

THE PLACE OF THE IMAGE IN THE LEVANTINE INTERIOR

THE LEBANESE CASE

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The preponderance of the figurative image in Middle Eastern societies during the second half of the twentieth century has prompted questions about its origins through the region. The following study aims at examining the place occupied by the image in Levantine interiors (the Lebanese case) since the nineteenth century, and the adoption by the local populations of this imported icon in their daily and intimate life. Publications on this topic are very rare and it is hoped that this article will open the door to more extensive research in this field.

The first part of the study will sketch a historical background, attempting to portray a typical Levantine interior with its sparse elements of figuration. In the following parts, the progressive presence of the image from around the turn of the century will be scrutinized in all aspects and major change in attitudes towards it examined.

Historical background

Arabs throughout history have always been known for their explicit preference for abstraction. Although the commonly held view is that the Islamic religion maintains an unclear position on the subject of figurative imagery, recent studies have shown that figuration existed during the Umayyad period.¹ It is more likely that the conflict between the post-Umayyads and the Byzantine Empire pushed the Muslim camp to ban the image because of its associations with Christian iconography. The book *Madhāhib al-husn*² is quite revealing on this issue, and discovers a high affinity among Arabs for the realms of beauty and aesthetics. However, it is widely believed that from the ninth century to the late eighteenth century the concept of beauty was mainly non-figurative, and one good reason for such a view is the scarcity of evidence proving the contrary. Nonetheless, we should mention the presence of figuration (mainly of Persian and Mongol influence) in the following items: ceramics, used heavily in the interior decoration, miniatures, illustrating books and manuscripts, rugs, carpets and tapestries, undeniably overwhelmingly present in all interiors and painted wood panels covering walls and ceilings.

It is very clear from this that the absence of the figurative image in the oriental interiors is more of a false common belief than a reality, and a serious study of the topic might one day explain the reasons behind those false convictions. In all cases, the nineteenth century witnessed an increasing use of images in Levantine interiors compared to the years before. A series of paintings by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Vanmour³, now at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, provides a real pictorial encyclopedia of the Sultan's palaces in the eighteenth century and shows the imperial rooms practically void of any figuration; the same applies in the case of the Celsing collection in Biba, Sweden.⁴ In comparison, one century later, and

¹ Nāsir al-Rabbāt, "Nahwa i'ādat taqyīm al-thaqāfa al-fanniyya al-umawiyya", Abwāb 19, Winter 1999, 88-107.

² Sharbil Dāghir, *Madhāhib al-husn*, Beirut, 1998.

³ Jean-Baptiste Vanmour (1699-1737) lived and worked in Istanbul, commissioned by the Dutch Ambassador Cornelius Calkoen.

⁴ "102 Paintings executed for the Swedish Celsing family, representing Constantinople in the eighteenth century", an illustrated lecture presented by Philip Mansel, Beirut, American University of Beirut Museum, February 1998.

with the growing European influence, images will start to fill the spaces,⁵ as this article will attempt to show.

The era of eclecticism

Photography

By the mid-nineteenth century “occidentitis” in the Ottoman Empire had already its apogee. Furnishings became essentially European, but adapted to the local taste, marking the beginning of a new age. It is at this point in time that European photographers travelling to the region and taking photographs of archaeological and biblical sites introduced photography to the Arab world. Towards the end of the 1860s, the young locals who had worked as assistants to the European pioneers began producing their own images. Local photographic production intensified after Yessai Garabedian, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, held the first photographic workshop in the 1860s.⁶ Photographic production subsequently expanded, especially after the massive exodus of Armenians (many of whom worked as photographers) from Turkey to the Arab lands. This exodus provided the labour force necessary to accommodate an expanding market for photographs, especially after the invention and export of the Kodak box camera in the 1880s-90s to the Arab world. The earliest studios were founded by resident Europeans, such as the Bonfils family and Jules Lind in Lebanon, V. Giuntini, Heyman and Stromeyer, G. Lekegian, and A. D. Reiser in Egypt, Madson in Palestine and Clément Thevenet in Syria.⁷ People from different social groups filled their halls with family pictures in multiple formats. Rarely could one find a household lacking the patriarch’s photos, nicely framed and proudly hung. However, in contrast with Europe, displays consisted mostly of photographs and seldom anything else. Pictures represented portraits of men in dignified poses, wearing traditional costumes under a European jacket and a tarbouche. Studio business flourished in big cities, while rural areas witnessed the phenomenon of the street photographers.⁸ The relatively low-cost process⁹ allowed for this media to spread fast and all over. Everybody wanted to get photographed, although it was not easily accessible to the poor, though still much sought after.¹⁰ The fact that pictures were done mechanically and not by a human being helped photography to be easily and widely accepted, even amongst the devout religious groups. Nonetheless it is interesting to mention a story told by Sā’ib Salām (a famous Lebanese politician and prime minister, and amateur of photography since 1911), about a picture of Sheikh Ahmad Tabbāra, a renowned Sunni dignitary who was an advocate of Arab independence. The Ottoman authorities edited a picture of the Sheikh during a trip to Paris in 1913 to make it look as though he were sitting with a non-veiled woman. This caused turmoil in the conservative Beirut milieu.¹¹

The popularity of this art as the most collected form of artistic expression persisted till the fifties when paintings started to replace photos as a more fashionable object of decoration. Nowadays, hanging photographic portraits is almost extinct.¹² Even the simple souvenir

⁵ Mansel, Philip, *Constantinople. City of the World's Desire, 1453-1924*. Harmondsworth, 1997, 273.

⁶ Akram Za’tarī. “Bahth quddima ilā mu’assasat Ford”, *Manshūrāt li-l-mu’assasa al- ‘arabivva li-l-ṣūra*, Beirut, September 1997, 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marilyn Stafford, *Silent Stories*, London: Saqi Books, 1998, 139.

⁹ “l’lān li-l-musawwir Kūfā: nisf dazẓīnat suwar bi-25 qirshan”, *Al-Ma’rad*, 168, 24 Dec. 1922, advertisements page.

¹⁰ Mohsen Yammine, *Histoires intimes: Liban, 1900-1960*, Arles: Actes Sud, 1998, 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Gaby ‘Amshā, akhar al-dināsūrāt”, *Al-Nahār*, 5 March 1999, 10.

photo is being abandoned for the more fascinating videocams and digital photography. In the summer of 1998, at the initiative of the “Mois de la Photo” in Paris, photography in Lebanon began to be rediscovered as an art. Yet there is a long way to go before it regains the position it used to have in the “good old days”.

Painted walls and ceilings

When the governor of Mount Lebanon, emir Fakhr al-Dīn II (died 1635), came back home from his exile in Tuscany, he brought with him a multitude of Italian artists. This marked the first encounter of Levantine society with European forms of decorative arts. However, only from 1840 onwards did figurative painted ceilings really develop. This period was dominated economically by the golden age of the silk industry, a source of new fortunes which translated into a proliferation of beautiful mansions corresponding to the tastes and dreams of opulence of a wealthy and influential bourgeoisie. Before that the tradition had been to cover walls and ceilings with the famous arabesque damascene-design wood panels. But by 1914 painted ceilings had established themselves as the fashion and adorned most of the larger houses in Lebanon. Wealthy families continued to commission Italians,¹³ while the less fortunate ones contented themselves with the less talented local artisans. Lebanese artists of the late mid- to late nineteenth century like ‘Abduḥ Muṣṣawir (Beiteddine palace, 1831). Ni‘matullāh Ma‘ādī, Nadjīb Qīqānū (1867-1927), Iskandar Salībī, Nākūzī, Ilyās Fā‘ūr and others were highly sought after, especially in villages. Scenery of skies, birds and flowers were the most frequently recurrent, in addition to such extravaganzas as the depiction of the first train or the visit of Kaiser William II (see figurel).¹⁴ However, this form of ceiling decoration went into decline with the evolution of European-style multistory walk-up apartment buildings at the turn of the century. The lower ceilings of the latter structures shifted the interest of dwellers towards wall frescoes.

Frescoes became very fashionable in the 1920s and 30s. Local artists were commissioned to paint entire walls with the most eclectic of topics. Sections of the huge gazelles painted on the dining room wall of the artist ‘Umar Unsi’s house in Tallet Khayat in Beirut still exist in private collections.¹⁵ Although fantasies from “One Thousand and One Nights” were the most popular, landscapes in addition to naked women were also requested for special places. However, the rise of the plastic arts during the French mandate period meant that fresco art did not have adequate time to blossom.

It is worth mentioning here the popularity during the first decades of the twentieth century of a form of lace curtains that used to incorporate figurative elements, animals, trees and even female figurines. This was mainly an artisan work and of no great importance.

The fashion for paintings

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, religious paintings were practically the only kind of figurative paintings available. However, the accelerating interest of Europeans (and Americans) in what the land of the Bible actually looked like resulted in a mass of topographical artists visiting in Middle East to identify, quantify and pictorialize those sites most likely to interest a captive audience back home. Local artists noticed this activity, along with what was happening in the commercial world of photography: a photographic way of looking at the world began to impinge on their own work. It is not too difficult to trace the impact of photography on the portraits of pioneers like Dā‘ūd Qorm [Corm] (1852-1930) and

¹³ Interview with Bahā’ Rifā‘ī, grandson of Pasha Mkhayish, revealing that Italians painted the ceiling of his ancestors’ mansion in 1894.

¹⁴ Claire Paget, *Murs et plafonds peints*, Beirut, 1998, 25.

¹⁵ Omar Onsi: 1901-1969, Exhibition Catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, 1997, 20-21.

Khalīl Salībī [Saleeby] (1870-1928). “Topographically, an extraordinary view of Beirut from the sea [...] can also be traced in origin to the inspiration of a monochrome Bonfils photograph”.¹⁶ The painting (anonymous, c.1870), now destroyed by the war, used to hang in the salon of Grand Hotel Bassoul in Beirut.

By the turn of the century, European artists who had chosen to settle in the Levant began to outnumber the traveller artists. These came with the clear intent of making money and fame in this virgin market, having failed to make successful careers in Europe. Most of them (French, Italians and White Russians) opened ateliers to teach the art of painting to the local aristocracy and to sell them their works which functioned as the signs of wealth and avant-garde taste. The examples of the French Georges Cyr (1881-1964), the Italian Franco Manetti (1899-1964) and the Russian Boris Novicoff (1888-1966) are typical.¹⁷

Nevertheless, those artists played an important role in the development of the plastic arts in the region by accepting disciples among the local artists, especially the less fortunate ones who couldn't afford the luxury of travelling to Rome or Paris. This opened the way for a number of locals to study arts. Previously the cost of travel had meant that only very few artists in the late ottoman period could come by such training.¹⁸

The good days of painting had started. For a society to create and nurture an artistic tradition, there are two requisites: there must be artists, and there must be a public to support them. Since Dā'ūd Qorm in the 1870s artists have been present and active. An 1890 self-portrait by Corm presents him holding the badge of the Turkish Order of the Medjidiye and the badge of the Order of Saint Gregory of the Vatican.¹⁹ The curriculum vitae of artists like Habīb Surūr [Srouf] (1860-1938), Khalīl Salībī (1870-1928), Philippe Mūrānī (1875-1970) and their productions clearly reveal that they were very established and known. They executed portraits for the most powerful dignitaries of the day, and the studio of Habīb Surūr used to be located in the grounds of the Beirut home of the aristocratic landlord-tycoon Alfred Sursock.²⁰ On the other hand, the quantity of portraits surviving today reveals that it was portraits that were very much in demand, for portraits were the major ornamentation of houses and a definite sign of prosperity and success.

In addition to the society artists, there was a class of popular artists who catered to the masses. Most of the time these artists were self-taught, and produced paintings of the Swiss chocolate box variety. Imported items of this kind used to have on their covers and lids images showing the Alps and the surrounding lakes. In most middle class houses kitsch themes like mills, swans, ponds and romantic views, adapted to the vernacular taste and preferences in a grotesque manner became highly popular (see figure 2). It was customary that a worker painting a house be asked to execute one or two *barāwīz*, literally “frames” as paintings were commonly known among the population.²¹ Needless to say this category of art was never known for its quality or refinement. The most famous artists in this category are Hasan Tannīr (his paintings are known from 1890 to 1898) and Abū Sharīf Mrāyātī (lived from around 1890 to the 1960s).

However, one category of popular artists did produce some interesting artworks using a *fixe sous verre* technique. Traditionally this technique, which consists of fixing the paint from inside the glass, has existed from at least the eighteenth century. Rarely has it been written

¹⁶ John Carswell, “The Lebanese Vision, A History of Painting”, in *Lebanon, The Artist's View*, Exhibition catalogue, London, Concourse Gallery, Barbican Centre, 1989, 17.

¹⁷ Cf. *Lebanon, The Artist's View*, op.cit.

¹⁸ Muṣṭafā Farrūkh, *Tarīqī ilā al-fann*, Beirut, 1986.

¹⁹ *Lebanon, The Artist's View*, op.cit., 170. Cf. also plate no. 6, 26.

²⁰ *Lebanon, The Artist's View*, op.cit., 160.

²¹ Interview with Ḥādjī Aḥmad Fleifel, November 1998, Beirut.

about, but it was a category of its own, with its own artists. Knowledge of the technique was transmitted from master to disciple; locally prepared materials (natural pigments, gomme arabica, Bleu d'Orient) were used. The work was targeted at the masses and mainly illustrated local mythologies and folkloric tales ('Antar and 'Abla, Imam 'Alī, Noah's Ark, al-Burāq, and so on). Such artworks were mainly found in oriental cafes and barbershops, along with pictures of the Holy places and calligraphic verses from the Koran. That the work was seldom signed was probably due to the illiteracy of the artists, though there are some known names like Sābir Radjhī (late nineteenth century) and Abū Subhī al-Tināwī. The case of the latter deserves mention. Since his death in 1971, this kind of authentic original colourful decorative artwork can be considered extinct. Only cheap imitations still persist for tourists' consumption.

Parallel with the European-inspired school of art, it is interesting to mention the presence at the turn of the century of a local school of painting inspired by Ottoman pictorial art (see figure 3). These paintings were mainly derived from Persian miniatures, which are technically characterized by twodimensional representation, the absence of contrast between light and shadow, pure colours and defined contours. Basically faithful to the aesthetics of the miniature, the major addition was the integration of two Western innovations: chiaroscuro and perspective. This school was influenced by the fact that during the Ottoman period only military schools used to offer art courses, thought necessary for versing army officers in topography. This undoubtedly explains the sense of detail and precision of execution evident in the work of artists like Ibrāhīm Sarbiyya (1865-?), Dimashqiyyeh (his most famous painting dates from 1893), 'Alī Djamāl (worked in the last quarter of the nineteenth century), Tawfīq Ṭāriq (1875-1941), Ibrāhīm Nadjdār (late nineteenth century), Ṣalāḥ Labābidī (1898-1985), Muḥammad Sa'īd Mār'ī (late XIX c.) and others.²² They were the last generation of artists to attempt to steer a course between drawing and photography. After the First World War, the world had changed, and painting as a discipline aimed for more than mere manual dexterity. In addition, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to the decline of all Ottoman-related tastes and preferences.

A third type of popular artists was also very present in the region: commercial artists who reproduced any figurative image that for some reason could not be printed. For instance, before the arrival of coloured offset printing cinemas used to find it cheaper to paint a poster than to print one. Some artists worked mainly in this way and not for private customers. But some of their production can sometimes be found in homes. Needless to say, however, that it is of mediocre quality. Nowadays this category of artists still produces movie posters and politicians' street portraits. Names like Sha'bān Lāwand and Hawwāriān are found at virtually every corner, especially during election time.

In order to examine more closely the presence of images in Levantine interiors, the study covered items that logically go hand-in-hand with them. For example, the availability of huge quantities of turn-of-the-century frames in the flea market is a further proof of the adoption of images by households. Most of the frames show a sophisticated woodwork and finish, indicating the concern and attention that people used to give to decorative details.

In addition to frames, interiors were filled with figurative bas-reliefs. These wooden elements mainly carved as parts of furniture, portrayed animals and flowers in a very delicate way. The influence of the Art Nouveau is widespread, but it is its adaptation to vernacular use and taste that is more striking. The whole picture wouldn't be complete without mentioning the always present folding screens with their painted panels: Khalīl (he signed himself Halil in the Latin alphabet) was the most fashionable specialized artist of the era, although his work has never been published (see figure 4).

²² Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de la peinture au Liban*, Paris, 1997.

The other items that adorned interiors were the ones executed by the female dwellers. Women were expected to excel in sewing and knitting, and other works with needle and thread. They competed in producing the most sophisticated canvases that were ultimately hanged proudly in the salons. Other activities involved painting on silk and velvet. Surprisingly, most of the images represent European interiors or royal hunting trips. Although this kind of work is not in fashion anymore, one seldom finds an interior without a knitted canvas somewhere. It was definitely the most widespread female artistic activity in the first half of the century.

To conclude this discussion on the era of eclecticism, it is clear that the image won a respectable place in the Levantine interiors in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Walls were filled with photos of ancestors, coupled with painted portraits of parents. Religious pictures still had their own place, for their baraka, but more space was now allocated too to different artistic works produced by the female members of the household.

Conclusion

With the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the expanding interest of Western powers in the Levant, the place of the image in Levantine interiors started to assume growing importance. The European model was considered as the most advanced and to copy it was thought to be the shortest way to advancement and modernity. Traditions were abandoned as enemies of progress and forgotten by force of neglect. Popular vernacular forms of local art were considered vulgar and of inferior taste. With the French mandate over Lebanon, the presence of the European-inspired image was becoming more and more preponderant at the expense of the Ottoman-inspired school. The first public exhibition of paintings took place at the American University of Beirut in 1929.²³ On this occasion, Karam Malham Karam, one of the most influential press personalities, wrote: "When will the Orientals know the value of the artist? When will they know that art has no equivalent value in the universe? Kings and Emirs die, but the artist remains. Thrones fall down, and countries vanish, yet art stays alive, doesn't shake and doesn't die"²⁴. The attitude towards fine arts started changing among people who became more receptive to the new iconography. The creation of the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts in 1937 increased the numbers of artists dramatically. Plastic art became a part of the Lebanese social scene. The launching by the Lebanese government of the Salon du Printemps in 1953 acknowledged the importance of contemporary art in the advancement of the society as a matter of national interest. Soon after, the first commercial gallery, Galerie One, opened its doors in 1963. Nowadays, the country counts twenty-four professional galleries with an average of two openings per week, and sixteen cultural centres. The Lebanese Association of Painters and Sculptors has around six hundred members, but unfortunately there are no official figures regarding the volume of the market. All forms of traditional art have become virtually extinct and the heritage mentioned in official discourse goes back only to the pioneer Dā'ūd Qorm and the Western-inspired art disciplines.

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²³ Muṣṭafā Farrūkh, op.cit., 154.

²⁴ Karam Malham Karam, "Rīshat al-djabbār fannan ṣa'lūk". *Al Aḥwāl*, 3 Dec. 1929, 3.

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Fig. 1: *Interior of the late writer Marūn ‘Abbūd at Kfār ‘Akka (Northern Lebanon)*



Fig. 2: *Example of vernacular artworks from turn-of-the-century Lebanese interior.*



Fig. 3: *Artworks inspired by Ottoman military painting.*



Fig. 4: *Decorated furniture by Halil*