



THE LAST WORD

Cultural Buzz

Fact: Individuals and institutions are investing in Palestinian art. Had you invested a decade ago in artwork by Suleiman Mansour or the late Ismail Shammout, for instance, chances are the piece you've purchased is worth tenfold today. In all likelihood your artwork will fetch even more in the future. Judging from the number of art exhibitions, galleries, and auctions that feature Palestinian art, there is definitely a surge in interest, particularly in that of local Palestinian artists. I would like to think that this surge is not driven solely by financial gain, but rather by a deepening awareness of the need to preserve and emphasise Palestinian cultural identity. Culture is just another battlefield for us Palestinians, one that engages different, yet fierce, and if I may say, sophisticated soldiers.

Big names in Palestinian art, such as Samia Halaby, who was born in Jerusalem in 1935 and who is still recognised as one of the Arab world's leading contemporary painters, Kamal Boullata, Laila Shawa, and Jumana El Hussein, have all paved the way for a new generation of Palestinian artists who are not only talented but also shrewd, hard-working, and media-savvy. On the international scene, artists such as Muna Hatoum, whose work relies on the kind of interactivity that invites the spectator to become involved in the aesthetic experience without the presence of the artist, and whose artwork fetches hundreds of thousands of dollars; Emily Jacir, who works in a variety of media, including film, photography, installation, performance, video, writing, and sound; and Gaza-born, Paris-based Hani Zurob, who was selected by the Huffington Post as one of ten international artists to watch in 2013, have collectively and literally given Palestinian art a new dimension.

The Pasha Room at the American Colony Hotel was full during an auction of Palestinian artworks held a few months ago. The audience was predominantly Palestinian, and the buyers were all Palestinian. It wasn't Christie's, but the scale of the event was a novelty in Palestine, although Palestinian art goes back at least a century. The circle of collectors is no doubt growing, and it looks as though art collection is becoming a fad, albeit one that is restricted to a fortunate few. The process itself is also becoming more sophisticated, whereby the search includes not only travelling abroad but also online combing of top international auction houses. Other sought-after art treasures include pristine Palestinian embroidery, antique olive wood and mother-of-pearl handicrafts, original damascene inlay furniture with silver linings, Persian carpets, Russian icons, antiquarian books and maps, and even old bottles of wine. And these are only examples of items that you can bet will attract buyers. I realise that this is not the image that comes to mind when one thinks of Palestine, but this is, in fact, the reality that is deemed to continue.

A word of gratitude and appreciation goes to a number of individuals and institutions that have played a major role in promoting Palestinian art and empowering Palestinian artists. Some of the individuals who have whole-heartedly done that include George Al-Ama, Ramzi Dalloul, Mazen Qupty, Ehab Shanti, and certainly many more whom I'm not aware of. The institutions that stand out include the United Nations Development Programme/ UNDP-PAPP, Bank of Palestine, and Padico.

The cultural buzz is definitely on and it is infectious. On the other hand, the more pain that the Israeli occupation inflicts, the more creative Palestinian artists become; this is how it works.

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Publisher