‘powerful’ statement. However, what was notable about the museum’s official approach to this display and the general response to it is the almost complete absence of discussion of the newly hanged artworks or the careers of artists who made them. The museum, as well as the articles highlighted that they will be temporarily replacing artworks by Picasso, Matisse, and other western modern artists. The wall text included referred to the ban and the political context. The curators’ comments and interviews in different magazines and newspapers mostly refer to inclusion and political statement. But very few addressed questions related to the artists and artworks: who are these artists? where did these artworks come from? How did they suddenly appear in the museum’s collection and why was the majority never seen before? And the broader question: where do these artworks fit in the

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208 MoMA, “Travel Ban Rehang.”
museum’s collection? The artworks were part of the museum’s collection, acquired between the early 1960s and 2000s. Notably, those collected in the 1960s have never been on display since. Although the Travel Ban Rehang was a spontaneous ‘inclusive’ reaction to a political event, it showed many of the systematic exclusive issues within the MoMA displays that disregarded the modern art outside the Euro-American context.

This approach could also be seen in other museums. In an interview discussing the LACMA’s decision to collect and exhibit modern and contemporary art from WANA, the curator Komaroff states ‘My colleagues in the contemporary art department were not particularly interested in the Middle East.’ Unlike the BM, LACMA possesses a considerable collection of modern and contemporary art that features primarily European and American artists. The disinterest of contemporary art curators that Komaroff notes, reflects many museums continuous inclination towards geographically locating modern and contemporary art in the west and excluding what is considered the peripheries from their choices. Collecting art from WANA and adding it to collections of regional art or Islamic art, allows the museums to have an appearance of internationalism and globalism, without having to disturb their narratives and discourses.

These approaches are primarily due to the underlying assumption that modern art outside the western world is derivative from western modern art and lacks originality. Which brings me to another question that was omitted in Without Boundary: the influence of Islamic art on modern western art. Daftari included Viola and Kelley in the exhibition to complicate the question labelling the art based on the artist’s identity. However, Daftari previous research focused on the influence of Islamic, particularly Persian art, on Gauguin and Matisse. Within a museum that is crowded by the work of both artists, omitting such question could be problematic. This continues the museum old standing narratives that were solidified in the 1985 exhibition Primitivism in the 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. The exhibition was highly criticised for its displays and interpretations of ‘tribal’ art, and its erasure of colonial violence. But as Partha Mitter notes, the exhibition highlights

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209 Mason-Campbell, “LACMA’s Islamic Art Curator on How Her Ambitious New Exhibition Reveals Another Side of Iran.”
the difference between western and non-western artists when it comes to influence and borrowing. Unlike non-western artists borrowing the vocabulary of western modernism, Picasso and his contemporaneous western artists borrowing from other cultures does not impact the originality of their work.\textsuperscript{211}

On the contrary, as Christopher Reed affirms, in the western modern art narratives to ‘discover’ different cultures is to be original.\textsuperscript{212} Nonetheless, the discourses surrounding influence outside the western art continue to be restrained within the museum displays. As Thomas McEvilley notes in his review of the \textit{Primitivism} exhibition, the curators through the display and analysis included in the catalogue wanted to present modern art and modernism as a creative act and not as an appropriation. Hence, they employed chronology and dates of the early display of ‘tribal’ art, to suggest ‘that the European artists were on the verge of producing forms similar to primitive ones on their own account—so positively ready to do so, in fact, that the influx of primitive objects was redundant.’\textsuperscript{213}

In his review of \textit{Primitivism}, Hal Foster asked ‘did MoMA in fact pose a new model of modernism here, one based not on transformation within but on transgression without - an engagement with an outside (tribal traditions, popular cultures) that might disrupt the order of Western art and thought?’ Through his analysis, Foster argues that the transgressive was blocked through the exhibition, the museum pretended to disrupt its formal and narrative unity to only re-establish it.\textsuperscript{214} McEvilley contends that the MoMA collection was not only based on the formalist view, but on the idea that this formalism ‘will never pass, will never lose its self-validating power.’ But following a late 1970s influence of Frankfurt thinkers and postmodern relativism, the universal aesthetic and absolutist view of formalist modernism were threatened, hence the museum organised the exhibition as a new defence and brought the ‘primitives’ in an attempt to revalidate the modernist aesthetics ‘By demonstrating that the ‘innocent’ creativity of primitives naturally expresses a Modernist esthetic feeling, one

\textsuperscript{211}Mitter, ”Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery.”
\textsuperscript{212} Reed, ”Alienation,” p. 14.
may seem to have demonstrated once again that Modernism itself is both innocent and universal.  

Recent displays of modern and contemporary art from WANA at MoMA do not fall far from this approach. The displays would appear as inclusive gestures and an attempt to engage with non-western art. Following Without Boundary, most of the artworks by modern artists remained unexhibited. Even the 2017 Travel Ban Rehang was an unplanned gesture unintended to answer any issue in relation to the museum, its collection and displays. Despite the museum’s directors and curators’ multiple references to redressing the museums practices, and attempts of more inclusive approaches, both displays omitted the issues of global modernism and alternative modernities and remained constrained to regional topics and questions of identity. The questions of the artworks’ place and relation to the museum’s collection, especially the modern art collection, remained unaddressed.

Moreover, the display included artists who contributed to the American art scene, such as Siah Armajani. Unlike the other artists, Armajani has been exhibited multiple times at the MoMA. The first time being in 1970 at exhibition Information which brought together some of the latest creations by young artists. The same year Armajani published the manifesto of public art in America and throughout his career he created many public artworks in different cities across the US. Armajani was not a leading figure in different contexts of modernism, but even within the context that the MoMA has adopted. Yet, when the travel ban Rehang happened, there were no reference to the contributions of many artists, such as Armajani, to the American art.

a. The exclusive universalism

Although Without Boundary was set to challenge the concept of unity, centralising the question of ‘Islamic or not’ narrowed the curator’s choices and argument. Daftari acknowledges that her selection of artworks was limited by their reference to elements or vocabulary of traditional Islamic art. This approach however, hindered the exhibition’s

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216 Daftari, "Introducing Art from the Middle East and Its Diaspora into Western Institutions: Benefits and Dilemmas," p. 193.
engagement with MoMA’s own narratives and displays. The exhibition was a response to the growing categorisation and labelling of the modern and contemporary art from WANA as Islamic. However, this was not an issue within the MoMA’s narratives, as the museum does not possess a category of Islamic art. This does not imply that curators and museums can only organise exhibitions that align with or address their dominant discourses. Nonetheless, in a way, the exhibition introduced the discourses linked to Islamic art and essentialised identity into the museum, while at the same time overlooking the issues related to modern art from WANA from within museum displays.

The exhibition included art made since the 1990s by artists mostly based in London and New York. Apart from the two American-born artists Bill Viola and Mike Kelley, whose work was included as answer to the danger of ghettoising, only Mona Hatoum was previously exhibited at the MoMA. One could argue that many were emerging artists at the time which explains their absence from exhibitions. However, many artists like Y.Z. Kami, Kutlug Ataman, Marjane Strapi, Rachid Koraichi, Ghada Amer were not exhibited at the MoMA since Without Boundary. Even the work of Neshat, based and working in New York for decades, was featured in only one of the museum’s displays. This echoes the museums’ longstanding disregard of the modern art from WANA that continues today. In the panel discussion mentioned earlier, Lowry thanked Daftari for ‘creating a context at the Museum of Modern Art for looking at art that falls outside, normally, the boundaries of the kind of modernism that this institution has traditionally looked at.’ Nevertheless, that art remained outside these boundaries even following the exhibition.

Interestingly, Mona Hatoum, one of the artists included in Without Boundary, was invited to curate a display at the MoMA in 2003 as part of the Artist’s Choice series. Here is Elsewhere included as selection of sixty artworks that reflected Hatoum artistic practices in terms of medium, concepts and themes. Hatoum choices, started with artworks reflecting the feminism in the 1970s with Cindy Sherman’s photographs who was ‘the only female artists well presented in the collection from that period.’ The 1970s were important for Hatoum as that was the period of her arrival to London and encountering feminist art and theories. And

217 Daftari, "Introducing Art from the Middle East and Its Diaspora into Western Institutions: Benefits and Dilemmas."
218 MoMA, "Without Boundary: Meditations on Truth."
it is when contemporary Western art became her own context. As she noted her choice was limited by the ‘Museums policies and bias, toward American art.’ None of the artists included in Without Boundary appeared in that display, although some of their artworks were in the collection. The point here, is that, in many of these exhibitions the artists’ own connections and affinities they evoke or are inspired by, rarely appear.

The Travel Ban Rehang in 2017 was the first time some artworks from the museum’s collection were displayed in decades. According to the museum’s master checklist, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi’s $K+L+32+H+4$. Mon Père et Moi [My Father and I] (fig. 1.9) (1962), as well as the work of another Iranian artist Faramarz Pilaram, were purchased from the Iranian pavilion at the 1962 Venice Biennale. $K+L+32+H+4$ was then exhibited in 1964 among the Recent Acquisitions: South Asian Painting. The Sudanese artist Ibrahim el-Salahi’s The Mosque (fig. 1.10) (1964) was acquired in 1965 by MoMA’s then-director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. who met the artist during his travel to New York, after receiving the Rockefeller Foundation Grant. The same year, the Iranian artist Marcos Grigorian’s Untitled (fig. 1.11) (1963) was acquired and exhibited in 1966 among the museum’s Recent Acquisition: Painting and Sculpture. The Prophet (1962/63) (fig. 1.12) by the Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli’s entered the museum’s collection in 1968. But none of these artworks have been displayed at the MoMA until the 2017 temporary rehang.

The artworks mentioned above did exist within the museum’s collection for half a century, but there were no efforts to contextualise and display them. This is not surprising given that the museum has been known, and criticised, for its predominantly western narratives and displays. Even when eventually these artworks were exhibited, these questions remained out of discussion. What was missed in the conversation and discourses is the fact that artists such as el-Salahi, Zenderoudi, Tanavoli, Grigorian and Pilaram are not only Iranians, Sudanese, Iraqis, Muslims... They are leading figures of modern art in different contexts. Contexts that as Lowry noted in 2006, usually fall outside the museum’s display and definition of modern art.
The *Travel Ban Rehang*, was one of the rare occasions of disturbance of the museum’s traditional formalist narrative of modernism established in the mid-century. The MoMA’s permanent installation of masterpieces was created in the 1958, ‘devoting a good deal of the Museum’s space to what were deemed the classics of modern art.’ This installation enhanced the sense that these artworks present the exemplars of ideal canon. The ideal canon was, and remained, exclusively western. The choice to display these artworks among the artworks from the early twentieth century was framed as an arresting gesture. However, that choice disregarded the historical context and connections. The artworks made in the 1960s were presented next to the work of Matisse and Picasso from earlier periods, presenting them, as late derivation, especially with the earlier generations of artists like Ziapour who introduced the discourses of modernism and influenced the 1960s artists. Furthermore, the work of the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists like Zenderoudi and Tanavoli was labelled as ‘Spiritual Pop Art’ by Karman Diba. Although the label is debated by other historians, as Kashmirshekan notes, it cannot be totally ignored. But the multiple influences that led to the movement emergence cannot be simply reduced to an influence from early modern European artists. His use of elements from the popular culture and traditional visual language differs from Picasso’s use of African mask, or even Matisse using Persian miniatures and carpets. Tanavoli’s work was partly a response to the art commercialisation, reflecting the discourses of the 1960s. Placing these artworks among the art from earlier period, hence, disregarded these histories and connections.

This is a practice that continues within the MoMA’s display. For example, in 2019, the museum opened its expanded galleries with a new rehanging of the collection including more artists from marginalised identities. The project did receive praise for many critics, however, as the feminist curator Maura Reilly noted, it presented many issues. The museum included *American People Series No. 20: Die* (1967), the monumental artwork by Faith Ringgold, in a room full of Picasso’s artworks, drawing connections between the artwork and Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937). This approach, however, presents Ringgold as ‘derivative of Picasso,’ when

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221 Kashmirshekan, "Neo-traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The Saqqa-khaneh School in the 1960s."
she was not only influenced by Picasso. Ringgold work from the 1960s was inspired by the writings of James Baldwin and influenced the work of Jacob Lawrence as well as different artistic practices from Zaire.

These displays and approaches by the museum, from the travel ban rehang to the 2019 rehang, do not really address the issues in the museum’s narratives. They do not explore the artworks in their own time, nor look at connections. In a way, these approaches suggest that being displayed next to Picasso is a form of validation or recognition for these artists, hence, the is no need to discuss the other aspects and influence. The travel ban rehangs along with the statements and discussions carried by the curators suggest that the artists deserve to be included temporarily within the permanent display because they are facing political prejudices and biases outside the museum based on their identity. But it totally overlooked that, based on these same identities, the artists faced and continue to face biases within the museum itself.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter raised many questions concerning the recent exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA in western museums and explored various aspects related to regional exhibitions. As it has been shown, the a-historical perspective combined with a focus on essentialised identity are highlighted to evidence unity. However, these approaches are overlooking the critical studies of both Islamic art and modern art.

Recently, there has been a trend towards ‘ahistorical’ exhibition in western museums, thus could these exhibitions of art from WANA be seen in the same trend? Not really. The ahistorical exhibitions abandon the traditional chronological arrangement aiming to reveal different sets of correspondences.222 But a central element of these ahistorical displays is that they bring together artworks from different periods and cultures, artworks that seemingly have no connections, and attempt to draw these correspondences. ‘This is [a] way of approaching the utopia of art, that is revealing art’s utopian potential: art whose dream of

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total freedom offers a counterweight to the unfree nationalistic state.'\textsuperscript{223} Les Magiciens de la Terre is one example, and as many other examples, it fails to attain that utopia.\textsuperscript{224}

But even with these shortcomings, the ahistorical exhibitions remain different from the exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA. The latter start with the assumption of unity, but rarely do they try to untangle the correspondences. The exhibitions and choices seem to rely on a presupposition of unity and otherness. This ‘otherness’ would supposedly not allow the western viewer to connect or understand the art unless it is presented within these configurations. Unless grouped together, displayed for a western viewer to understand this ‘other’ and its story, the individual artwork is assumed to have little to no artistic or aesthetic value. Or if it does have it, the western viewer is unable to grasp it due to the cultural differences and experiences. This, also, have been used as reason to exclude the non-western artists from collections of modern and contemporary art.

Within these approaches, artworks are seen as cultural objects, and art scenes dissolve within the social and political context of the presumed WANA. A key aspect of diversity is narratives, as museums expand their collections, what remains untouched are narratives. Diversifying a collection does not equate diversifying narratives. The displays or curatorial approaches mostly lack the critical engagement with the museum’s collection and narratives nor with its history. Especially the narratives of modern art. ‘By selecting, framing, and interpreting peripheral art in exhibitions and exhibition catalogues, for instance, art curators can claim to be shaping a more democratic space where specific cultural groups can recognize themselves.’\textsuperscript{225} While the displays of contemporary art have seen some inclusions, it is the modernism that remains out of question.

The national/geographic categorisation, and the inclusion of modern and contemporary art within the collection of Islamic art provide museums with a way to avoid the questions regarding exclusions. More importantly, it allows museums to keep their title as gatekeepers of an exclusive modernism. Historically, museums as colonial entities have been instrumental in establishing hierarchy in arts and cultures. Since the rise of Modern art

\textsuperscript{223}Meijers, "The Museum and The ‘Ahistorical’ Exhibition," p. 8.

\textsuperscript{224} Meijers, "The Museum and The ‘Ahistorical’ Exhibition."

in the west, museums have also contributed to building gates that would ensure the exclusivity of modernism. While the addition of art and artists from WANA might seem-or be presented- as a step towards diversity and inclusion, it is still a conditioned and limited.

The approaches discussed above have gained popularity in the Western context since the mid-twentieth century. However, the emergence of globalism and postcolonial studies in the 1990s has had a significant impact on the discourses surrounding non-Western modern and contemporary arts. This shift led to a greater recognition of alternative modernities and the inclusion of diverse narratives in the discussion. As this chapter revealed, these concepts were present in some exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and North Africa (WANA) during the 1990s, but they gradually faded away in later years. This decline can be attributed, at least in part, to the politically charged environment that followed the events of 9/11. The impact of political context on art and discourses can be expected. However, it is concerning to observe the extent to which the discourses have regressed and moved backward.

The discourses generated by the exhibition of modern and contemporary art from WANA, on the one hand, echo the early perception and categorisation of Islamic art, which have been heavily criticised by Islamic art experts. On the other hand, they recall the early and mid-twentieth century discourses and perception of non-western art that the studies of alternative modernities have been trying to counter and challenge since the 1990s. Hence, while Islamic art studies and alternative modernities studies have been challenging grand narratives of universalism, unity and exclusivity, the exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA seem confined to these narratives.
Figure 1.1 Tala Madani, Seeking Cake Inside, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 24x 31 cm. Saatchi Gallery. © Tala Madani
Figure 1.2 Shirin Neshat, Paulita Cowboy, 2019, digital C-Print with ink and acrylic paint, 120 x 80 cm (from the series Land of Dreams). © Shirin Neshat © Gladstone Gallery, New York & Brussels; Goodman Gallery, London
Figure 1.3 Shakir Hassan AlSaid, Evacuation We Will Return, 1983. Mixed Media on Board, 122x 101.5 cm. Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. ©Shakir Hassan AlSaid © Barjeel Art Foundation
Figure 1.5 Walid Raad, AG_AFF: ABLF/61-62, 2003. Color print, 24 x 30 cm. © Walid Raad/The Atlas Group.

Figure 1.6 Jalil Ziapour, Zaynab Khatoun, 1953, repainted in 1962, oil on canvas, 127 x 117 cm. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.© TMoCA
Figure 1.7 Ramses Younan, Untitled, 1939. Oil on Canvas, 46.5 x 35.5 cm. Sheikh Hassan M. A. Al-Thani Collection. © Estate of Ramses Younan
Figure 1.8 Alfred H. Barr, Jr. "Flow chart" diagram of art movements, from the jacket of the catalogue for the 1936 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, Cubism and Abstract Art. © MoMA
Figure 1.9 Charles Hossein Zenderoudi K+L+32+H+4. Mon Père et Moi (My Father and I), 1962. Felt-tip pen, coloured ink, crayon, and metallic paint on paper on board, 225.9 x 148.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Philip Johnson Fund. © Charles Hossein Zenderoudi ©MoMA
Figure 1.10 Ibrahim El-Salahi, The Mosque, 1964. Oil on canvas, 30.7 x 46 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Fund. ©Ibrahim el-Salahi ©MoMA
Figure 1.11 Marcos Grigorian, Untitled, 1963. Dried earth on canvas, 84.9 x 80.9 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Alex J. Gray. ©Marcos Grigorian ©MoMA
Figure 1.12 Parviz Tanavoli, The Prophet, 1962/63. Bronze, 67.9 x 16.5 x 10.1 cm (including base). Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Parviz Tanavoli ©MoMA
Chapter Two Modern women artists: Belonging and recognition in local and western art scenes.

Many institutions refer to their acquisitions of modern and contemporary artworks from WANA artists since the 70s and sometimes earlier, but it was rarely exhibited whether in regional exhibition or in more general displays. Until 2000, the exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA in western cities were limited to few galleries and curated by experts from the region like Rose Issa and Salwa Nashahibi. Nevertheless, many artists from the region were working and exhibiting in western cities and galleries since the early decades of the twentieth century. For most of the mid-twentieth century, many artists from the region were studying, practicing, and exhibiting in western cities. Women artists were especially present.

In many recent exhibitions, we see a focus on the theme of women in art, however, this focus is on women as a theme with artworks representing gender issues and women status and struggles in society. There is less focus on women as artists and their contributions to the art scenes and the challenges they faced. Therefore, many artists who did not address gender issues and politics were overlooked. These approaches not only neglect the careers of these artists, but also creates a stereotype of women artists and their art. Just like artists from the Middle East are expected to produce art that is related to the region instead of ‘generic themes and works’ that might connect them to a global art scene, women artists are expected to produce work about women in the region or in Muslim societies. They are expected to tell a story, not to produce an aesthetic/artistic -apolitical- work which is still considered as exclusive to male European artists, especially abstract artworks.

I will discuss in this chapter the work of four women artists from the Arab world, Iran, and Turkey, considered as pioneers of abstract art in different art scenes. The artists are Fahrelnissa Zeid (Turkey, 1901-1991), Madiha Omar (Syria, 1908-2005), Saloua Raouda Choucair (Lebanon, 1916-2017) and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (Iran, 1922-2019). Each of these artists had a different path on a personal as well as artistic level. I will argue that their work challenges the notions of unity and identity. Though their work might show

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226 The three artists were born in the Ottoman Empire before its fall after WW1.
some influences from Islamic arts, it was also influenced by the different cultures and
civilisations in the region as well as the modern European practices, and each artist
interpreted the art and aesthetic in her own view and created a unique body of work.

In 2017, the Tate Modern presented the first solo exhibition/retrospective of
Fahrelnissa Zeid’s work. Described as ‘The Painter Princess,’ the gallery referred to her as ‘one
of the greatest female artists of the twentieth century.’ Zeid, the Turkish artist, was not
however a stranger to the British art scene. Her career that developed from the late 1930s till
her death in 1991 expanded between different cities, from Istanbul to London, Paris, and
finally Amman with short intervals in Baghdad, Berlin, and New York. In 1954, Zeid was the
first woman artist to be exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary arts in London. That,
however, does not explain the Tate emphasise on Zeid’s gender when declaring her greatness,
is she one of the greatest female artists of the twentieth century, or greatest artists, and what
is the difference?

Many artists from the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey established themselves as part of
wider art scenes and were exhibiting along their contemporaneous European and American
artists since the 1950s. Nevertheless, many of these artists were overlooked and forgotten
later and their work resurfaced lately with the new tendencies of exhibiting ‘Islamic’ and
‘Middle Eastern’ art. Three of the artists explored in this chapter had recent retrospectives in
major western museums, however, as soon as the exhibitions are over, their work is barely
shown again. The problem is not merely that these artists worked in the peripheries and were
never seen in western cities, galleries, and institutions. Many of them were exhibited
internationally, but they were always linked, in a way or another to their race, ethnicity,
religion…. The case is that these artists, like many women artists, were systematically
removed from the writing of modern art history. Are the same processes still adopted now?
Is there actually an effort/intention to correct the exclusivity of art history narratives?

Modern abstraction seems to be a domain where the discussions of binary
contradiction and identity are amplified. Between the materialism/spirituality,
eastern/western, traditional/modern, local/global, personal/generic, the different forms and

styles of abstraction led to different approaches and interpretations. After the emergence of abstract art in Europe during the first half of the 20th century, artists and theorists attempted to abolish the derogative connotation related to decoration and design and associated with abstraction especially with the Bauhaus. Although they succeeded to a certain degree, ornaments and decoration were not seen as high art. There was still a separation between ‘pure’ abstract art and ‘decorative’ abstraction. Paul Klee’s work was described as decorative and associated with the feminine aspects which led to a pejorative perception. Abstract art was the triumph and the death of modern art. The core modern art is usually situated between two abstract movements, Kandinsky’s first abstract painting and the minimalist movement. Its history has been almost exclusive to white male artists. Very few women have been able to break that exclusivity until recently. In 2001, a book was published in the occasion of the exhibition Ornament and abstraction, the book title was *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue Between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art*. The title itself already separates and contrasts the non-western and the modern and the contemporary. None of the modern and contemporary artists from outside the western world is presented. Islamic art is usually described as abstract, however in most exhibition of what is currently labelled as ‘modern and contemporary Islamic art,’ abstract art is the least exhibited form.

Rosalind Krauss, one of the leading figures of formalist approach, discussed and criticised these narratives in 1972 in *A view of Modernism*. Published in Artforum, the article marked her breaking away from Greenberg and Fried’s formalism. Krauss starts the article by referring to an encounter between Fried and student during the exhibition *Three Americans Painters* at the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Responding to the student’s question about what is good about Frank Stella’s work, Fried said ‘there are days when Stella goes to the Metropolitan Museum. And he sits for hours looking at the Velazquezes, utterly knocked out by them and then he goes back to his studio. What he would like more than anything else is to paint like Velázquez. But what he knows is that that is an option that is not open to him. So he paints stripes. […] He wants to be Velázquez so he paints stripes.’ As Krauss notes, the value of the artwork, within such theory, is not within the artwork itself, but within the

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narrative and history of its medium. The value and importance, the meaning of the work and its purism could only be found in its insertion into a consecutive lineage of paintings. ‘If someone asks us what’ so good about a painting by Stella and our answer is that he has to paint stripes because of Manet, etc., etc., and Impressionism, etc., etc., and then Cubism, and then onto a history of the necessity of flatness, what we have made the Stella painting into is a particular kind of screen onto which we project a special form of narrative.’

The issue with this narrative, from a formal and aesthetic point of view, is the limitation it poses on art, as Krauss explain. Abstraction would be the culmination of modern art, but also its end.

The feminist reading of art history brought different criticism. In 1978 Joyce Kozloff and Valerie Jaudon wrote *Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture* which became a de facto manifesto of the art movement *Pattern and Decoration* that emerged during the 1970s in the US focusing on exploring patterns and what has been called applied/ornamental arts. ‘In rereading the basic texts of Modern Art, we came to realize that the prejudice against the decorative has a long history and is based on hierarchies: fine art above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art, men’s art above women’s art.’

The Pattern and Decoration movement involved the work of many feminist artists working around that period...the movement was set to reject the notion of applied art, decoration and ornaments being ‘minor’ arts. The article argued that decoration and ornaments were seen as inferior due to many reasons, mostly related to sexism and racism in the art world and art history. Kozloff and Jaudon collected quotes from different western male art historians, writers, artists, and critics in the first half of the twentieth century. These quotes mostly labelled ‘decorative’ as a degrading feature of a work. Furthermore, the article focused on the way all forms of non-western arts, especially Islamic arts were seen as inferior and less creative than western arts. The same applies to women’s art. Kozloff and Jaudon shared two lists of notions and terms that has been dominating the art history and its language and dividing the arts between good and bad.

Within the discipline of art history, the following words are continuously used to characterize what has been called ‘high art’: man, mankind, the individual man, individuality, humans, humanity, the human figure, humanism, civilization, culture,

230 Krauss, "A View of Modernism."

the Greeks, the Romans, the English, Christianity, spirituality, transcendence, religion, nature, true form, science, logic, purity, evolution, revolution, progress, truth, freedom, creativity, action, war, virility, violence, brutality, dynamism, power and greatness. In the same texts other words are used repeatedly in connection with so-called ‘low art’: Africans, Orientals, Persians, Slovaks, peasants, the lower classes, women, children, savages, pagans, sensuality, pleasure, decadence, chaos, anarchy, impotence, exotica, eroticism, artifice, tattoos, cosmetics, ornament, decoration, carpets, weaving, patterns, domesticity, wallpaper, fabrics, and furniture.\textsuperscript{232}

*Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture* refers to the history of art as it was until the 80s. Some changes have happened since that time; today we can notice more exhibitions of women artists and non-western artists in most institutions. The impact of these exhibitions, however, is still debatable. ‘Over the past decade, just 29,247 works by female artists were acquired by 26 top museums in the United States, out of 260,470 total works. The barometer of achievement for female artists, experts agree, is not the number of solo and group exhibitions they are given, which are often less expensive and easier to mount, but direct purchases by the museum for their permanent collections, as well as donations.’\textsuperscript{233} Museums especially have been the guards of Modern art exclusivity.\textsuperscript{234} Their permanent collections have been the haven for white male artists whose works display a singular narrative of art history, ‘the moral superiority of western art and culture.’\textsuperscript{235} The history of art narratives and books, institutions and museums, sales and auctions are still dominated by the same white male artists. Most of the permanent collections are still overwhelming dominated by the same artists. The difference is that there are few more seasonal exhibitions accumulating many artworks of women and non-western artists with barely any question about where these artists fit in the museums’ collections and how the artworks could be integrated into the narratives and history of art.

\textsuperscript{232} Kozloff and Jaudon, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture."
\textsuperscript{235} Kozloff and Jaudon, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture."
This chapter is firstly about exploring and discussing the work and career of some of these artists. Through this discussion and through comparison of their work, two main arguments can be furthered, first that the assumption of unity in the region art and the labels of Modern middle eastern art or Modern Islamic art is inaccurate and reductive. Second, that the identity of these artists, as women from Muslim societies, is one of the reasons behind the interest in exhibiting them. However, this interest is conditioned by the themes and styles of their work and how much it indicates their identity. I will argue that their choice of making abstract art and not presenting any themes related to women is behind their neglect from art history and institutions later, and that the current curatorial approaches are deepening this neglect and estrangement.

Exhibiting and studying the work of women artists could be risky as some would see it a further segregation that could have the same implication of exhibiting Middle Eastern art. However, again the main issue here is interpretation and the way the artists and the work are presented. Exhibiting more artists from WANA or from any country and region that has been neglected is a necessity, however, labelling and categorising these arts is the issue. The same goes for women artists, women in general, in all societies have not yet attained equality and justice, the art world especially is still far from equality. Therefore, it is important to focus more on women’s work and acknowledge the obstacles that privileged male artists do not face. However, this is not a call for double standards in treating the artworks, nor it is in anyway a reason to argue for some special ‘feminine’ characteristics that differentiate the work of female artists. This study is also not to say that these artists did not deserve the recognition they got at certain times, or that their work was in any way overestimated. It is to say the total opposite. These artists did create a significant body of work, overcome many challenges, and had a clear concept of their own artistic vision. However, the focus on their identity had limited the understanding of these visions and with it, limited their recognition and acknowledgment as part of Modern art history.

In a study of Modern and contemporary art in Iran, Fereshteh Daftari, curator and scholar of modern art, mentions that ‘[the] recognition of Farmanfarmaian can be credited not to a more open embrace of decoration but rather to the greater visibility of Middle Eastern artists, especially women, and the increasing recognition by museums of a need for
 inclusiveness.’ Daftari also argues that the international recognition, though arrived late in the case of Farmanfarmaian, is yet to be enjoyed by artists who ‘do not overtly display a Persian cultural provenance’ and that artists like Behjat Sadr (1924-2009), an Iranian woman artist who studied art in Italy and moved to Paris after the Iranian revolution, made abstract paintings that did not reflect her identity and was marginalized for these reasons.

This study will take this argument further, demonstrating that these approaches are not recent, but have been employed since the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, although these artists had some moments of recognition during the second half of the twentieth century, the recognition did not last. Every few years, one of these artists is rediscovered by institutions, exhibited, and forgotten again. I would argue that the reason behind this cycle is the interest in identity over art, in the cultural heritage over personal and individual vision, and in the lack of addressing the questions regarding modern art narratives and exclusive canon. And that in regards of women artists from the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (or what was traditionally known as the core Islamic world), the western interest in the identity of the artists as ‘exotic’ women from Muslim societies was sometimes greater than their interest in the art they made, with a fixated necessity to link every art they make to an imagined ‘Oriental/ Islamic/ Eastern...’ identity.

Furthermore, these approaches are continued now but on a different level. While artists whose abstract work could be visually connected to their identity got more recognition, they still get less exposure than the new tendencies in creating political and social art and including ‘Muslim’ women as a theme in the art. To take the example provided by Daftari, Farmanfarmaian did get more recognition than Sadr, however this recognition is still minimal compared to artists like Shirin Neshat. Even for Neshat, her early series Women of Allah and Rapture that deal directly with the theme of women and Islam in Iran after the revolution are the most acquired and exhibited by western museums. The artists discussed in this chapter had long artistic careers and contributed, each in a different way, in various art scenes. But regardless of their achievements and accomplishments, they are still underrepresented in

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collections and in exhibitions. Even in recent western museums’ exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from the region, these artists are not always included.

I. Fahrelnissa Zeid: expressive abstractionist

Born in 1901 to a privileged upper-bourgeois Ottoman family, Fahrelnissa Shakir Kabaaghacli’s youth years were marked by the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Turkish nationalism especially with the Young Turks access to power in 1908. The multicultural, multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire was coming to an end and the local national movements were growing. After graduating from school, around 1918, she attended the Inas Sanayi-I Nefise Mektebi, [The School of Fine Arts for Girls] which was founded in 1914. There she studied painting, drawing and anatomy. The school was the first to teach live female nude drawing in Turkey. Zeid started her career as part of d Group. A collective of young Turkish modern artists with styles influenced by Cubism and Futurism. The aim of the group was to reflect the modern face of the young republic. Zeid participated in few of their group exhibitions but was not very immerse in the politics and nationalism. As for solo exhibitions, she decided to host them in an appartement in Istanbul that she had rented and used to host events and salons. Though some galleries had opened in Istanbul at that time, Zeid preferred not to work with any of them and exhibited in a private space. For her first solo in Istanbul in 1945, she exhibited 172 artworks that she had painted in Turkey and Baghdad.\(^{238}\) Her collaboration with the group did not last long however, due to many reasons. As she later stated, she felt unsure and isolated in Turkey due to her social status. Also, in terms of artistic style, her work was not aligned with the d Group which was mostly focused on cubism while hers had a more expressive side. And although the group never focused on nationalist and patriotic themes, its members were involved in politics and in the creation of national feeling, which she was not interested in. Zeid tried to distance her work from any political, social, national, or activist movements or concepts. Even when asked about feminism, in an interview in 1959, her response was ‘I have never been a militant feminist and I hate to think of my paintings as expressions of a faith of this kind.’\(^{239}\)

\(^{238}\) Laïdi-Hanieh, Fahrelnissa Zeid: Painter of Inner Worlds. p. 73.
\(^{239}\) Roditi, Dialogues in Art, p. 196.
Zeid is known for her monumental paintings that she started creating by the early 1950s. Immense abstract composition in sizes that sometimes exceeded five meters with kaleidoscopic patterns (fig 2.7, 2.8). The scale of these paintings was unusual at that time and are almost only be seen in Picasso’s Guernica and in the work of the American artist Jackson Pollock. Though Zeid had lived many major political events and drastic changes, such as the founding of the Turkish republic, the rise of Nazism (which she experienced first-hand while she resided in Germany where her husband was ambassador), WW2 and the Iraqi revolution, these themes never directly appeared in her work. However, when these events affected her personal life directly, it manifested through some changes in her artistic style. Her work was partly an expression of her personal emotions and circumstances, therefore however they changed, the work changed. In 1923, her eldest son died of scarlet fever, ‘I felt I was a tree whose branches were being hacked off with big axe’, she told her daughter Shirin. This tragedy pushed Zeid to painting extensively. Zeid wrote many poems and expressed her thoughts and work processes in her diaries, where she also quoted some of her preferred writers and discussed the spirituality in art. The following extract, taken from a lengthy text, shows her internal monologue and the process of her work, how she dealt with the paintings. She was focused on colours, values, light, and visual balance in her work.

‘I have to sustain in the corner above, the fire of the cadmium red at the same degree as the dominant red, the summit of the tableau like a bloodied horizon of intense life. […] The hardest starts by where to paint after the attack of directions. One must advance. Charge. Reinforce, solidify, advance expressions, necessity, to coordinate, coordination of the jet- and this cataclysm of a thousand ideas!’

Zeid artistic career and style have seen many changes over different phases. Her early work was figurative, semi-abstract (fig. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). That was mostly the work she did in Turkey and Baghdad and in her first year in London until 1947. She then moved to abstract painting (fig. 2.5). Her abstract phase was the longest, between 1947 and 1969 spent between London, Paris, and Ischia, and saw her experiments with different styles of abstraction, from the highly detailed colourful work to larger organic surfaces. In the middle of her abstract paintings, she also experimented with painting on different material. Using chicken bones as

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her canvas and covering it with resin, she created her three-dimensional works that she called *paleokrystalos* (fig. 2.6). Her last phase, from 1975 until 1991 in Amman, was a return to figurative art and portraiture. However, it is important to note that these phases overlapped, and her work was not static. ‘Eventually, I do not see a major difference between a portrait and an abstract,’ she said in an interview ‘because one could make one hundred portraits, and every time it would be different because it is not the photo, it is the soul.’\(^{242}\) Being a prolific artist, she used to work on different styles at the same times. Hence, many portraits date back to the 1960s, when she was still creating abstract art. The portraits created during this period (fig. 2.9) were different from earlier portraits and escape her overall style’s characteristics. Here we see the details, the strict clear lines and bold pure colours disappearing. The colours are more transparent, overlapping with no clear cuts. In most of these phases, three elements could always be seen: colours, movement, and details.

The portraits especially show the change in her work and the influence of abstraction on her style. When they were exhibited in Paris for the first time in 1972, some critics linked them to ‘Byzantine effigies’ and ‘Persian miniatures’, the portraits however show more resemblance to Roman Al-Fayum portraits in Egypt.\(^{243}\) Nevertheless, compared to her early portraits, a significant difference could be spotted, although the same short fast brushstrokes can be seen in both. In her early portraits, we can see a more realistic approach with the details of the face, the creases of her clothes, the waves of the hair. These however disappear in the later portraits. As she explains in a video interview, she would ask her models to sit meters away from her, to avoid seeing the details and to ‘gain a general view, to see the presence of the person, and perhaps their soul.’\(^{244}\) In these portraits, the face occupies the total space of the large canvas, therefore, unless seen from a distance, it is hard to capture the full face. The closer the viewer gets to the painting the more it would seem like an abstract composition.

In 1947, Zeid reflected her artistic route and shift from figuration to abstraction in a painting, *Fighting Abstraction* (fig. 2.4). The painting marks the appearance of the earliest abstract kaleidoscopic patterns coupled with some deconstructed faces and a hand. Her initial

\(^{242}\) Tate, "Fahrelnissa Zeid – 'She Was the East and the West'," (2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLec_T5LLBA. (Accessed 07/06/2022)


\(^{244}\) Tate, "Fahrelnissa Zeid – 'She Was the East and the West'."
concepts and ideas about art were related to figuration and forms, as she notes, but when later that started to change, it was mainly for emotional, spiritual, and visual reasons. ‘I did not “intend” to become an abstract painter; I was a person working very conventionally with forms and values. But flying by plane transformed me … The world is upside down. A whole city could be held in your hand: the world seen from above.’

This impact of viewing the elements from a distance could also explain her later process in portraiture.

a. *Exhibitions and Art Reception: from 1949 to 2017*

In 1949, Zeid had her first solo exhibition at the Colette Allendy gallery in Paris. The following years would see the rise of her artistic career in Paris. A member of the Nouvelle Ecole de Paris from 1952, Zeid was exhibited regularly at the modernist international Salon de Réalités Nouvelles. During Zeid’s lifetime and in many of her solo exhibitions in different western cities, she was presented as an ‘Oriental artist.’ Most exhibition’s preface and critiques referred to her nationality and religion and assumed that her abstraction was a direct influence of Islamic art aniconism.

In the preface to one of Zeid’s exhibitions in Paris, the French author Andre Maurois ‘praised Zeid’s work for its originality, while seeing in it evocations of the “oriental carpets”, “primitives Byzantines”, and “Batiks of Java”, which are “dictated by her hereditary instincts”, among which are the influence of “Arab artists” and of their “Saracen disciples”, to whom “figurative art was forbidden [...] [and who] had to express themselves by forms with no other precise meaning than their beauty”.

These notions were echoed in the New York Times review of Zeid’s first show in New York in 1950. The review notes that ‘In her abstract paintings at Hugo Gallery, Princess Zeid, wife of Ambassador of Iraq to the court of St James, makes no concessions to Western art. Abstraction comes naturally to an Arabian artist to whom figurative art is forbidden. Squares and lozenges and spheres of bright color flow on to the canvas with the unrelieved brightness. In design as in spirit, they recall the decorative arts of the Near East. Also shown here are stones and pebbles that she has ingeniously decorated.’

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While Maurois ‘praised’ Zeid’s work for its originality, his comments and analysis are degrading and reflect an Orientalist view. As he uses Orientalist terms and mixes the different cultures in the region, he even includes the Indonesian Java among these cultures. This reflects the reductive approach towards the non-Western cultures that prevailed at that time, not very far from the perception of Baya. Charles Estienne, on the other hand, compared her work to naive French painter Seraphine de Senlis who was working during the 1920s. ‘Zeid, too, Estienne implies, shares a femininity linked to the decorative, to excess, and to the naive, which separates her abstraction from, say, that of the ‘theorised’ geometric production of August Herbin or Victor Vasarely, her contemporaries.’ Moreover, if we refer to Kozloff and Jaudon arguments, the use of the terms ‘primitive’, ‘byzantine’, ‘oriental’, ‘feminine’ becomes problematic and poses more questions on how Zeid’s art and identity were viewed. As Andre Malraux, the French writer, art theorist and minister of cultural affairs, wrote in 1951, ‘Now a barbarian art can keep alive only in the environment of the barbarism it expresses . . . the Byzantine style, as the West saw it, was not the expression of a supreme value but merely a form of decoration.’ This extract from Malraux’s book Les Voix du Silence, was written during the same period of Zeid’s exhibition, and it was a widespread opinion among European and American critics and artists. Hence, while Zeid was exhibited frequently, European and American critics could not see her work beyond a reflection of a ‘primitive’ identity.

The Tate exhibition in 2017 suggested that ‘Her [Zeid] vibrant abstract paintings are a synthesis of Islamic, Byzantine, Arab and Persian influences fused with European approaches to abstraction.’ Vassilis Oikonomopoulos, one of the Tate curators focused on that connection asserting that ‘The way in which Zeid experimented with geometric forms, the intensity of her palette and her attention to detail suggest both a deep understanding of Islamic art and a desire to adapt its principles to her own needs.’ However, there is no evidence of Zeid studying Islamic art or being even interested in the art or its concepts. As the artist stated in an interview with art historian Edouard Roditi, facing his many questions about Sufism, calligraphy, and Islamic art ‘I have never been a student of Moslem art.’

248 Zeid, Fahrelnissa Zeid. p. 95.
249 Kozloff and Jaudon, “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture.”
250 Kozloff and Jaudon include several quotes in their article.
251 Tate, “Be Mesmerised By The Kaleidoscopic Paintings of The International Female Artist, Fahrelnissa Zeid.”
252 Zeid, Fahrelnissa Zeid. p. 52.
253 Roditi, Dialogues in Art, p. 191.
Furthermore, the expressionism and spontaneity in her work is the opposite of the strictly measured and calculated geometric patterns/Arabesque in Islamic art. As mentioned, Zeid early life and education coincided with the weakening of the Ottoman empire. Following WWI, the new republic was found on the concepts of nationalism, secularism, modernization, and westernization. It adopted western costumes and concepts, replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin and started a language reform to purify the Turkish language from the Arabic and Islamic influences.

In the many introductions Zeid wrote for her exhibitions’ catalogues, her focus is usually on emotions, movement, and colours as a source of her work and abstraction. She never mentions any specific cultures. ‘I’ve also been conscious, at all times, of being an artist of the same generally ‘abstract’ school as many of my American, French or English friends and colleagues. I mean a painter of the Ecole de Paris rather than of any more specifically nationalist school.’ However, that did not stop the critics from insisting on the association between her art and Islamic arts and cultures. Oikonomopoulos statement, echoed in the Tate’s webpage introducing Zeid, *Fahrelnissa Zeid in Four Key Works*, could be linked to Zeid’s identity: being a Turkish, born in a Muslim society entails a direct natural understanding and practice of Islamic art. Which seems to echo Maurois’ comments on the evocations of certain traits ‘dictated by her hereditary instincts’ and keeps with the same process of focus on identity over the work and process of the artist. It also brings forward the notion of Islamic arts as cultural objects with no aesthetic principals, where one does not need to learn these principles, it is enough to be born into the religion to know them.

Zeid own statement ‘I’m a descendent of four civilisations. In my self-portrait, the hand is Persian, the dress is Byzantine, the face is Cretan and the eyes Oriental, but I was not aware of this a I was painting it’, is usually used to comment on her overall work. This is a comment that she used to describe her self-portrait, which is mostly a comment on her own identity more than her work. Stating that she was not aware what she was painting is something that the artist used to repeat to refer to the intensity of the process and how emotional and spiritual it is. She wrote in her diary that ‘they [my paintings] surge within

me from the depths that lie far beyond peculiarities of sex, race or religion,’257 which indicates that she did not approve the connections made between her art and her identity. ‘[...] Zeid observed a complex amalgam of cultural traditions and diverse histories. For Zeid painting enabled these elements to surface from her subconscious and occupy the picture plane.’258 states Vassilis Oikonomopoulos, but according to the above extract from her diaries, Zeid was conscious and aware of these elements of traditions and histories, her ‘subconscious’ connects with a more universal concept ‘the world’ or ‘the tree of life’ as she called it.

Moreover, although she was often described as ‘Oriental,’ Zeid did not seem to consider herself or Turkey as part of the ‘Orient.’ In 1980, she mentioned to her Friend and art-critic Andre Parinaud ‘Another souvenir that played a role in my abstract evolution was during my first trip to the Orient in Baghdad.’259 If taken out of context, this statement also could be used by critics trying to apply the ‘Islamic’ and ‘Oriental’ influences on Zeid’s work. However, she continued ‘I saw in the great expanses, the Bedouins ‘fly’... from my window, I saw from dawn the very distant road, coloured orange in the morning. This is how I saw six or seven silhouettes that came from the depth of the horizon, as if flying over the sands. I was petrified. They had on top of their heads a pyramid of pots of yogurt, that looked from afar like very high chimneys... and their veils floated in this gold [hue] that was ablaze. I ran to the window, but they had already passed... this little event played a role in my abstract painting... While looking at the Bedouin women, I was seeing space and movement.’260 Repeating the word ‘fly,’ referring to the colours and shapes ‘coloured orange, silhouettes, pyramids, gold’ sustain the idea that she mostly saw space and movement and that these were her main motives and influences. ‘If we wanted to reach the complete artistic persona through our art, we ought to draw life, to draw its curved lines in continuous motion with different direction through this big void... And we ought to fill that void in colours...’ Zeid told the Iraqi artist Jamil Hammoudi, who met her following her exhibition at the Colette Allendy gallery in Paris 1950.261

257 Roditi, Dialogues in Art, p. 197.
258 Zeid, Fahrelnissa Zeid, p. 45.
b. Abstract expressionism

For a brief period, especially after her London exhibition, there were more reviews that focused on analysing the work of Zeid in relation to her personal approach, as art critic George Butcher wrote for the Guardian, ‘she works with a double vision- the inner eye (the unconscious) and her outer eye [...] these two visions are integrated into what becomes - literally- a single abstract-expressionist vision.’ Another review in the Spectator, goes further into locating Zeid’s artworks locally and internationally. The writer notes that the artworks ‘reminded critics of Turkish and Arabic mosaics and textile designs. As I discovered during the course of recent tour, this abstract tradition has not imposed itself on the contemporary middle Eastern artist as one might have expected it to do, so the effect of Paris upon Far-El-Nissa Zeid’s style should not be underestimated.’ Robert Melville’s short review of Zeid’s ICA exhibition in 1954, could be one of the rarest in locating the work within the context of art movements and styles. Zeid, he wrote ‘practices a kind of automatism that is called lyrical abstraction in Paris, abstract expressionism in New York and action painting in London. This is the most curious school that has arisen inside the modern movement for several years. It has become fashionable and continues to gain adherents. It is play-therapy taken to inordinate lengths. As communication it is non-existent and as wall-texture it is distracting and overbearing; and there is nothing to discuss apart from its relevance or irrelevance to such matters as the artist’s place in society.’ In 1957, Zeid’s work was exhibited at the Edinburgh Festival, a review notes that ‘the Princess’s latest work might be described as cosmic visions, remarkable for their radiance in colour, and an inventiveness very much in tune with the present international trend in abstraction.’

Melville ended his review of the ICA exhibition by noting that ‘Princess Zeid’s work is still a little impure in that, it contains faint traces of preconception, which spring from the thinking mind and seeing eye. But no doubt they will be eradicated, and in due course her

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work should bring the modern movement to a close.\textsuperscript{266} How did Fahrelnissa Zeid go from ‘bringing the modern movement to a close’ to being forgotten and erased from art history? Although the artist continued to work and produce art until her death in 1991, from the early 1960s, Zeid’s name seems to almost disappear from galleries, exhibitions, reviews…. when she would be exhibited again in Paris in 1990, for the first time after decades, her work would be presented as naïve art. After years between London and Paris, Zeid moved to Jordan in 1975. This move to the artworld ‘peripheries,’ as well as creating modern art, both figurative and abstract, while the art production was moving rapidly to conceptual and postmodern arts could be considered as partial reasons for the decrease of her entanglement with the art world. These reasons do not, however, explain her erasure from all accounts of art history. A better understanding of the 1940s-1950s socio-political context of art would help clarifying this issue.

Zeid’s career was growing at a particular time for modern art that saw the art centre moving from Paris to New York. Despite the many issues of othering and exoticising, the New School of Paris that emerged after WWII included many non-French artists and many Women artists, at a time when women artists were not getting enough recognition. Other than Zeid, Carmen Herrera (Cuba, 1915), Aurelie Nemours (France, 1910-2005) were among these artists. The new centre, however, emphasised masculinity in art. ‘The “confectionery” paintings of the École de Paris, seen as corrupted legacy of the sensual female nudes, decorative surfaces and delectable paintwork of Matisse, counterpointed the construction of an emphatically masculine and heroic New York School in Greenberg’s formalist accounts of 1950s art.’\textsuperscript{267} In an interview with the Guardian in 2016, Herrera talked about the struggle of women in the world of art and being rejected by galleries because she was a woman.\textsuperscript{268} This rejection persisted throughout her life in New York, and Herrera would not receive recognition until the early 2000s. In this new centre, Zeid’s work, as a member of the École de Paris, was not welcomed enthusiastically. Following her New York exhibition, Zeid received a letter from the gallerist Alexander Iolas who organized it, expressing his disappointment in the exhibition reception and referring to ‘an American school, very nationalist and very anti-

\textsuperscript{266} Melville, "Exhibitions: Painting And Sculpture."
foreigner [...] which issues quasi divine and superhuman condemnations and protections. This group is considered as the important one that will save world painting.²⁶⁹ Iolas was referring to the American Abstract Expressionism movement. Paradoxically, Zeid’s work was criticised in her London’s exhibition because her colossal abstract paintings were composed of patterns of colours repeated indefinitely, giving no reference to a theme or content. This meant that ‘from a formal point of view, her painting too often suffers from a similarity of scale and touch throughout and a consequent impression that any rectangle might be cut from the canvas which would be as complete as the whole.’²⁷⁰ This is an aspect she shared with the American abstract expressionism, the all-over painting which will become one of the most celebrated attributes of their work.

This period and new movement of art was not only championing American art as the ‘saver of painting world’ as Iolas suggested in his letter, but it also saw the birth of narratives of formal linearity of western modern art theorized by Greenberg, arguing for a continuity of western art trajectory exclusively. The artists in this canon were exclusively male and white. Even American women artists who were working around the same period were excluded from the movement of Abstract expressionism and the canon. From that time on, the American art came to dominate the art world, and Zeid and most of her colleagues, especially women and non-western artists, lost their spot in the art world or were labelled as imitators of the ‘original’ art of the centre.

The formalist exclusive narrative is still adopted by institutions and could be viewed in most if not all western museums display. While more modern women artists are recognized today and there are efforts to include them into the narratives of art history, this still mostly applies to European and American born artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Helen Frankenthaler, and Lee Krasner. Non-Western artists however, even those who, like Zeid, were a significant part of a western art scene, are still to be included. While the former’s work started to be included in museums’ permanent collection, more researched and their names being listed in international exhibitions of modern art, the work of Zeid is still barely exhibited and mostly in regional exhibitions.

²⁷⁰ Middleton, "ART (Book Review)."
The constant link of the work of Zeid with her identity and the claim that her artistic creativity is dictated by a ‘hereditary’ element or a mentality, ignores her artistic personality and her individual expression, which were some of the main components of modern art. Starting with Maurois and continuing with recent texts, critics seem more interested in talking about Zeid’s life and identity than their interest in analysing her work and locate it in the history of modern art. This focus ignores the context in which Zeid was active. She worked and exhibited between London, Paris, and New York. Her work was in synch with the abstract creations of the mid-twentieth century and reflected the preoccupations of many modern artists.

II. Madiha Umar: the first Hurufi artist

Madiha Umar was born in Aleppo in 1908, for Circassian father and Syrian mother. Her family moved to Iraq while she was a young girl. She received her secondary education in Beirut and Istanbul and was the first woman artist to receive a scholarship from the Iraqi government to study art in London. In 1933, she graduated from Maria Grey training College in England and then returned to Baghdad and started her career as an artist and an art teacher. She taught at the Teachers Training college for Women and became head of Arts Departments. In 1939, She got married to Iraqi diplomat Yasin Umar and three years later, the couple moved to Washington D.C. where Umar continued her art training in George Washington University and Corcoran School of Art where she got her master’s degree in 1950.271 Her work during this time was figurative, leaning mostly on realistic representations.

While studying, Umar came across a study on the origin of Arabic script by Nabia Abbott, *The rise of the north Arabic script and its Kur’ānic development, with a full description of the Kur’ān manuscripts in the Oriental institute* (1939). The book sparked Umar’s interest in Arabic calligraphy leading her to study the possibilities of its inclusion in modern art practices, encouraged by the Islamic art historian Richard Ettinghausen. In 1949, she held her first exhibition of twenty-two paintings and drawings from this experiment at the Peabody Library at Georgetown University. Following the exhibition, Umar published *Arabic Calligraphy: Inspiring Element in Abstract Art* which is dated 1949-1950.272 With the exhibition

and the article, Madiha Umar cemented her name as a pioneer and as the first artist to employ and theorize the use of Arabic calligraphy in a modern artwork. Many other artists, including the Iraqi Jamil Hammoudi, the Lebanese Said Ilyas, claimed similar experiments in the late 1940s, however, none of it is documented according to Charbel Dagher and Nada Shabout.

In 1952, Umar exhibited her new style for the first time in Baghdad at the Ibn Sina Exhibition. At that time, many artists had started experimenting with introducing elements of the Iraqi heritage into modern art and the Baghdad Group of Modern Art was already founded in 1951. She moved back to Iraq in 1966 and started teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad and joined the ‘One Dimension Group’ where she published extracts of her theoretical studies in the exhibitions’ catalogues in the early 1970s. Umar had solo exhibitions in different cities between 1950 and 1980, in Iraq, USA, Lebanon and Turkey, and took part in various group exhibitions. Her career and artistic production were not extensive, nevertheless, her contribution to the new modern art scene in Iraq and the Arab world cannot be denied. Little has been written on her work, there is no clear answer on why her work is usually overlooked but some attribute it to her work being shadowed by her male colleagues in the ‘One Dimension Group’ who were dominating the Iraqi art scene during that period.

Umar’s work and the theory behind it could be seen in the core of Hurufiya movement or school. ‘Hurufiya’ in Arabic derived from the world ‘Harf’ which mean ‘letter.’ Though many artists were working on similar experiments at that time and started to theorise the idea of using elements of their own cultural heritage in the creation of modern art, Umar’s concept was very specific and focused on letters and calligraphy. Also, for many other artists, the idea was about recreating a modern national art that reflects the culture of the society, as the 1951 ‘Baghdad Group for Modern Art’ manifesto declares ‘[…] we will honour the stronghold of the Iraqi art of painting that collapsed after the school of Yehya al-Wasiti, the Mesopotamian school of the thirteen century AD. And in this way, we will reconnect the continuity that has been broken since the fall of Baghdad at the hands of Mongols. […] We, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, hereby declare the birth of a new school of art for the sake of our civilisation, and for the sake of universal civilization.’

\[273\] Dagher, Arabic Hurufiya: Art and Identity.
\[274\] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents.p. 150.
Umar’s theory and practice were, however, inspired by the script itself as a form and independent element with an ‘intrinsic ancient value,’ as she described it, and its development throughout the centuries. ‘I have studied and observed modern art, always comparing it with the Arab art of the Middle East. The letter still stands out, so magnificently colourful, fascinating, intricate, and ornamental; but I felt that a more meaningful and powerful life- which might have brought that monumental art from his stage of stillness, from the limitation of the surface manipulation into the freer expression and closer dynamic movement and restlessness of our modern art- is needed.’ She then suggests that ‘[..] Arabic calligraphy, which is abstract and yet so symbolic in its essence, needs not to be limited any more to the space-filling of geometrical design.’ As it ‘curtails its freedom of expression and individuality in forming a design.’ These ideas explain what Dagher and Shabout, in their studies of the Hurufiya movement refer to as the detachment or the break with the Islamic calligraphy and not its continuity. As Umar suggests, this new style or form of art she started experimenting with was to express individuality of the artist through the engagement with the letters as abstract symbols, ‘the letter ayn, which has no equivalent in English alphabet, an active and strong member, bearing a double meaning in Arabic language. It stands for eye in certain phrases and at other times may mean spring of water. [...] The letter lam, which stands for L in English, expresses delicate and rhythmic movements, as seen in Swing and Rhythm of Lam.’ Thus, Umar’s work and interest in the calligraphy is not related to its sacred notion and its relation to religion, but to the history of the script, the individual letter, its form and how it metamorphosed from the early writing in the Arabian Peninsula, to the influence of Aramaic and Phoenician alphabets to its current appearance. Her work is deconstructing of the notion of sacred script.

Umar treated the Arabic letter as an abstract form to be remodelled to create an artwork. The artworks were not necessarily abstract as it is seen in At the Concert from 1948 (fig. 2.10), one of her early works in this style. The work is semi-abstract, as the title suggests, it is an allusion of a concert with a stage, crowds, and lights, however, Umar turned the letter

276 Dagher, Arabic Hurufiya: Art and Identity, p. 23.
into organic shapes to illustrate many of these elements. The work is a scratchboard; hence the detailed engraved lines are obvious.

In *Untitled* (fig. 2.11), from her work few years later, significant changes could be detected. The work has a surrealist sense that alludes to a forest with organic forms resembling humans. Organic and geometric shapes are dominating the surface of the painting with more colours. The defined lines that appear in the early work are disappearing, as well as the elements’ replication. The letters are not as easily detected as they are more integrated and fused with other elements. The difference between the two works could represent how Umar’s ideas are ‘gradually developing it [Arabic alphabet] from plain surface manipulation into a more expressive dynamic movement of a thought in a picture’ or as Shabout describes it ‘transforming their simple into expressive and mobile images of thoughts.’

The 1960s saw Umar’s first full abstract paintings (fig. 2.12, 2.13). The letters are still detectable; however, they are turned into full-bodied coloured shapes that occupy the surface of the painting. In this painting, the focus is on creating a balance between the colours, forms, and lines.

Madiha Umar had a leading role in establishing one of the main modern art movements in the Arab world, *Hurufiyya* which could be the only art movement that spread across the Arab world and included artists from different Arab countries. Umar was not only the first *Hurufiyya* artist and the first artist to theorise and practice the fusion of Arabic letters in paintings, but she was also the only woman artist to have a role in theorising this movement and writing about her vision in publications related to it in Baghdad. Her contribution to the movement were very distinct, as she was less interested in the notional and cultural aspect, while emphasising the design and formal characteristics. Her work, it could be said, is the earliest and closest representation to the literal meaning of the term *Hurufiyya*, as it involves a strict emphasis of letters, not words. However, Umar’s role was overshadowed by her male colleagues during her career. In recent exhibitions by western museums, Umar’s work rarely appears in modern art exhibitions. When it does, it will be brief and overshadowed by her male counterparts. Her case especially sustains the argument that institutions are more interested in artworks that represent the theme of women than in representing the women artists and their role in modern art scenes.

III. Saloua Raouda Choucair: reconstructing abstract sculpture

Saloua Raouda Choucair was born in 1916 in Beirut which was still part of the Ottoman Empire. She studied natural sciences at the American Junior College for Women (currently the Lebanese American University) between 1934 and 1936, and Philosophy at the American university in Beirut. Simultaneously, she was studying painting with Mustafa Farroukh and Omar Onsi, two leading Lebanese artists whose works were mostly figurative and Impressionist. ‘Onsi, tried to teach her to produce from nature the landscapes [...] But to Saloua’s inquiring mind, this direct, romantic interpretation of the world around her was as unexciting and irrelevant as the study of history has been.’

In 1943, Choucair visited Cairo. In an interview later, she mentioned her fascination with the architecture and arabesque in Cairo’s mosques. Moreover, during her philosophy courses at the AUB ‘a philosophy professor’s preference for the Hellenistic concept of beauty and his announced opinion that the Arabs had no art indignantly drove her into an intensive study to prove him wrong.’

Thus, Choucair started her career on three different level. She started studying and theorizing her perception of the concept of Islamic and Arab art. She also joined the Arab Cultural Club (ACC), an Arab nationalist group, that was established in Beirut in 1944, where she organized art courses, talks and exhibitions with artists and writers. Simultaneously, she continued painting and presented her first exhibition at the ACC centre, this exhibition is usually referred to as the first abstract art exhibition in Lebanon, and probably the Arab world. ‘So she began, with the square, the circle, and the triangle, mathematically calculating in fractions and equations their various proportions. This was in 1946.’

In 1948, Choucair travelled to France to study at the Ecole des Beaux-arts in Paris and enrolled in Fernand Leger’s atelier between 1948 and 1952. While in Paris, Choucair visited the still unfinished ‘Cite radieuse’, the first building of Le Corbusier’s modernist residential housing project. Architecture was of great interest for Choucair, and even though by 1974, her career as sculptor was succeeding and she had been awarded multiple prizes ‘she says that, given another life to live, she would choose instead to be an architect.’

279 Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*. p. 56.
280 Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*. p. 56.
the building, but also in design and modern architecture are clear in the detailed notes she marked on the back of each picture she took. These interests were reflected in many sculptures and drawings of architectural designs (fig. 2.14), nevertheless, none of them was realised or built.

In 1952, Choucair returned to Beirut where she continued her work on abstract paintings but soon painting was not providing enough material to translate her approach. This was clearer to Choucair after her visit to the USA in the mid-1950s, where she attended many workshops and courses on jewellery design. In 1957, she started with her sculpture series *Trajectory of a Line* (fig. 2.15) or what Helen Khal refers to as the *Closed form* which is ‘distinguished by the absolute containment of energy of an object or image within a defined inner space.’ These are mostly solid pieces, made of different materials such as stone, fiberglass, brass, wood with holes or void in the middle. Mid 1960s she opted for a new method with her ‘Emboitement’ series [The Duals] (fig. 2.16). Still using various material, Choucair started to construct her sculptures from different carved pieces that could be seen separately or stacked in certain way to form one piece. ‘Emboitement is also the name of an outmoded biological theory [...] Choucair was interested in scientific theories and would probably have been aware of this definition. [...] Choucair was also fascinated by the geometry of nature, naturally occurring proportional systems and rhythms.’ This series led her to a new one, the *Elements Additionnels* where the concept stacking is ultimate or infinite as she titled her piece *Infinite Structure* (fig. 2.17). Here, instead of limited number of pieces that slides into a certain defined form, the vertical composition allows a continuous addition of elements. ‘Choucair revisited the idea of infinity with a new series of modules she created in the 1980s ‘Movement of the Angle.’”

Inspired by Arab poetry structure and Sufi philosophy, she began her *Poems* series. This series combined some of her previous work concept- especially *Elements Additionnels*- with the philosophy and concept of Arab aesthetics that she explained in her writings, ‘the Arabs never described things but rather treated the probability and potentiality of the

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285 Morgan et al., *Saloua Raouda Choucair*.p. 128.
286 Morgan et al., *Saloua Raouda Choucair*.p. 125.
287 Morgan et al., *Saloua Raouda Choucair*.p.128.
thing.’ The Poems (fig. 2.18) were structures composed of different elements, like her previous work, however they were not meant to be stacked in any defined composition, hence unlocking the potential of the piece. She continued this idea in later work such as The Screw (2.19), using various material and compositions. The concept of restructuring was reflected on the flyer for her exhibition in 1988, which presented the artwork The Screw in three possible configurations (fig. 2.20).

‘With a number of works titled Additionnels Choucair invited visitors to take the structure apart and stack the pieces in any number, any order and combination they chose.’ Probably this is the main reason behind her retrospective in Beirut in 2011 was titled Work in progress, not only was the artist constantly working on her concepts trying to express them in different styles, but her sculptures were also flexible and the visual presentations are not definite, they can all be deconstructed, reconstructed, and reshaped. As Samir Sayegh, Lebanese writer and critic says, Choucair’s work represents ‘sculpture, if we wanted to define it from a purely aesthetic perspective, defines itself by the absence of sculpture, meaning that what will give this sculpture its spirit is not the form or the volume or the formulaic or geometric unit; rather, it is the movement of this form and geometric unit undertakes in its accumulation, growth and repetition.’ Which brings us to the second symbol, the infinite possibilities which echoes the repetition and ‘infinity’ concept in arabesque derived from Sufi Islamic concepts.

The idea of involving the audience in the work shows affinities with American Post-minimalists’ conception considering the audience perception and reaction to the work as part of the artwork. But it is not clear if Choucair was aware of these new tendencies. Nevertheless, she had a very clear idea about the origin, the process, and the development of her work. She was also very particular about her inspiration and influence. In a video interview from the 1990s, Choucair said ‘the fast communications, the news I hear, even the new car models we see every year, don’t they have an influence? A Critic once told me that my work is a result of European influence. No. it is a universal influence, what I see, and

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288 Morgan et al., Saloua Raouda Choucair. p. 119.
289 Morgan et al., Saloua Raouda Choucair. p. 129.
291 Richard Serra giant metal installation are an example, as Serra said, they are meant to disturb the viewer with their scale.
experience is seen and experienced by people worldwide.’ She admired the Arab and Islamic philosophy and aesthetics, and she believed in modernity and science as she mentions in her 1951 article ‘He who fears matter is far from grasping the foundations of our age and the civilizations preceding it. Matter, for him, is an airplane that could explode and dispatch the souls of innocents or a car that could mow down humans. Or it is the search for an atomic bomb that will extinguish the world. Such is the thinking of he who does not understand the spirit of our era.’

Choucair, regardless of the inspiration and different influences in her work, refused to be limited to one category or to be defined by her identity, be it her identity as woman, as Lebanese, as Muslim, as Arab... ‘I am an artist and I work as a person, not as a woman or man.’ Her belief was in universal expression and forms of art that transcends these categorizations and their limitations. And she translated this belief into her work. This could be seen through her Poems series, which is inspired by Arabic poetry and, in concept and theory, is the most related to her cultural heritage. However, if a viewer were to confront it is for the first time, with no previous knowledge of any of the interpretations and analysis, it is almost impossible to detect these influences visually. ‘Like every artist, I look for a new conception of beauty, of how I see the world in terms of all the many different forms and materials it contains. In everything around me I find beauty of form, this perfect order of shape, proportion, and design sequence. I try to make others see it, too. I look upon my work as the mirror of our age.’

Choucair’s work remained abstract throughout her career and rarely alluded to any social or political context. Two=one (fig. 2.21) is one of Choucair’s most famous paintings, in terms of technique and style, the work does not differ from any other painting in this series, the choice of colour is interesting, most of the other paintings are dominated by primary and earthy colours. However, this painting contains one of the rare signs of war in Choucair artworks. In the middle of the painting there is a hole as well as shattered glass in multiple places. During the Lebanese civil war, the painting was damaged after a bomb exploded next to the building where she lived. And that is the most obvious link between her work and the

293 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon, p. 56.
294 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon, p. 55.
war. Although she was politically and socially active since the 1950s. She did not explicitly refer to the war in her work. Throughout the war, her work kept its rational abstract character. Her *Duals* sculpture made in the 1980s were seen by some critics as a call or hope for unity, especially that Beirut was divided into two camps, Eastern and Western. Although in a 1994 study of Chouc裹’s work, Khalida Said saw the possibility of the eternal duality of the spirit and the material, or the female/male.  

a. The Lebanese art scene, the global art scene and geometric abstraction

The 1950s proved to be challenging for Choucair in the Lebanese art scene, it was ‘a decade of working alone, without encouragement and unrecognized.’ Upon her return from Paris in 1952, she had a solo exhibition at the Ecole Supérieure des Lettres in Beirut, probably with work made in Paris or inspired by her time there, a little is known about the exhibition but it appears that it was not met with enthusiasm from the audience or the critics. An article from the daily newspaper *Annahar* notes that this was the first exhibition of abstract art in Lebanon. Identifying modern abstraction with prejudice and atheism, the writer notes that many critics noticed that Choucair’s art leaned on the masculine side, with the use of bold colours and geometric shapes instead of organic ones with soft colours.  

The Tate Museum curator Kaelen Wilson-Goldie states ‘In Lebanon, Choucair is both a legend and a secret.’ Affirming that ‘throughout the history of her practice, local journalists have gallingly reduced her to a ‘lady painter’ while describing her work as largely incomprehensible.’ Wilson-Goldie is probably referring to Victor Hakim’s article mentioned earlier. However, these were at the start of her career. Choucair’s early start was not as appreciated by the dominant movements of art. No one had started working on abstraction in Lebanon before her, but from the early 1960s, more artists were adopting abstraction mostly women artists like Helen Khal, Yvette Achkar, Nadia Saikali, Etel Adnan… However, the idea of art groups or collective was not spread in Lebanon as in other Arab countries, few

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296 Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, p. 61.
298 Wilson-Goldie, "A Damaged Painting, a Shard of Glass: Discovering Saloua Raouda Choucair."
299 Wilson-Goldie, "A Damaged Painting, a Shard of Glass: Discovering Saloua Raouda Choucair."
artists in Lebanon joined the Hurufiya movement and established a group in Beirut connected to those in other Arab countries.

Choucair’s breakthrough came after her 1962 exhibition in Beirut UNESCO Hall. For the following years, her sculptures won the Nicolas Sursock Museum prize for four years in a row (1965-68). However, the real public and official recognition came in 1974, with a retrospective organized by the Association of Lebanese Painters and Sculptors at the Ministry of Tourism in Beirut. As Helen Khal affirms ‘In span of years and in scale, it was the first exhibition of its kind to be accorded a Lebanese artist, and included a total of 113 sculptures, paintings, and tapestries.’ The next year however, the Lebanese war started, and Choucair like all Lebanese entered a new phase in their life dominated with conflicts, violence, and uncertainty. The war that lasted 15 years (1975-1990), had the biggest impact on the emerging art scene in Lebanon as many artists left the country. Among the twelve artists included in Helen Khal’s study on women artists, only three artists, aside from Choucair, stayed in Lebanon. Choucair continued creating art, but the chances of exhibition were very limited as many art galleries closed. After the war ended, the art scene started to re-emerge with many artists from the new generation.

Was the fact that she was a woman influential? Maybe, but not to the point that is suggested by many recent critics and curators. As Hakim’s notes suggest, the issue was not ‘a woman artist’ as some women artists were working in Beirut at that time such as Marie Haddad, Bibi Zogbe and Blanche Ammoun. The role of women artists was growing, as Khal mentions in her book, by the 1970s, there were more than 40 professional women artists in Lebanon, 25 per cent of the members of Lebanese Association of Painters and Sculptors were women, and third of the twelve leading artists recognized in Lebanon were women. The problem seems to be that Choucair’s work did not show any ‘feminine’ characteristics, it is a rational, abstract, and purely geometric work, characteristics that are not attributed to femininity in patriarchal society standards. Nevertheless, the main issue at that time was in fact artistic and aesthetic. As Jack Aswad states ‘It was ignorance, I rather think, in the sense of lack of knowledge - that Choucair’s art was unknown, not in the sense of not yet known

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300 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon. p. 56.
301 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon. p. 182.
302 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon. p. 15.
but in the sense of not knowable.¹³⁰³ When Choucair emerged, the Lebanese art scene was still dominated by Impressionists and post-impressionist artists and those who started experimenting were still very cautious. As she told Helen Khal, ‘The articles were funny, the critics could not even differentiate between impressionism, cubism, and abstraction, and again, most of them described my work as ornamental. They were not able to see the line that links my artworks.’¹³⁰⁴ Choucair came with an exhibition of pure abstraction and a new conception opposing all the dominant practices and ideas about art, which many, did not admire, understand, or accept. However, during her 1974 retrospective she said ‘I was impressed by the number of visitors, I was handing out 300 catalogues every day, it was something I have never seen before. For me, this audience was the best appreciation and prize I could ask for. It proved how much the Lebanese had matured in their understanding of arts in the 20 years following my first exhibition.’¹³⁰⁵ Choucair challenged the existing artistic movements, which was not expected from a woman artist.

The reference to Choucair being a Druze and how that might have influenced her work or affected her career only appears in Hakim’s 1952 article and in the recent western critics and curators’ analysis. Her influence by Islamic and Arab aesthetic could be linked to her religion, however, it is important to remember that Choucair was an Arab nationalist. This is especially clear in her article in 1952 where she refers to the artist and aesthetics as Arab and not Islamic. More importantly, the main issue that faced Choucair and held back a wider recognition is the nature of her work. Geometric abstraction has been problematic in the world of art, not only in Lebanon, but in many art scenes. With the rise of modern art in Europe, there was a fear of geometric abstraction leaning towards ornaments, which was seen as a crime in Adolf Loos’s perception, the Austrian theorist of modern architecture titled his book Ornament and Crime (1931). According to Kandinsky, ‘If we were to begin today... to content ourselves exclusively with the combination of pure color and independent form, we would produce works that would look like geometric ornament, that, to put it crudely, would resemble a necktie or a carpet.’¹³⁰⁶ Concerns over the decorative ends of geometric abstraction were also preoccupying many Arab artists, as noted earlier in Younan’s writing.

³⁰³ Saloua Raouda Choucair, Saloua Raouda Choucair. Her Life & Art (Beirut, 2002).
³⁰⁴ Choucair, Saloua Raouda Choucair. Her Life & Art.
³⁰⁵ Choucair, Saloua Raouda Choucair. Her Life & Art.
Adolf Loos wrote in 1908 ‘I can tolerate the ornaments of the Kaffir, the Persian, the Slovak peasant woman, my shoemaker’s ornaments, for they all have no other way of attaining the high points of their existence. We have art, which has taken the place of ornament. After the toils and troubles of the day we go to Beethoven or to Tristan.’ An opinion that seems to prevail in the art world. The problematic notion that faced the artists and theorists when dealing with ornaments and decoration is that historically, they are associated with the feminine and the non-western, especially the Oriental, both deemed degrading features in modern art. However, when modern western male artists like Mondrian and Malevich started theorizing and practicing geometric abstraction, it became their exclusive domain. When it is created by a woman, a non-western, its purity becomes questionable, and it turns to a decorative object. Hence, women artists were denied that right. Choucair was not alone in this exclusion, many women artists creating abstract art faced rejection. While critics could attribute Choucair’s interest in abstraction to her identity and ‘Arab mentality’ as a French critic called it, it was not the case for other artists. The major challenge that Choucair faced was not only being a woman artist in a patriarchal society nor a member of minority religious group in a sectarian society. It is the choice of creating pure geometric abstraction, a choice that, in the modern art narratives, has been exclusive to white male artists.

The other impact was the war, and the after-war period. After 1990, Choucair continued producing abstract sculptures, the Lebanese art scene however, was changing. Although Choucair was recognized and her work was celebrated, the new generation artists, especially those working on the themes of war grabbed the attention of curators and museums, especially the western and international. Many of them, like Walid Raad and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, were exhibited and celebrated in western museums and institutions way before Choucair’s work retrospective in the Tate in 2013. Choosing not to engage with the themes of war and not to present it in her art meant that Choucair’s work would be overlooked as it does not represent her identity as a Lebanese, Arab, woman, nor the ‘realities’ of such lives.

307 Kozloff and Jaudon, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture."
IV. Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: mastering the game of light and reflection.

‘Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian is not only a pioneering figure of Iranian art but also a forerunner of current artistic models that participate in global dialogues without annihilating local difference.’\textsuperscript{308} Living and producing art between New York and Tehran from the early 1950s, it was not until 2014 that Monir Farmanfarmaian got her international breakthrough with the exhibition \textit{Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility. Mirror Works and Drawings 1974–2014} curated by Suzanne Cotter at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Portugal. The following year the exhibition travelled to Guggenheim Museum in New York. The Guggenheim exhibition was the first time Farmanfarmaian’s work received its overdue recognition in the city where she lived for decades, however, it was not her first exhibition in the city. Farmanfarmaian’s first solo exhibition in New York took place four decades earlier and between the two exhibitions, she lived ‘many lives’ within a lifetime and created a prolific body of work.\textsuperscript{309}

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian was born in 1924 in Qazvin, Iran. After graduating from the Fine Arts College of Tehran, she travelled to the US to continue her art studies, her dream was to go to Paris but due to the war and the occupation of Paris, she changed her plans. Hence, she became one of the early Iranian women to pursue art studies abroad. Farmanfarmaian finished her studies at Cornell by the end of WWII and her initial dream to study in Paris re-emerged. However, her fiancée at that time, Manoucher Yektai, who travelled with her to New York, had the same plan, and Farmanfarmaian gave up her dreams of Paris and of being a professional artist to support him financially and emotionally. She enrolled at the Parsons School of Design to study fashion illustration, an option that seemed the best to keep her close to art practice but would also help financially. She had a chance during these years to meet many artists, writers, critics, and galleries. She was introduced to the Tenth Street Club where she met many of the emerging American artists, who were soon to be the icons for Abstract Expressionism.

Most of Farmanfarmaian work in New York was focused on commercial fashion designs (fig. 2.22). After twelve years in the U.S., she returned to Iran to settle there for the

\textsuperscript{308} Hans Ulrich Obrist and Karen Marta, \textit{Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry} (Damiani Editore, 2011).

\textsuperscript{309} Obrist and Marta, \textit{Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry}.
coming two decades. She started drawing these years and, in 1958, with the recommendation of the artist Marcos Gregorian, her work was admitted at the Iranian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where she won a gold medal. Her first solo exhibition was in 1963 at the Tehran University, where she exhibited around a hundred monotypes of flowers. Around that time, she started experimenting more with glass and mirror paintings. And in 1966, after her second exhibition at the Italian Institute in Tehran, she was approached by the Shah’s official architect Heydar Ghiai regarding a commission for the new House of Senate. It was her first commission of art made with glass and mirrors, and she completed two projects at that building.

Farmanfarmaian’s interest in Qajar paintings, coffeehouse paintings, mirror work and all the traditional and tribal crafts of Iran started after her job at the Point Four program with the Ministry of Agriculture. The project included ‘adapting traditional handicrafts to appeal to foreign markets, with the intention of promoting exports and tourism.’ She started to build her own collection from the mirror works, coffeehouse paintings, paintings behind glass, textiles, jewellery, furniture... These discoveries and her trips around the country to visit tribes had influenced her art, however the major influence came in 1966, following her visit to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad and to the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz. After experiencing the mirror mosaics, a technique known as ‘ayeneh-kari,’ she was determined on working with that material. She was able to recruit a master craftsman, Hajji Ostad Mohammad Navid, who became her teacher and worked with her for the coming years. Though he did not teach her how to cut the mirrors, a mastery that he believed very few could achieve as they are thought since being kids. He thought her the principles of his designs, how he used the points, lines, and circles to create a work.

Unlike the mirror ceilings in the shrines that contains the viewers, the work of Farmanfarmaian could be contained by the viewer’s eye. The artist said that she was inspired by the shrine to create artworks that could be placed in houses and moved around. Aside from few commissions, the works she created are not made for one place, they are not dedicated to a certain place or confined by certain measurements, which gave her more freedom to work. The material itself dictates the work of Farmanfarmaian, working with

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mirror is not like working with paint or other malleable materials. And throughout her career and practice, the artist had to learn from the craftsmen with whom she worked. However, she took what she learned and reinterpret it with her own vision and perception. In her work, the artwork itself holds its own entity and presence, it is modelled by the viewer’s perspective, but it is also distinct from any context (fig. 2.27). It is possible to link it to certain philosophies and explain it further, however it does exist independent of explanation. ‘Caring the plaster gave the pieces a sense of sculptural relief, and it was a short step from that to freestanding sculpture. Freed from the limits of two dimensions, the geometric shapes seemed to extract their mathematical essence from the space itself.’

In 1975, Farmanfarmaian had her first solo exhibition in New York at Jacques Kaplan gallery. The opening was attended by most of her old friends, artists, curators, and critics who she had met during her first stay in New York, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali, Louise Nevelson, Richard Linden... The exhibition was then moved to the Kennedy Centre in Washington as the Shah and Queen of Iran were on an official visit. After the U.S came Paris, and an exhibition at Denise Rene Gallery in 1977, which was at that time exhibiting mainly abstract and optical art. Farmanfarmaian’s work with the mirror, reflections and geometric patterns creating illusions fitted rightly within the gallery concept (fig. 2.23). Between the exhibitions, she was commissioned for multiple works in Iran, from the Shah’s Palace to the newly established Tehran Museum of Contemporary art to many hotels and establishments. Along with her own exhibition, she was also working on exhibiting the collection of traditional and tribal artifacts she had collected for years. In 1978, the collection was prepared for an exhibition curated by Carmen Diba at the Negarstan Museum in Tehran, however due to ongoing uprising it was cancelled. Shortly after, the Iranian revolution had succeeded, and the Shah’s regime was toppled. While the country entered a new phase, the Farmanfarmaian were visiting family in N.Y and could not return.

Farmanfarmaian found herself again in N.Y. after almost two decades with most of her possessions left in Iran and confiscated by the revolutionary committee, she had none of her artworks. For a decade, she did few commissions-mostly in N.Y.-, some were glass and mirror other, such as the Jeddah Airport’s work was made of collage of mixed materials, which as

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she said ‘was the first time I was properly paid for a commission.’ Inspired by her own work at that time, this artwork was abstract, colourful, and expressive, with the materials used being papers, textiles, and some wires, it was easier for her to control and step away from the geometric patterns.

In 1992, she returned briefly to Iran following the death of her husband. Upon returning to the U.S she started a series of memory boxes (fig. 2.24), the Heartache Boxes or ‘self-portraits in collage’ as she called them. The boxes were made of collage and mix of different medias. They were mostly composed of old personal photographs, jewellery, suggestions of stained-glass windows in Qazvin, flowers and nightingales, fragments of poetry, pieces of Persian miniatures, hexagons... These thirty boxes made during the 1990s could be Farmanfarmaian’s most personal and expressive work. They included elements of her own life and memories and reflected some of her feelings during that period. Talking about the series she says ‘sometimes a woman appears, here a tiny doll with arms raised in startled surprise, there a figure clipped from a miniature painting with finger to mouth, again a gesture of surprise. She is asking, ‘Chi shod?’ What happened? What happened to my past?’ in their visual style, patterns, colours, and with some of the elements used, many of these boxes reflect an influence with the popular folk and tribal Persian culture. During these years, Farmanfarmaian did not work much with glass and mirrors, mostly for technical reasons, as it was extremely difficult to find a master craftsman able to provide the same quality of work as Hajji Ostad, also the thin mirror and glass used in ayeneh-kari was not available in New York.

By the early 2000s, Farmanfarmaian was making her most minimalist structures. Sculptures or free-standing compositions made of metal and wood (fig. 2.25). These seem like three-dimensional application of some of the drawings she made in the 70s (fig. 2.26). The same patterns and lines reappeared later, in the tapestries and textile work she designed and were made in Tabriz. In 2004, Farmanfarmaian received an invitation from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary art proposing a major retrospective exhibition. The museum offered to help tracing her artworks and her collection of traditional art as well as shipping

313 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden. p. 286.
314 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden. p. 312.
315 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden.
316 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden. p. 312.
her work made during the previous two decades in New York. She moved back to Tehran and started her search for her collection. She also found Hajji Ostad Navid and reopened a studio to work with glass and mirrors again until her last years.

The life of Farmanfarmaian is referred to as ‘life in fragments’ or ‘starts and ruptures.’ She witnessed WWII, saw three radically different regimes ruling Iran, and moved between two countries. The impact of these events on her work is not only one of mental or emotional basis, but that of practical and technical one. By the mid-1970s, Farmanfarmaian’s work had reached a unique geometric concept that would encompass her abstract vocabulary. Yet, being in New York following the Iranian revolution meant that she had no access to the skills available in Tehran. Hence, her work shifted dramatically and she started creating the memory boxes. While it might seem that these boxes were the first manifestation of the personal in Farmanfarmaian’s work, there is always an element of the personal even in her most geometric creations. This could be seen through her work on paper, as Cotter notes. While her work is geometric and calculated, it is also subjective. The shapes used are geometric and the genesis of the art is based on numbers and calculation related to Islamic aesthetics, however, she added her own perception, she remade those ideas into her own.

In the documentary Monir, directed by Bahman Kiarostami in 2015, Dirk Snauwaert, the director of WIELS Art centre, Brussels is explaining the drawings of Farmanfarmaian saying ‘these are not only geometric shapes, they are also based on Sufi philosophy and numerology.’ However, Farmanfarmaian is seen objecting ‘no, mine is slide on the hexagon only, no philosophy, nothing behind it. I just put a hexagon drawing on the table, and I put my paperweight and I feel to go this way and that way. But always it touches the corner of the hexagon, or the line of the hexagon.’ The three-dimensional structures are indeed titled variations on hexagon. Though she starts from the grids and the mathematical philosophy of

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317 Obrist and Marta, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry, p. 177.
322 Kiarostami, “Monir.”
traditional geometric patterns, she breaks away from these rules by drawing these asymmetric lines that do not follow a strict calculation, but her own vision. As she notes 'The geometric patterns started to infiltrate my own work. I used them not quite faithfully but with a minimalist twist, relishing the clean, modern lines that appeared when the mathematical logic was distilled from the traditional designs.'

Her works, as Nader Ardalan explains, ‘reveal not only aspects of her approach as an artist, but also the unique metaphysical dimension of her Persian heritage and its cultural gestalt: a historical worldview that seeks to explore a deeper spirituality through the richness of the phenomenal world, according to which, through “Everythingness”, one may sense the transitory “Nothingness” of the material within the Eternity of Infinity.’ Many refer to Farmanfarmaian’s identity and birthplace as a main reason for her approach to art, which is true to a certain point true, however, they assume that her decision was natural given her upbringing and the domination of Islamic arts aesthetics and the ideas of aniconism over the Iranian art scene in the early twentieth century, which is not accurate.

As could be seen in Farmanfarmaian’s biography and career, though she studied art at the faculty of arts in Tehran, she had to go for trips around Iran to learn the different tribal artistic aesthetics and practices. She also had to hire a master of glass/mirror work and a mathematics teacher to teach her about the Islamic aesthetics in geometric works. As she says after visits to some mosques and palaces in the 1950s ‘My own education had omitted so much of this- had I been too busy clowning with my classmates to notice, or had we really skipped so lightly over the history of Iran?’

Assuming that art studies in a Muslim society or even in an Islamic country is based around Islamic art is misleading. In fact, as Fereshteh Daftari mentions, after the establishment of the Islamic regime in Iran, abstraction was discouraged while ‘Islamist artists did not shy away from adopting blatant Christian iconography.’

Media Farzin asks some interesting question regarding the work of Farmanfarmaian in an essay included in the book Monir. ‘Are these works primarily perceptual because they

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323 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden, p. 193.
325 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden, p. 151.
do not serve an ideological purpose? Would a Farmanfarmaian mirrorwork on the ceiling of a mosque be any more metaphysically integrated into its historic worldview than one in the art gallery? Would it make a difference if she were a working-class craftsperson who attended Friday prayers religiously?\textsuperscript{327} however, due to large scope of these questions, Farzin does not address them in that text. These questions, however, intensify the issues with the dominant discourses and definitions not only of what is called ‘Modern Islamic art,’ but also in what is assumed as traditional Islamic art. The dominant definition of this art assumes that all the art made during the Islamic Empires ruling in predominantly Muslim societies would be labelled as Islamic, regardless of the artists beliefs and ideologies, whether they are Muslims or not. This classification assumes that all artists working since the emergence of Islam follow a certain unified conception of art and negates the possibility of individuality.

Here particularly, in the analysis of Farmanfarmaian’s work, Shaw’s proposition of reconfiguring the history of Islamic art to integrate the intellectual and philosophical concepts beyond the visual (p. 78), could be applied. Interestingly, in her discussion with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Etel Adnan, Farmanfarmaian credits the book \textit{The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture} by Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar as a source to understand forms, numbers, and geometry. The book, published in 1973, could be one of the earliest studies of the ‘conceptual and symbolic significance’ in Islamic architecture.\textsuperscript{328} Ardalan and Bakhtiar explored the role of the intellect, the language of symbolism, bridging notions such sciences, crafts, creativity, unity, structure, spirituality among many other concepts. But Farmanfarmaian, as she expressed, is not interested in the philosophy and concept behind the Islamic patterns. She appropriates the Sufi iconography in technical and symbolic ways, using their geometric and mathematical principals to create her personal design.\textsuperscript{329} While she recognises the spiritual effect of the mirror and geometric patterns within the shrine, her works secularise the practice and isolate it from religion.\textsuperscript{330} Her interest is visual, focusing on

\textsuperscript{327} Farzin, "Mirrors and Diagrams: the Art of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian," p. 69.
\textsuperscript{329} Farzin, "Mirrors and Diagrams: the Art of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian," p. 69.
the effect of geometry, repetition, mirrored pattern, and reflective surface on the audience, creating ‘infinite possibilities.’

The other questions that these notions also bring forward are related to artists identity in relation to the perception of modern artists’ work, especially abstract art. The early approaches to Islamic art segregated it from the art history field and created the illusion of inherent differences, as discussed in chapter 1. But these approaches have not only affected the perception of traditional arts, but also that of modern and contemporary arts. Following Farmanfarmaian’s first New York exhibition in 1975, Kaplan noted in an interview that the critical reception was good but, ‘it is difficult for a Western critic to analyse because we have no frame of reference.’ However, Farmanfarmaian’s work has a reference within the western culture, and is not totally alien to western critics, especially those trained in modern art. Just a year after that exhibition, in her review of the galleries of Islamic art at the Metropolitan, Amy Goldin demonstrated a substantial understanding of the art and remarkable ability to recognise the meaning in form and patterns because of her knowledge and training in modern art history. Therefore, even if taken from a point of view of visual affinities with Islamic art, understanding Farmanfarmaian’s work is not limited to certain audiences. But exploring Farmanfarmaian’s work through Islamic art’s principals and concepts do not provide a full analysis. The affinities or resemblance detected visually do not provide a comprehensive explanation. The latter could be reached by reading of the artworks through the literary and cultural narratives of its time. The work needs to be situated within its own time, the geometric abstraction of the second-half of the twentieth century. Farmanfarmaian’s work, reflects many of the ideas and concepts that started infiltrating the art world in the 1950s-60s. In a talk with artist Frank Stella organised by Guggenheim Museum to discuss her work, Farmanfarmaian states ‘I am not intellectual, I am very optical.’ Hence, Media Farzin suggests ‘Farmanfarmaian’s geometries are more concerned with the impact of

geometry on the eye and the body than on the mind and the soul." The refusal of meanings and symbolism behind the work, the focus on its formal composition, its relationship with its environment and its viewer, are ideas that could be seen the work of many of the minimalist and post-minimalist artists. As Cotter notes Monir says ‘there is no meaning’ is echoing Stella’s statement ‘what you see is what you see.’

What almost every curator, exhibition, paper repeat is that Frank Stella, among many American artists, were Farmanfarmaian’s friends, which seems like some sort of validation for non-westerns. While the personal is always notes, the professional and artistic are often obscured. Observing Flight of the Dolphin (fig. 2. 28), Farmanfarmaian’s work recently hanged in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Farzin says ‘Clearly, we’re in the “subaltern craft” gallery, where the non-western artist is presented as the conceptual genius presiding over a workshop of labouring artisans. [...] her work is usually name-checked against Frank Stella and Andy Warhol, and then placed within an artisanal lineage of Islamic design and “mirror designs”.’ Indeed, as the Met’s press release notes, the work of modern and contemporary Iranian artists including Farmanfarmaian, has been collected since 1993 by the museum’s department of Modern and Contemporary art, but since 2011, by the Department of Islamic Art. Evidently, prior to 2011, the artworks collected were never exhibited. It was not until the Met opened its new galleries of Islamic art that they were put on display for the first time.

Also, Farmanfarmaian was working in Iran around the same time the Pattern and Decoration movement started in the USA, there is no notion of any connection or interaction with that group, although similarities could be detected. The P&D artists were clear about Islamic patterns, ornaments, and tiles being one of their main inspirations. But there are also some differences, especially on the theoretical and conceptual levels. While the P&D movement focused mostly on what was traditionally known as feminine craft or practice, the work of Farmanfarmaian made used of a practice associated with males in traditional practices. While they were clear in their intentions and their use of these patterns and materials for a feminist reason and to counter art history narratives, such claims do not

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335 Farzin, "Mirrors and Diagrams: the Art of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian," p. 69.
337 Obrist and Marta, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry p. 67.
appear in Farmanfarmaian’s conception and vision. Nevertheless, today, Farmanfarmaian’s work is exhibited either in crafts and decorations sections or in Islamic art departments in western museums, but this does not apply to the P&D artists. The major difference between the artists from the P&D movement and Farmanfarmaian, is that they were American while she was Iranian. Through these differences, one could further understand Farmanfarmaian’s resistance to the link between her art and Islamic art principles. Assuming that Farmanfarmaian’s work is a result of identity and certain inherited perception of art denies her individual creativity and vision.

a. Farmanfarmaian and the American art scene

Dona Stein, American curator and scholar, published an article on Farmanfarmaian in 2012 titled *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Empowered by American Art*. Stein starts the article by describing how Farmanfarmaian grew up in a house in Iran where ‘Painted images of flowers, nightingales, and other birds ornamented the ceilings, doors, and stained-glass window frames of their home.’\(^{339}\) She continues however by saying that when Farmanfarmaian arrived in New York in 1945, she was ‘finally able to see art first-hand.’\(^{340}\) It seems that for Stein, as well as many critics and artists, the art forms that existed in Iran, from the ancient Persian civilisations to the Islamic arts to folk arts do not qualify as creative or real arts. ‘Islam can hardly be called creative in the sense that the Greeks were creative in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. or the Western world since the Renaissance, but its flavor is unmistakable.’\(^{341}\)

Though the article’s title claims that Farmanfarmaian was empowered by American art, Stein does not explain how this empowerment manifested. Is it because she studies and lived in the US? In fact, for most of her time in the New York, Farmanfarmaian was exoticised as a woman and marginalised as an artist. ‘These recent shows,’ the artist said in 2015, ‘have been a remarkable time in my life because for so long I was really a nobody. Little by little,

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340 Stein, “Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Empowered by American Art: An Artist’s Journey.”
341 Kozloff and Jaudon, “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture.”
I’ve become...I don’t know...better known?342 In her autobiography, Farmanfarmaian illustrates the exoticising and orientalist behaviour among most of her male American encounters in the art world, from the specialist in Islamic and Persian arts to the modern artists. Farmanfarmaian, young and excited was not aware of these ideas as she wrote in her memoir, after meeting curators and art historians from the Metropolitan Museum, ‘It hadn’t dawned on me yet that such kindness might be motivated by anything other than pity- that I might be an exotic novelty; an object of curiosity, or God forbid, a blank screen for the projection of some silk-and-sequin fantasy out of a Hollywood harem.’343 The artist also notes that after marrying Yektai and with their circle of connection growing, it seemed that it could be helpful with his career. They were invited to parties, they invited artists, critics, and gallerists, however, ‘No gallery signed Manoucher [Yektai], not a single painting was sold, and no offer of help arrived in any form whatsoever; just more invitations to dinner parties, running in endless circles.’344 This echoes the responses that Zeid received after exhibiting in New York about the modern art scene being enclosed to foreigners. ‘It became obvious to me that Manoucher and I were exotic flowers to decorate a dinner table.’345

For the first period of her life in New York, Farmanfarmaian’s work was not acknowledged or exhibited. For the second period she spent in New York, as she said in the Guardian article, the situation was not different, it became even more challenging. Following the Iranian revolution and her move to the New York, she was not exhibited, again, her identity was behind that neglect, as she recalls in an interview in 2011, ‘In America, after the revolution, after the [Gulf] war, nobody wanted to do anything with Iran,’ she says, ‘None of the galleries wanted to talk to me. And after September 11 – my God. No way. Rather than being a woman, it was difficult just being Iranian.’346 Not to claim that the American art and

343 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden.p. 95.
344 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden.p. 115.
345 Farmanfarmaian and Houshmand, A Mirror Garden.p. 114.
artists had no impact on her, however, to say she was empowered denies how her work was overlooked and neglected all these years.

This statement by Stein echoes her recent publication *The Empress and I*, where she claims her role in building the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) art collection was neglected. The book created a controversy regarding the roles of those involved in collecting for the museum. ‘Have you heard there’s this American girl who’s going to start a new museum in Tehran? was the question circulating in New York gallery circles in 1974’\(^\text{347}\) a sentence repeated in different articles wrote about the book, although, even if the role of Stein in creating the collection is debatable, it is sure that she did not start or create the museum. However, in many articles, she is referred to as the ‘American who brought Modern Masterpieces to Iran,’ ‘An American Wrote a Memoir About How She Built Tehran’s Legendary $3 Billion Art Collection. The Iranian Art World begs to Differ,’ ‘Picasso and Pollock in Tehran? Thank Donna Stein for That.’ These claims and controversies are out of this research scope. What is more significant here, is the way Stein describes and refers to Iranian as ‘uneducated’\(^\text{348}\) public who knew nothing about art, and Iran, the Third world country where she, as a modern woman, could not fit. These statements and titles, as well as Stein’s statements about Farmanfarmaian reflect a condescending position towards Iranian artists and art scene and how they their modernism is only a result of western encounters and altruism. Another article in the Guardian, published after the opening of Farmanfarmaian museum in Tehran, claims that the artist gained international acclaim during her exile.\(^\text{349}\) However, the only international exhibitions of Farmanfarmaian’s work were organised when she lived in Iran. Her recent recognition by some western museums came following her move back to Tehran in 2004.\(^\text{350}\) While the artworks that were acquired by some institutions and museums during her 70s exhibitions, were never exhibited.


Being a woman, an ‘aristocrat’ married to the Farmanfarmaian’s family with its connection the royalty and Qajar dynasty, as well as making abstract work were all elements that obscured the name of Farmanfarmaian for two decades in Iran. In the U.S. where she was based for this period, the circumstances were not better, her identity was at first a factor of curiosity and interest for artists and curators, they were however less interested in her art.

V. Do these artists represent a unified movement of art?

The work of each of these four artists is clearly distinct and different, they do not share the same artistic vision nor the same practice. Visually their artworks are diverse and even when they seem to share few concepts and ideas, they translate them differently. While their work is dominated by abstraction, they do not represent a single abstract art movement. They do not represent one Middle Eastern or Islamic modern abstract art. From the concepts they employed in their artworks, to the styles and materials they chose, to the titles and interpretations they gave to these works, it could be seen that each subscribed to a distinct art style.

To start, one of the first differences that could be detected before the visual and aesthetic discussion is the titles of their works which reveals some of their approaches. Many of Zeid’s artworks titles seem to be personal and referring to personal feelings and emotional/moral status, e.g. Three moments in a day and a life, Fighting Abstraction, Mixed Stasis, My Hell, Resolved Problems… As for Omar, many of her artworks are left untitled or have descriptive titles such as At the concert, The Cathedral, Abstract. For few works, she chose some symbolic titles Victory, Music in Line, Mirage. However, for the work that focused on the Arabic letters and translated her ideas about each letter own symbolic power and existence, she chose to name the work by the letter presented Letter Ya, Temple of Ayn… Choucair’s titles mostly evoke the deep interest in geometry and movement in space, Trajectory of the Line, Secret of a cube, Poem Cube, Poem boxes, Intercircles, Trajectory of the Arc, Trajectory of the Vector… As all of these represent the title of series composed of different artworks, which relates also to the concept of potentials. In each series, the artist is experimenting with the different possibilities existing for each geometric element. The early work by Farmanfarmaian, made in the 60s and 70s, consisted of one a main element done in the technique of reverse-glass painting, surrounded by geometric composition with mirror,
the title of each painting is descriptive, referring to the painted element: *The Nightingale, Poetry Book, Daisies, Irises...* For a considerable number of works, Farmanfarmaian adopted descriptive geometric titles like *Triangle, Hexagon, Pentagon, Triangle and Hexagon, Relief Heptagon...* For few works made in 2004-2005, after her return to Iran, more intellectual titles appeared, *The Number of Material Order, The Auspicious Number, The Pillars of Wisdom, The Perfect Number of the Created World.*

These differences in naming the artworks could reflect the different approaches of the artists. Zeid’s titles reflect a more expressive, emotional sometimes philosophical/metaphysical approach which is also obvious through her work and her diaries. It also reflects her journey to abstraction, something she shares with Omar, as they both started from nature to render the elements into abstraction. Choucair and Farmanfarmaian on the other hand, did not approach abstraction from the same perspective. Their artworks were not a simplification or abstraction of natural components, their elements are abstract in nature. The artwork could not be seen as alluding to something outside geometry and forms, the shapes exist in their own entity, regardless of symbolism and nature. Which is why, their titles of their works were mostly referring to these geometric elements and shapes.

The approaches behind Choucair and Farmanfarmaian’s work are similar as they both start from ideas about geometry. The practice is however different. Choucair relies on the philosophy and concepts of Sufism but not on the visual practice, therefore visually her work is distanced from traditional Islamic arts. Indeed, it is interesting that the work of Choucair which could be the most connected to Islamic arts conceptually, is the most divergent from the latter visually. Farmanfarmaian’s work, on the other hand, relies on the visual practice and effect more than philosophy. While the same concept of possibilities and potential is clear in both works, it manifests on different levels: for Farmanfarmaian, due the material used and the reflective nature of mirrors, the work is ever changing, its visual effect and perception has endless possibilities, and they could be seen with every change of the environment with no need for further intellectual work or physical interference or modification in the artwork. As for Choucair, the potential of the artwork is either physically exercised by the audience by rearranging the elements of artworks such as the Poems or exercised on a theoretical level which is the case of Elements Additionnels where the additional elements, that could be add to the infinity are imagined by the audience.
The work of Farmanfarmaian and Zeid might show resemblance if analysed through the small, detailed pieces on a larger surface. However, while Zeid colours these pieces, Farmanfarmaian uses mirrors, which means Zeid decides the visual experience for the viewer and is not impacted by other surrounding elements. In Farmanfarmaian mirror, the space, light, and all the surrounding elements are reflected in the work, which means the same work would have a different impact every time, as every person, element, colour, or form around the artwork will become part of it. In terms of style and technique, Omar’s work is very distinct from the others. She was the only one among them to use the Arabic letters and study its origin and calligraphy. Unlike Choucair who studied the philosophy behind the abstraction, and Farmanfarmaian who studied the geometry and relation between shapes, Omar was interested in the letters, their shapes, and metamorphoses. Her approach was not historical, nor national nor philosophical.

Zeid and Choucair were both working in Paris in the early 1950s. They both participated in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in 1951. The same year Choucair had also her first solo exhibition at Galerie Colette Allendy in Paris. The same gallery organized Fahrelnissa Zeid’s first Parisian solo two years earlier, and exhibited the Iraqi artist Jamil Hammoudi the following year. However, in most studies about each artist and their time in Paris, there is no mention of the other artist, the artists that are mentioned usually are the western seen as central to that time, such as Hans Arp, Sonia Delaunay, and Nelly van Doesburg. Although they were working among the same groups of artists, and maybe had met, or seen each other’s work, the artists themselves do not mention each other, it does not seem that they sensed that their work shared any extraordinary connection derived from their identity or the influence of Islamic art or certain middle eastern characteristics. This is particularly interesting because looking at the artworks of both artists from the period, it is easy to detect the divergent approach, which refutes the notion of identity. At the same time, working within the school of Paris, the work of Zeid and Choucair developed in distinct way from their colleagues, which refutes the notion of imitation.

351 Morgan et al., Saloua Raouda Choucair. p.43.
353 In the pamphlets for both Zeid and Hammoudi’s exhibition, the names are written in Arabic script (fig. 14-15) unlike Choucair’s exhibition.
The assumption that the abstraction in these artists is a result of being born in a Muslim society or having a certain Islamic identity that manifests through this abstraction is incorrect and reductive of each artist perception and interpretation of abstraction itself. What applies to these artists also applies to other artists from the region or from other Muslim societies. As this assumption not only ignores the various forms of abstract art that existed, but it also limits artists to one form of art. Being Muslim or born in Muslim societies would mean that they are only able of producing one form of art, abstract art that aligns with what is conventionally known as Islamic arts. The risk of focusing on identity or ‘mentality’ as it was identified earlier, is that it strips away the artists’ process and choices and suggest that abstraction is the natural ending for their work due to their inability to create any other forms. Hence, while the western modern artist reached abstraction due to his ‘great,’ ‘genius’ artistic talent coupled with a trajectory of aesthetics’ development, the modern ‘Muslim’ artist creates abstract art because it is what her identity dictates. With these notions, the authenticity of figurative work by artists from the region becomes questioned, and their identity and belonging to their ‘own culture’ is problematised. These assumptions ignore the fact that artists are also a part of a cultural scenes, that their work is influenced, not only by identity-which in itself is constructed-, politics, and social circumstances, but also by cultural and philosophical debates surrounding them.

VI. The Feminine and the Feminist

During her studies at Leger’s studio in Paris, Choucair created the paintings *Les Peintres Célèbres* (fig. 2.29) which could be seen as both feminist and opposing the Orientalist representation of women. Leger’s work was as echoing Orientalist’s odalisques and décor as Kirsten Scheid explains, ‘it is his female models that have been reduced to a series of breasts and buttocks, arms and tights with the connecting parts removed’, however in Choucair’s versions, ‘the implicit harem rational is gone, each body claims its own part of the pictorial space. [....] There is a narrative explanation for their behavior, not simple reliance on the idea that women naturally gather about naked for aesthetic delectation. They are workers who are reading up on the people who make their livings out of distorting them.’ However, neither Choucair nor Zeid, Umar and Farmanfarmaian were self-proclaimed feminist. It is rare

354 Morgan et al., *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, p. 55.
355 Morgan et al., *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, p. 45.
to find in their work any signs or symbols that engage with any themes related to women, nor feminine qualities that would differentiate it from their male colleagues. This have made their work less appealing for western museums.

Nevertheless, what the current displays and exhibitions are missing is that the contextualisation of these different experiences, provide a critical perspective to the role played by women artists in shaping art scenes and blurring boundaries of the feminine/masculine. The work of the four artists is not only distinct, but also pioneering. They introduced styles and movements, and reinterpreted concepts and techniques marking their contributions in different art scenes. Zeid was one of the first women artists to create massive abstract paintings, a practice that was dominated by male artists. Her work does not find similarity in her contemporary Turkish, nor in the work of School of Paris. Umar introduced a modern perspective to explore a traditional practice which was also the domain of men. Farmanfarmaian did the same with ‘ayeneh-kari’ and led a team of male masters and craftsmen in her studio. As Rose Issa notes, when she saw the work of Farmanfarmaian for the first time, she assumed it was made by a male artist. Choucair’s work was first criticised and labelled masculine because of its geometric attributes. Nevertheless, she persisted with her artistic views and conceptualisation and entered the realm of sculpture, using solid materials and further challenging the boundaries of masculine/feminine.

Furthermore, the work of Farmanfarmaian and Choucair blurs the boundaries between the traditional duality of art and craft. To absorb the different ideas that she learnt from Hajji Ostad, Farmanfarmaian started reading about Islamic philosophy and cosmology and hired a mathematics teacher to explain the geometry principles behind these concepts. ‘Much of what I learned I have forgotten. Was Hajji Ostad aware of the volumes of knowledge that twisted through his pattern? When I tried to use too many words, we always came back to his string.’ The string here is referring to a piece of string that he would use, anchored with his thumb to make a compass, and extend his designs. As the artist notes, she came into deeper appreciation of the work of Hajji Ostad later as she tried to install one of her mirrors works in New York without his help. ‘It took a firm of architects many expensive hours of computer time to calculate how to extend my design in the space. Hajji Ostad could have laid

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it out in a few minutes with his piece of string.” These statements from the artists demonstrate the complex concepts of traditional ‘crafts,’ and their intricate abstraction, contrary to their assumed hierarchal notions of minor arts.

Choucair, on the other hand, worked with many techniques and materials. Although known mainly for her sculptures, she created tapestries, ceramics, and jewellery designs that followed the same concepts of geometrical abstraction. And she treated all material with the same attention to details. Choucair was very conscious about the orientalist gaze and hierarchical narratives of art history. In 1951 she wrote *How the Arab Understood Art*, as a response/review of Musa Sulaiman’s study *Narrative Fiction among the Arabs* (*Al-Adab al-qisasi 'ind al-'arab*) published a year before. She started by referring to the different perspectives, ‘First, I want to draw your attention to the issue of Orientalists and how they appear from the perspective of us Arabs, or rather from the perspective of you who studied with them and were influenced by their standards.’ She then proceeds to explain her understanding of Arab art and how the Arab artists approached visual arts by purifying forms. In another article in 1965 about Lebanese art, Choucair asserts that a painting of a Lebanese peasant or a Lebanese house does not make the art Lebanese, it is the style and concept adopted. For Choucair, the problematic aspect of the early twentieth century Lebanese and Arab art, is that the artists forgot their traditional abstraction and adopted the figuration and realism of European artists. The dominant hierarchal western system classifying this abstraction as decorative minor art influenced the Arab artists and made them abandon this tradition, she believed. Hence, her choice of abstraction, but also her use of unconventional materials and engagement with different artforms that are labelled as crafts could be seen as challenging these notions of hierarchy.

Dagher was the first to argue and demonstrate that Omar was the first Hurufi. His study, published in 1990, was the first in-depth study of the Hurufiyyya movement, its emergence, and the different approaches that artists adopted. Dagher’s arguments, however, are not based on a feminist approach or an attempt to highlight the work of women artists.

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358 Choucair, "How the Arab Understood Visual Art."
359 Choucair, "How the Arab Understood Visual Art."
360 Saloua Raouda Choucair, "rfyq sharaf bila huwiyya walfann allubnany wa antum tudalilun alfikr," (Beirut) 1965.
He rarely refers to Omar as woman artist. Neither does he make a point of the fact that the first Hurufi artist was a woman. This is why it is important to understand the experience of women artists within the context of art scenes where they worked. The case of Omar might provide a better understanding of many artists refused their categorisation as women artists or any distinct feminine attributes. They did not seem to feel that their recognition was hindered by their identity. And given that they were living and working in patriarchal society, the art world seemed to be the rare space where they could step outside the confines of gender inequality.

VII. Conclusion

In a press release accompanying the retrospective dedicated to Farmanfarmaian’s work at Guggenheim New York, the museum notes that ‘expanding the boundaries of art historical discourse is an important aspect of the Guggenheim’s curatorial vision and its global strategy.’ Describing Farmanfarmaian’s exhibition as ‘incarnation of this commitment.’ The text continues with reference to the artist years in New York, and to the museum commitment to art of the greater Middle East region and its transnational histories adding the museum’s director Richard Armstrong note that ‘It is no surprise that Monir’s work should be a part of the collection now being developed for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.’ 361 But it is surprising that the work would be included in Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and not New York, especially that the artist was based in New York for a long time, and never in Abu Dhabi. The statement refers to the transnational histories but suggests that the art made by artists from the region, would eventually be allocated to Abu Dhabi as the ‘natural’ place for it to exist, segregated from the rest.

The recognition of non-western born artists is long overdue. Museums are awakening to this fact just recently, but seasonal and regional exhibitions as well as retrospectives are not enough as long as critical questions are not addressed. Where do these artists belong and until when they will be seen as emulators of western modern artists? One of the main concepts of modern art is universality, which could be seen from different perspectives. It could be the mixing of elements and techniques from different cultures to achieve the

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universal character. It could also be the creation of artworks that could be understood and appreciated by diverse cultures and societies. In this regard, abstraction is seen as a universal language of art. But universality is not a one-way process. It cannot be exclusive to a group and denied to another.

The way artists are presented and the focus on their ethnical identity and religion reinforce these concepts, it asserts the idea of two worlds, ‘western/non-western,’ ‘centre/peripheries,’ but it also assumes these two worlds were totally disconnected, and that artists’ identity is what influences them more than what the society they are living. In these discourses, the work of an artist like Zeid, becomes a product of an imagined ethnic feminine identity and not the artist method, vision and lived experiences in the ‘western’ society where she resided. While artists like Farmanfarmaian get excluded from modern art movements and are exhibited in crafts sections or Islamic art departments based on her identity and use of techniques labelled as minor and traditional. The work of Choucair on geometric abstraction becomes a result of an inherited culture and not the artist’s own intellectual vision and process. And the achievements and contributions of artists like Omar and other pioneer women artists are ignored in favour of exhibiting artworks that display a direct connection to social and political status.

The interest in the artists based on their identity could explain why they are exhibited in the west but soon forgotten. As institutions, gallerists, critics, and writers give a little interest to the analysis of their work and any effort into contextualising it into art history. Retrospectives, solo exhibitions, temporary exhibitions do help. However, they are not enough. Until today, most of the work of artists from outside the mainstream centres to be exhibited in a temporary exhibition then stored away. The fact that these artists were exhibited in western galleries and institutions for years, then forgotten, proves again that only exhibiting artworks few times with no intentions or efforts to incorporate their art within a wider global art scene would not result in changing narratives.

The four artists have been barely exhibited in the recent exhibitions, and when exhibited their roles and works are overshadowed by political and social artworks. They are not given enough space that reflects their roles and careers. When artists are all grouped together in shows, their achievements, the challenges they faced, and their unique vision and perception of art and modernism goes unmentioned. The work of a lifetime gets reduced to
one work, that communicates the curators’ perception more than the artists body of work. And while their identity was enough to attract attention earlier, now it is less attractive with the new tendencies of political art that reflects the identity even more. With the focus on art that represent women status and conditions in Muslim societies, the work of pioneer women artists gets overlooked. Even more, as these artists who are celebrated as pioneers of art in the region are ignored, what would be the case for emerging artists and young artists who decide not to go with these tendencies and create art that has no specific elements or factors that reflects their identity.

Figure 2.1 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Self Portrait, 1944. Oil on Canvas, 60 x 50 cm. Collection of Sema and Çağ'a. ©Raad Bin Zeid.
Figure 2.2 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Third Class Passengers, 1943. Oil on plywood, 130 x 100 cm. Collection of Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, Istanbul. Eczacibasi Group Donation. © Raad Bin Zeid ©Istanbul Museum of Modern Art
Figure 2.3 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Loch Lomond, 1948. Oil on Canvas, 102 x 192 cm. Collection of Dirimart Art Gallery, Istanbul. © Raad bin Zeid

Figure 2.4 Fahrelnissa Zeid Fight Against Abstraction (Dispute contre l’Abstraction), 1947. Oil on Canvas, 101 x 151 cm. Collection of Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, Eczacıbaşı Group Donation (Istanbul, Turkey) © Raad bin Zeid ©Istanbul Museum of Modern Art
Figure 2.5 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Resolved Problems, 1948. Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm. Collection of Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, Eczacibaşı Group Donation (Istanbul, Turkey) © Raad bin Zeid ©Raad Zeid Al-Hussein Collection © Istanbul Museum of Modern Art
Figure 2.6 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Paleocristállos. Bone in resin, 6 works, various dimensions. Collection of Raad Bin Zeid. Display from Sharjah Art Biennial 12. © Sharjah Art Biennial.

Figure 2.7 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Break of the Atom and Vegetal Life (Rupture de l’atome et vie végétale) 1962. Oil on canvas, 210 x 540 cm. Yildirim Family Collection. © Raad bin Zeid
Figure 2.8 Fahrelnissa Zeid My Hell 1951. Oil on canvas, 205 x 528 cm. Collection of Istanbul Museum of Modern Art Collection, Shirin Devrim and Prince Raad Donation © Raad bin Zeid © Istanbul Museum of Modern Art
Figure 2.9 Fahrelnissa Zeid, Portrait de Charles Estienne, 1964. Oil on canvas, 138 x 85 cm, © Julien Vidal, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Roger-Viollet, © Raad Bin Zeid
Figure 2.10 Madiha Umar, At the Concert, 1948. Scratchboard, 23 ½ x 32 ⅜ cm. ©Madiha Umar

Figure 2.11 Madiha Umar, Untitled, 1955. Oil on Canvas, 45.7 x 58.5 cm. ©Madiha Umar
Figure 2.12 Madiha Umar, The Eyes of Night, 1961. Oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. ©Madiha Umar © Barjeel Art Foundation.

Figure 2.13 Madiha Umar, Untitled, 1978. Watercolour on paper, 31 x 444 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. ©Madiha Umar © Barjeel Art Foundation.
Figure 2.14 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Structure with One Thousand Pieces, 1966–68. Wood and metal fixtures, 147 × 36 × 36 cm. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation
Figure 2.15 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Interform, 1960, from the series Trajectory of the Line. Wooden sculpture, 60 x 32 x 11.5 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. © Barjeel Art Foundation © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation
Figure 2.16 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Moving Dual, 1978-1980, from the series Emboitement [Duals]. Wooden Sculpture, 20 x 12 x 7 cm. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation
Figure 2.17 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Infinite Structure, 1963-65. Tufa stone, 240 × 48 × 30 cm. Collection of Tate, London. Purchased with funds provided by the Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation ©Tate
Figure 2.18 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Poem, 1963-65. Aluminium, 35 x 16.5 x 7 cm. Collection of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation ©Mathaf
Figure 2.19 Saloua Raouda Choucair, The Screw, 1975-77. Bronze, 46 x 40 x 32 cm. Collection of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation ©Mathaf

Figure 2.20 Saloua Raouda Choucair exhibition in Al-Muntada, Beirut in 1988 including the artworks The Screw. © AUB University Libraries
Figure 2.21 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Two=One, 1947-51. Oil on panel, 62 x 82 cm. © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

Figure 2.22 Monir Farmanfarmaian, Flowers, 1965. Oil on canvas (monotype), 50.8 x 67.3 cm. Collection of Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art, Gift of Abbey Wees Grey. © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian
Figure 2.23 Monir Farmanfarmaian, Something Old Something New, 1974. Mirror glass, painted glass and plaster on wood, 102.3 × 127.5 × 7.5 cm. Collection of Tate, London. Purchased with assistance from the Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee and Tate Members 2013. © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

Figure 2.24 Monir Farmanfarmaian, Heartache Box 5, 1994. Mixed Media, 51.5 x 35.5 x 5.5 cm. © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian
Figure 2.25 Monir Farmanfarmaian, Variation of Hexagon, 2002. © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

Figure 2.26 Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Untitled, 1976. Felt pen on paper, 50.7 x 35.5 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Filipe Braga. © Fundação de Serralves. © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian
Figure 2.27 Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Octagon, 2010. Mirror, reverse-glass painting, and plaster on wood 73x 73x 50cm. Third Line Gallery, Dubai, UAE. © Third Line Gallery © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

Figure 2.28 Monir Farmanfarmaian, Flight of the Dolphin, 2010. Mirror, reverse glass painting, glue and plaster on wood, 140.3 x 140.3 x 4.4 cm. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York, Purchase, Gift of Hon. and Mrs. Peter I. B. Lavan, by exchange, 2010. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art © Estate of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian
Figure 2.29 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Les Peintres Célèbres, 1948-1949. Oil on canvas, © Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation
Chapter Three Women in Art: artists and themes

In 2014, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston mounted the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story* curated by Kristen Gresh, the museum’s curator of photographs. The exhibition included over eighty works by twelve female photographers from Iran and the Arab World. But it was received critically by some artists and curators from the region as the curator notes. Gresh refers to the view expressed by an Iranian-born artist describing the show’s focus on women artists from Iran and the Arab as ‘alarming,’ as the women from the region are already stereotyped and subsumed into one group and seen as oppressed by outsider, grouping them in one exhibition would reinforce such perception. The curator refuted this view contending that on the contrary, the work and exhibition challenge stereotypes and perception of the women as powerless.362 But similar criticism continues to be expressed by many artists, curators, and art historians about exhibiting women artists from WANA. Why do many consider these exhibitions and representations to be reinforcing stereotypes when many of the artworks included are sought to counter stereotypes? This chapter will discuss some of the choices, displays and interpretations that might be generating these reactions.

In a conversation with Iranian gallerists published in Art Journal in 2018, Anahita Ghabaian, a Tehran based curator who runs a specialized photography gallery voiced her critical stance from the western interest in exhibiting women artists mentioning that she has been approached several times to curate exhibitions of women but refused. ‘What is the point of organizing an exhibition solely of women? If our women are good artists, you should hold an exhibition for both women and men together to determine who is more competent and successful. But I will not organize an exhibition plan that is based on rubber-stamping.’363 Referring to *She who Tells a Story* and other recent exhibitions Ghabaian notes ‘We have many individuals in Iran who have command of Iranian art and are capable of organizing an exhibition. It is not necessary, at all, for an American or a French woman to come to Iran to collect works and display them somewhere; Iranian gallerists are capable of doing so.[...]

Second, it is strange if you only pursue women, implying that we are so downtrodden that

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you must highlight our women in these exhibitions, and then subsequently you say that they are not that downtrodden.’

Ghabaian is referring to two issues here. First, the problematic questions of curating (as discussed in the first chapter). The second issue, the new tendencies in the framing of women artists’ work that emphasis their identity and struggles as women within Muslim societies will be discussed in this chapter. The number of women artists presented in most recent exhibitions of art from the WANA region in western museums is remarkably high. Women artists account for up to half of the artists exhibited and exceed it sometimes, beside exhibitions dedicated to women artists. While these numbers could be commendable and reflect more attention from museums and institutions for diversity and equality, they seem at odd with the general representation of women artists. As curator Maura Reilly notes in 2015, the numbers of women artists in western museums’ collections, permanent displays, solo exhibitions as well as in biennials and auctions, are still considerably low.

All-women exhibitions continue to be a controversial topic within the feminist discourses. While they are considered a tactical necessity, they also present the risk of essentialised categories and assumptions. In other words, the risk of viewing the artists as women first, not as artists. When it comes to women artists from WANA, these risks seem to double or triple. Women artists from WANA, similarly to their male counterparts face the risk of being ghettoised and their work being reduced to culture representator devoid of artistic and aesthetic value. And similar to their western female counterparts, their work remains undervalued and placed outside the canon. But, as women from WANA, they face a different challenge in western societies, one that stems from narratives of orientalism and stereotyped tropes. There is no denial that these themes have been some of the most controversial and most debated in relation to cultural differences in the last few decades, which was reflected in exhibitions. Hence, scepticism around the western museums increased interest in the work of women artists does not exist in a vacuum.

The interest in the art created by women artists originally from the Middle East intensified during the early twenty-first century, however it started slowly during the last

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364 Sharafjahan et al., "In Tehran: A Conversation with Iranian Gallerists."
decade of the twentieth century. As the museums include more women artists in their exhibitions of art from the region and dedicate certain spaces for women artists and female gaze, what they do not mention or discuss are the reasons behind such inclusion. Museums do not usually clarify whether their presentation of women artists is a result of the latter’s notable presence in art scenes in the middle east or it is an emphasis on women artists due to discriminations in their representation in the local/regional art scenes. Are these rates a reflection of the art scenes? Are women artists as presented in their local art scenes, or is it the museum’s choice to emphasize the work of women artists and why? As the previous chapter discussing the work of the four women artists, since the mid-twentieth century, women artists had and continue to have a significant role in establishing and developing art scenes in different societies. This chapter will provide further evidence of women contributions by discussing the work of women artists who addressed themes related to feminism, gender, and sexuality. These histories, however, are rarely mentioned by museums or curators when exhibiting women artists.

In the preface of She Who Tells a Story, Gresh states ‘One of the most significant trends to emerge recently is the work of women photographers, whose remarkable and provocative images provide insights into new cultural landscapes.’ Gresh’s statement exemplifies many of the issues in the way the art of women is seen: it is a trend, it is provocative, and it provide cultural insights. As Hamid Keshmirshekan notes ‘Various kinds of explicit social and soft political representations, such as gender-related issues in the male-oriented society, among other genres, are the most fashionable.’ Keshmirshekan use of the term fashionable to describe the curatorial approaches is precise, as most curatorial approaches decontextualise the art practices and present it as trends. Hence, this chapter will explore some aspects of the curatorial approaches and discourses that are leading to controversies around the representation of women artists. I will start with discussing two discourses that are repeatedly seen when referring to women artists from the region: the educated and provocative women, and the potential dangers of constructing the image of artists as hero based on political factors rather than artistic merits.

The controversies around exhibiting women resulted from the choices and tendencies to emphasis specific elements that would allow the work to be culturally located. These choices are imposing further risks of essentialising the women artists and their art. The focus on photographs of Muslim/Middle Eastern women could be noticed in most exhibitions. This focus could be understood through the growing interest in photography, and the ease of the transportation compared to other mediums of art. However, these reasons do not answer all queries. This chapter discusses the choice of photography with its roots in the Orientalist perception and interests. The Orientalist discourses are also reflected in the limited interpretations of dichotomies and differences. Hence, the discussion highlights the work of contemporary women artists that focuses on bringing forward the voices of underrepresented generations of women, while burring the boundaries of binary opposition between the personal and the collective, tradition and modernity...

The major problematic aspects in the exhibitions and discussions, however, is not what is presented, but what is excluded. The lack of contextualisation in many exhibitions is obscuring the contributions of artists in local and global art scenes. The exhibitions include many diasporic artists; however, the interpretations of their work remain limited to their past, their connection with the region and rarely touches on their present and their role within the western and global and art scenes. The key absence, however, is the role of women artists, the challenges they faced in entering the fields of art, and the gendered and symbolised notions that they overcame to establish themselves as artists, which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Looking at the exhibitions and choices, it could be noticed that the majority is made following 1990 by contemporary artists. This especially applies to art reflecting social and gender issues. It could be argued that the focus on artworks made since the 1990s is caused by the rise of women artists engaging with themes related to women and gender issues, which museums are trying to highlight. Which is partly true. More contemporary women artists have been exploring gender themes and addressing several aspects of representations. Nonetheless, these themes are not completely new as many modern women artists, since the 1940s have engaged with themes related to women and gender. Discussing the work of different modern artists evidences the diversity and breadth of these artistic explorations. The question remaining then would be, why are these artists excluded from exhibitions? I
would argue that it is the artistic diversity in these artworks that is leading to their neglect. As artists are expected to present certain characteristics that would make artworks culturally authentic, women artists are also expected to highlight elements that would refer to their identity as women from WANA. The work of many modern women artists does not provide this immediate identification.

Many women in the region were involved in nationalist and anti-colonial struggles since the early decades of the twentieth century. This involvement was reflected in many cultural and social practices, including their art. Although they did not form organised movements and groups, as western feminist artists did since 1970s, they started engaging with feminist, political and social themes since 1940s from different perspectives. As the anti-colonial and nationalist movements grew, the questions related to gender and women became central to the debates. This centrality, however, was not always in the best interest of women. Women’s image and life were inserted into debates where their interests, lives and challenges they face became secondary. Between the colonialists trying to evidence the backwardness of societies by using the conditions under which women were living, and the nationalists responding by either tightening these conditions or using the images of women to prove modernity, both sides did not reflect women’s voices and concerns. Many women artists resisted these notions by engaged with feminist discourses and highlighting the struggles of women in their art. As museums neglect these histories, they do not only neglect women’s role in shaping art scenes, but they also dismiss the different histories of feminism and women’s struggles.

This long history of exploiting the female bodies in political discourses where the women became secondary is echoed in today’s discussions of women artists and their work. The exhibitions, often framed within the concepts of understanding and humanising the region, overlook many interests, challenges, and notions that the women artists reflect through their work. Projecting political discourses into the representations of women overshadows the contributions of women artists and their long history of defying the reduction of their voices.
I. The artist as hero

The rise of western museums interest in the art from the region came at a politically charged time, highly influenced by certain events, 9/11 and the war on terror. It arose at the highest of discussions about the ‘clash of civilisations,’ identities, and cultural differences. The exhibitions were said to counter this image of Muslims and ‘humanise’ them in the eyes of western audiences. However, aiming to ‘humanise’ populations without addressing the source of such demonised image and its spread can be problematic, as it deprives artists from expressing freely and limits their work into limited themes. The issue of ‘humanising’ the Middle East and Muslims in American museums’ exhibition through arts was discussed in 2008 by Jessica Winegar in The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror. Winegar essay ‘critiques the universalist assumptions about humanity and the agentive capacity of art to build bridges of understanding in contexts of so-called civilizational conflict. Assumptions that have strong roots in anthropology.’

Within this narratives and discourses, some tropes of artists and art were constructed and have governed the choices and presentations of art from WANA in western context. ‘In American elite circles, from the U.S. government to universities and arts organizations, there is no greater contrast to the image of a suicide bomber than the image of an artist.’ With this contrasting image also came the expectations of critical art and dissident artists as a way for the artists to prove their humanity. Within this context, debates on gender issues and questions related to women in Muslim societies were intensifying, hence, women artists were expected to address these issues. Two tropes of women artists were constructed through these expectations and choices: the women artists as hero and as few enlightened among the majority of oppressed, uneducated women.

Shirin Neshat explored the problematic aspects of political art and the creation of a myth or an image of heroism, especially in the western audience perception of non-western artists in an article she published in 2016. Neshat remarks ‘how by supporting and rallying around artists who put themselves at risk and are courageous in the face of tyranny, the Western public risks constructing cultures that are limited and based less on artistic merits.

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than on creating heroes.' Neshat herself was one of the earliest artists around whom such a myth or image was built. Her series Women of Allah remains one of the most exhibited artworks and had become the archetype of museums’ choices of art by women from WANA. Ehya’s study was completed in 2012, almost two decades following Neshat’s first exhibition Unveiling. Nonetheless, it was the first thoroughly detailed artistic and aesthetic study of the work and one of the first to situate it within the American context. Most of the discussions until that point, and even today, continue to be dominated by hyper-charged discourses regarding politics, the artist’s view of the Iranian regime, the lives of women under Islam.…. 

Similar approaches often apply to current displays of women artists. Museums link these choices and the emphasis on the work of women artists to the status of the women in the region, the issues, challenges, and oppression they face. In Art and Power, Tripp states that ‘Nowhere has this [dangerous line to walk] been more apparent than in works that have addressed the place and role of women in the changing societies of the Middle East and North Africa. For female artists, questions of gender, tradition and faith informed many of their works […] Inevitably, this brought them up against forms of power and censorship, driving some into exile.’ The emphasis on women artists, as especially defiant and provocative in Gresh’s preface could also be seen within the same visions.

Hence the current representations of women artists and the interpretation of their work seem to propose some myths of greatness and heroism, but in the case of women artists from WANA, this greatness is associated with their identity, political and critical opinions, and life stories more than its connection to their intellectual and artistic visions. Consequently, women become highlighted as the theme of display rather than the creators. The significance of their presence, then, lies not in the art they create but in their dissidence as women. Their contributions, their roles in pushing the limits of artistic practices becomes secondary to their political engagement.

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a. Tropes of educated enlightened women.

The stereotyped image of WANA women as uneducated ignorant women originates from the long history of Orientalism but is still spread and assumed even among curators and experts. As Porter notes in the curator’s tour to the exhibition Reflections at the British Museum ‘Laura Boushnak has been preoccupied by the general lack of literacy amongst women across the Middle East.’\cite{Venetia Porter, Curator’s Tour of Reflections: Contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa 2021} Boushnak’s photography series I Read I Write (fig. 3.1) that Porter is referring to, does address the theme of women and education in various parts of the Arab World. The artist travelled to Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Palestine and recorded stories of women in their education journey. While the work included in the British museum exhibition does portray an Egyptian woman in adult literacy class, it does not apply to all countries. As the artist explains in an interview ‘if you take the Gulf Countries, for example, there is no illiteracy. On the contrary, education is quite high for women. Saudi Arabia: thousands of women go abroad to study. They come back highly educated, with PhDs. But the problem is that there is no work. And then, if you take the example of Yemen: at the moment, it’s the war that is interrupting education. This also happens in Syria, Libya, Iraq. It’s not just because parents don’t want to send their children to school: the war is interrupting education.’\cite{Laura Boushnak, “I Read I Write,” interview by Eefje Ludwig 2020} Assuming ‘a general lack of literacy’ based on a regional identification, with no distinctions or references to the many factors that affect women’s access to literacy and education, reinforce the stereotypes of women.

Many curators, when referring to women in the region, emphasis the theme of education, albeit in contradicting perspectives. ‘The Tehran-born-and-based photographer Newsha Tavakolian testifies to the power of contemporary women in Iran, many of whom are highly educated.’\cite{Gresh and Krifa, She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World p. 23} States Gresh in the introduction to She Who Tells a Story. Commenting on photographs by Jordanian artist Tanya Habjouqa from the series Women of Gaza she adds ‘In another powerful portrait, a student wearing a niqab waits on a bench, holding a black bag with a small teddy bear hanging from it. By capturing these humanizing details of fully covered women, Habjouqa challenges her own resentment of the rise of the niqab. [...] Another
example from the series shows an educated young woman that the photographer met at a local university. [...] In a lively portrait, a university literature student is intent on photographing Habjouqa.  

The continuous reference to women and artists as educated serves similar concepts of ‘humanising.’ The focus on education status seems to suggest that the women do not deserve such restrictions because they are educated. But more importantly, these references to the women’s and the artists’ education seem to constantly appear in the discourses about women artists from the region exclusively. Rarely do curators refer to artists outside the region, or even the male artists from the region, as educated. It is only the woman artist who seems to always be required to affirm her education, as a signal that proves her modernity. These notions also suggest that the artists are worthy of attention and consideration because they are educated, and they do not fall under the stereotypical image of Muslim/oriental women. These interpretations paint the image of most women as oppressed and passive, and the few artists as the ‘enlightened and empowered.’ This image becomes more engrained with the exclusion of the earlier feminist artistic practices that will be discussed in the following sections.

II. The Women of WANA and the western museums: The Illusion of real image

One of the lures of the Women of Allah series, for western institutions and audiences, was that it opened a new window to view the women from Iran, and subsequently, the Middle East. For a long time, these women have been subject of interest and curiosity in the west. The literature, travellers’ books, and arts displayed a considerable interest in the lives of ‘oriental’ women. The representation of women from the Middle East has a long history in western museums. Since the nineteenth century and the rise of Orientalist art, they have been constant guests within museums’ walls. Since most travellers, writers and artists were men, they were not allowed to enter women’s private space, the Harem. The concealed space captivated the curiosity of European men and created what many refer to as an obsession with the Harem and oriental women.

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375 Gresh and Krifa, She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World. p. 112.
Some of the earliest representations of Oriental women and Harem were depicted by the French artist Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867). Ingres, who had never travelled to the Orient, was commissioned to create *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) in reference to the Ottoman concubine. But the recognition of the theme came two decades later with Eugene Delacroix *Femmes d’Algiers Dans Leur Appartement* (1834) depicting Algerian women. The painting was made in the wake of the French initiation of the conquest and colonisation of Algiers. Delacroix was one of the rare artists who entered an Algerian Harem, which granted his depiction a sense of authority and authenticity. During the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, as artistic styles and movements changed, the theme of oriental women or Harem remained popular among the western male artists. And many of these were and continue to be presented and celebrated by western museums.

Realism and objective depiction of the true image of the women were significant factors emphasised in the reception of Delacroix’s painting of *Women of Algiers*. When the painting was presented in Paris, many critics noted the artist’s realistic reflexion of the laziness and ignorance of the women. ‘The critic Gabriel Laviron expresses the sentiment of the day: “In seeing this picture, one really understands the boring life of these women who do not have a serious idea, nor a useful occupation to distract themselves from the eternal monotony of this prison in which they are enclosed.”’ Objectivity and accuracy align with Nochlin’s discussion of the realness in *The Imaginary Orient*, ‘Part of the strategy of an Orientalist painter like Gérôme is to make his viewers forget that there was any ‘bringing into being’ at all, to convince them that works like these were simply ‘reflections,’ scientific in their exactitude, of a preexisting Oriental reality.’

Within these forms of ‘realist’ or ‘naturalist’ art that were popular among Orientalists, the focus is on authenticity and objectivity, or in other terms, on the artlessness as Nochlin notes “The ‘seriousness’ of realist art is based on the absence of any reminder of the fact that it is really a question of art.” The carefully depicted details, the specific elements that mark a specific culture, such as calligraphy, carpets and patterns are ‘[…] signifiers of the category of the real, there to give credibility to the ‘realness’ of the work as a whole, to authenticate the total visual field as a simple, artless reflection—in this case, of a supposed Oriental reality.’

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In other words, what was interesting and celebrated in the work of orientalists depicting women was not the aesthetics, nor the artistic value, but the knowledge they provided, their representations of the reality of Oriental women. And these tropes remained the main and only representations of women from WANA until recently.

The recent exhibitions gave a new meaning to the representation of women from WANA in western museums. It is now conveyed through the work of women artists from WANA themselves. In theory, this could be seen as a way to redress the historical imbalance and the museum’s contribution in perpetuating stereotypes of women. The choices and displays, however, suggest different ends. On a visual level, the artworks chosen represent images of women, with specific elements that refer to their identity from the veil to Arabic/Persian script to some ‘oriental’ accessories, ornaments... These elements have been immensely popular in Orientalist paintings and became staples that indicate the identity of the women presented. Another common aspect in the artworks that are displayed is the use of photography. This choice also stems from orientalist narratives and a curiosity to discover the ‘real’ lives of muslim women. In her book *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950*, Sarah Graham-Brown explored the themes and uses of photography by westerners in the Middle East. Graham-Brown notes that ‘as Barthes suggests, this product of chemistry has a claim to ‘represent a reality’ in a way no artist would claim for a painting. The process of photography, therefore, could transform these imaginative arrangements in the studio into ‘proof’ of the way in which people in the Middle East and elsewhere looked and behaved.’

The invention of photography gave new dimensions to concepts of realness and objectivity. Many scholars have pointed the connections between the history of photography and Orientalism. Since its inception, the medium has been described as an essential tool in advancing the European studies and interests in the Near East region. Ali Behdad discusses ‘the ways in which photography proved to be a highly valuable tool in transforming the Orientalist system of knowledge by furnishing it with an efficient technological apparatus for gathering data.’

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with a claim to objectivity and accuracy, while rapidly producing an enormous body of information about the Middle East.\textsuperscript{380} Photography grew rapidly to replace Orientalist paintings and drawings due to its ‘realistic’ attributes, becoming the ‘perennial instrument of representing the Other.’\textsuperscript{381}

The issue, as Graham-Brown notes in her study of the images of women produced by Orientalists, is that the themes and compositions were based on Orientalist paintings, and the images of women were supplemented with elements of calligraphy, decorative patterns associated with Islamic arts. Similar elements could be seen in many of the photographs displayed in recent exhibitions. From Neshat’s \textit{Women of Allah} to Essaydi’s \textit{Converging Territories} and \textit{Les Femmes du Maroc} that borrowed the composition of Orientalist paintings with the Harem women, but also included Arabic script written all over the monochromatic photographs and Ghadirian’s \textit{Qajar} series that was inspired by Qajar studio portrait photographs with the painted backdrop and the models’ outfits. Ghadirian however added some modern-day life elements to each setting. Many other artists followed with similar compositions.

This is not to say that the work of these artists is orientalist or reflecting stereotypes. Many artworks were created in attempt to counter the Orientalist stereotypes of passive objectified women.\textsuperscript{382} To what extent each artwork succeeds or fails in this attempt remains debatable. Each body of work could be interpreted differently, Neshat’s work for example has been repeatedly interpreted as orientalist, postcolonial, subverting the gaze, confronting the gaze, reaffirming the orientalist gaze and stereotypes.… The same applies to other artworks. Nor is it to say that the artworks are similar conceptually or lack originality. On the contrary, each artist is inspired by different contexts to create their artworks. And each artworks holds many complex layers of meanings. The issue is that these complex layers are at risk of being reduced when the art is not contextualised, or when the artworks are grouped together to present the theme of women. Those issues are related to choices and politics of representations.

\textsuperscript{380} Behdad, "The Power-Ful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran."
\textsuperscript{381} Farzin, "Exhibit A: On The History of Contemporary Arab Art Show," p. 94.
As a result of this focus, most of the discourses shift to discuss the lives of women under Islam, or the stereotypes of Muslim women, but little would be said about the art and the artists. The curatorial approaches mostly focus on bringing the artworks to discuss the women of the Middle East, or Muslim women but not the women artists. Shadi Ghadirian, for example, was the youngest artist included in the 2000 exhibition *Contemporary Iranian Art* in London. Ghadirian was among the first contemporary artists based in Tehran to re-employ photography in artistic compositions. Her *Qajar Series* was the first artistic photography series following the growth of photojournalism during the years of war.\(^{383}\) Ghadirian studied photography at Azad University and worked at the Museum of Photography in Tehran. And there she came across the Qajar photography that inspired her series.

a. The veil and the dichotomies

A common component in most exhibitions, is the veil, not only as a visual element in exhibited artworks, but as a central theme or trope. In general, as the veil in its different forms and definitions is a widespread practice in the region, it would appear in the work of the artists who are presenting women or reflecting aspects of life or culture. Veiled women have appeared in the work of many modern artists, both males and females. However, the choices and framing of the recent exhibitions seem to limit this representation within certain frames. The problem is that the interpretations of artworks between defending the veil and criticising it are in many cases simplistic and didactic ignoring many layers of complexity. The advantage of such artworks in exhibitions that are preoccupied with political discussions is that the theme is easily identifiable. More importantly, the artists are constantly presented through an ahistorical approach that does not attempt to locate their work within its time and place.

Historically, the themes related to women have not only been the subject of interest for many westerners, but they have also been used constantly to indicate the backwardness of societies and the cultural divergence between Islam and West. The veil in particular held these notions in western perceptions. In recent times, the veil has become again the centre of discussions in the west. As Fadwa el-Guindi notes in her study published in 1999 ‘The Western word veil is ‘sexy’ and marketable in the West. It thus tends to be overused, invariably out of or without context, in titles of books, articles, conferences, press, films and

popular literature in a way disproportionate to the relative significance of the veil in Middle Eastern affairs, and irrespective of the quality of knowledge about the veil. [...] the veil has come to replace the earlier obsession with ‘harems’ and hammams. [...] In the West harem, veil, polygamy envoke Islam and are synonymous with female weakness and oppression. Following 9/11 and the war on Afghanistan, the theme of Muslim women came to the centre of discussion again. The veil, the most explicit symbol of otherness, with its historic connection in western consciousness with oppression and victimization of Muslim women occupied a central place. As Joan Wallach Scott notes in her book, *The Politics of the Veil* (2007), the veil became one of the main aspects of the incompatible cultures. In the post-colonial world and with the rise of immigration, the discourses of alienation and othering were growing, but while these discourses were confined within the harem and third world geography, the immigrant posed a new threat within the western society. The veil, hence, became not only an indication of victimhood of Muslim women, but also the symbol of their shared identity, collective existence, as well as their opposition to modernity and ability to perform in an open modern society. More importantly, their mere presence in such society, with their loud and clear declaration of their ‘different’ beliefs is a threat to the modern society.

Women artists are expected to tackle the issues that relates to women conditions through certain themes: the body image and control-mostly in relation to the veil, education, social and political liberties. Certain themes, however, do not seem to interest western museums and curators.

b. Traditions and Memory

But the more important concept to discuss here is dichotomy. Dichotomy and its synonyms have been some of the most used terms to describe both the women and the artists from the region. The curator of *She who Tells the Story* notes that the artists ‘explore the dualities of the visible and the invisible, the permissible and the forbidden, the spoken and the silent, the prosaic and the horrific.’ Although many artworks could be seen as individual and reflecting personal experiences, the overall or general themes of artworks still fall under

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the wider themes of dichotomies, conflicts, East/west, Islam/west, tradition/modernity, oppression/freedom, collective/individual…. The artists, and the women depicted, are usually presented as torn between the two extremes. However, many artists present a more nuanced and complex approach to the notions of traditions and modernity. The work of artists discussed hereafter blurs the boundaries between the personal and the collective, but also between tradition and modernity. Through different techniques and materials, the women artists document changes, and generational differences and bring forward many underrepresented voices.

The blur boundaries could be seen in the work of Tunisian artist Nicene Kossentini, who plays on more minimalistic presentations for a ‘poetic and melancholic interpretation of the fleetingness of time and elements.’ Her video *Stories* (2011) (fig. 3.2) could be the most representative of these concepts. As her grandmother was ageing, the artist realised that the long-standing tradition of storytelling was disappearing. The stories, including tales, legends, anecdotes, and histories of the community, transmitted orally from mother to daughter across generations were in risk of vanishing. In the artist’s family, her grandmother was the last person to know them, hence, Kossentini decided to film her telling the stories to preserve them. The artist intended originally to examine the intersection between the intimate and familial stories and the political history. But as they started filming, Kossentini realised that her grandmother was suffering from memory loss, struggling to remember the details. *Stories*, hence, could be interpreted from various perspectives. It can be seen as representing a universal human experience of loss, where the identity of the artist and of the grandmother becomes secondary overshadowed by the emotions and expressions of the grandmother. The final product is a series of inconsistent and incomplete stories with many gaps of silence that turns into an exploration of notions of loss and the ephemeral nature of human memory and life. It presents some aspect of realness by exploring notions of memories, loss, and disturbance, and can function within a context that is hard to limit to women from the region.

*Stories*, however, could also be analysed as a cultural and generational loss in relation to the region and women’s role. The video sheds light on the tradition of storytelling associated with women. This form of art was a known and preserved practice among

generations of women in different societies. However, the history of crafts usually differentiates between the women as amateurs and the men as professionals. In the case of storytelling by women, as it was largely performed in private spaces, it has been less documented and appreciated while the male storytellers who performed in public spaces are usually highlighted more. In his 1990 translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Husain Haddawy starts by referring to his memory as a little boy in Baghdad listening to stories from his grandmother’s friends. Most accounts and books, however, would refer to public storytelling often performed by men. With this video, Kossentini is preserving the memory of a practice and documenting the role women themselves played in preserving and transmitting collective memory across generations.

The Saudi artist Manal AlDowayan explores notions of tradition and memory through the various changes in Saudi society using photography and videos. While these could be seen from the perspective of dichotomy and contrast between tradition and modernity, AlDowayan approaches the topic from various perspectives. One of the artist’s main interests is observing and documenting the changes that took place in society due to oil discovery and the new wealth that occurred. Some of these changes are very particular to certain countries in the region, especially the Gulf countries in the 1970s. With her father’s generation, as she notes, the economic and political landscape of the country was transformed dramatically. That generation ‘straddled the divide between extreme poverty and extreme wealth. This can only happen once. No other generation will ever bear witness to this epic transformation.’

Hence the artist created *If I Forget you Don’t Forget Me* (fig. 3.4) in 2013. The series documents the fast urbanisation within Saudi society and its impact on individuals and communities.

Despite the series *If I Forget You Don’t Forget Me* being mostly focussed on men, since they dominated the early careers in the oil industry, AlDowayan does not ignore the role women played. In her talks, statements, and interviews, she makes it a point to refer to the men and women of that generation and their role. To further highlight the role of women, AlDowayan presents the story of Mona Attieh (fig. 3.3), who was the first Saudi woman to receive a scholarship to study abroad. Ranking first in high school scores, Attieh was denied

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387 from the Arabic manuscript published in 1984 by Muhsin Mahdi.
the scholarship for being a woman, however she protested and countered the rejection and eventually travelled to study in the US. In her earlier series *I Am* (2005), AlDowayan addresses through photography the stories of women and their historical contribution to the development of their society as well as the impact of changes on women’s conditions. Explaining the circumstances leading to her choice of theme, AlDowayan refers to the impact of oil discovery and rapid urbanisation on traditional crafts such as al-Sadu weaving\(^{389}\) associated with women.

These were natural social structures that existed in the past that allowed women to earn money and have financial independence, or at least contribute to the family livelihood alongside men. The fast pace of change brought on by oil-fuelled modernity has, in one generation, made these jobs obsolete for women. Bedouins have been urbanized and Nagsh has all but stopped with the death of the last generation of great artisans who led large groups of women painters. Although their communities in the past allowed women and men to be equal earners and financial contributors, today it is the women who live in poverty or have become totally dependent on the earnings of the male members of their families.\(^{390}\)

The fast shift in society excluded many women from labour sectors, simultaneously, it created new sectors and needs in society that generated the questions by conservatives on what kind of labour is suitable for women’s nature. AlDowayan series includes photographs of Saudi women who started their career in many of the newly needed sectors disregarding the ongoing controversies around women work in Saudi society. In a more recent work, *Sidelines* (2017) (fig. 3.5) commissioned by *Jeddah Arts initiative* 21,39, AlDowayan continues to explore this topic by collaborating with Sadu weaver and Bedouin craftswomen.

Kossentini’s and AlDowayan’s work discussed above do not approach traditions from the perspective of dichotomy, or the struggle between tradition and modernity. They are more of observations on the changes that occur within society across periods and generations. They are not interested in the male gaze, nor the colonial gaze. The artists are

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\(^{389}\) Al Sadu refers to the traditional woven textile made by Bedouin women: in Arabic, ‘Al Sadu’ means weaving done in a horizontal style. The weaving is a form of warp-faced plain weave made on a ground loom. (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage).

\(^{390}\) AlDowayan, “Artworks.”
not attempting to revive the traditions through their work, neither Kossentini is a professional storyteller, nor AlDowayan is Sadu weaver. Their artworks, however, shed light on different practices and roles assumed by women. They document the memory of traditions usually associated with women. The artists employ archival material, photography, and video to create artworks that oscillate between personal and collective memories. The use these different contemporary artistic practices to highlight traditional artistic practices associated with women. By doing so, they bring forward underrepresented voices and highlight distinct roles and practices performed by generations of women.

III. The unmarked present

Most literature and discussions about the art from WANA usually refers to the forgotten past, or the art without history. Acknowledging the history of modern art has been a central concern, which this study also has argued. But the last point to discuss in this chapter is in relation to the present, and its absence from most exhibitions. This is mostly a symptom of ahistorical exhibitions. However, when it comes to analysing and contextualising the work of contemporary artists, the attempts seem to always fail to acknowledge the present. Preoccupied with the artists past and where they come from, the curators overlook the present lives of artists and the impact of different circumstances on their art. That ultimately leads to overlooking the many complex layers that the art provides. The work of women artists from WANA might provide some knowledge about the women in the region, but it also reflects many aspects related to societies, both middle eastern and western.

What remains to discuss then, is that the relationships to time and place, the generation and geography. The categorisations and interpretations are usually confined with the artists’ past, where they came from and not with their present as they are moving between cities, nations, and continents nor their future with an increasingly connected world. The exhibitions, even when trying to contextualise the art, do that through the artists’ past, but ignore their current connections and locations. How are these notions navigated by postcolonial artists? what differences could be seen between those based in region and those based in western cities? How have the western narratives and media influenced their work? how have the art scenes where they work influence them? would three Iranian artists based in Tehran, New York and London respectively produce similar work?
a. The artist and the city: here and now

The exhibitions are generally categorising artists within the department and exhibitions of Middle East without noting any differences between the work of Diaspora artists and the work of artists based their native countries, or any similarities with the work of artists in cities where they are based, have learned, and lived for decades. Also, For Diaspora artists, museums focus on their work that is related to their origins, seen as a form of nostalgia or criticism as they live in exile. Nevertheless, they rarely include works that depict the ways they navigate the notions of belonging, through their present lives in western societies, challenges, progress or any forms of connections and relations.

The questions related to diaspora artists or non-western artists working in western context have been examined by many scholars and art historians. The constantly questioned belonging of these artists have been the centre of alternative modernities studies, especially for the mid-twentieth century period. One might argue that today, these issues are less prevalent as more artists are acknowledged. But the questions related to diaspora and local artists are not only those of belonging and identity. Many differences could be marked between the two, and these depend on the different contexts they experience.

The work of Iranian-British artist Mitra Tabrizian is one example. In recent exhibitions, Tehran (2006) (fig. 3.7) has been one of the most exhibited artworks. Four museums acquired the photograph Victoria and Albert Museum, London, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Musée d’Art Moderne, Luxembourg and Moderna Museet, Stockholm. And the artist still receives invitations to talk about it. The invitation, as Tabrizian notes, come within the context of the political crisis and the conflict between the US and Iran. 391 This interest, however, overlooks the more complex and diverse notions in the artist’s work. Tabrizian’s emergence was marked by feminism and critical discourses in the UK. Her earliest publication, Correct Distance (1991) (fig. 3.6), was edited by the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock and explored the themes of sexuality, femme fatale, gender, and race. ‘Correct Distance offers a map of the ways in which the debate on sexual difference and photographic practice developed during the eighties.’392 Her photographs came to represent a radical engagement

with the critical and theoretical theories of post-structuralism and postmodernism, questioning the politics of representation.

Tabrizian’s work, for instance, differs from the work of Neshat, although both artists share an Iranian identity and a similar timeline. Both artists were born in Iran, both left few years before the revolution, and returned to Iran in the 1990s. Both artists adopted photography as primary techniques and moved to videos and films. And both have addressed themes related to Iran. However, their approaches and visual language are utterly different. These differences could be interpreted through the artists’ vision and individuality and through the locations and geographies they occupied. Neshat’s work was a response to the artist’s visit to Iran after year and reflected an interest in women’s lives and thoughts. However, it was also a reflection of her life in the US and the influence of the images of Iranian women that populated the American mainstream media after the revolution and the hostage crisis. Unlike the singular portraits in Women of Allah, Tabrizian includes the female figure in Surveillance (1989-1990) within spectacle that alludes to the recent history of Iran, from the 1953 US and UK instigated coup that overthrew the democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, to the revolution, establishment of the Islamic regime and the Iran-Iraq war. Surveillance, as Stuart Hall notes, engages with Foucault’s theories ‘on the panoptic gaze of power, in that compelling, single, stereoscopic image of Khomeini’s Islamic cultural revolution and Iranian women staged as part of the spectacle of power.’

In Another Country (2010) (fig. 3.9), Tabrizian tried to depict the ideas of political and cultural dislocation, being both part of the city and excluded from it. She photographed the Muslim Sunni and Shia communities in London, in frames that seems like everyday life, kids in school, men in a coffee shop, at work... Part of the series is a shot of young girls at a Shia Mosque in east London. Describing the process Tabrizian said, ‘It took me almost a year to get access for this shot. [...] As they live under surveillance and are subjected to constant harassment, they don’t trust outsiders. But once I won them over, they were extremely helpful.’ Tabrizian acknowledges that one feature of the photographs is that many would

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393 Ehya, "Facing Up to Shirin Neshat’s “Women of Allah”.
think that the photographs were taken somewhere in the Middle East due to the resemblance in the settings between these photos and locations in the Middle East.

However, she notes that she is not suggesting ‘that the west and the east are indistinguishable or that people from the Middle East lead the same sort of lives wherever they may be – I’m just highlighting the difficulty of deciphering the setting visually. This could be read as a breakdown of the barriers of otherness, which are so prevalent in relation to the Middle East.’

What the artist is displaying with this series, as well as the other series, are notes on the human conditions within different landscapes and societies. Understanding the work of Tabrizian only in terms of east and west, immigration and displacements, means overlooking many complex layers that examine today’s societies.

Although each series is very specific in its depiction, they share some similarities and notes on representations of human life. In both Tehran (2006) and City, London (2008) (fig. 3.8) Tabrizian’s work addresses the issues of isolation within contemporary societies, and systems of representations. The staged photographs are not concerned with the ‘representation of politics’ as much of they are focused on ‘politics of representation.’ What is prevalent in all series is the sense of detachment and isolation the characters display, whether the work includes one, two or a group of people. This isolation could be a consequence of various factors, Tehran was set against the sanctions and war threats by Bush’s administration, which created a sense of alienation among Iranians as a result on inside and outside pressure. City, London, on the other hand, was shot at the heart of the financial city and alludes to the 2008 economic crisis. You don’t know what nights are like? (2016) focused on night-time workers in London. The series included their pictures with interviews depicting another form of isolation, alienated by their work schedule these people become invisible within a society.

Tabrizian’s work does not necessarily reflect the artist’s own experiences. It is also not a tale of heroism, beauty, courage. It is not about history but about time. The location becomes secondary to the time in when one looks at the different series. Whether in rural areas in Iran, or in city centre London, in Bahrain or in the middle of Tehran, Tabrizian’s work

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396 Phillips, “Mitra Tabrizian's Best Photograph: Mosque Students at Breaktime.”
397 Tabrizian, interview.
reflects a sense of isolation shared by different people today. As Homi K. Bhabha notes ‘Despite shifts in landscapes and locations, Mitra Tabrizian’s photographs have consistently posed an urgent question: Who are the people?’ 398 They do not convey a clear direct political message or commentary, they focus on representing the underrepresented, the people, attitudes, status that might go unnoticed within the meta-narratives. While the circumstances and reasons might be different, it is a symptom of current times and Tabrizian’s work reflect contemporary conditions.

Interestingly, the topic of surveillance is pointed out by two other artists residing in London. Responding to a question about her first impression of London when she arrived in 1975, Mona Hatoum notes that it was ‘the control on the individual, the surveillance issues, cameras pointing at you all the time. That’s why these things came into my work right from the beginning, and then of course I came across the writings [on surveillance, the idea of the ever-visible inmate] of Michel Foucault and of Jeremy Bentham.’ 399 This impression translated into Hatoum’s use of video and human body which started with Don’t Smile, You’re on Camera! (1980) (fig. 3.11). A performance work in which the artist used a video camera to take shots of the audience and mix them with x-ray to produce an effect a nudity effect. The performance high levels of privacy invasion left the audience in discomfort and anger. Hatoum continued exploring the themes of body privacy and surveillance which culminated in her work Corps Étranger [foreign body] in 1994 (fig. 3.12). An endoscopic footage of the artist’s own body displaying the ultimate form of surveillance and body invasion.

Another artist who refers to surveillance is Zineb Sedira, albeit in a different approach. Born in France to Algerian parents only one year after the Algerian independence, Sedira grew up in a society where differences, racial, ethnic, religious, culture etc… are to remain private. ‘In the French imagination, the nation is central. The Nation, the state, their project. […] The language of race, of difference, is said to help the handmaiden(s) of the ghetto. So we are all French.’ 400 Sedira moved to London in 1986 and realised that the concepts of identity were,
however, completely different between the two societies. ‘Britain, compared with France, entertained a different sense of difference, born from its own historical experience of Empire building and closely aligned to notions of race and color.’ London offered a different perspective, a different challenge. For Sedira ‘it felt alien to encounter monitoring of race, ethnicity. Filling in forms created a mixture of unease. Was this a form of surveillance?’ For Sedira, this resistance to the ethnical and racial categorisation translated into an interest with exploring gender and class within the colonial systems. Hence, for postcolonial artists, the experience of belonging depends on the city and informs many aspects of their presence and their practices.

The difference between the perception of artists working in various western art scenes should be noted here. Tabrizian, like Hatoum and Sedira worked in London. And as many artists from non-western origins, their work has faced many challenges and attempts to essentially locate it. Yet, their work has been seen outside the regional exhibitions and studies. For example, Hatoum’s work was included in Catherine de Zegher's widely admired 1996 show Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine. In the recent history of exhibitions informed by feminism, very few have managed to escape the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, gender essentialism, while also presenting a selection of ‘aesthetically challenging’ artworks, and inside the visible was one of these exhibitions. Neshat’s work, however, is rarely seen or discussed outside the regional discourses.

The work of women artists, as discussed above, reflects many aspects related to society and art scenes. Additionally with the different phases and changes, it might provide insights into the shifts in art scenes influenced by socio-political circumstances. The work of diaspora artists usually viewed based on identity, past, and nostalgia, can offer more intricate perspectives on contemporary societies and art scenes, western societies included.

**IV. Women artists in local art scenes**

What is missed in the displays and exhibitions of modern and contemporary women artists from WANA is the history and role of women artists in establishing art scenes. As mentioned earlier, the presence of women artists in western art narratives and context has been

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401 Al-Nawab, "On Becoming an Artist: Algerian, African, Arab, Muslim, French, and Black British? A Dialogue of Visibility."
been constantly challenged. Hence, feminist interventions attempted to address this exclusion and reintroduce women artists into the narratives and increase their presence in art history accounts and in museums displays. Women artists in WANA local art scenes seem to present a different case. While it could not be said that women artists in the region have attained equality in representation, visibility, and market price, they do occupy a better place relatively if compared to other regions. In 2018, the share of female artists representation by galleries in WANA region was the highest internationally. While male artists still attract more attention and higher prices, an art market study by Ibtesam S. Alrasheed and Mohrah Hamed Sakr showed that the difference in median prices for works created before 1999 is the lowest between the female and male artists from the region. But as Alrasheed and Sakr also suggest, that could be because the general prices of art from the region are among the lowest in the world. However, the presence of women artists in art history studies does not mean that there is no need for a feminist examination of the art history. Numbers of women artists do not provide adequate depictions, nor do they address the questions of representations.

Following their first poster about women artists in the Met Museum, the Guerrilla Girls continued their activist work both nationally and internationally. In 2007, they created billboard and posters examining the place of women artists in Turkish museums and galleries (fig. 3.13). The poster praised Istanbul galleries as over 40% of the artists shown are women, a much higher percentage than in Europe and the US. However, in museums the case was different. Only seventeen women are exhibited in the permanent collection of Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture, while the Pera Museum only included two women artists in the 2006 exhibition The Image of Women in Turkish Art. These numbers as the poster noted reveal the disparity and prejudices towards women artists in the Turkish art history canon.

The Guerrilla Girls work is shaped by the discourses around women artists and representations in museums, which have been mostly dominated by the questions of exclusion and underrepresentation informed by the feminist theories that emerged in the 1970s. But as postcolonial studies of art history argued, the study of art outside the western

world cannot follow the western model, as the modernity in these places took different forms and was based on various elements. As many argued, these numbers did not reflect the Turkish museums’ current gender exclusion, but the ‘actual scarcity’ of women artists during the early modern art periods due to the social constraints and the gendered division of spaces between the private and the public in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, very few women until the end of the nineteenth century had access to professional opportunities.\textsuperscript{405} The problematic aspects, as Shaw notes, reside within the ‘gap between the roles of women as signs of modernization and agents of artistic creation in the late Ottoman Empire.’\textsuperscript{406}

The major shifts in artistic styles in WANA started from the second half of the nineteenth century with the opening of art schools that taught the western style paintings. Some women attended these schools, but given the societies structure, their practice remained mostly private,\textsuperscript{407} hence the first generation of artists that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were predominantly male. However, that period also saw the rise of feminist movements in different societies leading to shifts in gender roles and especially challenging the gendered notions of the private and public spheres. Women education rates started to grow, and they started to enter professional spaces. The admission of women in art academies and schools varied from one society to another (the dates of establishment of art academies also varied). But many among the first generations of women artists were from affluent or upper middle classes, thus, they received private education that their families’ social stature allowed. Hence, the women artists entrance into the professional art world took different forms and paths. These paths, influenced by gendered perceptions and challenges that women artists overcame to attain recognition, mainly the perception of art as a suitable profession for women or as hobby. The representation and symbolised tropes of women in national discourses and in the representations of male artists was another notion that women artists had to challenge.

Another layer of difference between feminist artistic approaches should be considered here also: the question of medium in women’s art, and the problematic notions

\textsuperscript{405} Shaw, "Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic."
\textsuperscript{406} Shaw, "Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic."
\textsuperscript{407} Alimadadi and Moridi, "The absent history of Iranian women painters A sociological study of women painters from constitutional revolution till Islamic revolution."
associated with ‘traditional’ medium such as painting and sculpture. For western feminist artists and art historians, painting in particular seemed problematic because the masculine power has dominated its history, language as well as the instruments for a long time. How then can a woman paint without accepting the history of a medium within which women had a minor role? Moreover, the history of the medium reflects the objectification and sexualisation of the female body. As the feminist art movements grew in western cities following 1970s, many women artists abandoned painting and reverted to a variety of mediums. Some artists adopted embroidery and patterns, the categories historically labelled as feminine and low arts, in an attempt to redefine the concept of fine art. Other artists embraced the new waves of contemporary art, from photography to video art, installations, performance... The WANA art scenes present a different trajectory. Unlike the history of western art, the recent history of painting in the region had not established a sexualised and objectified image of women’s body. This was also influenced by the problematic perception of nude painting in the early modern painting era. It had, however, created an idealised and symbolised image of women, which women artists soon started deconstructing.

a. Women artists in WANA: local art scenes and recognition

From the early twentieth century, women initiated their careers as professional artists. *Mihri Hanim* was one of the earliest Turkish women artists to travel to Rome and Paris to study art, returning to Istanbul in 1913 and teach at the Women’s Academy of Fine Arts that opened in 1914. ‘Unlike women artists fighting to enter the male domain of art in the West, women artists of the Ottoman Empire engaged in art during approximately the same era as men.’ To varying degrees, similar circumstances could be seen in many countries in the region. In Palestine, Sophie Halaby (1906-1997) was the first woman to travel to Italy and France in the late 1920s to pursue art education. Marie Hadad (1889-1973) was among the first women artists to be exhibited in Lebanon in the 1930s, although no art academies were

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409 Shaw, "Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic."
411 Shaw, "Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic."
open in Beirut until later. In 1933, Hadad had her first solo exhibition at Georges Bernheim Gallery in Paris and was also the first Lebanese artist to be exhibited in the Paris Salon d’Automne in 1937, she took part in the 1939 New York World Fair, in the Cleveland (Ohio) International Exhibition in 1941, and in the same year was represented at the Harvard University Museum exhibition. In Iran, the art education in the early decades of the twentieth century remained local with many young women attending Kamal al-Molk’s school. Fakhori Anqa and Leyli Taqipur (1920) were among the first cohorts to study at the Faculty of Fine Art at the University of Tehran that opened in 1940. Other women artists, like Talat Akhundzadeh and Lilit Trian (1930-2019) participated in the artistic and cultural activities of the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1981, the Syrian art journal dedicated one volume to discussing topics and issues related to women in art from the general place and issues facing women, to the discussion of work of Arab women artists, Syrian women artists, and the representations of women by some modern Arab artists. The volume also included translations and articles about women artists from different periods and various geographies. In the first article, the editor-in-chief, critic, and photographer Tarek al-Sharif (1935-2013) discussed the history of women in art as artists and as a theme. As Al-Sharif notes, women have been denied the recognition as creators due to the social norms that assumed their roles as models and inspirations. Critical of the claim that natural and biological reasons are behind the absence of great women artists, al-Sharif discusses the many obstacles and challenges that have faced women and minimised their presence in art scenes. Then he goes on to discuss the archetypal images and tropes of women that dominated the art and created tropes of beauty that again limited the women representations. Al-Sharif refers to the feminist movement in art in his article and his arguments and discussions, although he does not include any specific references, reflect the various discourses in the art world regarding women in art.

412 The Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) [Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts] was founded in 1937.
413 As Kal notes, Hadad disappeared from the Lebanese public art circles in the 1940s and spent the rest of her live following the guiding of a spiritual guru, Salim Moussa Achi, known as Dr Dahesh.
The following article, by Khalil Safiyya, was more localised study, discussing the work of Arab women artists. Safiyya starts his article by confirming that the examination of women’s artistic practices is not a search for a “feminine” practice with specific characteristics distinct from male practices. On the contrary, as he states, any attempt to segregate “the art of man” and “the art of woman” is doomed by failure. To evidence his argument, Safiyya refers to the experience of over half a century that have proven that the work of women artists in the Arab art scene is no less effective, significant, and present than that of men. Hence, he presents his article not as a study about a “feminine artistic movement,” but rather about artistic experiences accomplished by women artists and their artistic creations across different stages that contributed to the establishment and development of art scenes and movements since the 1940s. The article goes on to discuss the work of women artists from different Arab countries while noting that it can only cover some aspects of women artists’ practices. Safiyya divides the presentation of women artists into two sections, the first introduces the artists he identifies as the pioneers working during the 1940s and 1950s who have contributed to the establishment of local modern art. Then the 1960s and 1970s are presented with the emergence of the second generation of artists who diversified their practices in terms of medium and themes. Hence, sculpture, printmaking, pottery, and graphic arts became central creative practices.

How could such presence and recognition be explained? Many reasons could be behind these differences, but partly it could be traced to the nature of societies and discourses during mid-twentieth, and the status of visual arts, especially in capitalist societies. The mid-century saw the remarkable rise of art commodification and the birth of the myth of ‘greatness’ or ‘genius artist’ in modern art narratives. However, these concepts did not spread as extensively outside the western art scenes. And when they did, the same male Western artists became acknowledged globally as Master of Fine Art.

The different views on art’s role within society, especially, the minimal spread of the art for art’s sake concept, could be a reason for the notable presence of women artists. In the western context, the perception and exhibition of modern art since the mid-century focused on certain artists presented as reflecting the aestheticised, autonomous ideal that frames and

isolates the individual and the individual work from other social formations.\textsuperscript{417} The interest of modern artists in the region, as it will be discussed, were not totally divorced from society. While they valued the aesthetic and visual aspects of art, they also were interested in the national and social role that it would play in changing society. And in many societies, this period saw the growth of feminist and nationalist feminist movements within which the role of women was highlighted.

Discussing Egyptian modern art scene, Nadine Atallah notes that ‘greatness, defined by Nochlin as a relative and gendered concept, implies a unique male creative individual bringing a brilliant masterpiece into the world, conversely, in Egypt a great number of male and female prolific artists were called to work for the national interest.’\textsuperscript{418} Authenticity, as Atallah, argues was the main focus of the Egyptian modern art scene, which allowed the women to be recognised. Atallah’s reference to authenticity as main component of modernism in Egypt is true. An article entitled \textit{An Unknown Egyptian Woman Artist} from 1961, the Egyptian artist and writer Saad el-Khadem discusses the work of the little-known artist Nazima Selim,\textsuperscript{419} who as the author argues, proves the emergence of Egyptian art in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{420} Selim, who was 83 years old when the article was written, represents a generation of artists earlier to Egypt’s well known modern artists like Mahmoud Mokhtar and Naji. The significance of her work, as he confirms, is not only in its chronological anteriority, but in its representation of an ‘authentic’ Egyptian character that resembles the Coptic styles of painting. El-Khadem concludes his article noting the ‘genius of this self-taught artist whose practice could be considered one of the missing loops in our artistic heritage.’\textsuperscript{421}

The reference to ‘authenticity’ is shared with many other art scenes. Safiyya refers to Madiha Omar as ‘not only a pioneer of modern Arab art, but as the authentic artist in her time.’\textsuperscript{422} However, it still does not explain all factors that influenced the acknowledgement

\textsuperscript{419} Selim participated in some exhibitions in the early 1930s, but then refrained from exhibiting (although the article does not explain the reasons). However, she continued to work, traveling between Egypt and Greece. The article included a photograph of the artist herself and some of her artworks, the earliest dating 1898. Many of that period’s work was lost during WW1. And it seems the rest, also was unfortunately damaged or misplaced as noted in a recent publication on pioneer women artists in Egypt.
\textsuperscript{421} Khadem, “Fannana Misriyya Majhula.”
\textsuperscript{422} Safiyya, “Fannanat Arabiyyat.”
of women in many art scenes. As women started to enter professional work forces gradually, many differences in their acceptance could be noted. The admission varied depending on the field and how it was socially perceived. In 1908, feminists objected the limitations of women professional choices in the Ottoman Empire where the art education and professions were seen as socially acceptable, but that was not the case for other professions. Similar limitations are noted by Khal in late 1920s’ Lebanon. Blanche Ammoun and Nina Trad were the first female students to be accepted in the Jesuist Law School—despite objections. They were, however, advised against attending the classes in person as their presence might disturb male students. Forced to study remotely, when they graduated in 1931, they were again faced with a biased choice. For the graduation ceremonies, they could either have their names announced or appear on the podium and walk amongst the graduates. However, the same year, Ammoun and many women artists were exhibited along male artists at the first group exhibition at the Ecole des Arts et Metiers [School of Arts and Crafts] in Beirut. Art, thus, was not considered as serious as law or science.

One of the essays included in the book accompanying Forces of Change also referred to the difficulties faced by women artists, as they had to work harder to be taken seriously. The Palestinian artist Jumana el-Husseini refers to a prevailing belief that women adopt painting as a hobby or out of boredom. ‘They question whether a woman’s work is worth investing in—maybe she won’t be painting in ten years… then what will her painting be worth?’ While the Lebanese artist Seta Manoukian refer to the implication of being an independent artist on gender roles ‘In her [the woman artist] independence, in freeing herself of all conventional attitudes, she ceases to perform conventionally as a woman; she insists on being a person, and on a human level, no different than a man. The problem is that men keep regarding her as a woman, and expect her to act in conformity with their pre-conceived image of a woman.’ Within these contexts, the artists’ resistance to be categorised or referred to as women artists becomes more understandable. But more importantly, their contributions and recognition become more significant.

423 Shaw, “Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic,” p. 19.
424 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon, p. 25.
425 Nashashibi, Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World, p. 50.
426 Nashashibi, Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World, p. 53.
427 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon.
In her study, Khal attempted to identify the reasons behind the higher presence and recognition of women artists in Lebanon. She conducted surveys among art critics, gallerists, and artists and reported their opinions. As she notes, many patronising views were communicated, ‘art as an easy profession for women’, ‘the art scene was developing so there were no standards’... as Khal notes, these opinions focused solely on quantitative standards and the higher numbers of women but ignored the qualitative value of their work. However, she notes two different opinions that could explain the case of women artists. Women artists were more innovative and daring as it was noted that their first abstractionist was a woman artist, Saloua Raouda Choucair, the first artist to work with kinetics was also a woman, Nadia Saikali; and the first artists to introduce sexuality and erotic themes were women artists, Juliana Seraphim and Huguette Caland. Similar assessment could be seen in Shaw’s discussion of the work of women artists in the late Ottoman period, and in the early stages of the Turkish Republic, noting that ‘often women were the stylistic innovators.’

Few professions in the first half of the twentieth century allowed women an active presence and visual art was one of them. However, this acceptance was also limited by gendered notions. Women artists were faced with biased expectations, yet the creativity and innovation in their work led to their recognition as pioneers. The efforts of these early generations to establish themselves as professional artists and shift the perception of art made by women are essential in the context of art scenes. These narratives and histories are rarely seen in the displays of women artists’ work.

The centrality of gender issues and questions related to women in the discourses of modernity also influenced the recognition of women artists. The image of the female body, and the presence of women in different public spheres were used to evidence progressiveness and modernity. While such signalling had some ‘benefits,’ its impact on women was equally damaging, as will be discussed hereafter.

b. The representation of women in local art

The late nineteenth century saw the rise of new artistic styles in the region. These styles were inspired and influenced by Orientalist artists. As Ali Behdad argues, photography,

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428 Shaw, “Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic.”
which flourished considerably during Qajar rule and became with Nasir al-Din Shah ‘the dominant medium of artistic representation in Iran’ shared the Orientalist eroticising gaze. Although the eroticising tendencies would fade considerably by the end of the century, the tropes that emerged would not be highly different in considering the women perspectives. The early art scenes, same as the traditional miniature paintings and the orientalist movement, were dominated by male artists. Hence, the representation of women was conditioned by the male gaze. Although different from the western male gaze, it still excluded the female view. The artists of the late Ottoman era included the images of women regularly in their work. They often focused on subverting the sexualised image in European orientalist paintings of the Harem. However, their perspective ignored women’s struggles and agency. ‘Ottoman artists defended the morals of their women by clothing them, but still relegated them to the private sphere, where they sit or lie more often than they act.’ One of the most famous artworks from the late nineteenth century is Osman Hamdi Bey’s Young Woman Reading (1880) (fig. 3.14). The painting contrasts the orientalist representation of nude and sexualised odalisques by presenting a clothed woman in a ‘compact, self-contained pose.’ The young woman is also reading a book, probably the Quran- the painting is sometimes referred to as Young Girl Reading the Quran, in a drastic divergence from the themes and activities included in European orientalist images. The painting, however, does not reflect the feminist discourses of the time, nor the roles played by women. This period saw the incorporation of the female figure as ‘signal of modernity’ in visual arts.

The intersection between the male/patriarchal gaze and the colonial gaze would continue through the early twentieth century. In the colonial period, feminist movements grew in many societies in the region and the question related to gender issues and roles of women in society intensified. One topic seemed to occupy a significant space in these discussions: women’s veiling/unveiling. Leila Ahmed discusses the emergence of discussions

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429 Behdad, "The Power-Ful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran."
430 Shaw, "Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic."
432 Shaw, "Where Did the Women Go? Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic."
of the veil in Egypt in 1899, following the publication of Qassim Amin’s book *Tahrir al-Mar’a* [The Liberation of woman]. In the wake of its publication, Amin became known as the first feminist. Yet, as Ahmed notes, the principal recommendations that Amin advocates regarding education and reforming the laws on polygamy and divorce have been advocated earlier by Muslim intellectuals. Yet, Amin’s call for the abolition of segregation and veil marked ‘an important moment in the history of Arab women: the first battle of the veil to agitate the Arab press.’ In her discussion of Amin’s work, Ahmed demonstrates that this call for the abolition of the veil and segregation was reflecting the colonial discourses. ‘Amin's book,’ she wrote ‘marks the entry of the colonial narrative of women and Islam—in which the veil and the treatment of women epitomized Islamic inferiority—into mainstream Arabic discourse.’

Amin’s view, similar to Ataturk’s denouncement of the veil in the Turkey and Reza Shah banning of the veil in Iran, were based in western narratives that associated the veil with ignorance. Those narratives were adopted and encouraged by many upper-class men who assimilated European ways and ‘who have accepted its representation of their culture, the inferiority of its practices, and the meaning of the veil.’ Their call for unveiling, hence, was a call for westernisation more than a call of emancipation as it did not take into consideration the perspectives and circumstances of the women and assumed their ignorance. Nor were these calls and narratives concerned with women’s liberation. Or as Ahmed puts it ‘The book [Amin’s] merely called for the substitution of Islamic-style male dominance by Western-style male dominance.’ What Ahmed emphasises in her argument is the origin of the discussions in the western orientalist colonial narratives and not the native women’s demand.

Similar discourses could be seen in the early depictions of unveiling in artworks. In 1928, the Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891-1934) unveiled his monumental sculpture *Nahdat Misr* [Egypt’s Awakening] (fig. 3.15) in Cairo. The sculpture, made of pink granite depicted the sphinx and a *fellaha* [female rural peasant], announcing the emergence

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of modern Egyptian art that draws from authentic and national heritage. The sculpture was received favourably by many critics announcing the ‘artistic awakening’ and describing the monument as reflecting the ‘awakening of the nation.’\textsuperscript{439} One review by Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini, however, was sceptical of Mokhtar’s vision, stating ‘I do not understand at all the significance of the young woman placed next to the sphinx. [...] if the intention was to signify that Egypt is arising, then the sphinx alone would have been sufficient to symbolise that [...] the young woman standing beside the sphinx muddles the meaning [...] do you think the intended meaning is that the new Egypt is unveiling her face and showing herself to the world, supporting herself all the while on the ancient Egypt?’\textsuperscript{440}

In an article responding to al-Mazini’s criticism, Mokhtar wrote ‘The sphinx, symbol of pharaonic civilization and of the Pharaohs’ greatness arises. The Egyptian nation stands at its side, proud of her noble part, and shimmering with everlasting glory, tears away the veil that covers her and emerges before the people of the West, from whom she has been hidden for many centuries.’\textsuperscript{441} The tropes of female peasant symbolising the nation has been popular in national discourses. Nadia Radwan notes that ‘The sculptor’s fellaha also hinted at a contemporary event: two prominent figures of Egyptian feminism, Huda Shaarawi and Sayza Nabarawi, had publicly removed their veils on the platform of the Cairo Central Railway Station.’\textsuperscript{442} This, however, is debatable, as both Shaarawi and Nabarawi were upper-class women. But in Mokhtar’s explanation of his sculpture established two rhetoric: tearing the veil and emerging before the people of the West. The woman in his sculpture is depicted lifting the veil and showing her face, hence, the awakening is equated with lifting the veil, and according to Mokhtar it is associated with the recognition of the people of the West.

\textit{Egypt’s Awakening} could be one of the first artworks to directly draw such narratives, and it can be traced to earlier discourses paralleling Amin’s views. Mokhtar, like Amin, and the Ottoman artists from earlier period, do not seem really interested in questions related to gender or women’s role in society. Mokhtar’s inclusion of the woman figure refers to the use


\textsuperscript{440} Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, \textit{Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents} p. 62-63.

\textsuperscript{441} Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, \textit{Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents} p. 64.

\textsuperscript{442} Radwan, “Between Diana and Isis: Egypt’s “Renaissance” and the Neo-Pharaonic Style (1920s‒1930s).”
of women tropes in the discussion of tradition and modernity, with no particular interest paid to the issues faced by women, especially rural peasant women.

On this level, local male gaze intersects with the Orientalist painters’ disinterest in the theme as Nochlin notes “[T]he absence of scenes of work and industry, despite the fact that some Western observers commented on the Egyptian fellahin’s long hours of back-breaking labor, and on the ceaseless work of Egyptian women engaged in the fields and in domestic labor.” These images and tropes of women defined by the male gaze emerged during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, as the following discussion will show, it was not long before women artists and photographers emerged challenging this gaze and reclaiming representation.

c. Modern women artists reclaiming the representation.

Few notable challenging tropes could be seen in the representation of women and gender in the early twentieth century, especially in photography. Women’s interest in photography started during this period. Naciye Suman (1881-1973) was one of the first professional female photographers in the region, opening a studio at her own home during WWI. Her photographs consisted mostly of portraits, family, and bridal photography. Working during WWI and the war of independence and often in private settings meant that most of her work and photography archive did not survive. The following generation of photographer produced more extensive and diverse.

In An Alternative Representation of Femininity in 1920s Lebanon: Through the Mise-en-Abîme of a Masculine Space, Yasmine Nachabe discusses the work of Marie al-Khazen (1899-1983), one of the first women photographers in Lebanon. Born into an aristocratic family in North Lebanon, Al-Khazen witnessed the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, the French mandate following WWI and the announcement of the Greater Lebanon. The shift from the Ottoman to the French rules left some impact on the cultural and social life, especially among the elites. Exploring the photographs, Nachabe argues that they represent some of the earliest attempts to reconstruct the image of femininity and womanhood. ‘She has constructed the image of the new woman as a separate individual refusing to recede into

443 Nochlin, ”The Imaginary Orient.” p. 39.
domestic duties and cater to the needs of the man of the house.” In *Two Women Dressed up in Men’s Suits* (c.1920) (fig. 3.16), al-Khazen staged herself and her sister dressed in men’s attire of the time, which Nachabe interprets as expressing a desire for social equality.

Another photographer who started her career in the 1920s was Karimeh Abbud (1896-1955). Born in Bethlehem, Abbud studied Arabic literature at the American University in Beirut. Interested in photography since her early age, she became the first professional woman photographer to open her own studio in Nazareth in the early 1930s. Graham-Brown notes that Abbud released some postcards before WWI. Beside the portrait images that Abbud took in her studio and when booked to photograph family gatherings and celebrations, she accumulated a wide range of photographs from her travel around Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese cities. She took images of landscapes, historic ruins, and landmarks to turn into postcards, as well as photos of people performing their everyday work. As a woman, Abbud had more access into houses and was preferred to take photographs of women and children which gives historical insights to the private lives of people of that time. An advertisement in El-Carmel newspaper (fig. 3.18) published on March 26th, 1924, refers to Abbud as the first and only national female photographer, reading: ‘The only national female photographer in Palestine. She learned this beautiful art from one of the famous photographers, and she specialised in the service of women and families.’ The emphasis on nationality could be as challenging the colonial rule, as Palestine was under the British mandate. But combined with emphasis on gender could be seen reassuring to the natives that the photographer would produce an authentic image and challenging the colonisers and voyeuristic interest.

Abbud’s photos document the changing society during the British mandate over Palestine. She did not limit herself to the studio work and portraiture, as many of her photographs capture the daily public lives and the occupations and labour that the European photographers who visited the region were not interested in. Among the portraits she took are those of many working women with their profession noted on the back or side of the photographs from the rural peasants to the genecologist to the nurse (fig. 3.17). Abbud’s

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photographs, unlike the paintings of early male artists, did not limit the women to the indoor spaces and traditional roles.

Women photographers continued to work and diversify their practices through these decades. Samiha Es (1912-2012) received her press accreditations in 1950, becoming one of the world’s first female photojournalists, and Turkey’s first war photographer and travel photographer. Her photos covering the Korean war were published in the daily Hürriyet in 1950. She then covered the Vietnamese war and continued travelling around the world. Maryam Şahinyan (1911-1996) was Turkey’s first professional female studio photographers. Following her father’s death, she took over his studio Galatasaray in 1937 and she continued to manage it until 1985. With an archive of approximately 200,000 images, Şahinyan work at the Galatasaray studio documents crucial years of demographic and cultural transformation in the Turkish society. A selection of photographs was grouped in a publication Foto Galatasaray (2011) under the direction of Tayfun Serttas. Being a woman, and a part of an Armenian minority that had suffered due to the Ottoman ethnic cleansing, Şahinyan’s studio seems to have gain prominence among Istanbul’s minorities and marginalised groups. The photographs depict women from different ages and periods, as well as many depictions of queer identities and cross-dressing.

The work of the early female photographers is undeniably different from the contemporary photography that is presented in exhibitions and museums. Like most photography from that time, it was not intended for gallery exhibitions. Nevertheless, their experiences are important as indicators of the early manifestation of women’s interest in photography on the one hand, and their attempts to reclaim their own image on the other hand. Before them, the images that were available of women from the region were dominated by the Orientalist male gaze. And even as more local male artists and photographs started their practice, their depiction was through the male gaze, influenced and concerned by the Orientalist perspective. Taking photography as a profession, including many professional women in their photographs, and stepping outside the confines of private spaces, they present a different image of women then the ones presented by Europeans orientalists and local male nationalists. By claiming their place and right in creating the image of women and society and reconstructing the concepts of womanhood and femininity
through their practice, the photographers provide a better understanding of the history of photography, art, and feminist representations.

Although some of these photographers did address themes related to women and gender inequality, it could be said that their contribution remained limited and little influential. The same could not be said about the modern women artists who started working few decades later. Mid-twentieth century saw a shift in representation of women with the rise of many modern women artists in the region. These artists approached many themes related to women, their struggles, and their representations from different perspectives. But as mentioned earlier, the artworks included in most exhibitions were made after 1990s. Moreover, curators rarely mention any previous artists who engaged with themes related to women, gender, and sexuality. This exclusion not only propagates the stereotype of the silent oppressed women, but also neglects the experiences and the efforts of many women artists who for decades tried to address gender issues and reclaim the image of women.

In Egypt, the romanticised and symbolised use of tropes of women by male artists emerged in the 1920s, as noted earlier. Few decades later, women artists led a shift in women’s representation. Influenced by the nationalist, anticolonial and feminist movement, these artists thought to reflect the social and political issues facing women in Egypt through their art. Since the early 1950s, Gazbia Sirry began series of paintings that addressed the colonial and patriarchal injustices. In 1952, Sirry painted *Umm Saber* (fig. 3.19), a rural peasant who was the first woman to be killed in direct confrontation with the British soldiers. Sirry continued her work during the 1950s and 1960s focusing on themes related to women in Egyptian society especially depicting the impact of polygamy and divorce on women. But the artist whose work highly engaged with themes related to women is Inji Efflatoun.

Efflatoun merged her political and artistic practices, addressing issues related to labour and social injustices. In 1949, Efflatoun published *We... The Egyptian Women* in which she discussed the issues facing Egyptian women, especially peasants, who constituted a considerable labour force in Egypt but were suffer major injustices. Accentuating the necessity and urgency of equality in education, work, social and political rights, Efflatoun’s analysis focused on the intersection between social, feminist, and anti-colonial movements to achieve national liberation and development stating, ‘Thus, we see that the woman’s cause is inextricably linked with the independence cause and democracy cause, and the real reasons
behind the current woman’s condition in the Egyptian society resides only in a relic of oppressive eras that faced the Egyptian people. [...] Gendered inequality is not traced back to Islam and Islamic believes, nor to the physical nor moral weakness of a woman, nor to the nature of her social role, but to clear historical real reasons that left its stains on pages of blood and tears of Egypt’s modern history.’

In 1952, Efflatoun had her first solo exhibition in Cairo and represented Egypt at the Venice biennale. Her solo exhibition cemented her reputation as a revolutionary artist as many reviewers noted. Few artworks were especially noted by critics, *We Will Not Forget* (1951), *The Fourth Wife* (1951), *The Divorce/ Go, You Are Divorced* (1952) and *They Work like Men* (1951/2). Through these artworks, Efflatoun highlighted the role of women in the national struggle against colonialism and addressed the social inequalities and the gender discriminations. However, her revolutionary approach is not limited to the themes. Efflatoun, trained by a surrealist artist, broke away from surrealism and adopted new artistic styles influenced by social realism and Mexican muralist.

Efflatoun became preoccupied with issues related to women conditions in Egyptian society, and women labour was one of the main topics she addressed in writing and in painting. Many of Efflatoun’s paintings, since the early 1950s, addressed these issues (fig. 3.20, fig. 3.21). In one review of her first solo exhibition in Cairo in 1952, the art critic Salah Hafez wrote 'We are in need of an Egyptian woman to tell us that we are thieves... and to confirm this accusation with the painting of two female peasants [...] exhausted to death, lying on the ground lifeless... while they both create a whole life for us...'.

In 1959 Efflatoun was imprisoned for four and half year for her political activism. This period marked her life and art significantly as she noted ‘My five years of detention were a period of artistic and human maturity.’ While in prison, she managed to get a permission to paint and there she produced some of her most known artworks. Efflatoun paintings, (fig. 3.22) depicted expressive portraits of her fellow inmates with their intense gaze as well as the crammed dormitories and the prisoners’ labour and everyday life. ‘I wanted to depict the

misery of the prison for common-law prisoners, [...] I wanted to present the victims of the society, the ordinary individuals, the women peasants, hence I entered the phase of portraits, queues, and cells in an attempt to illustrate the tragic environment of jail.'\textsuperscript{447}

Throughout her careers, Efflatoun went through different artistic phases. Her style shifted multiple times, and her themes varied, however, the representation of women remained central. At the highest of her political and social activism she presented the social constraints and issues facing women within the family and marriage laws like polygamy and the men’s power in divorce matters as well as the inequality and pay gap. In the depiction of national struggle, she emphasised the presence of women and their role. For Efflatoun, the most significant themes were the depictions of labour and prison. Efflatoun’s interest in the conditions of women’s labour was emphasised through both her writings and paintings, and it is a theme that she returned to constantly, even when her art seemed to divert from politics. But the remarkable notion in Efflatoun’s work, is that her representations of women broke away from both the objectified and the romanticised image of women, especially the harem and the fellaha. Her paintings, as well as Sirry’s, were not the result of a sexualised fantasy as were the Orientalist paintings. Neither were they the symbolic tropes inflected by patriarchal notions on some of the society’s most neglected groups. They reflected the women’s struggles during that period and highlighted their roles and labour. Yet, their work, like the artworks from other artists related to labour and social changes and their impact on women are rarely seen in western museums exhibitions.

d. 1960-1970s feminism

While feminist art groups were not formed in the region, and even feminist discourses were not among the most addressed by women artists during the 1960s and 1970s, many artists engaged with feminist themes. One of these artists is the Sudanese artist Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq (1939). Ishaq’s work focuses on countering the masculine domination of artistic perspectives. She is considered a leading figure in Sudanese art and was one of the first women to graduate from the college of Fine Arts in Khartoum and pursue her postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art in London between 1964 and 1966. There, she encountered the work of William Blake. Blake’s vision of spirituality and metaphysical reminded her of the

\textsuperscript{447} Halu, “Inji Efflatoun: rihlat arba’in ‘aman ma’a al-fann.”
Zār spiritual tradition, consequently she started her journey of exploring these traditions and rituals and depicting some aspects in paintings. After finishing her studies in London, she returned to Sudan and started teaching art at the Khartoum College.

In 1976, Ishaq co-established the Crystalist school with her students Muhammad Hamid Shaddad and Naila al-Tayib. The movement could be seen as opposing the Khartoum School that dominated the Sudanese art scene and thought to create a national art through the emphasis of heritage’s visual elements. The Crystalist movement, however, refuted national and culturally specific elements and aimed to present a different view or interpretation of knowledge based both in the internal and the universal. For Ishaq, the attraction of the movement was in its challenge of the male domination in art, in ‘its cultural position as one against a masculine prioritised empirical word view and towards a redesignation of knowledge as insight.’

Ishaq’s body of work over decades centred on representing women’s experiences. In an interview in 2016, Ishaq cites two influences on her visual language: Francis Bacon’s work and expressive figures, and the reflections of faces on windows of trains and metro she saw on her daily commute. The result of these influences she translated into her work by painting distorted figures revealing different psychological phases. Unlike Bacon’s work, Ishaq’s figures are rarely seen alone, this is probably the influence of the Zār rituals and communities (fig. 3.23). ‘The Zār are a very colourful cult who use costume, music and dancing as part of their rituals. While dancing, they go into a trance and become possessed by spirits. In Arabic Zār means ‘visitation,’ meaning that as a result of spiritual possession the spirit will enter the sick person’s body. I recorded the music and the many stories about the spirits and these have been the inspiration for some of my paintings.’

_loneliness (1987) (fig. 3.25) could be one of these rare occasions where the figure is presented alone, and as the title suggests, the painting is an expressive and symbolic visual translation of a psychological state and its effect on a human.

In her early work, probably by influence of the Crystalist movement’s concepts and the windows’ reflection, a layer of transparent glass/crystal seems to always cover the figures.

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of women, ‘Existing in contingent, crystal space, they [the women] opposed—or at least troubled— the masculine empirical world view that established the norm.’\textsuperscript{450} In her later work, the glass and prisms disappeared while elements of nature, especially trees and green leaves surround the figures of women (fig. 3.24). According to Ishaq, this work is the depiction of the organic bound between human and nature. Visually, the work of Ishaq presents a unique language combining different influences and concepts. Her distorted female figures with their expressive and symbolic illustration introduced a different gaze and perception of a female body within a painting. Ishaq’s work does not directly address political and social issues, nevertheless it challenges the masculine norms by redefining femininity and its representation in art.

Many artists based in Beirut addressed the questions related to feminine sexuality during the 1960s. Huguette Caland was one of them. Born in Lebanon in 1931, Caland studied art in Beirut, Paris, and California. Throughout her career, the human body and sexuality remained her focus. ‘Since childhood, Huguette had been preoccupied with the weight of her body, and her work shows an intense curiosity around the human form.’\textsuperscript{451} Caland, as her daughter notes was comfortable with her own body, however others were, and the artist was aware of it. The interest in body-image, as well as in textiles and motifs inspired by Palestinian costumes led to her decision to reject the western influenced attire and adopt the loose-fitting kaftan (fig. 3.26), which she started creating since 1960s. Caland’s work oscillated towards abstraction with organic forms that alluded to body parts, especially the vulva. While sensuality is expressed through a minimalist approach relying on lines, organic forms, and colour in Caland’s work (fig. 3.27), it is expressed through maximalist approach in Juliana’s Seraphim’s painting (fig. 3.28). Her depiction of the female body in surrealist world of ‘gods, monsters and women’\textsuperscript{452} reflected a deep interest in the subconscious and feminine sexuality. A Palestinian refugee in Lebanon since 1952, Seraphim’s entrance into the professional artworld was not easy. Unlike the many artists included in Khal’s study, Seraphim did not

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\textsuperscript{451} Huguette Caland et al., \textit{Huguette Caland} (St. Ives: Tate, 2019), p. 7.

come from a privileged family. However, by the mid-1970s, she was one of the first women artists in Lebanon to entirely live from her profession as an artist.453

Dorothy Salhab Kazemi, on the other hand, approached sensuality and sexuality not only through the visual language and symbols included in her art, but also through material. Unlike the artists discussed above, Kazemi chose pottery and studied with the Danish ceramist Gutte Erikson. Kazemi’s interest in pottery was fuelled by two reasons. The ancient craft was losing its place with the changes that occurred in the Lebanese art. Once part of a cultural heritage and tradition, pottery was becoming commercialised, less expressive, and creative.454 Between 1968 and 1970, Kazemi exhibited and taught in Glasgow, Scotland. Then she returned to Lebanon to launch the first school of ceramics. The other reason that attracted Kazemi to pottery is the sensuality of the clay which allowed a unique expression, as she said ‘I simply follow that interaction, from piece to piece, as I feel the forms. Some people say my work is erotic; they give it a limited definition that views eroticism with a narrow vision. For me, all life is an erotic manifestation.’455 Many of her works reflect these notions, sometimes explicitly (fig. 3.29), and sometimes subtly. In the 1970s, and while most artists in Lebanon employed painting and sculpture, Kazemi tried to remedy the gap between the modern art scene and the traditional craft, by creating artistic and sculptural pieces along with functional ones.

As Negar Azimi notes ‘What, one might wonder, does Caland’s work have to say about women, or Lebanon, or Arab women, or women who abandon their husband, anyway? Not all that much, it turns out. Her Bribes du Corps (Body Parts) works, for example, are fragmentary, partial, incomplete; they aren’t at all stand-ins for larger narratives.’456 It does, however, tell us about the early engagement of women artists in themes related to gender and sexuality. Efflatoun, Sirry, Ishaq, Caland, Seraphim and Kazemi are examples of artists who dedicated their work to address themes that they saw as relevant to women since the 1950s. These artists had significant role in different art scenes, both on artistic and social levels. They are, however, constantly neglected and excluded from regional exhibitions and from discourses about women artists and global feminism. This exclusion creates an illusion

454 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon, p. 141.
455 Khal, The Woman Artist in Lebanon, p. 135.
456 Caland et al., Huguette Caland, p. 50.
of a newfound feminist awareness among contemporary women artists that was not present earlier, which as demonstrated here is not accurate. These artists employed a range of styles and techniques to transmit their perspectives. The importance of these experiences is in it providing a context for gender discussions that are not anchored solely in the recent political discourses of dichotomies that have been the principal interest in exhibitions. The diversity of imagery they produced is usually missing from exhibitions, which is partly creating a stereotyped imagery associated with the art of women from the Middle East.

V. Conclusion

This chapter explored the issues related to presenting women artists from WANA, especially the art focused on themes of gender and women. Museums choices have been focused on photographs, made by women artists from the region, and employing themes and issues that are relevant to current days, but also specific to women from the region, the themes/content of these artworks becomes easily identifiable. These choices do not interpret the artists through their individualistic, artistic vision, but through the prism of collective identity. And while individually the artworks might be countering stereotypes, when they dominate exhibitions and rarely other forms and themes are exhibited, they create a stereotyped perception of women artists. Hence as museums and curators are assuming themselves presenting a new image of Middle Eastern women, or fighting stereotypes, they are in many ways creating stereotyped images again of the monolithic woman and monolithic art. What is further leading to these accusations of stereotyping is the lack of contextualising the art within the broader art scenes. The problem of the museums and curators’ choices is that they are still dictated by orientalist discourses. Whether to affirm it or to counter it, it is that rhetoric that sets the standards for themes and mediums, and not the contexts of art scenes.

In her discussion of Orientalist and Nationalist discourses of the early and mid-twentieth century, Meyda Yegenoglu concludes that ‘What was lost in this battle over the veil was the women’s question.’457 Graham-Brown asserts similar argument in her analysis of the images from the century between 1850 and 1950. ‘Proponents of Orientalism, nationalism,

‘westernization’ and various religious ideologies have all found in women powerful metaphors for their own concerns. Women have often been used to, not at their own behest, to represent ideas in debates conducted largely by men. The current representations and narratives anchoring the work of women artists are in many ways echoing these images. The issue, as this chapter discussed, is that the discourses constantly shift from representing the art of by women artists to discussing the women in the region. And within these discourses, the question of women in art is limited to ideologies and conflicts.

This chapter also highlighted the narratives that are constantly absent from the exhibition: the women as artists and the challenges they overcame to establish themselves as artists. Women entrance into the professional fields of modern art were faced with many biased and gendered notions. Despite these challenges, they achieved a remarkable recognition within the local art scenes because of their integral artistic contributions. They worked and continue to work to claim their place as artists and creators. This place is compromised through the current choices and interpretations of western museums.

Women artists from WANA have been working for decades to reclaim their voices and their bodies. They explored different themes and engaged with multiple narratives to counter stereotypes and address gender issues. By highlighting examples from the history of women artists addressing social and gender issues, this chapter does not only attest for the diversity of artistic practices, but it also demonstrates the artists’ awareness and involvement with the issues of their time and location. The difference in representations, themes, and issues they address shows that the work of women artists was and continues to be anchored in their respective contexts. Their interests, concerns, and approaches vary depending on their time and location. This history and diversity, however, remain absent from exhibitions.

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Figure 3.1 Laura Boushnak, I read I write (1/5), 2011. One of seven photographs from the series Women Education. Photographic Print, 30 x 50 cm. Collection of the British Museum. © Laura Boushnak © The Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 3.2 Nicene Kossentini, Stories, 2011. One Channel Video, 3 mins 11 secs. © Nicene Kossentini
Figure 3.3 Manal AlDowayan, Mona, from the series If I Forget you, Don’t Forget Me, 2012. Photographic prints. © Manal AlDowayan

Figure 3.4 Manal AlDowayan, Mohammed and Oil, from the series If I Forget you, Don’t Forget Me, 2012. Photographic print. © Manal AlDowayan
Figure 3.5 Manal AlDowayan, Sidelines, 2016. Woven wool and Cotton. © Manal AlDowayan
Figure 3.6 Mitra Tabrizian, Correct Distance, 1987-88. Photograph. © Mitra Tabrizian

Figure 3.7 Mitra Tabrizian, Tehran, 2006. © Mitra Tabrizian
Figure 3.8 Mitra Tabrizian, City, London, 2008. © Mitra Tabrizian

Figure 3.9 Mitra Tabrizian, Another Country, 2011. © Mitra Tabrizian.
Figure 3.10 Mitra Tabrizian, Leicestershire, 2012. © Mitra Tabrizian.

Figure 3.11 Mona Hatoum, Don’t Smile, You’re on Camera, 1980. Single-channel video (b/w, sound) on monitor. © Mona Hatoum.
Figure 3.12 Mona Hatoum, Corps Etranger, 1984. Cylindric structure, video projection, 11 min 51 secs. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris. © Mona Hatoum ©Musee National d’Art Moderne

Figure 3.13 Guerrilla Girls, The Future for Turkish Women Artists, 2007. © Guerrilla Girls
Figure 3.14 Osman Hamdi Bey, Young Woman Reading, 1880. Oil on Canvas, 41.1 x 51 cm. Private Collection.
Figure 3.15 Mahmoud Mokhtar, Nahdat Misr, 1919-1928, Cairo University Gate. Granite Sculpture Photograph by Alex Dika Seggerman.
Figure 3.16 Marie al-Khazen, Two Women Dressed up in Men’s Suits. Lebanon/Zgharta, circa 1920, Collection Mohsen Yammine. ©Arab Image Foundation.

Figure 3.17 Karimeh Abbud, photograph of Dr Chafika Abbud, gynaecologist in the Palestinian government hospital in Akka 1928. Palestine 1928. ©Palestinian Photo Club
Figure 3.18 Karimeh Abbud advertisement in el-Carmel Newspaper, Mars 26, 1924. ‘National woman Photographer, Karimeh Abbud’
Figure 3.19 Gazbia Sirry. Umm Saber. 1952. Oil on hardboard, 98 x 68 cm. © ArtTalks | Egypt Archive.
Figure 3.20 Inji Efflatoun, Fellaha and her Son, 1954. Oil on Canvas, 65 x 50 cm. Collection of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha. © Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art
Figure 3.21 Inji Efflatoun, Prisoners, 1957. Oil on Canvas, 42 x 29 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation. © Barjeel Art Foundation

Figure 3.22 Inji Efflatoun, Dreams of the Detainee, 1961. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. © Barjeel Art Foundation
Figure 3.23 Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, Untitled (Zār), 1973. Oil on canvas (covered with board on the backside), 134 x 134 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. © Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq © Barjeel Art Foundation
Figure 3.24 Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, Untitled, 2014. Oil on canvas, 175 x 175 cm. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah. © Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq © Barjeel Art Foundation
Figure 3.25 Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, Loneliness, 1978. Oil on canvas, Collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman. © Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq © Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts
Figure 3.26 Huguette Caland, Tete a Tete (Face to Face), 1971. Textile, thread, wood and paint, 187.7 x 55x 31.6 cm. Collection of Tate, London. © Huguette Caland © Tate
Figure 3.27 Huguette Caland, Bribes de Corps #296, 1973-74. Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © Huguette Caland Estate.

Figure 3.28 Juliana Seraphim, Untitled, 1980. Oil on canvas, 88 x 116 cm. Collection of Dalloul art Foundation, Beirut. © Dalloul Art Foundation.
Figure 3.29 Dorothy Salhab Kazemi, Untitled, 1974. Clay, 43 x 36 x 36 cm. © Dorothy Salhab Kazemi Museum.
Conclusion

This study explored the different narratives and discourses that have shaped the representations of modern and contemporary women artists from the West Asia and North Africa in western museums. Since the 1940s, women artists have been actively and regularly involved in various artistic practices both locally and internationally. The gendered and ethnocentric notions of modern art history narratives that dominated the western museums excluded them from display. With the waves with feminist and decolonial discourses, these women artists recently entered western museums. However, the recognition of their contribution in the transnational history of modern art is still burdened by discourses of identity and binaries.

The politically charged context of the last two decades had a double-ended effect on the representation of modern and contemporary art from WANA. On the one hand, it awakened the interest in the art with a sudden rise of regional exhibitions. The modern and contemporary artists from the region, largely absent from the discourses of global art started to receive more attention. On the other hand, that attention and the exhibitions caused a wave of criticism and controversies. The representations of women artists and all-women exhibitions drew some of the most accentuated accusations of exoticising and othering. This criticism was caused by the ahistorical curatorial approaches reinforcing essentialist identity, and the interest in exploring topical themes with the focus on the political debates.

The work of modern and contemporary artists from WANA provides rich aesthetic, visual and conceptual experiences. Additionally, research and publications on the art by scholars and art historians from the region have been increasingly growing and providing diverse ways to interpret and trace the genealogy of modern and contemporary art. Attempting to view this richness through the prism of identity and arguing for its unity would only lead to stereotypical expectations that obscure more complex meanings and connections. To borrow Daryush Shayegan words introducing the exhibition *Iranian Contemporary Art*,

‘The kaleidoscopic perception of the world offers Middle Eastern artists tremendous expressive potential. In their broken vision of things, “relational thought”, as Edouard Glissant calls it, takes the place of linear monolithic discourse, with
interbreeding, “creolisation” and hybridity becoming “rhizomatic”, to use a term coined by Gilles Deleuze. All these transformations give rise to the changing connections, to perpetual metamorphoses. It is this prodigious wealth of this world that is nowadays highlighted by the artists of the “periphery”.

This reading of the work of artists is rare in recent exhibitions and discourses. Shayegan does not negate the regional aspect, however, he keeps his interpretation open to the different connections as in today’s world, identities and cultures cannot be seen as static, but as hybrid and overlapping. These connections create complex links among the various ‘peripheries’ and their relation to the ‘centre.’ However, the intriguing aspect of Shayegan’s writing is his contend of the assumed relationship between the centre and the peripheries. Regional exhibitions and recent tendencies to show non-western artists have been largely seen as attempts to redress the imbalance in art history. They are considered as inclusive process from the part of western museums. Shayegan, however, refers to the reciprocal relationship between the two. The arts of the peripheries, he wrote, ‘reveal a whole spectrum of original visions with no equivalent in the western cultural arena.’ Hence, maybe it is time to think about the exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from WANA in western museums not as corrective impulses, or gestures, or attempts to understand the region but as a need for the museums that are seeking originality and globalism.

The representation of women artists from the region have especially been overburdened with the essentialised identity discourses. The discourses and interpretations have mainly focused on the stereotypes of Muslim women, or on lives of women under Islam. Absent from the narratives and discourses about the art of women, are the women artists themselves. The challenges they face as artists, the contributions they made to different art scenes, the history of their engagement with feminist discourses and gender inequality. Despite the numerous challenges, women artists from WANA have been pushing both artistic and social boundaries since the early decades of twentieth century, both locally and internationally. In many cases women artists were the first to adopt new techniques and introduce new styles to different art scenes. Their work provides examples of the different contexts of modernism and the transnational history of art. Discussing and referencing the

work of women artists from different generations working in various geographies, this study demonstrates the diversity of artistic practices that they explored.

The prolific nature of each artist's body of work, and her exploration of different styles and materials evidences her complexity and the creativity. Zeid, working and exhibiting between London, Paris, and New York, displays the preoccupation of the mid-century artists and the rise of abstract expressionism. In the local art scenes artists like Choucair and Omar introduced new styles and established themselves as pioneers of abstraction and modern art in the Arab world. Farmanfarmaian, working during the rise of Saqqakhaneh movement in Iran, found a distinct way to approach abstraction, focusing on mirror, thus implicating the audience within the artwork.

Women artists have also addressed themes and topics related to gender since the 1940s. Through their work, they resisted the symbolised tropes of women and reflected many issues facing them in patriarchal societies, bringing forward the struggles of underrepresented classes and highlighting the little acknowledged practices and roles of generations of women. Many diasporic artists played an integral part in the feminist and postcolonial discourses. Their work presents a complex and nuanced approaches exploring different notions and layers of the contemporary societies.

Women from the region faced a long history of body objectifying and symbolising, in both orientalist and nationalist discourses. In art, these acts were widespread among European orientalist painters who sexualised the oriental female body and used it as signal of the societies’ backwardness. In the early phases of nationalism in the region, male artists used the female body as a signal of modernisation and shift in society, when their art did not depict the realities and the challenges faced by women. Even the presence and the recognition of women artists was always linked to similar ideas of proving the ‘modernisation’ or the ‘progressiveness.’ The image of women and female body have been used and abused in endless discourses where women’s interests were secondary. And many women artists attempted to break this cycle and reclaim this image. By ignoring this history and focusing on current political discourses, the recent exhibitions are shifting the focus again and overlooking the contributions of women artists.
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