



## ARTISTS RE-MEMBER PALESTINE IN BEIRUT

KAMAL BOULLATA

*The following article examines the work of seven visual artists of the first generation of Palestinian refugees whose careers unfolded in Beirut, at the time the cultural center of the Arab world and “the metropolis of Arab modernity.” The two groups of refugee artists—those from the camps and those who became part of Beirut’s elite artistic scene—produced works very different in approach and spirit, but which all bore the stamp of their experience of Palestine. While examining the works of these artists in the context of their lives, the paper also highlights the sometimes explicit, sometimes hidden presence of Palestine.*

“Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.”

Homi K. Bhabha,

*The Location of Culture*, (Routledge: London, 1994) p. 215.

BEIRUT MAY BE invisible in the works of Palestinian artists who lived there for almost three consecutive decades, yet nowhere outside the Lebanese capital could their art have evolved in the way it did there. Seemingly oblivious to Lebanon’s landscape, the focal subject of generations of Lebanese painters, Beirut’s Palestinian artists were haunted by the experience of their displacement and the memory of a birthplace that was overnight rendered beyond reach. Thus, the inspiration of their art could not well from the immediacy of their new environment as much as from the artist’s “re-membered” world. And though the seven visual artists selected for this study all had different experiences prior to settling in Beirut, and came from different social classes and cultural and demoninational backgrounds, all their work seems to reflect the “putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.”

The first four artists discussed here hail from the region’s refugee camps, where the majority of Palestine’s dispossessed rural population found shelter. The other three, referred to here as the Ras Beirut artists, are from Palestine’s

---

**KAMAL BOULLATA**, an artist whose works are held in numerous public collections, including those of the Arab World Institute in Paris, the World Bank, the New York Public Library, and the British Museum, has written extensively on art. He lives in the south of France.

urban centers. Though the work of both groups is marked by the Palestinian experience, the language of each is grounded in a different terrain, representing different political and cultural agendas and addressed to different audiences.

Generally speaking, the art produced by camp artists is figurative and often reflects the explicitly narrative imagery popularized by the nationalist rhetoric of the time. The art produced by the urban refugees, on the other hand, is more experimental and personal, with any reference to the artist's political experience deeply buried. In terms of audience, the camp artists addressed themselves to the common people whose art appreciation was governed by their political commitment; the audience of the Ras Beirut artists, on the other hand, was the city's cultural elite. And while the camp artists remained outsiders to Lebanon's art movement, the Ras Beirut artists were in its vanguard. Yet whether figurative or abstract, populist or personal, the works created by the Palestinian artists in Beirut are crucial to understanding how Palestinian art survived outside its native soil. More importantly, and despite the differences in approach reflecting the two major cultural streams that fermented in Beirut during this period, one continues to find affinities in the works of artists from the two groups. It is these affinities that this paper will attempt to elucidate. Through the articulation of memory by each artist we may come to read these affinities and detect the continuity of Palestinian art.<sup>1</sup>

### BEIRUT AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

Beirut's heyday as "the metropolis of Arab modernity" began in 1952 and ended in 1982—two pivotal dates both on the region's politico-historical map and Beirut's cultural map. At the regional level, 1952 marked the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution, one of the first major direct consequences of Palestine's fall and an important factor, through its nationalist and anti-imperialist policies, in the subsequent coups d'état in neighboring Syria and Iraq as well as in the political unrest in Jordan and Lebanon. At Beirut's cultural level, 1952 was the year that Suhail Idriss launched *al-Adaab*, a literary monthly sustained by his own publishing house, which became over the following three decades the region's pan-Arab platform for a new form of nationalist literature. In the visual arts, that same year Nicolas Surssock bequeathed his residence to Beirut's municipality to become Lebanon's first museum of contemporary art, the Nicolas Ibrahim Surssock Museum.<sup>2</sup> Within a few years, galleries sprang up around the capital to display the freshest work of the city's artists as well as work from all over the Arab world and even Europe and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The period under study ends in 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon, and Beirut became the first Arab capital outside Palestine to fall under Israeli occupation. Though local resistance against one of the world's most sophisticated military machines was legendary, 1982 marked, as Georges Corm noted, the end of the era of anti-imperialist struggle in the region, an era that had

witnessed both the high mark of Arab nationalism and the burial of dreams of Arab unity.<sup>4</sup> And with this political landmark, the three decades of Beirut's crucial role in the making of modern Arab culture also ended. By the time the people of Beirut bid their thundering farewell to the Palestinian forces, most members of the Arab intelligentsia who had made their home in Beirut had long gone, and the Palestinian artists who remained were soon dispersed.

Before discussing the works of Palestinian refugee artists in Beirut, it is important to cast a general look at the cultural role Beirut played over this thirty-year period. This role can only be understood in contrast to Egypt's earlier cultural hegemony. For the century and a half preceding the Egyptian Revolution, Cairo had been the cultural capital of the Arab world. There, Western concepts of modernity were eclectically borrowed, refashioned, and diffused to fit a nationalized framework. In what was called the renaissance (*al-Nabda*) of Arab culture, each borrowed form of expression helped define the Arab cultural identity by *contrast* with its European counterpart. The rebirth of the national Self was reinforced by the negation of the Western Other. The neo-classical language permeating all fields of expression was *al-Nabda's* compensatory defense against the unceasing invasion of Western cultural models.

With the fall of parliamentary governments in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, Beirut became a sanctuary and meeting place for political and cultural dissidents from neighboring Arab countries and an open forum where all currents of thought for or against *al-Nabda's* cultural legacy could be debated. As the capital of a country whose political system sought to represent seventeen religious denominations, Beirut's brand of openness created the ideal environment for becoming a microcosm of the Arab world, embracing all its distinctions and contradictions. During three eventful decades in which the region seethed with social and political upheaval, Beirut served as a lightning rod for all the political movements erupting in the Arab world since Palestine's fall.

In contrast to Cairo's claim during its cultural heyday to stand as citadel against Western cultural importation, Beirut's form of cosmopolitanism dared simultaneously to act as the crucible of Arab nationalism and to be fully open to the West. At a time when Arabic poetry published in Beirut was witnessing the language's greatest innovations in more than a century, the city equally recognized its native poets writing in French,<sup>5</sup> whose works came out in literary periodicals and publishing houses not confined to Arabic. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of the cultural cohabitation of East and West was Lebanon's Baalbeck Festival. Launched in 1955, the festival continued to accommodate Beirut's two independent audiences year after year. On one night Maurice Béjart's Ballet du XXème Siècle would perform to a full house; on the next, and in the same amphitheater, the rest of Beirut would applaud Fairuz, Lebanon's leading Arabic singer, in a Rahbani musical allegorizing the Palestinian resistance.<sup>6</sup>

As East and West lived cheek by jowl in Beirut, opinions from the extreme left to the far right were equally accommodated. Religious sectarian practice,

Christian or Muslim, thrived in the shade of secular modes of living. Some held fast to tradition while others ardently called for a total break with the past. In the free-for-all atmosphere that allowed the confluence of all different trends of thought, the politicization of culture was seen as inevitable on one side and anathema on the other. The result was a polarization that manifested itself both in literature and the visual arts.

In the literary field, the polarization expressed itself in two major currents. The first called for a *littérature engagée* in which the writer speaks for the group and in direct response to a political situation. The other foregrounded the individual's voice, calling for an aesthetic experience devoid of ideology. Among Beirut's most influential literary journals, *al-Adaab* patronized the first current, whereas *Shi'r*, launched in 1957,

---

*In the free-for-all intellectual atmosphere of Beirut, the politicization of culture was seen as inevitable on one side and anathema on the other.*

---

championed the second. These currents had their counterparts in the visual arts; indeed, the intellectual ferment of Beirut's cultural environment brought writers and visual artists in close association, helping to elevate the visual arts to share the space traditionally dominated by the oral arts. The artists whose figurative language perpetuated a narrative pictorial art seemed to echo the metaphorical imagery popularized by the poetry introduced in *al-Adaab*. The poets associated with *Shi'r*, meanwhile, valorized the more abstract and experimental artists and welcomed them into the discourse of contemporary Arab culture.<sup>7</sup> The work produced by the first generation of Palestinian artists who found sanctuary in Beirut falls very much into these broad cultural currents: the artists from the camps, who produced an explicitly nationalist pictorial form of representation of the Palestinian experience, identified with the first, while the Ras Beirut artists, whose more experimental and individualist work was more reflective of international art trends, were more attuned to the second.

### ARTISTS FROM THE REFUGEE CAMPS

Over the three decades following Palestine's fall, untrained talents germinated in the region's refugee camps, and the best of them generally made their way to Beirut. Keen to join the poets in addressing the Arab masses during a highly charged political period, most of the artists in this group promoted a populist form of figurative expression, their pictorial language often borrowing images from popular metaphors. The general thrust of their art sought to express a collective cry that claimed to represent the Palestinian experience and that solicited support for the national cause.

Art from the camps never made it into Beirut's art market or commercial galleries. When it was publicly viewed, it was usually at group exhibitions in improvised public spaces under the sponsorship of the Art Education Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Such exhibitions were generally organized to commemorate a national event or

as part of a solidarity rally in Beirut or elsewhere in the Arab world or abroad.

The camp artists, mainly from Palestine's villages and rural areas, were all men; the artistic talents of the women were generally channeled into the traditional embroideries characteristic of their hometown. But while the embroidery products turned into a lucrative market not necessarily confined to Palestinian patrons, the selling of the paintings—mostly didactic forms of narrative art serving a political purpose—was generally limited to individual Palestinians working in the Gulf or small circles of friends and admirers. Consequently, few camp artists were able to earn their living from their art, and most had to support themselves as teachers or administrators in UNRWA schools, free-lancing in commercial art, or working on construction sites.

Palestinian artists from Lebanon's refugee camps or who migrated to Beirut from camps elsewhere in the Arab world included Yusif Arman, Ibrahim Ghannam, Michel Najjar, Jamal Gharibeh, Naji al-'Ali, Isma'il Shammout, George Fakhoury, Tawfiq 'Abd al-'Al, Muhammad al-Sha'ir, Mustafa al-Hallaj, Tamam Shammout, 'Abd al-Hai Musallam, Husni Radwan, and 'Imad 'Abd al-Wahab. Four of these—Isma'il Shammout, Mustafa al-Hallaj, Naji al-'Ali, and Ibrahim Ghannam—will be discussed in this article.

Shammout and Hallaj were exceptions among the camp artists in that they had scholarships from Egypt to pursue art studies in Cairo. Shammout was from a refugee camp in Gaza (then under Egyptian administration), and Hallaj was a refugee living in a poor neighborhood of Cairo. 'Ali and Ghannam, brought up in refugee camps in Lebanon, were, on the other hand, mainly self-taught. 'Ali was to break away from the pictorial limits of conventional painting and achieve fame throughout the Arab world as a political cartoonist, whereas Ghannam doggedly pursued a personal form of narrative painting and remained—like most of his generation of camp artists—virtually unknown beyond his refugee camp. All four artists worked in Beirut in its heyday, and all were dispersed after the 1982 Israeli invasion.

### **Isma'il Shammout (b. 1930)**

Isma'il Shammout was eighteen when his hometown of Lydda fell to the Jewish forces, who forced the entire population out at gunpoint. The long march on foot with family members and neighbors ended in a Gaza refugee camp, where he began life as a street vendor. In Palestine, he had been a favorite student of the Jerusalem painter Daoud Zalatimo, and in his spare time he picked up paint and brush to give body to his personal experience of the Palestinian exodus. Within a decade he was acclaimed as the leading talent of his generation to emerge from the camps, and devoted his image-making skills to publicizing the Palestinian national struggle.

Shammout's artistic role was shaped not only by his early training and the talent he possessed, but also by the political scene of Cairo, where he went to study and which spearheaded the anti-colonial struggle in the Arab world at the time. In 1954, while he was still an art student, his first exhibition

was a highly publicized event inaugurated by Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasir and attended by Palestinian political figures including Haj Amin al-Husseini and Yasir Arafat, at the time head of the Union of Palestinian Students. In 1956, Shammout moved to Beirut, and within two years he opened his own commercial art agency (he had worked in a commercial studio in Cairo throughout his school years). In his spare time he produced figurative paintings that utilized book illustration techniques to enhance dramatic narrative. The central motif of his art was the unfolding of the Palestinian saga, and its aim was to rally support for the national cause.

Shammout's earliest canvases were peopled with destitute figures from the refugee camps determined to regain the lost homeland. His later paintings depicted optimistic images of heroic fighters, dancing women in national dress, and arcadian representations of the liberated homeland. Shammout's visual repertoire often eclectically borrowed from socialist-realist models, which he adorned with familiar peasant clothes and artifacts. Inspired by Zalatimo, he often infused his narrative art with allegory. During the 1960s, for example, when Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Lover from Palestine" popularized the metaphor of a woman's body as the ancestral land, Shammout gave this metaphor pictorial form. In this he was followed by an entire generation of image-makers.

When the PLO set up its Art Education Department a year after its creation in 1964, Shammout was the obvious choice to head it. From his Beirut office he designed political posters and supervised the layout and illustration of countless PLO pamphlets and publications. At the same time, he continued to paint and organize touring exhibitions of his own work along with that of other Palestinian painters, with whom he founded the Union of Palestinian Artists. By the late 1960s, he established in Beirut "Dar al-Karamah" as a gallery and meeting place hosting seasonal exhibitions of young talents emerging from the camps. In the meantime, large numbers of Shammout's paintings had been reproduced in color posters that not only brightened the rather bleak PLO offices throughout the region but also became fixtures in almost every home in the camps, and indeed wherever Palestinians resided.

### **Mustafa al-Hallaj (1938–2002)**

At a time when the young Shammout was peddling wares in the alleyways of the Gaza camp, ten-year-old Mustafa al-Hallaj was drinking in the universe of Cairo. In a poor neighborhood of the city, his family had pitched their tent after their native village of Salma was wiped off the map. Venturing into the city center, the village boy was mesmerized by the public monuments. From the small soft stones he found in back streets, Hallaj started carving figurines and statuettes that for him resembled the monuments that adorned the city's parks and squares. In time, like Shammout, he gained free admittance to the Cairo Academy of Fine Arts and enrolled in the department of sculpture.

Hallaj's promising career as a sculptor, however, reached a dead end within a few years of his graduation: his favored medium was perhaps not suitable

for a stateless refugee, sculptures being costly to produce and too heavy to carry around, and the prospect of winning public commissions being virtually nil. Once he got to Beirut, Hallaj embarked on a career as a printmaker. By channeling his carving skills into engraving, he was able to adapt his artistic language to the needs of his new vocation. With lightweight tools and easily transportable prints, he not only freed himself from the place-bound restrictions of sculpture, but was able to reach a wide audience through the multiple editions of his images, which were affordable to almost everyone. Today, his prints still adorn his favorite Damascus coffee house, frequented by the city's intelligentsia.

Hallaj's art mostly consists of delicately etched black and white prints, though hints of color were sometimes added by hand. Narrative in representation and tragically absurd in tone, his figurative subjects connoted allegorical associations that seemed to derive their surreal imagery from a highly personal vocabulary. Animated human figures, in varying proportions drawn within the same field, are represented in an arcane, chimerical atmosphere in which nothing stands still. Naked bodies of faceless men and women float aimlessly in a bottomless space while ghostly horses, roosters, and mythical beasts share the mystery of their being. From Egypt's ancient art glorifying the afterlife, Hallaj appropriated suggestive symbols to eulogize the Palestinian martyr. Here, under astral discs, the silhouette of a sleeping figure is seen carried by rows of men recalling Egyptian friezes; miniature trees flower from the limbs of the corpse while gigantic birds peck on a distant hill. Above them, the night sky spreads out in the form of a flagging wing.

While Shammout's narrative pictorial iconography inspired amateurs from the refugee camps to try their hand at declamatory art, Hallaj's articulation of personal metaphors and surreal imagery borrowed from poetic sources freed more daring talents to give expression to their own fantasies and visions.

### **Naji al-'Ali (1937–87)**

Like Shammout and Hallaj, Naji al-'Ali aspired to bring the Palestinian experience to the widest possible audience in the Arab world. While Shammout's narrative art was disseminated through posters and Hallaj's through successive editions of his prints, 'Ali was determined to invent a pictorial language that transcended the confines of traditional spatial conventions.

Born in Shajarah, a village near Tiberias destroyed in 1948, 'Ali was eleven when he and his family arrived in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Saida in south Lebanon. After graduating from a local missionary school, 'Ali worked at menial jobs in citrus groves, making drawings in his spare time. Later, he moved to Tripoli, where he enrolled in a vocational training center to learn the trade of electrician. After class, he worked as a laborer on construction sites.

'Ali's originality was immediately obvious to those who attended the Palestinian group shows in Beirut in which he participated. In contrast to Shammout, who employed the conventions of rhetorical iconography to

convey his political message, and to Hallaj who communicated the chimerical side of the world he lived in, 'Ali had no apparent interest in pleasing his audience. Instead, he sought to shake them from the passive stance of mere observer and force them to confront their own predicament vis-à-vis the Palestinian experience. At a time when the most visible artwork were the posters plastered all over the walls of downtown Beirut that depicted freedom fighters fallen in battle, 'Ali's works consisted of disjointed fragments of broken mirrors glued into old frames. To this base, minimal elements were added in such a way as to implicate the viewers in his art. In one work, for example, viewers read across their own reflected faces the words "wanted: dead or alive." In another, 'Ali screwed metal bars across the mirror so that viewers would see themselves locked in prison. And those seeing their reflection within a frame bordered with black ribbon could imagine, for a fleeting moment, their own death announcement.

'Ali experimented with other narrative forms far from the pictorial language utilized by Shammout or explored by Hallaj. During one period, unable to afford tubes of color, he painted a series of works depicting camp life using a thick petroleum product akin to asphalt known as "*zift*", which he got from the construction sites where he worked. Through the black pitch pigment he smeared to compose his figures, 'Ali was turning the *zift*, a word also used colloquially to describe a dismal state, into a pictorial medium; painting with the crude petroleum *zift* could also be seen as defying peers aspiring to attract oil-rich patrons.

Eventually, 'Ali abandoned painting. With the encouragement of Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian novelist and editor of the weekly *al-Hadaf*,<sup>8</sup> he embarked upon a career as a political cartoonist; his success soon freed him from the menial jobs that had supported him. 'Ali saw his cartoons as a communicative form of expression that allowed him to integrate verbal and visual means without the affectations that plagued "art" in his environment. As cartoonist for the widely read Kuwaiti dailies *al-Siyasa* and *al-Qabas* and the Beirut daily *al-Safir*, he achieved widespread popularity, reaching thousands of readers throughout the Arab world on a daily basis. With biting humor, he summed up the position of the common Palestinian vis-à-vis the endless political compromises reached in the region. His unsparing criticism, however, was found intolerable, and 'Ali's outstanding career over twenty-five years was ended with an assassin's bullet on a London street.

### **Ibrahim Ghannam (1931–84)**

Unlike Shammout, Hallaj, and 'Ali, who engaged with other artists and who all sought in different ways to reach the wider world, Ibrahim Ghannam created the entire body of his work enclosed within the grim reality of the refugee camp, determined to summon with his brush every detail of his lost homeland and to document what no photographer had ever captured.

Born in the coastal village of Yajur near Haifa, the self-taught Ghannam went back to his childhood hobby of painting after polio confined him to a



wheelchair a year after his arrival in Beirut's Tal al-Za'atar refugee camp. Thanks to the UNRWA head nurse who supplied him with art materials, Ghannam was able to devote himself to evoking the village where he had once walked barefoot, revealing in every painting the homely details of daily life. Each work was naively rendered with the precision of an Islamic miniature, where every detail demanded equal attention.

Anyone seeing his narrative works could not but be struck by the contrast between the life he tried to capture on canvas and the one he was living. While his cramped room overlooked open sewers, he painted wide landscapes bustling with pastoral life and village festivities. Living, like all his neighbors, on canned rations and meager meals, Ghannam celebrated in his canvases golden fields of plenty and the lush orange groves of the Palestinian coast. While the men in the camp had to scrounge for menial work to survive, Ghannam painted peasants harvesting luxuriant fields while cattle grazed in the distance. While the camp residents rationed drinking water in hot Beirut summers, he painted peasant women returning from the village spring balancing water jars on their heads. Sitting all day in his wheelchair unable to move his feet, he painted vigorous young men stamping their feet in group dances in the village square. And when he was too tired to paint, he picked up his *'ud* and the camp alleyways reverberated with the peasant songs the villagers once sang under the stars. With the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, when the funeral processions of those killed in battle began passing outside his window, he painted wedding scenes with women ululating and children rejoicing.

Yajur, the village that came to life in Ghannam's work, had been razed to the ground after its inhabitants were driven out. Every new painting the camp artist added to his pile of works further reduced the living space he shared with his Lebanese wife at Tal al-Za'atar. When Ghannam died at 53, however, only a handful of these works survived the grueling war that followed him into his shelter.

### **RAS BEIRUT REFUGEE ARTISTS**

Ras Beirut (literally, "*Beirut's Head*") is the name given to the cape that protrudes into the Mediterranean in West Beirut. When a stretch of the cape's rocky coast was chosen as the site for the future American University in 1866, it became inevitable that Ottoman Beirut would turn its face westwards. Within a century, the entire cape had come to represent the country's meeting place between East and West. In all manifestations of life on the cape, imported modes of expression were grafted onto traditional patterns of living.

During the decades when Beirut's regional affluence was at its peak, Ras Beirut, which included the modern business district, also became the city's cultural seat. Theaters, art galleries, cultural clubs, bars, bookstores, and convivial sidewalk cafés frequented by the city's intelligentsia of both sexes spread in all directions from Ras Beirut's main artery, Hamra Street.

Palestinian artists identified with Ras Beirut were not necessarily residents of the neighborhood but were part of the art scene centered there. In contrast to the artists from the refugee camps, who were of peasant stock, the Ras Beirut artists all came from Palestine's major cities and mostly belonged to the Palestinian bourgeoisie; those from poor backgrounds were the exception. Unlike the camp artists, some of whom had hardly had the opportunity to step inside a gallery or art museum, the Ras Beirut artists, who were at the very least bilingual, were very much abreast of the latest art trends in the West. A number of them had spent long periods in Europe and the United States.

As a port city that aspired to modernity and prided itself on its tradition of hosting a multitude of religious sects, Beirut was eager to welcome those who promoted its image of sophistication and pluralism and who reflected a Western orientation. The Palestinian artists of this group discreetly bolstered the status quo. Thus, while their countrymen from the camps had "refugee status" that did not allow them work permits, the Palestinian Ras Beirut artists, a number of whom were granted Lebanese citizenship, could openly earn their living from their art.

Work by Ras Beirut artists patronized by Lebanese, Arab, and foreign collectors was exhibited in Beirut's Sursock Museum and commercial art galleries and was often included in international exhibitions representing Lebanon. And while there were no women among the refugee camp artists, the Ras Beirut artists boasted a number who won wide recognition.

A number of refugee artists from Palestine's urban centers associated with the Ras Beirut art scene lived in Beirut only intermittently, though for protracted periods. These include Maliha Afnan, Rita Daoud, Laila al-Shawwa, Vladimir Tamari, and Kamal Boullata. The three artists discussed below—Jumana al-Husseini, Juliana Seraphim, and Paul Guiragossian—all lived in Beirut permanently. Their entire art careers were carved out in the city and their work was part and parcel of Lebanon's art movement. Husseini was exceptional in openly identifying with her compatriots from the refugee camps, while both Seraphim and Guiragossian, who were publicly recognized as Lebanese artists, generally kept their Palestinian identity in the shadows. Their art, however, did not cease to reveal different facets of their Palestinian experience.<sup>9</sup>

### **Jumana al-Husseini (b. 1932)**

In 1948, when Jumana al-Husseini's home outside the walls of Jerusalem's old city was hit by a bomb, her family went to wait out the storm in Beirut. Husseini young men and women had been sent to Beirut for higher education since the turn of the century, and the family maintained relations there from earlier sojourns. Indeed, Jumana, the youngest of the Husseini girls, had been taken to Beirut when she was four and lived there for a number of years; her father, the nationalist leader Jamal al-Husseini, had been exiled by the British following the Palestinian revolt of 1936–39 and had

sought refuge in Beirut along with other Palestinian leaders, including his second cousin the mufti of Jerusalem. Beirut was thus not new to the sixteen-year-old refugee from this notable Jerusalem family that had played a pivotal role in Palestinian public life for two centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Jumana al-Husseini spent most of her adult life in Beirut. In 1954, the American University of Beirut opened a Department of Fine Arts that offered an alternative to the more conventional art classes given at other local art institutions. For the first time art was “taught according to formal, not stylistic principles.”<sup>11</sup> Husseini, by then the mother of a two-year-old, enrolled in some courses at the university which was very near her Ras Beirut home. Within five years, her paintings were displayed at Lebanon’s most prestigious art event, the first *Salon d’Automne* at the Surssock Museum. She was later invited to participate in the museum’s third and sixth salon, and in 1979 her work was exhibited in the Lebanese Pavilion at the Biennial of Venice.

Though favorably received within the Ras Beirut art community, Husseini never exhibited in modish galleries and was never considered part of the inner circle of “avant-garde” artists and poets who hung out in Beirut’s cafés. Indeed, despite marked differences in stylistic rendering, her work showed surprising affinities with that of Ghannam. Just as the village artist in Tal al-Za’atar camp elevated the memory of his native landscape to the pastoral image of a paradise lost, so Husseini’s figurative language recreated the Jerusalem of her memory in the image of a celestial city. Over three consecutive decades of living in Beirut, Husseini elaborated with childlike freshness geometric representations of her city of birth, which seemed to emerge from a fairy tale free from any concrete reference to the experience of a real place. And besides the legendary buildings she composed, hardly any other human trace is detectable in what appeared to represent her personal dreamscape.

Husseini’s idealization of Jerusalem took the form of a reverie in which a walled city, frontally conceived with studded gates and arched windows, is cloaked in bridal whites. Distant V-shaped swallows often flecked her cloudless skies. Crowned with blue and golden domes and surrounded by towering belfries and minarets, Husseini’s imaginary Jerusalem looked like an impregnable fortress. Laboriously composed with unsaturated colors, highlighted by gold leaf and adorned with ornamental elements, her canvases recall medieval miniatures of the Holy City.

What is most striking in Husseini’s Jerusalem paintings is the way the stylized forms and embellished patterns are executed with the quaint skill of the nameless village women who preserved the tradition of Palestinian embroidery. In fact, the decorative elements of her palatial houses seem not to have been inspired by architecture so much as directly borrowed from patterns in the national embroidery, an eclectic affiliation that enhances the appeal of her cityscapes. The general pictorial effect recalls the viewing of the precious contents of a traditional trousseau. Created in the safety of Beirut

by a distinguished daughter of the Holy City, these decorative paintings, removed from the earthly place and recalling the charm of artifacts, became prized reminders of the city that had become inaccessible following the 1967 conquest.

### **Juliana Seraphim (b. 1934)**

Born in Jaffa, Juliana Seraphim was fourteen years old when her native city was besieged by the Zionist forces. Fleeing by fishing boat up the Lebanese coast, the family waited in the southern Lebanese city of Saida for the violence to subside. Four years later, when it became clear that there would be no return, the Seraphims moved to Beirut where they started a new life. There, the family's eldest daughter found a job as a secretary at UNRWA, one of the few places where Palestinian refugees in Lebanon could work.

When Seraphim arrived in Beirut in 1952, the city's rapid transformation into a regional economic center and vital metropolis had just begun. Public interest in art grew with the spreading affluence. Seraphim, attracted to the visual arts, began taking private lessons with the Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh (1923–78). Her earliest work was introduced to the public through exhibits at Khalifeh's studio. Within a few years, she was a prominent member of the Ras Beirut art circle, and her paintings were displayed at Beirut's leading art galleries. Together with Hussein, she was invited in 1961 to participate in the first *Salon d'Automne* at the Sursok Museum. Between 1958 and 1965, she won protracted sojourns in Florence, Madrid, and Paris. Eventually, she went on to represent Lebanon in international exhibits, including the biennials of Alexandria in 1962, Paris in 1963, and São Paulo in 1965.

Unlike Hussein, Seraphim remained aloof from her compatriots from the camps. Notwithstanding, it is possible to see in her work certain affinities with Hallaj.

Believing that the inner self is the fountainhead of all images, Seraphim, like Hallaj, delved into the farthest corners of her subliminal world to recover a visual language from dormant memory. While Hallaj's surreal images mirrored the nightmarish reality he was living, Seraphim's art, which became a channel for self-discovery, captured the traces of a dream gleaming with fantastic imagery.

Through an intrinsically improvised style wherein the line between drawing and painting was often blurred, she not only disregarded formal pictorial conventions but deliberately defied all forms of mental censorship. In the process, dream and fantasy surged from her work, divulging—through the free association of adjacent forms—a wide range of biomorphic compositions. With her semi-figurative suggestions of human anatomy, the liquefied realm she created was saturated with erotic connotations.

The ethereal quality of Seraphim's fantasies challenged all sense of gravity in a way that may recall Hallaj's figures suspended in a bottomless space. Her erotically suggestive imagery defied social taboos as much as 'Ali's cartoons

defied political conformities. Thus, it is not surprising that when Tawfiq Sayigh ventured to publish in his quarterly *Hiwar* the Lebanese novelist Laila Ba'albaki's erotic novella, "A Vessel of Tenderness to the Moon," he asked Seraphim to illustrate it.<sup>12</sup>

With sweeping brush strokes and hairline drawings she gave shape to agile bodies and winged beings floating amid pools of imaginary orchards. She traced the curves of sculpted buds and wild petals swirling and undulating among glistening, translucent shapes evoking the female form. If Husseini's idealized cityscapes seemed to emerge from a childhood reverie, Seraphim's imagined dreamworlds seemed to retrace objects and sites remembered from a childhood spent between seashore and orange grove.

Years later, when asked about the source of her imagery, Seraphim recalled how as a child she used to spend weekends in Jerusalem with her grandfather, whose home had once been a convent. She mentioned how the domed ceilings of her grandfather's house bore traces of colorful frescoes that evoked the apparition of supernatural beings. These frescoes filled the little girl with awe and mystery, marking her for the rest of her life.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in her work we see—as in a dream—how impressions from a Jerusalem ceiling dissolve into seashells collected by the Jaffa shore. Through free association she affiliated the details of a place remembered with the intimate parts of her own body. Often, through her winged beings, which can be seen as a subconscious tribute to the biblical origins of Seraphim's family name, we see a woman's face emerging behind bridal veils.<sup>14</sup> While the "bride" often denotes Jaffa in Palestinian vernacular, in Seraphim's paintings the bride's features invariably reflect her own face.

### **Paul Guiragossian (1926–93)**

Of all the Palestinian artists of his generation, Paul Guiragossian was unquestionably the one whose career was most highly rewarded in Beirut. A prolific artist and the recipient of Lebanon's highest honors, he was perhaps the most widely exhibited talent in Lebanon, with solo and group exhibitions in major cities of the Arab world and the West as well. He enjoyed the patronage of the city's elite, and his work found its way into all the big Lebanese private and national collections.<sup>15</sup>

Born in Jerusalem to a poor Armenian family, the son of a blind fiddler who roamed the city streets, Guiragossian was three years old when he was taken in by Catholic monks.<sup>16</sup> Until he was seventeen, he was a boarder in Jerusalem's Franciscan convent and received his formal education at its charity school. With his innate talent for drawing, the boy was sent to spend his last four years of school as an apprentice of religious painting at the studio of the resident Italian painter Pietro Iagheti. His apprenticeship was later to secure him a job for two years as an assistant to an aging Armenian icon painter in the Old City. With the death of his father and the escalating violence in Palestine, Beirut seemed the ideal place for

the ambitious young man to seek refuge, especially since family lore had made much of the success of an older relative who had moved there decades earlier.<sup>17</sup>

With his family, the twenty-three-year-old Guiragossian settled in Beirut's suburb of Burj Hammoud. In that dingy and remote neighborhood, the city's most impoverished population survived along with the Armenian refugee families who had escaped the Ottoman massacres earlier in the century. He set up his studio and lived there for the rest of his life, even after he had achieved great financial success and was courted by the highest Ras Beirut society. For Guiragossian, Burj Hammoud seemed to provide him with the kind of seclusion and security he once enjoyed within the convent and Jerusalem's old city walls.

Throughout his career, images conjured up during his formative years in Jerusalem continued to be the distinctive feature of his art.<sup>18</sup> Guiragossian's early canvases portrayed people from his Burj Hammoud environment, but the composition reconstructs religious paintings. His repeated theme of mother and child recalls the icon of the Virgin Mary, while the family groupings around a bride or a newborn child evoke group images of the Virgin's betrothal or scenes of the Nativity. His later paintings of frontal groups of erect figures recapture the iconographic vertical staging of standing figures representing Christ's apostles. While the Jerusalem School iconographers brought the Byzantine tradition of iconography into the popular domain, Guiragossian's paintings sought to elevate the common people with whom he came in contact, sanctifying their everyday acts and rituals.<sup>19</sup>

In Guiragossian's early representational work, human features are often obscured by dramatically dark shadows intensified by the contrasting flashes of light that illuminate his central figure the way traditional halos illuminated saintly heads. During the three decades he lived in Beirut, Guiragossian's style underwent a gradual transition from figurative to abstract. His later paintings, fresh and vivid, reduce all details of the body to vigorous slashes of thick paint highlighted by luminous accents of color. The vertical figures, whether suggesting movement or stillness, whether representational or abstract, are consistently huddled together as if to express the fusion the artist lived between his Armenian identity and Palestinian experience. In the biblical themes he painted of exodus and exile, Guiragossian found the vocabulary of his own world, a world where disinherited Palestinians relived Armenian destitution.

### **A LEGACY'S INHERITANCE**

The year 1982, when Beirut was besieged and then occupied by the Israeli army, witnessed the dispersal of all Palestinian artists who once had found refuge there. Except for Guiragossian, who remained in Beirut until his death, and Seraphim, who lives in the city to this day, all the other artists left.<sup>20</sup> The

cultural center that nourished the first generation of Palestinian refugee artists was no more.

Palestinian art had to grub its survival under new and different skies. Memory continued to play a central role in the works of the subsequent generations of artists born both outside Palestine and in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Without any cultural center to bring artists together, Palestinian art developed along different paths. Curiously, the closer the artists live to the

---

***Curiously, the closer the artists live to the home culture, the more figurative their art, and the farther away they settle the more their art evolves into abstraction.***

---

home culture and country of birth, the more figurative their art seems to be, and the farther away they settle the more their art evolves into abstraction.

In the meantime, the Beirut that was called in its golden decades “the lung of the Arab world” is now falling into amnesia in an effort to move beyond the civil war that killed between 100,000 and 150,000 of its people. Today, no traces remain of the Tal al-Za’atar refugee camp, and Sabra and Shatila are devastated

ruins. There is not a single monument in the country for the dead. Nostalgia for an earlier time seems to be the cure of choice to bind the wounds of the city’s implosion.<sup>21</sup>

No matter how alluring nostalgia may be, the Beirut experience cannot be repeated. Not because “nostalgia is not what it used to be,” in Simone Signoret’s famous phrase, but because the Beirut that was at the center of the Arab world during its most critical decades in modern history has lost its own center. The fate of the two currents that formed the major schools of thought in those crucial years is echoed in the fate of Beirut’s two main squares, Martyrs’ Square and Star Square. The first had been seen by the people of Beirut as the heart of their city since the end of the nineteenth century, and the second is the site of the Lebanese parliament. After the war, the huge square that commemorates national memory and which traditionally formed the link between East and West Beirut, was razed to the ground, whereas the parliamentary site, originally built by the French as a miniature of the Parisian square of the same name, was duly renovated.<sup>22</sup>

Beirut may not have been present in the work of the generation of Palestinian artists who spent the prime of their lives in the city. The memory of home was the driving force giving body to their art. Memory also was the legacy the first generation of refugee artists passed on to the next.

During those “Beirut decades,” the Palestinian national struggle was central to all parties involved in the redefinition of Arab identity and in the making of contemporary Arab culture. Thus, the Palestinian art produced in that period in Beirut was not an isolated phenomenon but an organic segment of a larger cultural movement in the Arab world. Beirut was not only where Palestinian artists were able to *re-member* Palestine in their art, but it also was the place where “defiant memory” could be born.<sup>23</sup> Now that Beirut aspires to be like any other Arab capital, Palestinian artists, as dispersed as they are, can finally embrace the world.

## NOTES

1. For a general view of the course pursued by Palestinian art before and after 1948, see my book, *Istibdar al-makan: Dirasat fi al-fan al-Filastini al-mu'aser* (Recovery of Place: A Study of Contemporary Palestinian Art) (Tunis: ALECISO, 2000).

2. Beirut's Academy of Fine Arts was established in 1937, but private art patronage began to spread in earnest about a decade after Surssock made his bequest, coinciding with Beirut's rise as a regional economic center. See *Musée Nicolas Surssock: Le Livre* (Beirut: Musée Nicolas Surssock, 2000).

3. Most exhibitions of works by European artists were sponsored either by foreign cultural missions or commercial galleries. International artists exhibited in Beirut during this period included Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Mathieu. The American artists exhibited were all Beirut residents who intermittently taught at the American University of Beirut. These included Maryette Charlton and George Buehr, both associated with the Bauhaus school of Chicago, and the abstract expressionist John Ferren.

4. Georges Corm, *Le Proche-Orient éclaté: de Suez à l'invasion du Liban: 1956-1982* (Paris: Maspero, 1983).

5. Lebanese poets writing in French included Etel Adnan, Georges Shehadé, Nadia Tuéni, Fuad Gabriel Naffah, Venus Khoury, and Salah Statié. *Sbi'r*, *L'Orient*, and *Cahiers de l'Oronte* published some of their poetry.

6. For an analysis of Palestine's connotations in the Rahbani Brothers' musical plays, see Fawwaz Trabulsi's *Jabal al-Suwwan: Filastin fi fan Fairuz wa-l-Rahabneh* (Mountains of Flint: Palestine in the Art of Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers), *al-Karmel*, no. 57 (Fall 1998), pp. 203-12.

7. When *Hiwar* first appeared in Beirut in 1962, its editor, Palestinian poet Tawfiq Sayigh, made it a pioneering literary review that featured a different artist from the Arab world in every issue. A year later, the Syrian-Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal, who was co-editor, along with the Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis, of the influential *Sbi'r* review, opened *Gallery One*, the first gallery in the city to

show quality art from all over the Arab world. When Adonis left his co-editorship of *Sbi'r*, in 1968, he launched his own quarterly *Mawaqif*, whose editorial board included four artists (the Lebanese Halim Jurdaq, the Jordanian Mona Sa'udi, the Iraqi Dia 'Azzawi, and the Palestinian Kamal Boullata).

8. Kanafani, the spokesman of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine as well as a major literary figure, was killed in Beirut in 1972 by a bomb planted in his car by the Israeli Mossad.

9. Palestinian refugee artists were also key contributors to the development of contemporary art in Jordan. See Boullata, *Istibdar*, pp. 122-42.

10. For further reading on the al-Husseini family, see Ilan Pappé, "The Rise and Fall of the Husaynis 1840-1922," in *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, no. 9 (Autumn 2000), pp. 27-38 and in no. 11-12 (Winter-Spring 2001), pp. 52-67. See also Serene Husseini Shahid, *Jerusalem Memories*, (Beirut: Naufal Group S.A.R.L., 2000).

11. John Carswell, "The Lebanese Vision: A History of Painting" in *Lebanon, The Artist's View* (London: The British Lebanese Association, 1989), pp. 15-19. It is interesting to note that the opening of AUB's art department coincided with the U.S. government's covert campaign to lure young intellectuals in 35 countries (including Lebanon) toward a more accommodating view of the "American way." See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Art and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

12. "Safinat hanan ila-l-qamar" *Hiwar*, no. 4 (May-June 1963), pp. 22-28.

13. Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University College, 1987), pp. 71-78.

14. The artist's family name Seraphim etymologically derives from the Hebrew plural of the word *seraph*, the guardian angels of God's throne. See Isaiah 6:1-3. In Byzantine and Islamic art, these supreme angels are commonly represented with as many as six wings. In Western art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, they are mostly depicted only as heads with multiple wings.



15. Lebanon's adoption of the Jerusalem Armenian Paul Guiragossian makes for an interesting comparison with Israel's adoption of another minority Palestinian artist, the Druze Abdallah al-Qarra. While the voluntary adoption secured financial success to both artists, Guiragossian never privately or publicly denied his Palestinian roots, whereas al-Qarra has gone so far as to change his Arabic name Abdallah to the Hebrew equivalent Ovadia. See Boullata, *Istibdar al-makan*, pp.106–7. See also Susan Slymowics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 67–71.

16. Jerusalem Armenians have been an integral part of the city's population since the fifth century. See John H. Melkon Rose, *The Armenians of Jerusalem* (London: Radcliff Press, 1993).

17. The Jerusalem-born Abraham Guiragossian (1871–1956), who became a photographic assistant to Adrien Bonfils, was later to make a small fortune after he bought out Maison Bonfils, originally established by Felix Bonfils, the leading photographer of the region at the turn of the century. See Carney E. S. Gavin, *The Image of the East: Nineteenth-Century Near Eastern Photographs by Bonfils: From the Collection of the Harvard Semitic Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

18. In an interview with Tawfiq Sayigh, Guiragossian candidly spoke of how his earliest experiences in Jerusalem were an ongoing inspiration in his art. See *al-Fannanun al-Lubnaniyyun yatabaddathun 'an fannibem* (Lebanese Artists Speak about their Art), *Hiwar* no. 26–27 (March–April 1967), pp. 150–67.

19. For a general review of the Jerusalem School of icon painting, see chapter 1, *Milad allugba al-maballiya fi al-taswir* (Birth of a local pictorial language) in *Istibdar al-Makan*, pp. 45–84.

20. After the Israeli invasion, Isma'il Shammout moved to Kuwait. Like other

Palestinians there, however, he was forced to leave in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War and moved to Amman. Mustafa al-Hallaj, who moved to Damascus shortly after the invasion, died while trying to rescue a monumental sculpture he had been working on—his first return to sculpture in many decades—when a fire raged through his studio. Naji al-'Ali left for Kuwait in the wake of the invasion, but had to leave in 1985 under pressure from Saudi Arabia, unhappy at his political cartoons, and moved to London, where he was assassinated two years later. As for Ibrahim Ghannam, after the obliteration of the Tal Za'atar camp in 1976, in which all his works were destroyed, he moved to the Mar Elias camp near Beirut, and died of a heart attack eight years later. Finally, Jumana al-Husseini settled in Paris after the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975.

21. For a sampling of a single year's publications (which, interestingly, appear in French) of coffee-table books that induce nostalgia for earlier times, see Claire Paget, *Murs et plafonds peints: Liban XIX siècle* (Beirut: Editions Terre du Liban, 1998), Houda Kassatly, *De pierres et de couleurs: vie et mort des maisons du vieux Beyrouth* (Beirut: Editions Layali, 1998), and Houda Kasatly, *Si proche, si extremes: rituels en sursis du liban et de Syrie* (Beirut: Editions Layali, 1998).

22. See "*al-madina dbat al-sabatain*" (City of Two Squares) in Jad Tabet, *al-i'mar wa-l-maslaba al-'amma* (Building Development and Public Interest), (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 1997), pp. 105–24.

23. In his description of works by Mona Hatoum, an artist born in Beirut to Palestinian refugees, Edward Said wrote they are "the uncooptable mundane instruments of *a defiant memory* facing itself . . . [and] unwilling to let go of the past." See Edward W. Said, "The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum's Logic of Irreconcilables," in *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000), pp. 7–17.