
Women's Voices in Middle East Museums: Case Studies in Jordan, by Carol Malt, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse New York, 2005, 150 pages including appendices.

REVIEWED BY SHELAGH WEIR

During the past few decades museums have proliferated in the Middle East, not only in the wealthy oil states, but also in poorer countries and even (notably) within the dreadful constraints of occupied Palestine. Rulers and their officials want them for international prestige, to promote dynastic or nationalistic narratives, to attract tourists, and to provide educational facilities for their publics. There is also a grass roots drive for museums. Leading local figures want to assert regional or ethnic identities and present their own accounts of customs and histories. And scholars, collectors, and connoisseurs want places to study, preserve, and display the objects of their fascination and love. The general public is, however, variably interested in visiting museums. Those with beautiful, informative displays, and stimulating activities, including in-house and out-reach educational programmes, are popular. But others are too dusty, uninformative, and inaccessible to attract many visitors.

Women play significant roles in all spheres of museum activity. As an honourable, prestigious, and potentially stimulating profession, museum work can be an attractive option for educated women with limited choices, and many find employment as curators, conservators, educators, administrators, or (a few) as directors. Some elite and wealthy women are also enthusiastic private collectors, and have founded their own museums.

The stated aim of *Women's Voices in Middle East Museums* is therefore of great interest: "to know how [Middle Eastern] museums represent, serve, empower, and advance society in general and women in particular" (although I would add "or whether" after "how"), and focussing mainly on Jordan as a "case study" (p. vii). Malt describes herself as an art historian and museologist who has travelled and lived in the Middle East, but confesses that she has "no training in anthropology and no formal experience in cultural fieldwork" (p. xi). This shows up in her methodology and presentation. Information appears to have been elicited from her female informants mainly by means of formal interviews and questionnaires, and lacks depth and detail. The book is also confusingly structured with similar categories of information fragmented in different places. This might have been avoided if the author had imposed a unifying authorial perspective.

Most of the book is based on research Malt conducted in Jordan and the West Bank in 1999, when she visited museums, galleries and sites, studied written information about them, and interviewed selected women associated in some capacity with the museum world. It begins with an introduction to the history and development of museums in the Middle East including Egypt and the West Bank, but excluding the Gulf. Thus Malt brings in outstanding women such as Hind Hussein of the *Dar al-Tifl* in Jerusalem, and Sameeha Khalil of the *Inaash al-Usrah* in Al-Bireh, though she does not elaborate on their backgrounds or achievements. Then follows a survey of the surprising diversity of museums in Jordan, which she categorizes by discipline (archaeology, ethnography, fine arts, history, numismatics etc), though not all fit easily into one category. Further information about the development and functions of selected museums is also provided in chapter four, and in Appendix A entitled "Museums in Jordan", which also contains a potted history of Jordan and of the nine major cities where museums are situated. Here she also provides facts about exhibits, addresses, opening hours, and entrance fees such as is readily avail-

able in guidebooks. Most of this historical and museological information would have been better integrated in one place – perhaps at the beginning of the book – both for easier reference, and to avoid repetition.

In chapter one, entitled “Women in Middle Eastern Society”, Malt seems out of her depth as she attempts to interweave a history of Islam and the position of women in less than five pages. In chapter two she provides background to her main subject by describing Jordanian women’s education, training, and work opportunities within the context of recent economic and political change. Here she discusses the problems faced by women working in the museum world. Like their Western counterparts they have to juggle work and family commitments, and struggle to be taken seriously and given promotions. In addition, they are expected to embody cultural identity and traditional values, which creates its own stresses. Nevertheless many are ambivalent about or indifferent to feminism. Like much else in the book, this begs for deeper exploration and theorizing. Chapter three discusses the functions of museums, then focuses more closely on the practical and symbolic functions performed in and by Jordanian museums, and the roles of women working therein. Here she rightly notes that displays convey “silent messages about power, identity, and continuity” (p. 37), and “reinforce the inequality of women and perpetuate traditional stereotypes” (p. 37). She describes how women came into museum work: “Each woman had a story, a reason, and the determination to get where she now was” (p. 41). Here one longs for a fuller rendering of some of these stories, and/or an idea of what can be deduced from them.

Malt focuses most closely on forty-two women who were, or had once been, involved in the museum world in various capacities – as curators, administrators, patrons, and founders. This is an elite sample, for it apparently excludes women who worked or still work at lower levels of the museum hierarchy as technicians and conservators. In Appendix B, entitled “Jordanian Women and Museums”, these interviewees are listed with their institutions and present or former titles or positions. Together with comments and quotes scattered through the text, this reveals that most of these women are from the upper echelons of society as well as their professions. Twenty-four of these women who were currently working in museums were also subjected to a questionnaire, the results of which are summarized in Appendix B. She lists the responses to only three questions, the value of which can be gauged from the second and its results: “Do you support the feminist movement in Jordan? Responses: Yes: 2, No: 6, No opinion: 14, Considered it: 2”. The same appendix also provides a breakdown of the ages, marital status, religion, and educational level of these women. But we are not told how many women are currently working in the museum sphere in Jordan, so we have no idea what proportion of the total this small sample represents nor whether it typifies the wider picture.

None of these methodological defects would matter so much if Malt had explored the social backgrounds and individual biographies of her chosen subjects in greater depth in order to help us understand their remarkable achievements. Information about them and short quotes by them are scattered through the text. Potted biographies of eleven women (some deceased) are also provided in chapter five. But key facts are either absent, or are recorded without any exploration of their significance. She does not mention, for example, that Sa’diyah Tall (a Syrian) was first married to Musa `Alami, member of a leading Palestinian family, nor that her second husband, Wasfi Tall, was the Prime Minister of Jordan who presided over Black September in 1970, and was assassinated in revenge in 1971. Malt mentions that Tall encouraged Sa’diyah to found the Museum of Popular Traditions at the ancient amphitheater in Amman (which opened in 1971), but does not mention the view I heard expressed that Sa’diyah included Palestinian exhibits partly out

of a desire to make some kind of reparation for Black September. Neither does she explain what position Princess Wijdan Ali occupies in the Jordanian royal family, nor consider how her status might have helped (or hindered) her struggles to create and direct the Jordan National Gallery. She mentions that the noted collector Widad Kawar was born in Bethlehem, but not that she attributes her special feeling for peasant culture and costumes partly to her parental background in Palestinian villages. Absent too, is any detailed analysis of how these remarkable, high-achieving women were enabled or influenced by their educational backgrounds, by family wealth, or by their collaborations with foreign researchers and museologists. One would also like to know what professional and personal obstacles they overcame in the pursuit of their goals, and how they and others evaluate their achievements. But Malt's research methods do not seem to have been conducive to eliciting such information. She interviewed some of her informants "behind their desks", suggesting an inhibiting formality, and also tape-recorded some of them. This would inevitably have caused reticence about sensitive matters such as the social and political pressures to which these women and their institutions have been subjected. But it is precisely those issues which need to be thoroughly addressed in order to understand how Jordanian (or any other) museums are succeeding or failing to address social needs, or to promote female concerns and careers (for a more detailed and nuanced treatment see Irene Maffi's *Pratiques du patrimoine et politiques de la memoire en Jordanie*, 2003).

Malt raises many interesting questions, indeed several sections begin with a long list of questions (the most I counted was ten in succession). But she too often leaves them hanging, or veers off to quote other authors, leaving the reader confused and unsatisfied. This book will therefore be more useful as a reference work than for providing major insights into the issues it sets out to address.

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Dreaming of Change: Young Middle-Class Women and Social Transformation in

Jordan, by Julia Droeber. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 327 pages. \$188.00.

REVIEWED BY LUCINE TAMINIAN

In her book *Dreaming of Change*, Droeber studies young single women of middle class background and higher education as a social group that has great influence on the direction that social and political changes are taking in Jordan. Youth, male and female, are under-represented in the anthropological literature on the Middle East, despite the fact that they constitute almost one third of the population of any Middle Eastern country. Moreover, Jordan ranks eight out of 161 countries with regard to the youthfulness of its population. As such, Droeber's book constitutes a welcome addition to social studies on the Middle East.

Droeber raises two important issues: first, the impact of women's behavior and worldviews on the process of social change in general, and on gender roles and family relations in particular; second, the significance of religion in the lives of young single women, including Christian women. In her analysis of these two issues, she focuses on young women's daily experiences and on the way such experiences shape and are shaped by their social environment, religion being a component of the social environment. Unlike some anthropologists who come to the field with strictly defined

research questions and thus see “reality” through their presuppositions, Droeber reformulates her research questions while doing her field research in Amman, thus allowing for a better understanding of her research topic.

In her analysis, Droeber draws on data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with university students she met when teaching in the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Jordan, as well as on data gathered from forty female respondents who filled out the seven-page questionnaire she prepared. The problem here is that though Droeber introduces the ten women who constitute her main informants, she overlooks any presentation of the forty respondents whom she frequently quotes in the discussion of her research questions. Who are these women? In what respects do they differ from, or are similar to, her main informants? What significance do their views have for Droeber’s research? Moreover, the author fails to include a translation of the questionnaire as an index for the reader to refer to.

Following on from Turner’s discussion of liminality and “communitas”, Droeber considers marriage the rite of passage to “adulthood”, and the ability to create a family a signifier of becoming a fully-grown member of society. Despite the fact that young single women are gaining financial power and are actively engaged in socio-political life, Droeber argues that they are liminal since, though they are past adolescence, they are not yet fully adults. As is the case with all “in-between” groups, Droeber sees the power of young, liminal women to lie in the fact that they form a “communitas” that has the power to challenge social taboos, and therefore can pose a threat to social order. In this sense, she regards young single women as active participants in social processes, formulating and negotiating new ideas, and consequently furthering the socio-political changes that are taking place in Jordan. Thus she assigns agency to middle class young women in triggering change, and locates their agency in their liminality. However she fails to look into the socio-cultural conditions that are conducive to the emergence of a “communitas” of young, liminal women.

Gender ideologies, roles, and relationships are the main themes throughout Droeber’s discussion of her research questions. She examines the ways in which gender relations and roles are constructed, negotiated, and challenged in Jordan, and how young women are involved in these processes. Rather than looking at gender roles as totally determined by gender ideologies, she considers gender roles as flexible and in constant flux. This flexibility in acting out gender roles allows for change. Droeber’s concept of change brings to mind Bourdieu’s (1972) theory of practice whereby change is located in “improvisation”. Bourdieu (1972) argues that social systems are powerfully constraining, yet they can be made and unmade through human action and interaction, or more precisely through the improvisation that characterizes human action.

The second issue Droeber focuses on is the meaning of religion and religiousness for young Jordanian women. She defines religiousness in terms of worldviews and behavior, or belief and practices, rooted in the main principles of the religion one adheres to. Accordingly, she discusses three issues: women’s attitude towards gender inequality in religion and the strategies they adopt to accommodate them; women’s participation in the life of religious communities; and the Islamic dress code. Here her discussion is confusing. She states that only one third of the forty female respondents consider themselves religious, and also that the majority of the women she met are aware of gender inequality in their religion. But what in her view is the relationship between religiousness and awareness of gender inequality in religion? In other words, are “religious” women aware of gender inequality in religion? Or are women who are aware of such inequalities

'irreligious'? Do all women agree on which aspects of religion constitute gender inequality? By focusing simply on women's reactions to gender inequality in religion, Droeber overlooks such questions.

Another problem arises from the way that Droeber draws on the private/public opposition to analyze women's religious practices, a conceptual framework that many anthropological studies use to explain gender inequalities. By describing women's religious practices as private, Droeber indicates that they are less influential than men's public practices with regard to religious ceremonial and doctrinal issues. Though she is aware of women's participation in the Ramadan communal prayer known as *salat al-tarawih*, she does not try to go beyond the private/public dichotomy to research instances when women's religiousness is practiced in public, and when it is practiced in private. Moreover, she limits her discussion of religious practices to fasting and prayer and ignores other practices, such as giving alms and *hajj*.

Droeber's analysis of *hijab* is richer and more convincing. She researches it within the context of a dress code which she considers as one of the self-representational markers of everyday life. She looks at the different "expressions" of *hijab* (veil, or headscarf combined with loose gown, long skirt, or trousers, etc.), and unpacks its multiple social significance. *Hijab*, as Droeber argues, is not only a marker of religiousness, but also of class and sometimes of opposition to social norms and cultural values.

That said, there are some flaws in Droeber's study. First, in her discussion of the public discourses on gender issues, she fails to refer to the debates on young single people that are voiced in the pages of Jordanian newspapers, or to the related literature in Arabic. Here, Droeber quotes only Shteivi and Daghestani (1994), and *The Star*, an English-language Jordanian newspaper. The topic of single women, usually referred to as '*al-'awanis*' (spinsters), often makes the main headlines in the socio-cultural pages of Jordanian daily newspapers, and is the core issue of the publication of the Islamic NGO *Al-Afaf* (i.e. chastity). She also fails to refer to UNICEF's (2001) study on Jordanian youth, which covers topics of relevance to her study, such as the youth's attitudes towards gender roles and gender inequalities.

Secondly, her remarks on the "lazy Jordanians" as compared to the "energetic Palestinians", and on the "local" outlook of Jordanian families as compared to the "transnational" outlook of Palestinian and Circassian families, reflect existing stereotypes.

Thirdly, her account of women's movements in Jordan is superficial and inaccurate. She could be expected to have presented a better account, especially that women's political activism is central to her discussion of changes in gender roles. She also overlooks the related literature on women's movements and on women political activists written by Jordanians, e.g. al-Tall (1985), al-Burini (1994), and others.

Finally, she says that Christians and Muslims fall under different marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws. This is not entirely correct. Christians and Muslims fall under different marital laws (marriage and divorce), but the same inheritance laws.

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Al-Rujula wa Taghayyur Ahwal al-Nisa' (Manhood and Women Changing Conditions of Women, by Azza C. Baydoun. Beirut and Casablanca: The Arab Cultural Center, 2007.

REVIEWED BY FEISAL A. YUNIS

Azza Baydoun is not the kind of social psychologist you often encounter in our world of academia. She is a woman with a specific mission: to delve deeply into the inner core of society, so as to uncover intensely held perceptions, beliefs, and behavioral orientations that affect the most important and the most troubled relationship: that between man and woman. She does this armed with a mastery of theoretical as well as methodological tools. Most of her research involves well-designed fieldwork coupled with a clear theoretical understanding of the real issues behind the data. This book is no exception.

The main issue is the perception of self, of the opposite sex, and the beliefs and attitudes related to differing male-female roles among young Lebanese adults. The assumption is that the changes brought about in female self-perception might bring about similar changes in male perception of themselves, their gender identity, and their attitudes towards the other sex. I do not intend to cover the entire book in this short review. To try to do this might not do justice to a study that I consider to be an exhaustive source of information on the major theories and research in the field, the first of its kind in Arabic. Instead, I will focus on Baydoun's most important findings with the objective of persuading the reader to go straight to the book.

The first study focuses on the concept of androgyny, considering it as a measure of change away from the stereotypical male-female dichotomy. Her critical assessment of the available measures of androgyny is an example seldom followed in the field of psychological research. She justifies this by the need to avoid a "scientific Babel's tower", and believes that "the researcher must present her frames of reference and research tools, to be able to define the limitations of her results for herself, and to make them easy for the critic to find" (p. 95). One of the main findings is that there has been a shift towards crossing stereotypical gender boundaries, and that male and female students are now attributing more of the opposite sex characteristics to themselves than before. This is a significant finding especially when we consider that, even in the United States, male students are more reluctant to cross gender boundaries than female students. I wonder what we would find if we were to replicate the study in other more conservative societies in the Arab world. Other important findings are those dealing with the effects of social factors on gender stereotyping. In a country as diverse as Lebanon, it is surprising to find that gender perceptions are not influenced by socioeconomic and demographic variables, except for religious differences, with Christian males more committed to the masculine stereotype, and the females less committed to the feminine stereotype.

In the second part of her project, Baydoun moves to a study of the interplay between the characteristics men choose for the desired woman, and women's self-perception. Her objective is to find out the degree of sensitivity among men to changes in gender identity among women. Among the very arresting results are the findings related to gender type that young male adults desire in a partner. They certainly do not want them to be of the masculine gender type (6.8%), nor of the feminine type (19.7%), but prefer by a large margin an undifferentiated gender type (46.8%) or androgenous type (26.9%). Again these findings appear not to be influenced by social, educational, religious, sectarian, and other demographic factors, except for age, as if the chief characteristic of Lebanese society, its diversity, does not matter in this regard.

Another important result is that, of the ten characteristics commonly desired by members of the two sexes in their choice of partner, eight are stereotypically attributed to the female sex. In her interpretation of this finding, Baydoun refers to the findings reported in the research literature, which indicate that women are more satisfied in marriages with partners displaying more of the feminine gender type.

The third part of the book deals with prejudice, whether against women or men. She starts with two chapters reviewing and organizing the research literature published on the subject. Research findings that pose problems for the social scientist trying to make sense of social reality in the Arab region arise from contradictions in attitudes towards women. For example, Baydoun cites research from Egypt (p. 199) showing that, while a majority of respondents asserted the supremacy of men over women, the vast majority also acknowledged the right of women to work. Other research she mentions from Tunisia (p. 199) found that 62% of participants agreed that men and women should be treated equally, while 60% objected to their mothers working.

Young Lebanese men and women answered a questionnaire carefully designed by Baydoun. The results were analyzed, and the two groups compared on all the dimensions. Some of the findings were surprising. To start with, the young men were reluctant to reject gender stereotypes, whereas women readily rejected them. This goes against the common belief that women are more conservative than men. The details of this general finding make interesting reading, and raise some important issues concerning gender attitudes. Another important finding is that women were more forthcoming in expressing their beliefs than men, as shown by the fact that more men chose "do not know" as an answer to questions asked. Baydoun suggests that women might have thought about these issues more than men. Another reason might be that most gender issues are a more sensitive subject for women than for men.

There are many other crucial issues raised in this book, all of which are fundamental to understanding the extent and nature of changing gender attitudes in Lebanese and Arab society. What is more important is the endeavor to seek meaning beyond the direct empirical data, which is clearly manifested throughout the text. This reviewer considers Baydoun's book to be a substantial addition to the research available in the Arab world on this very important subject.

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Al-Rajula wa Taghayyur Ahwal al-Nesa' won the Arab Women's Organization Award for Social Sciences in 2007. The AWO works under the auspices of the Duwal al-Jamiaa' al-'Arabiyyah.
