

ARAB WOMEN IN THE FINE ARTS

The arts are not a primary topic of discussion or concern in the contemporary Arab world. Political, economic, social and ecological problems easily take precedence over cultural concerns during this period of tension, change and uncertainty in the Middle East. Lebanon, for instance, is a country intent on rebuilding its government, society and infrastructure after a long and devastating civil war. Palestinians are grappling with a variety of difficult political and economic challenges, Iraqis are struggling to survive day-to-day, while Algerians are living with the terror of civil war and Egyptians are striving just to earn a living in a perpetually depressed economy. None of these Arab countries is well-situated to support a thriving arts scene. Yet the arts do manage to survive and, in some cases, even to thrive. In fact, it is often during just such times of tension and uncertainty that artists, writers and intellectuals begin contemplating, questioning and reconsidering the world in which they live in new and creative ways.

Women artists in the Arab world have been posing questions and reshaping traditions through their painting, sculpture, poetry, music and theatrical performances for at least a century. Although some women artists continue ornamental and decorative traditions meant to please a wide audience, others create artworks which declare their own views and appraisals of society, culture and politics, often disturbing or jarring their audiences in unexpected ways.

In the spirit of enhancing understanding between Arab women and women throughout the world, the File section of this issue of *Al-Raida* provides glimpses of women artists and their works in the fields of painting, literature, ceramics, music, dance and theater. Although these women artists represent a variety of backgrounds and work in different media, they share some important common characteristics. First and foremost, nearly all of the women artists featured in this issue have grappled with the difficulties of balancing the requirements of their art with the demands of their families. Perhaps more so than American or European women artists, Arab women artists experience pronounced pressures and contradictions when they try to give their utmost to their arts while also fulfilling their culturally defined roles as wives and mothers. Hence, it is no surprise that most of the women we have interviewed for this issue are either divorced or have never been married. As Helen Khal noted nearly a decade ago in her excellent study of women artists in Lebanon, "as a designation, 'woman artist' contains within it a dual and alternate condition of status and role....Unlike her male counterpart for whom life and

work are one, the woman artist suffers from a conflict between her chosen career and the basic functions of her life as a woman, wife and mother....In her status as a woman, she is confronted with certain confining patterns of behavior...imposed by her society and its traditions. In her role as artist, on the other hand, she is offered an existence of her own creation, a private identity freed from predetermined limitations." (1)

Another characteristic shared by the women featured in this File section is their deep need to pursue their chosen art. They speak of this need in terms of a "call" to create. Each of these women has faced conflicts — with herself, her family, her society — as she has chosen personal aspirations over traditional authority. The striving after honesty and integrity of expression demonstrated by these Arab women artists may explain the strong, direct and unabashedly emotional character of their art work. Whereas many contemporary American and European art works (whether executed by men or women), are characterized by a cool, distanced and ironic stance generally described as "post-modern", the art work of Arab women is intimately engaged with the honest expression of emotions and sentiments.

A recurring theme which echoes throughout this File section is that, in Arab women's artistic creations, truth is beauty and beauty is truth. The aesthetic impact is to be found not so much in the design, colors or composition of elements, but in the feelings art expresses and inspires. All the women artists we have featured are involved in a passionate struggle to experience, know, express and defend the truths of their lives. As such, they are engaged, directly and indirectly, in transforming the collective cultural consciousness of Arab society. Arab women artists are truly pioneers in their professional and personal lives. Anyone who wants to know where Arab culture and society is heading in the next century would do well to follow their progress.

Laurie King-Irani
Editor-in-Chief

Endnotes

(1) Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987), pp. 21-22.