



Full Length Review Article

CONSIDERATIONS ON SOCIETY THROUGH SAUDI WOMEN'S ART

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ABSTRACT

This research deals with two important and long controversial topics in Saudi society: women and the arts. This study focuses on the development of social commentary through the work of Saudi female artists in the visual arts, photography, and modern art. It presents a survey of the history of women's education in the arts in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, from when art education began to be understood through the term *painting* in the year 1348/1929 until after its study was established under the name *arts education* in the year 1382/1962. Then when specialized departments, colleges, and other educational institutes specialized in art in both the private and public sectors were founded. The research seeks to present the role of women in pre-Islamic and traditional art, in addition to the relation between women and the arts throughout three generations in modern art and present times. This study also addresses the difficulties and obstacles women face in this field

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INTRODUCTION

Rock paintings, some of which go back thousands of years, are considered the earliest remnants of human artistic practice in the Arabian Peninsula. The importance of these paintings of animal and human subjects lies in the symbolic meanings connected to the beliefs of the time. The female depictions were of large women, a metaphor of their social status or perhaps of the fact that they were objects of religious worship in society (Khan, 1993). Researchers also point to the fact that some of the drawings show women's role in war, in addition to their presence in other settings, such as marriage and birth (see Figure 1) (Abdul Nayeem, 2000). During the historical eras of the Arab kingdoms in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam, the arts were a part of the culture of many cities. The town of al-Faw exhibits various examples of the arts, such as sculptures, drawings, and applied arts (Ansari, 1982). Some of these reflect the role of women in those Arab societies, such as the murals in the town of al-Faw, which depict women as having high social status. Such art goes back to the first centuries AD (see Figure 2) (Hadithi, 2008). Upon the arrival of Islam, the reasons for practicing painting and sculpture changed, due to their previous association with the paganism of the time.

The arts, especially those outside of the Arabian Peninsula, then moved toward architecture, applied arts, and Arabic calligraphy. The arts continued to develop in this decorative form under the category of handicrafts and traditional productions. Women in the Arabian Peninsula participated in these arts through traditional handicrafts that needed to be decorated, producing and decorating prayer rugs, drawing henna on their hands, weaving tents, and perhaps decorating the household walls with the colors for which the region of Aseer in the south of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is known. These are the best examples of the role of women in the arts (Al Saud, 1989). Perhaps these women's traditional productions and handmade items contain the seed of their attraction to the visual arts, an attraction that has not been observed until recently. Women's interest in decoration, due to its very nature, is a reason for their interest in modern art work. Indeed, the styles of some Saudi women visual artists are still believed to revolve in the orbit of adornment influenced by home decoration (al-Rasayes, 2010). Saudi Arabia lived in cultural isolation since modernity developed later than it did in Europe or North America. In Early times, Education was very limited, since it was unavailable to a large section of the Bedouin population and was rare among the other sector of highlands society that lived in cities (Athimin, 1995). Society at the time, built on trade, was dependent upon traditional handicrafts to meet the daily needs of society and crafts persons were viewed by society as artists (al-Rasayes, 1999).

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Figure 1. Rock Art from South Saudi Arabia, dates 8th - 1st millennium BC. Photograph by the researcher



Figure 2. Moral Painting from al-Faw, 1st Century AD. King Saudi University Archeological museum, Riyadh. Photograph by the researcher

The meaning of the arts began to be understood during the architectural and handicraft revival in the western region of Saudi Arabia, where the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina are located (al-Senan, 2007a). The study of painting in elementary school officially began in 1929 (al-Salum, 1994) and that in middle school and secondary school in 1944 (Zarkli, 1992). The subject was then canceled for religious reasons, and students went back to practicing the visual arts through Arabic calligraphy and handicrafts in extracurricular activities (Amud, 1994). These subjects, however, were brought back and developed in 1953 because of declining levels of Saudi students, since many were being sent abroad to study architectural engineering, medicine, and the fine arts (Fadhel, 1996). In 1957 (1377), Art reappeared in the official study programs in secondary schools and some institutes and, the next year, it was introduced at all levels and given the name decoration. Its name was changed to arts education in 1962 (1382) (al-Al-Senan, 2007b). The first college for girls was opened in 1970 and the first department of arts education was instituted in 1990, with the goal of graduating Art teachers. The College of Arts and Design was founded in 2010 as part of the Princess Noura Bint Abdurahmen University, which was previously opened with a group of women's colleges. In addition, a number of institutes and departments were opened that specialized in art and design in various domains.

The first art exposition took place in 1958, but it was for high school students and did not involve the artwork of professionals. However, it set the stage for later visual art expositions, which have operated with professionals since 1975, organized annually or semiannually (Dhamen, 1996). Although these beginnings were disconnected and privately run in Riyadh, Jeddah, and the eastern region, they at least motivated artists to later participate in university expositions held throughout the Kingdom (al-Suliaman, 1991). About 10 Saudi artists, both men and women, born in the 1930s and 1940s are considered pioneers of the visual arts movement in Saudi Arabia. Many of them finished their arts studies after secondary school or studied in art institutions abroad, including Egypt, Italy, and Spain (al-Al-Senan, 2007a). Others studied the arts in school and then joined their fellow artists in Europe to study the visual arts, specializing in painting and drawing (al-Resayes, 1989). The art movement in Saudi Arabia went through several phases, consisting of three to four generations of artists, depending on the period (Rasis, 1998). The early period was from 1957 to 1970 and consisted of those born in the 1930s and 1940s, some of whom were sent by the government overseas to study or who paid for their own studies. The second period, from 1971 to 1980, consisted of a second generation of artists, born in the 1950s and 1960s, who mostly studied at the Art Institute for Teachers in Riyadh. The third period witnessed a third generation, consisting of those born in the 1970s and 1980s, most of whom received their education in arts departments in regional colleges and universities (al-Senan, 2007a).

The fourth generation of Saudi artists, born in the 1990s, is arriving on the scene today. They are graduates of new, specialized schools and departments of graphic design or have studied abroad. Saudi women's participation in the arts followed that of men but exhibits their desire and attempts to establish their own presence. The participation of young Saudi female artists has been growing both inside and outside the Kingdom, attesting to the fact that these women are giving it their all, despite the unique social challenges they face. Some fourth-generation female artists have been recognized artists in local settings as well as broader regions, including international settings. The phrase soft power has been popularly used to describe the work of these female visual artists, considered by critics to be a driving force and strong voice for the rights of women, their discussion, or at least the documentation of women's history. Thus, their collection of work is an active indicator of female expression. The public education of women in the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia followed that of men, beginning with public education and moving on to institutes for women teachers, which were founded to appease those who were initially opposed to women's education. As time progressed and more educational domains opened up to women, the difficulties of providing job opportunities began to emerge. For example, female graduates of the arts were accumulating, with no governmental provision of jobs in state cultural foundations such as the Ministry of Culture and cultural media. Those who worked as visual artists in the private sector, for example, suffered from a lack of networking opportunities that would allow them to improve the quality of their work. In addition, men continue to dominate art activities, for example, judging competitions and the direction of activities and participation abroad.

When the work of female artists is compared with that of male artists, the scales favor men. For example, at the Foreign Ministry's Second Ambassador's Competition, more than 440 female artists showcased their work, compared to 214 male artists but, of the nine awards, only three were given to women (al-Senan, 2007d). This is the case at most official visual art competitions (Ibrahim, 1998). Perhaps the number of female participants in these competitions compared to the number of male participants and the results are indicators of women's need for other domains to be opened up to them, allowing them to improve their work and broaden their creative and intellectual development. One can follow Saudi women's social commentary through a chronological study of their visual artwork, as follows.

Review of Women's Artwork

Safia Bin Zaqer

Bin Zaqer, from the western region, is one of the pioneers of female visual arts. She was influenced by local folk traditions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in general and the traditions of Jeddah more specifically, see (Bin Zagr, 1979 & 1999). Her first goal was to document those traditions and, through her artistic gifts, preserve them. In the beginning, by her own admission, she followed the Western style she had been taught. As she developed her own style through practice and study, she created a distinctive form of documentation through the use of pastel colors. Bin Zaqer's work is preserved at *Darat Safia Bin Zaqer*, a private museum in Jeddah. Bin Zaqer's work depicts traditional Hejazi society in the first half of the 20th century. Her work speaks of the customs and traditions of society in general and those dealing with women more specifically. She documents these customs with spontaneity and her own personal style, which was influenced by schools of modern art at the beginning of the 20th century. Her work tells the stories of an urban Saudi society that were forgotten due to the economic and social changes that transformed the region since the discovery of oil and its development into a rich, modern state. Her work in (Figure 3) depicts one of the customs of Saudi society in which women gather at noon, while the men are away at work, to drink coffee, work together on household chores, or read shells to predict the future, an ancient custom of the Hejazi.

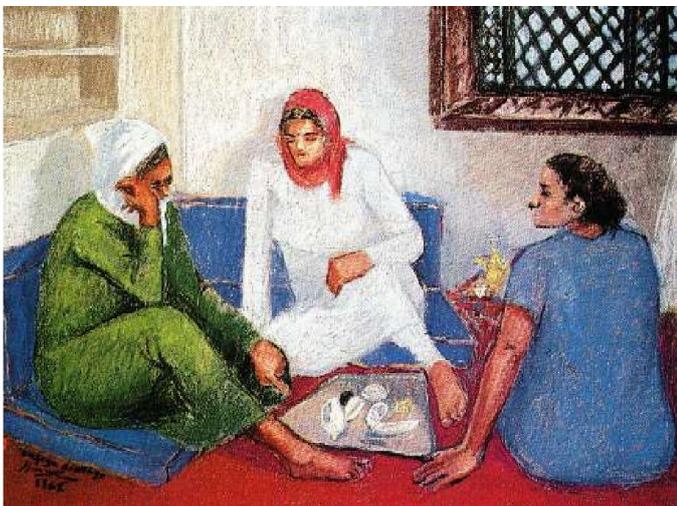


Figure 3. Courtesy of Safia Bin Ziger

Shadia Alem

Alem is one of the second-generation female artists from the western region of the Kingdom and her art has been exhibited internationally. Her work stands out through its modernity, mixture of styles, and a deep understanding of visual arts, drawing from the cultures and arts of the Arabian Peninsula, Islamic art, and local traditions. Since Alem began displaying her work in 1999, she has taken these topics and restructured them in an artistic style that maintains the spirit of Saudi cultural traditions and a deep awareness of its core components, just as it bears the characteristics of Islamic art and its iconoclasm (Ayad & Blackburn, 2014, p. 47). She began to be noticed in 2000, with her project *Lar Fairies* (Alem & Alem, 2000), on which she worked with her sister, Raja, dedicating it to social action through the symbol of the female gender through topics tied to legends, social change, women's place in society, women's rights, and so forth. Alem's *Negative No More*, consisting of about 5,000 film negatives (see Figure 4), is an example of an attempt to make society aware of the absence of women even from those photographs, since they are not seen, in addition to their absence from leadership roles and the political history of Saudi Arabia.

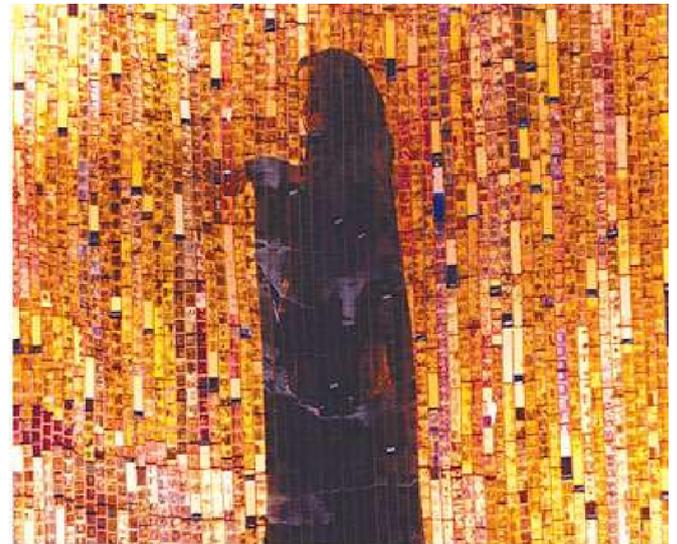


Figure 4. Courtesy of Shadia Alem

Radhia Barqawi

Barqawi is a third-generation artist from the western region (al-Resayes, 2010, p. 265). She was able to express herself very deeply through honest feelings and deep hope within her heart, expressing her personal understanding to the Islamic society in which she lives. Imagination and vague internal visions play an important role in the visual artist's work and Barqawi, through her personal style, records artistic attributes drawn from traditions and topics from her home region (see Figure 5). Her work reflects the struggle between the artist and conservative Muslims, who fear human representations, as she tries to hide people by covering them with superbly painted flowing fabric. She thus nearly removes the problem she intended to use to resolve her conflict. Barqawi's struggle in representing the human form is a common issue in the work of Saudi artists, many of whom tend to bypass it or use modern styles, including intellectual and conceptual arts, thus avoiding any religious or social issues.



Figure 5. Courtesy of Radhia Barqawi

Madiha Ajrush

Ajrush was one of the first female photographers in Saudi Arabia. She studied abroad and received her degree in photography in New York. She then practiced photography alongside her full-time job, photographing scenes from Saudi society to realistically reflect the role of women and their image in society. The scenes are sometimes exaggerated to draw attention to the peripheral place of women in society according to the artist. Ajrush loves to photograph human subjects in situations that embody the roles of each person in the structure of society, as shown in Figure 6, part of a book depicting social life in the region of Aseer, in the south of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Al Saud, 1989). This work shows a male subject represented by a child who symbolizes the position of men despite his age. He remains in charge and is the focus of all the women, whether they are his mother, sister, or daughter. The place of women in society as represented in Ajrush's photography fits with her style of calling for women's rights through her voice and pictures.

Maha Malouh

Despite the fact that Malouh has been displaying her work since 1976 (Ayad & Blackburn, 2014, p. 121), she did not begin to move toward a contemporary approach and achieve a personal style and an understandable goal until she released her "contemporary traditions" set of works in 2010, using a technique to create images resembling x-rays.

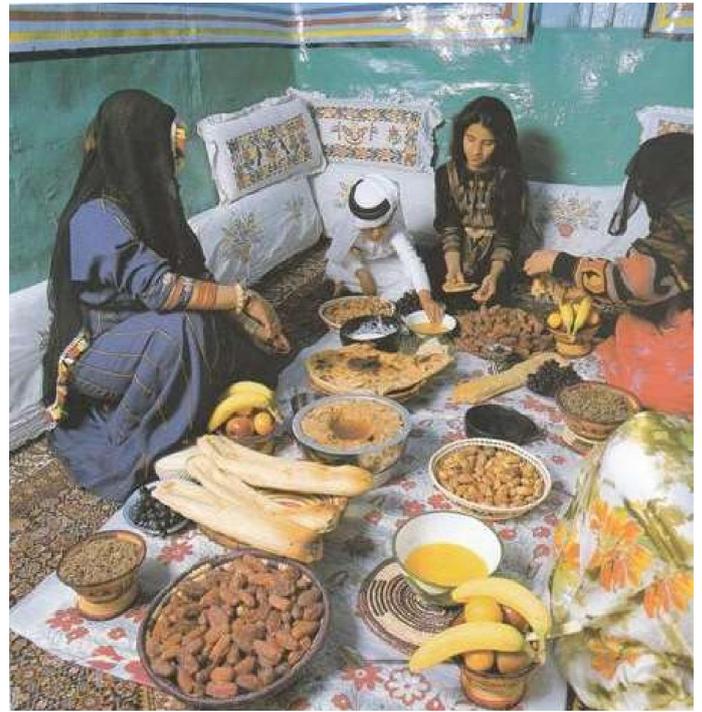


Figure 6. Courtesy of Madiha Ajrush

Most of her successive work reflects societal struggle, as it shifts from the pre-oil period (pre-modernity) to the post-oil period and post-modernity. These periods cover the most important historical eras regarding societal norms, such as the Awakening (Sahwah) in the 1980s, which took place at the same time as the Afghani war with the former Soviet Union (see Figure 7).

Badira Naser

Naser is from the second generation of artists and hails from the eastern region. Her work concerns female subjects, sometimes in a symbolic style and other times in a story form or a surrealist form. Her work tells the stories of women and all that surrounds them in terms of societal influence and their problems. She also depicts women's dreams and their aspirations and visions. Her artistic work always focuses on female subjects in a style influenced by surrealism and symbolism schools of modern art at the beginning of the 20th century (see Figure 8).

Sara Abdelli

Abdelli is one of the latest generations of visual artists in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Her work deals with various social issues and focuses on controversial issues regarding women in society. Even though she has only been producing art for a few years, she has already been displaying her work internationally. The power of the message contained in her art has contributed to its popularity. The works *Four Wives* in 2012 and *Two Wives* in 2012 (see Figure 9) (Raza, 2012) are representative of Abdelli's artistic orientation toward the subjects that Muslim women encounter, such as polygamy.

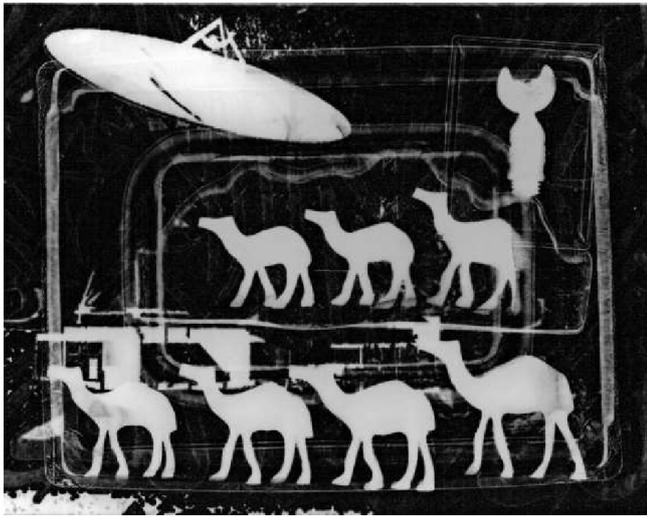


Figure 7. Courtesy of Maha Malouh

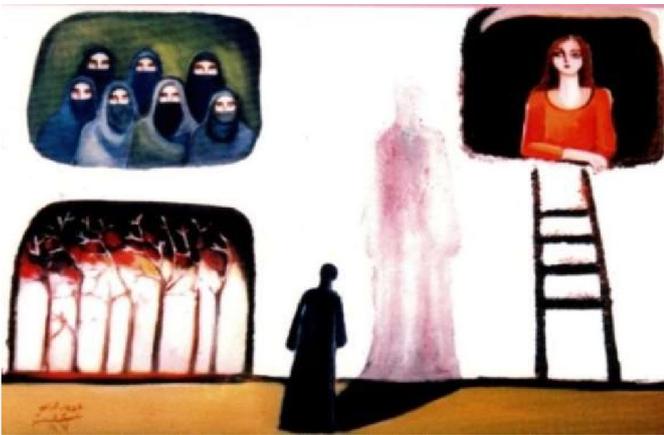


Figure 8. Courtesy of Badira Naser

Taghrid Baqshi

Baqshi is from the eastern region and belongs to the third generation of artists, which has made a clear mark with its singular styles. She deals with women and their suffering through symbolism, which, in some of her subjects, resembles primitivism, and through symbolism in form rather than content. She expresses ideas through styles that rely on the power of line and color and a boldness in addressing her topics, alongside deep feelings in her subjects' expressions. Her work speaks of social and personal topics concerning women as a foundational artistic element. Figure 10 shows typological pictures in Saudi society in which men wear a crown simply because they are male and in which women must deal with them accordingly. Baqshi, by expressing other issues, searches deeply into her characters, their layers, and their expressions to reflect the suffering of Saudi women. Some of her work addresses issues without depth, as in her expressive styles.

Iman Jabrin

Jabrin is one of the fourth generation of female artists. Even though she has not been very prolific, her limited artwork addresses the place of Saudi women and confirms the false judgments women face due to their appearance, especially on the part of the West, which is not aware that the veil is a

woman's choice and does not necessarily indicate the veiling of her goals. Jabrin's work (see Figure 11) thus depicts women in their niqab painted on wooden boxes that have an empty pocket at the top that holds various cards through which the receiver can interact with the women by reading the contents of the cards, thus revealing the varied thoughts of each box, or piece. This work reflects how varied the beliefs are of women who wear veils and niqab, even if their outer appearance is similar.

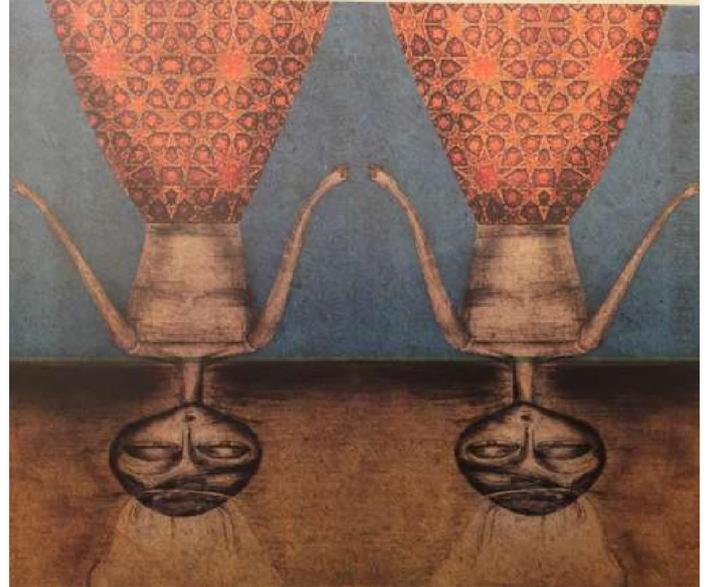


Figure 9. Sara Abdelli's 2 wives, 2012, Courtesy of Sara Abdelli



Figure 10. Courtesy of Taghrid Baqshi



Figure 11. Courtesy of Iman Jabrin



Figure 12. Courtesy of Manal Dhawian

Manal Dhawian

Dhawian is a third-generation artist from the eastern region. She practices an expressive style of photography, addressing various issues but mainly women, whom she uses alongside other subjects as symbols. In her first work, *Choice*, from 2005 (see Figure 12) (Ayad & Blackburn, 2014), she forms visual signs in an artistic creation dominated by bold colors with a focus on black backgrounds. This work symbolizes, on the one hand, the fact that women are forbidden to drive and, on the other hand, the role of women who lead in society in hidden ways. Dhawian deals with visual memory and the archival of female culture in society (Aldowayan, 2012), in addition to documenting a visual history not considered important by society or political history. She has also worked on art projects focusing on documenting and archiving the history of women, including the project *My Name* (Raza, 2012).

Conclusion

It can be said that the role of women in debates regarding societal problems, including the rights of women and especially

society's current views on the topic, has inspired a number of Saudi female artists. Their artistic work reveals a previously unknown female history in the home, the woman's social domain, using a method that could gently yet actively change the status quo of power under the umbrella of general social change in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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