

Mediterranean, Knowledge, Culture and Heritage 6

Erminio FONZO – Hilary A. HAAKENSEN
Editors

MEDITERRANEAN MOSAIC: HISTORY AND ART



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Book Series edited by
Giuseppe D'Angelo and Emiliana Mangone

This Book Series, published in an electronic open access format, serves as a permanent platform for discussion and comparison, experimentation and dissemination, promoting the achievement of research goals related to three key topics:

Mediterranean: The study of southern Europe and the Mediterranean world offers a historical perspective that can inform our understanding of the region today. The findings collected in this series speak to the myriad policy debates and challenges – from immigration to economic disparity – facing contemporary societies across the Great Sea.

Knowledge: At its core, this series is committed to the social production of knowledge through the cooperation and collaboration between international scholars across geographical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries.

Culture and Heritage: This series respects and encourages sharing multiple perspectives on cultural heritage. It promotes investigating the full scope of the complexity, hybridity, and morphology of cultural heritage within the Mediterranean world.

Each manuscript will be submitted to double-blind peer reviewing.

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Preface by the Series Editors

Narration and Representation of the Mediterranean

This new book, edited by Erminio Fonzo and Hilary A. Haakenson, addresses several little known subjects in the history of the Mediterranean world as well as artistic representations of this dynamic world created over the centuries.

As Marcus Tullius Cicero stated in a famous passage of his *Orator ad M. Brutum*, “Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contextitur” or “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history” (Cicero, *Orator ad M. Brutum*, 120). Taking this dictum to heart, the case studies in this volume, move beyond a one-dimensional vision of the “Great Sea” by contributing to the growth and development of a nuanced and complete understanding of the Mediterranean world across time.

This book is an achievement that explores the interconnections between two academic disciplines – history and art history - both essential to understanding the region. Building upon seminal scholarship produced during the 20th century, its essays address long-standing themes as well as little-known historical subjects from and artistic representations of the Mediterranean World.

We, the series editors of Mediterranean Knowledge, believe that creating new synergies and epistemological relationships between different but complementary disciplines is critical to advancing research on the cultures of the “Great Sea.” As we have elsewhere stated:

In the present world, the multidimensionality of the daily problems and the quick succession of social transformations urge us to re-compose the different points of view and the perspectives of various disciplines to create the fertile grounds for the cooperation between them. Opening a dialogue that can overcome “formal” disciplinary and terminological barriers is necessary. Only the permeability and the flexibility of the disciplinary borders - going “beyond the disciplines” and acknowledging them as “different disciplines” – will allow us to open ourselves to knowledge free from positivism (D'Angelo & Mangone, 2016, p. 5).

These theoretical and methodological premises drive the new scientific journey of Mediterranean Knowledge because:

The Mediterranean is not merely geography. Its boundaries are drawn in neither space nor time. There is in fact no way of drawing them: they are neither ethnic nor historical, state nor national; they are like a chalk circle that is constantly traced and erased, that the winds and waves, that obligations and inspirations, expand or reduce (Matvejević, 1999, p. 7).

It is precisely for this reason that narration and representation are important subjects not only in themselves, but also for understanding the present state of the Mediterranean World and the challenges that it faces today.

The three parts of the present volume speak to some of the most interesting historical and aesthetic themes emerging across the “Great Sea”: the relationships between the people of the Mediterranean Basin, their contact with other worlds, particularly the Americas, and the artistic representations and interpretations of both sets of interactions.

In bringing their respective contributions together, this volume’s authors, writing from a wide range of different countries and diverse academic backgrounds, provide a fresh and significant contribution to Mediterranean Studies.

The ICSR Mediterranean Knowledge is therefore particularly pleased to welcome this new book into its series “Mediterranean, Knowledge, Culture and Heritage” and hopes that new studies may deepen other subjects related to this sacred Sea.

Fisciano, Italy
February 2019

Giuseppe D'Angelo
Emiliana Mangone

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Erminio FONZO - Hilary A. HAAKENSEN

Editors

MEDITERRANEAN MOSAIC

HISTORY AND ART



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On the cover: Pietro Vesconte, *Nautical Chart*, 1311. Courtesy of Florence State Archive.

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Via Giovanni Paolo II n. 132, 84084 Fisciano, Italy



Peer reviewed contents

Contents

<i>Repositioning the Great Sea at the Centre of the World: an International Collaboration</i>	Pag.	1
Erminio Fonzo & Hilary A. Haakenson		
Part I – <i>Changes and Exchanges within the Mediterranean World</i>		
<i>The Emperors, the Caliph(s) and the Doctor: Cross-cultural Encounters and Interactions on the “Periphery” of Byzantium (ca. 650-950)</i>	»	9
Luca Zavagno & Zeynep Olgun		
<i>Conflicts, Equilibria, Hegemonies: the Case for Catalan-Aragonese Expansion as a Starting Point in Late Medieval Mediterranean Studies Based on a Survey of Recent Scholarship</i>	»	23
Pietro Corrao		
<i>Accommodating Foreign Merchants in a Changing Mediterranean: the Case of Galata</i>	»	31
Ekin Can Göksoy		
Part II – <i>Representations and Interpretations of the Mediterranean World</i>		
<i>Valorizing Venice: Art and the Production of an Early Modern Mediterranean</i>	»	45
Hilary A. Haakenson		

<i>The Mediterranean Origins of Jewish Music: Tradition, Cultural Assimilation and Religious Identity</i>	»	79
Irena Avsenik Nabergoj		
<i>Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World: the Early History of Art Education for Artists from Syria, Lebanon, and Algeria in the USSR in the 1950s, 60s and 70s</i>	»	93
Olga Nefedova		
 Part III – <i>The Transatlantic Reach of Mediterranean People and Power</i>		
<i>Missions in the Eastern Mediterranean: the Ambassadors of the Angevins of Naples</i>	»	119
Maria Rosaria Salerno		
<i>Diplomatic Relations and Trade between the Kingdom of Naples and the United States in the Late 18th and Early 19th Century</i>	»	135
Maria Sirago		
<i>The American Mediterranean in the Age of Thomas Jefferson</i>	»	149
Anthony J. Antonucci		
<i>Social, Economic and Cultural Relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Barbary States in the Kingdom of Naples under the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons, 1707-1815</i>	»	175
Franca Pirolo		
<i>Chilean Refugees in Italy: a Forgotten Story</i>	»	187
Erminio Fonzo		

*Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World:
the Early History of Art Education for Artists from Syria, Lebanon
and Algeria in the USSR in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s**

OLGA NEFEDOVA

Turbulent political and social events occurring in the Arab world during the early 20th century challenged the traditional creative threads of Islamic art and the earlier system of aesthetic training, which, in turn, stimulated an artistic evolution. Traditional forms of architecture and visual arts were slowly replaced as attention turned towards the artistic practices of the West. Fascination with new materials, technology and styles charted a new course for the development of visual culture by Arab artists. In turn, from the early 20th century onwards, easel painting and modern sculpture were favoured over traditional arts in the Arab world.

During recent decades, interest in different facets of contemporary Arab art has increased significantly (Shabout, 2007). Although this interest has brought modern and contemporary Arab art into wider focus, significant gaps remain in the scholarly discussion. Speaking to one such absence, this essay analyzes the new artistic practices and art heritage of Arab artists from Syria, Lebanon and Algeria who graduated from the Vasily Surikov Moscow State Art Institute. It examines artists who graduated or were continuing as postgraduate students between 1959, when the first group of Arab art students arrived in the USSR, and 1979¹. The study is based on previously unpublished material from the archives of the Moscow Art Institute (specifically, from the Personal Files Archive, the Graduation Artworks Archive, and the Foreign Students Admission Department Archive) as well as from the archive of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR (1950-1970), the

The article was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow, Russian Federation, in 2016-17.

The project was also supported by a Hans-Robert Roemer Fellowship for Visiting Scholars, Orient-Institut Beirut, Lebanon in 2018.

¹ During the decades under consideration, the Moscow State Art Institute also hosted graduates and postgraduates from Arab countries including Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Sudan. Not all the students mentioned in this essay were ethnically Arab, but they were born, raised and educated in Arab states. In the context of this research, the term “Arab artists” does not indicate an ethnic group, but is “an umbrella term that signifies a pluralization of experiences arising from Islam, ethnos, language and the West”, *i.e.* artists from Arab nations whose majority embraces the faith of Islam (Shabout, 2007, p. 8).

archive of the Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education (1959-1988) and the archive of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation (1959-1965). Finally, this paper draws upon other archival material from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts and the State Archive of the Russian Federation. The research for this paper was undertaken and written with the aid of artists and their relatives and based on the materials gathered through meetings, interviews and correspondence with these people. It also considers information from large collections of press clippings from Soviet newspapers, journals and magazines dating from the 1950s-80s. Brief biographical notes related to the graduates and postgraduates are also included.

* * *

Beginning in the 1950s, after WWII, improved political relations between the USSR and Arab states contributed to dynamic growth in the cultural sector. For instance, in the fall of 1955, a delegation of Soviet performing artists first visited Lebanon, Egypt and Syria to perform the Arab countries. The first exhibitions of Soviet art were also organized in these countries shortly thereafter².

In addition, the 1950s saw the organization and staging of a number of successful exhibitions in the USSR, which were dedicated to the contemporary art of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and other Arab countries. One such exhibit appeared at the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students. It opened in Moscow on 28 July 1957 and attracted 34.000 people from 130 countries. It was the first World Festival of Youth and Students held in the Soviet Union and a sign of new doors opening to the world. Among the various festival activities was an exhibition of contemporary art, which displayed work by artists from more than 50 countries, including several in the Arab world: Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Tunis, and Sudan. The pieces exhibited were created specifically for the festival between 1955 and 1957 by both an elder generation of renowned masters and also young artists including: Ahmed Sabri (1889-1955), Hassan Mohamed Hassan (1906-1990), Gamal El-Sagini (1917-1977), Nazem Al-Jaafari (b. 1918), Afif Bahnasi (b. 1928), Simone Baltaxe-Martayan (1925-2009), Nazem Irani (1930-2014), Ibrahim El-Salahi (b. 1930), and many others (Darsky & Prokof'ev, 1959).

In 1957, two other exhibitions of contemporary Arab art were also organized in the USSR. In September, the first, presenting contemporary art of Lebanon, was organized by the Union of the USSR artists in Moscow. It introduced the Soviet public to artists such as: César Gemayel (1898-1958), Omar Onsi (1901-1969), Rachid Wehbé (1917-1993), Simone Baltaxe-Martayan, Jean Khalife (1923-1978), Paul Guiragossian (1925-1993), Michele El-Mir (1930-1973), Amine Sfeir (1932-2001), Nadia Saikali (b. 1936), Elie Kanaan (1926-2009) and Michel Basbous

² Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (from now RGALI), Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 675. Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Department of External Relations.

(1921-1981)³. On 20 December of the same year, an exhibition of Syrian plastic and decorative art opened in the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow; it was then transferred to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (then – Leningrad) (Vojtov, 2006, pp. 156-158). The exhibition was curated by Hafez Imam and Hassan Kamal (a curator of the National Museum in Damascus) (Kamal, 1958, pp. 45-47; Vojtov, 2006, p. 157). Both men were experts in the realist style of painting, an attribute noted in a report by the Ministry of Culture of the USSR⁴. The contemporary art of Syria at the exhibit was represented by more than 60 paintings by Mahmoud Jalal (1911-1975), Michel Kurché (1900-1973), Adham Isma'il (1923-1963), Mahmoud Hammad (1923-1988), Fateh Al-Moudarres (1922-1999), Salah Al Nashif (1924-1971), Nazem al-Jaafari, Nasir Shoura (1920-1992) and many others (“Sirijskoe iskusstvo”, 1957).

At least two exhibitions of the art of the United Arab Republic - a short-lived presidential republic uniting Syria with Egypt under Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser between 1958 and 1961 – were erected in the Soviet Union in 1958. On 28 April, the Pushkin Fine Art Museum (in collaboration with the State Museum of Oriental Art) presented works from the region dating to the period between the 4th century BCE and the contemporary era. While the main exposition was dedicated to the art of the ancient world, one of the small exhibition halls was allotted for contemporary art (Hodzhash, Shuripova & Pevzner, 1958; Vojtov, 2006, p. 178). Then, from 23 December to the 22 January 1959, the State Museum of Oriental Art also presented an extensive survey of contemporary art from Syria and Egypt, bringing together more than 150 works. The exhibition travelled; on 28 January, it was packed and sent to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (Vojtov, 2006, pp. 178-179 & p. 197).

Cross-cultural activities like these exhibitions created mutual awareness of the relevant art world in various locations around the Mediterranean Sea and the USSR, a process that led to the development of exchange programs in music, cinema, fine art, performing art, etc. Eventually, such programs also extended into the arena of higher education. The government-sponsored international exchange programs that brought Arab students to the Soviet Union encouraged an increasingly global post-WWII art world. As the Arab bloc was emerging under the leadership of Egypt, the geopolitical region of the “Middle East” accrued strategic importance as a Cold War battleground. A report on a 1957 Syrian art exhibition by the Ministry of Culture of the USSR states: “The prospects and directions of contemporary art development in Syria are yet unknown. However they tend toward realistic art. It is important to influence the development of this art ...”⁵.

³ RGALI, Fund 2926, Inventory 1, File 188. Materials of an Exhibition of Contemporary Art of Lebanon in Moscow in September 1957 and RGALI, Fund 2932, Inventory 3, File 1445, Exhibition of Contemporary Art of Lebanon on the 19th of September 1957.

⁴ RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 386. Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Department of External Relations. Summary Report of Cultural Relations with Asian and African Countries in 1957.

⁵ RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 386.

The education program for Arab art students in the USSR became one method by which to “influence” the aesthetic trends.

Easel painting is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Arab world. Most Arab artists of the pre-1950 era were self-taught amateurs. Over the course of the 1950s, however, this changed, in part because the Soviet Union, like various European governments, created a program dedicated to attracting Arab artists and scholars from around the world. Various prominent art institutions in the Soviet Union participated in these early exchange programs. In the 1950s, the group of leading institutions included: the Vasily Surikov Moscow State Art Institute; the Moscow State Stroganov Academy of Industrial and Applied Arts; the Ilya Repin St. Petersburg State Academic Institute of Fine Arts, Sculpture and Architecture; the Moscow Academic Art College in Memory of 1905; the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts in Moscow (known today as the Russian University of Theatre Arts), the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, the Tashkent State Institute of Culture and the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts (two institutes that merged in 2012 to become the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture), the All-Ukrainian Art Institute in Kiev (now known as the National Academy of Visual Arts and Architecture), the Kharkiv State Institute of Culture (known today as the Kharkiv State Academy of Culture) and the Yerevan Institute of Theatre and Fine Art (now called the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinematography). The present research examines the legacy of the most popular among the institutions with programs for Arab art students – the Vasily Surikov Moscow State Art Institute – still one of the leading centers of higher art education in Russia today.

The Moscow Art Institute was established on the basis of the Moscow School of Painting and Sculpture of the Moscow Art Society, an institute founded in 1843⁶. After the 1917 Revolution, the school merged with the Stroganov School of Applied Arts, and a new organization was formed by 1920 – the Higher Art and Technical Studios – better known internationally by the acronym VKHUTEMAS. This school fostered the development of three main movements in avant-garde art and architecture: Constructivism, Rationalism and Suprematism. In 1930, however, political and internal pressure forced this new school to dissolve and divide into 6 other schools, which ultimately led to the opening of the Moscow Art Institute in 1934. In 1948, to celebrate the centenary of the Russian artist Vasily Surikov’s birth, the Institute was renamed in his honor. Today, the institute is composed of 5 faculties: the Faculty of Painting; the Faculty of Graphic Art; the Faculty of Sculpture; the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Theory and the History of Arts. The Faculty of Painting includes: the Workshops of Easel Painting; the Workshops of Monumental Art (where students can master the technique of mosaic, wall painting and stained glass); and the Workshop of Theatrical-decorative Art (which offers the study of the history of theatre and costume). The Faculty of Graphic Art includes: the Workshop of Easel Drawing; the Workshop of

⁶ Retrieved 20 January 2017 from <http://surikov-vuz.com>.

Graphic Design and Posters; and the Workshop of Book Illustrations. The curriculum of the Faculty of Graphic Art offers, not only painting and drawing lessons, but also the study of different publishing processes and graphic techniques such as etching, lithography, linocut, xylography, and serigraphy. The Faculty of Sculpture Workshop teaches the basics for training sculptors, including: sketching, easel painting, monumental and decorative sculpture, bas-relief, high relief, and animal sculpture, as well as experiments in various materials.

Foreign students have studied at the Institute since 1937, and today it continues to accept foreign students with secondary education and special pre-institute art training. According to education exchange agreements, or MOU, between various countries, foreigners can join the Institute with a full scholarship granted by the Ministry of Education of Russia or, if a grant cannot be obtained, with fully paid tuition fees and a study contract signed between the students and the Institute. As a prerequisite, all foreign students must complete a one-year Russian language preparatory course. In 1983, the Institute opened its own Foreign Language Department where students could fulfil this language requirement and learn the basics of Russian art, history, and literature while also undertaking special training and practicing their drawing, composition and sculpture skills. Based on the results of these prerequisite courses, students were (or were not) admitted to the institute.

In the 1950s-70s, foreign students, considered invited guests of the government, drew a small stipend (with their home countries as guarantor) and received a grant for art supplies. In the 1958 UNESCO “Study Abroad” international handbook, it states that scholarships in the USSR were “available for students... who have completed their secondary education. Instruction is in Russian; preparatory courses arranged for study of the Russian language...” (“Unesco”, 1958, p. 586). In addition, the document stipulates that students were to receive a “monthly allowance of 90 roubles for undergraduates, and 100 roubles for graduates (tax free), plus free tuition, medical care, [and] transportation to and from the USSR, paid by the government of the USSR at the end of studies. Students from Asia, Africa and Latin America [were to] receive an allowance of 300 roubles for purchase of warm clothing; an annual allowance of 80 roubles (maximum) [was to be] made to graduate students for the purchase of technical and scientific literature for their personal use. Hostel accommodation available...; students spending their summer and winter holidays in the USSR [could] visit rest homes, sanatoria, participate in excursions throughout the country, etc., free of charge” (“Unesco”, 1961, p. 445). Arab students also availed themselves of facilities in Moscow that had been expressly dedicated to them, including the Arab Cultural Centre, which housed a club and library, and organized outings and exhibition opportunities.

The first two post-WWII Arab students to study at the institute – Milaad Chaib (1918-2000) and Abdel Mannan Shamma (b. 1937)⁷ – joined in September 1959.

⁷ I have striven to verify the biographical entries to the best of my ability, but some dates of exhibitions and of degrees earned by artists and administrators may be off by a year or two. Conflicting dates are recorded even between biographical accounts provided by the artists themselves. I also found

Both were Syrians. Prior to arriving in Moscow, Milaad Chaib had worked as a secondary school Deputy Director in Syria, teaching a class in drawing. He completed his basic drawing training under the Syrian artist, Tariq Tawfiq (1875-1940), who encouraged him to continue his art education. Chaib arrived in Moscow in early 1958 as a member of a delegation sent by the Patriarchate of Alexander III (Tahan) of Antioch. In September 1959, he was accepted into the Art Institute and admitted to the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Easel Painting. The second student, Abdel Mannan Shamma, received his formal education between 1950 and 1958 under the supervision of the drawing artist and teacher, Subhi Shuaib (1909-1974). In 1958, Shamma won first prize in an art competition and was sent with a scholarship to Moscow to study art. In September 1959, Shamma was admitted to the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art of the Moscow Art Institute. At the Institute, the two Syrian students joined a vibrant international community, including both foreign and Russian students.

In 1959, the largest group of foreign students up to that point arrived at the Institute. According to the 1959-60 Activities Report, there were a total of 14 foreign students, 12 of whom were 1st year students. Of those, 11 (9 1st year, one 3rd year, and one 4th year student) were in the Faculty of Painting, and three 1st year students were in the Faculty of Sculpture⁸. The majority of foreign students took their prerequisite one-year Russian language course at Moscow State University until 1983, when the Moscow Art Institute opened its own Russian language preparatory course. Upon completion of this course, students would receive a certificate and a personal reference letter in which their teacher or course supervisor presented a short description of the skills they had learned and an evaluation of their class attendance and performance in class activities. Recommendations also included general assessments of the students' characters and religious behaviours and descriptions of their attitude towards the politics and regime of the Soviet Union. The content of these personal reference letters varied since they addressed students of different nationalities, religious beliefs, social statuses, and leadership skills. However, none of the letters, even the negative ones, ever prevented students from continuing their education at various institutes and universities in the USSR.

Upon completion of their preparatory course and admission to their respective universities and institutes, students would receive accommodation and a stipend, the amount of which was stated and agreed upon in the international agreements between states. In the 1960s, undergraduate students from Arab countries at the

varying dates on the birth and education certificates in the university students' files. All artists' biographical information was taken from the Archive of Personal Files in the Moscow Art Institute or from the personal communication of the artists' families and friends (unless otherwise noted).

⁸ RGALI, Fund 2459, Inventory 2, File 167. Moscow Art Institute. Institute Activities Report 1959-60. Department of Admissions.

Moscow Art Institute received between 90 roubles and 120 roubles per month⁹ as well as a supplementary allotment, officially called an “adaptation allowance,” of up to 120 roubles per semester. Postgraduate students at the Institute received 150 roubles per month, plus an adaptation allowance of 150 roubles per semester¹⁰. Lastly, students were given a one-time clothing allowance as well as funds to purchase books.

In 1959, when the Syrian students, Abdel Mannan Shamma and Milaad Chaib, were accepted into the Institute, admission for Soviet applicants was highly competitive. They often studied at an art school for a few years prior to submitting an advanced art portfolio for review by faculty members. Contrarily, foreign students had no prerequisite art training. Consequently, after the first mid-term, the under-prepared Syrian students, along with other foreign students, showed rather weak results. In a report from one semi-annual meeting of the Faculties of Painting and Graphic Art, the faculty sought to address the problem of foreign students in the Institute directly. The report states:

The situation with foreign students is rather complicated. Among new foreign students there are Vietnamese, Italians, and an Arab, as well as a poorly prepared Syrian and an Italian student with rather peculiar earlier art training. For this reason, the faculty teaching staff has faced certain problems when working with the foreign students ... After reviewing various drawings of the first-, second- and third-year students, questions have been raised about how to handle the foreign students. With their low level of art training, it would be difficult for them to continue into the second year when they should study the full figure in drawing courses and the half-length figure in painting courses. One suggestion has been to separate the foreign students into their own group. But this idea has been rejected, since the foreign students learn much from our Soviet students. There have also been suggestions that we give the foreign students extra assignments to address the serious gaps in their art training. They do not have basic, sometimes elementary, art skills. Extra drawing training now could give them the opportunity to excel in working with more complicated art forms later. However, it would be difficult and time consuming to give them extra training while they remain in the same group with the other Soviet students. Institute management will need to find the best way to introduce extra training for the foreign students¹¹.

On 20 May 1960, the Faculty of Painting held another meeting to discuss the results and outcome of the study year. Again, the question of foreign students was raised. According to one faculty member, Professor Fedor Nevezhin (1902-1964):

The interactions [of the foreign students] with our students provides many benefits. It is also most unlikely that our students would be influenced by the foreign students since they do not have any distinct art style or manner. The foreign students walk around the class and watch how other students draw and paint. It is very difficult to explain drawing techniques to people that can hardly say “hello”

⁹ Or 900 roubles per month before 1961. A monetary reform occurred in 1961, and the value was reduced by a factor of 10, making 900 roubles equal to 90.

¹⁰ GARF [State Archive of the Russian Federation]. Inventory 1, File A 501 1 3751. Funds of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. Expenses and Stipends of Foreign Students, Studying in Russian Federation Institutes and Universities – Summary Report for the year 1960.

¹¹ RGALI, Fund 2459, Inventory 2, File 167. Moscow Art Institute. Institute Activities Report 1959-60. Faculty of Painting and Graphic Art.

and “good bye” in Russian. When I remember Chaib drawing “suitcases” instead of human heads ... and now he has significantly improved his drawing skills. ... The most talented is the little Shamma, he has produced very good drawings that reach the level of the works of our students¹².

The final decision was announced by the dean of the Institute, Professor Fedor Modorov (1890-1967): “During the first semester we might have to group the foreign students together into a single group, find tailored and specific methods of practicing so they can catch up and align themselves with our regular students; but it is useful for the foreign students to work alongside our students. We will take them with us on a field trip and teachers should teach them easel painting there”¹³. The decision was justified. Already in the report of the following year, the students’ mentor, Nikolai Tolkunov (1917-1996), claimed there had been major advancements in the training and masterworks of the foreign students. In particular, he singled out Shamma and Chaib, stating that their drawing skills had reached the level of the other students¹⁴. Thus, it appears that the Arab students were successfully integrated into the general population of Soviet and international students.

The memoirs and scholarship of Leonid Pisarev (b. 1938), a Soviet classmate of Shamma and Chaib, recall those years at the Institute. In his article dedicated to the artistic heritage of Vjacheslav Prosvirin (1940-2008), Pisarev writes:

I will begin recounting my memories of Slava (*Vjacheslav Prosvirin - ON*) by remembering the Vasily Surikov Moscow State Institute, and by recalling the workshop, led by a remarkable artist, Alexander Deyneka. In 1959, “San Sanuch” (*Alexander Deyneka – ON*) admitted to his workshop six male students and one female student (“hoping that the male students would not use foul language in the presence of live models”). The number of students was becoming smaller and smaller as we studied and, in 1965, only three of us graduated from the Workshop of Monumental Art: Prosvirin, Pisarev, and Abdel Mannan Shamma from Syria. We went on to study under the supervision of Deyneka, not only because we liked this outstanding artist, but also because hiding behind his broad back, we could paint more freely and liberally than in other workshops.

A few words about our classmates. ... Carlo Ciccoli, son of an Italian communist, brought banned art books to the Institute – monographs of those foreign artists whom we could never have seen in the USSR. One of the most significant episodes of that time was tied to a 1962 exhibition in Manezh, organized to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of MOSSKH, the Moscow Section of the Artist’s Union, where Khrushchev became enraged¹⁵. A journalist from the “Soviet Culture” newspaper came to the institute to question and interview students about this episode. And we, instead of scolding the show, were praising it. Carlo Ciccoli was especially fond of it. The next day an article was published in which our words had been completely misinterpreted and changed. Carlo, as a Western man, naturally decided to demand a correction, and we went to the editorial office of the newspaper. The editor-in-chief reassured the Italian, promising to publish a correction, and, of course, he deceived us!

¹² RGALI, Fund 2459, Inventory 2, File 172. Minutes of Meetings, Plans, Discussions of Exams’ Results. Report of the Faculty of Graphic Art 1959-60.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ RGALI, Fund 2459, Inventory 2, File 183. Minutes of Meetings, Plans, Discussions of Exams’ Results. Report of the Faculty of Graphic Art 1960-61.

¹⁵ The author of this passage is referring to the events of 1 December 1962 when, upon visiting “The New Reality” contemporary art exhibition in Manezh exhibition hall in Moscow, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev became furious with what he saw and ordered the exhibition closed down. The exhibition’s shutdown led to official denouncement and prohibition of non-realistic art.

Abdel Mannan Shamma was very talented in decorative art skills. He was very fond of Syrian ethnography. His works showed signs of naïve art ... We spent our 1964 internship in the Leningrad Academy of Art workshops, laying out a mosaic using small left over from the Tsarist era construction of St. Isaac's Cathedral. After Leningrad, we went to Tallinn, where we met the second-year students, Natasha Nesterova and Tanya Nazarenko. We invited them to join us, and together we went to Mikhajlovskoe to "visit" Alexander Pushkin. Photo slides of Pskov, Izborsk, and Novgorod have been preserved until now. How young and happy we were then! (Vjacheslav Prosvirin, 2010, pp. 21-22).

In 1960, one year after Shamma and Chaib joined the Moscow Art Institute, the first applicant from Lebanon, Nazem Irani, was admitted. Irani received a formal education at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts between 1950 and 1953. He specialized in painting and sculpture. At the Institute, he joined the Faculty of Sculpture to study under the supervision of Nikolai Tomsky (1900-1984), the famous Soviet sculptor. In 1961, one more student from Lebanon, Whahib Bteddini (1929-2011), came to the USSR. Bteddini had begun his education in 1956 at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts. In 1961, he went to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) to continue this education. Then in 1962, he was transferred to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art. The first Algerian postgraduate student, Ali Benrejdal (b. ?), joined the Institute in 1965.

Fig. 1. *Graduation class of 1965. Milaad Chaib and Abdel Mannan Shamma (on the far right) with classmates and the Institute's professors.*



Source: Personal Archive of Wael Chayeb.

The first Arab graduates from the Institute – Milaad Chaib and Abdel Mannan Shamma – completed their work there in 1965 (fig. 1). Thereafter, the summer of 1966 saw the graduation of Nazem Irani and Wahib Bteddini. The university paid for their return home; a memo written by a Deputy Dean of the Institute on 8 July 1966 instructs the only Soviet travel agency that handled international travel in the

USSR to issue Wahib Bteddini an invoice to cover the costs of his tickets for a one-way train from Moscow to Odessa, followed by a one-way trip aboard “Tourist”, a ship to Beirut¹⁶.

Upon returning home, certifications in hand, Arab art graduates were often assigned to work as art teachers in their respective capitals or in rural preparatory schools. At that time, there was great need for professional art staff. For example, we know that employment demands were part of the reason Nazem Irani could not continue his postgraduate studies in Moscow. In January 1976, he briefly returned to the Soviet capital, intending to work on his postgraduate thesis, but he left again after only a few months. In a letter to the Institute management, Irani explained that his presence was required in Beirut because there was a serious shortage of art teachers in his home country¹⁷.

The late 1960’s witnessed a period of strained relations between the USSR and the Arab nations of the Middle East. For this reason, the next group of Arab students came to the Institute only in the early 1970s. Assem Al Bacha (b. 1948), a Syrian graduate of “Puedo” Academy in Buenos Aires and of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University, joined the Institute’s Faculty of Sculpture in 1971. Then, in 1974, the Institute accepted Boufersaoui Belkacem (b. 1949), its first undergraduate student from Algeria.

By the mid-1970’s the international exchange experienced a resurgence. Between 1975 and 1979, the Institute received what was likely the largest group of international Arab students in its history. Among them were: the Syrian students, Nassir Al Nasser (b. 1954), Zuhair Al Tall (1953-1996), Mou’eiber Hawara (b. 1954), Fayrouz Toufik Hezzi (b. 1954) and Mohammad Qassem Khleif (b. 1952); the Algerian students, Rabeih Lakhdar (b. 1956), Madjid Moula (1954), Farid Ouis (1955), and Tayeb Mustapha (b. 1953); and the Lebanese student, Milad Ouaida (b. 1955).

The persistence of such an active international student exchange program raises the following questions: Why did Arab artists select the Soviet Institute as their *alma mater*? And, why, when they could have gone to Paris or Rome, did they go to Moscow? I asked these questions in numerous interviews and correspondences with the artists and their relatives. While the responses I received varied greatly, the artists’ motivations generally fell under three categories. First, education in the USSR was free and students were provided with scholarships, places to live, book allowances, clothes, and tickets to and from the USSR. These perks were major motivating factors in the artists’ decision to study in the USSR since many students came from rural areas, had no financial support from home and received no governmental grants or scholarships. The second motivating factor was admiration of the communist regime and the Soviet way of life. A few students were even members of their countries’ respective communist parties or youth communist parties, and claimed to be faithful communists in their application papers. Several

¹⁶ RGALI, Fund 2459, Inventory 3, File 29. Correspondence with the Ministry of Culture of USSR and other government entities regarding foreign students’ education.

¹⁷ Archive of personal files, Moscow Art Institute. Personal file of Nazem Irani.

of these students were accepted, not through the international exchange program, but through decrees from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR. As noted, for instance, the Communist party of Iraq circumvented the traditional exchange student application process by sending requests for admission directly to the Communist Party of the USSR. The splendour of the artistic and cultural heritage of Russia was the final major motivating factor noted by the artists. The Russian people had created and maintained the country's immortal works of classic literature, music and fine art, which were well-known throughout the world. Regardless of the foreign students' initial motivation for studying at the Soviet Institute, and despite the hardships they sometimes faced, the majority of the Arab students recalled their study, professors and mentors with praise and kind words, and found the years they spent working under the Institute's faculty deeply memorable. The students were young, open minded, and impressionable.

Throughout the period under study, the USSR had close, albeit sometimes complex and multi-faceted, relations with many of the Arab states with whom it cooperated in both military and economic capacities. These relations also helped facilitate cultural connections. As this essay documents, hundreds of Arab nationals from home countries allied with the Soviet Union spent years studying at schools such as the Institute in the USSR. Consequently, through its training of Arab artists, the Soviet Union had a strong impact on the development of mainstream Arab art. Upon their return home, these young Arab artists assumed positions in art schools and universities. In turn, they contributed to the establishment of a robust network of relations between the Arab states and the Soviet Union both on the institutional level and among the elites - relations that remained in place until the end of the Cold War. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, these relations declined and the influence of the Soviet school on realist Arab art nearly ceased.

“Vasily Surikov Moscow State Art Institute”: Biographical Catalogue of Graduates and Postgraduates from Syria, Lebanon and Algeria (1959-1979)¹⁸

Al Bacha, Assem (b. 1948)

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the Syrian artist, Assem Al Bacha, first studied art at “Puedo” Academy in Buenos Aires. In 1969, he graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, Syria, and, in 1970, he arrived in Moscow to start his Russian language preparatory course. In September 1971, he joined the Faculty of Sculpture at the Moscow Art Institute, from which he graduated in 1977 with a final project in sculpture called “Palestinian” (fig. 2).

Since 1987, Al Bacha has been based in Granada, where he has worked as a sculptor, writer and translator (“Contemporary”, 1998, p. 224-227). Since first

¹⁸ In alphabetical order, these are the artists for whom I have traced the available information about their post--USSR years.

exhibiting in Syria in the mid-1960s, he has gone on to participate in solo and group shows in galleries and cultural centers in locations around the world from Cuba to South Korea¹⁹. Often experimenting with different forms and techniques, Al Bacha is known for his expressionist sculpture that explores a range of subjects and themes, most of which address the human experience. In both 1975 and 1981, he exhibited his works in Moscow (Starodub, 1982, p. 52).

Before being arrested, spending time in jail, and ultimately fleeing Syria in 2012, it is widely known that Al Bacha buried his artworks underground in Yabroud in hopes that they would avoid theft and destruction in a place where humans could no longer survive²⁰.

Fig. 2. *Assem Al Bacha. Palestinian, 1977. Gypsum, 144 x 30 x 30 cm.*



Source: Moscow State Art Institute, Graduation Artworks Archive.

Benrejda, Ali (b. ?)

Ali Benrejda, from Algeria, joined the Art Institute as a postgraduate in January 1965, and remained in the USSR until April 1966.

¹⁹ Retrieved 10 April 2017 from <http://www.tajalliyat.com/ArtistPreview.aspx?Index=7>

²⁰ Interview with Assem Al Bacha. Retrieved 15 April 2017, from <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2017/04/burial-art-assem-al-bacha/>

Boufersaoui, Belkacem (b. 1949)

Born in 1949, in Larhat (El Asnam), Algeria, Belkacem Boufersaoui began his formal art education at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Algiers, where he spent three years. In 1973, after completing the one-year preparatory Russian language course, he joined the Moscow Art Institute, Department of Sculpture. He graduated in 1979, after executing his work, “Algerian”, under the supervision of renowned Soviet sculptor, Pavel Bondarenko (1917-1992). After returning to Algeria, Belkacem Boufersaoui taught sculpture at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts from 1980 to 1994. He participated in numerous group exhibitions. Among his well-known works are his bas-reliefs in Tébessa and Tipasa²¹.

Bteddini, Wahib (1929-2011)

Born in 1929, in Kfar Nabrahk-Chouf, Lebanon, Wahib Bteddini began his art training in the early 1950s when he took painting classes in Omar Onsi’s atelier and sculpture classes in Halim El Hajj’s (1915-1990) atelier²². He was one of the first in the Druze community to take an interest in painting. Bteddini started his formal education in 1956 at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts where he spent a few years. In 1961, without graduating from the academy, he left to continue his education in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), and then, in 1962, he was transferred to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art. Bteddini graduated in 1966 with his work, “Harvesting” (or “The Picking of the Apples in the Mountain”) (fig. 3), executed under the supervision of the prominent artist, Alexander Myzin (1900-1984).

After returning to Lebanon, he taught in the Institute of Fine Arts at Lebanese University from 1967 to 1988, eventually becoming the head of the department. In 1988, he emigrated to the U.S.²³.

Bteddini won first prize from the Lebanese Intellectual Poet Said Akl in 1970, and second prize in 2003²⁴. According to documents in the Richard Chahine Archive, he was also the recipient of a Lebanese Cedar Badge of Honor Presidential Award in 2004. Bteddini was a member of the Association of Lebanese Artists for Painting and Sculpture, the Union of Lebanese artists, and the House of Art and Literature. He also participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions. During the last few years of his life, the artist was busy building a museum for his own work in his home town of Kfar Nabrahk²⁵. Dedicated to the memory of the talented painter and sculptor, the museum now showcases 400 of

²¹ *Dictionnaire des artistes algériens*. Retrieved 20 April 2017, from <https://patmagh.hypotheses.org/201>.

²² Retrieved 9 January 2018, from <http://artmodernmv.gov.lb/index.php?r=museum/collection/index>.

²³ Retrieved 9 January 2018, from <http://artmodernmv.gov.lb/index.php?r=museum/collection/index>.

²⁴ Richard Chahine archive, Beirut, retrieved 9 January 2018, from <http://artmodernmv.gov.lb/index.php?r=museum/collection/index>.

²⁵ Wahib Bteddini museum website. Retrieved 15 February 2017, from www.bteddini.com.

his oil paintings, pastels and watercolors, and includes approximately 50 sculptures in plaster, stone, and fiberglass (M. Bteddini, personal communication, 2016-18). There are also 16 paintings by the artist in the collection of the Ministry of Culture of Lebanon (S. Barakat, personal communication, February 2018).

Fig. 3. *Wahib Bteddini. "Harvesting"*
(or "*The Picking of the Apples in the Mountain*"), 1966



Source: Sursock Museum Archive, Beirut. Courtesy of The Nicolas Sursock Museum.

Chaib, Milaad (1918-2000)

Milaad Chaib was born in the town of Maaloula, Syria. His early artistic training included his study under the supervision of the artist Tariq Tawfiq, one of the first recognized Syrian fine art oil painters, who encouraged him and gave him his first lessons in art²⁶. At the age of 19, Chaib exhibited his works for the first time. For a few years, he taught a drawing class in a secondary school, eventually becoming the school's deputy director. Chaib arrived in Moscow in 1958 as a member of a delegation sent by the Patriarchate Alexander III (Tahan) of Antioch. He lived for 6 months in the Metochion of the Orthodox Church of Antioch in Moscow before joining the Russian language preparatory course (W. Chayeb, personal communication, 2016-17). In September 1959, he was accepted into the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Easel Painting. Chaib was deeply influenced by the art of Russia and especially by the heritage of

²⁶ Tariq Tawfiq was born in Damascus. He received his first artistic training at the Ottoman military academy in Istanbul, which was followed by supplemental training in art and architecture in Paris in 1923. Upon his return to Syria, he established the first independent art studio open to the public. During the French Mandate in Syria, he worked for the engineering office doing architectural surveys and restoration, and also established what was likely the first independent art studio open to the public, where he taught painting to interested pupils (Lensen, 2014, p. 388).

the 14th-15th-century icon painter Andrei Rublev. By adapting parts of Rublev's style and techniques, he developed his own style of icon paintings. Chaib graduated in July 1965 with the work "My Motherland" (or "The Melodies of my Motherland") (fig. 4), executed under the supervision of the prominent artist Gennady Korolev (1913-1995) (Bogdanov, 1993, p. 3).

After graduation, Chaib became a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus. He also participated in an exhibition of Syrian artists in Moscow in 1980 ("Khudozhniki Sirii" 1980). His one and only solo exhibition, a retrospective of his works, took place after his death in 2005 in the lounge of Ebla Arts in Damascus. Works of Milaad Chaib were in the collection of the National Museum of Damascus. Chaib was considered one of the finest icon painters in his homeland. His icons were kept in various churches around Syria, and especially in his hometown of Maaloula (currently destroyed). His oeuvre includes a substantial number of Biblical scenes and portraits of religious figures (W. Chayeb, personal communication, 2017-18).

Fig. 4. *Milaad Chaib. My Motherland
(or The Melodies of My Motherland), 1965*



Source: Personal Archive of Wael Chayeb.

Hawara, Mou'eiber (b. 1954)

Born in 1954, in the village of Fairouza (Homs governorate), Syria, Mou'eiber Hawara started his formal education in 1973 in the Faculty of Fine Art at Damascus University. After completing his preparatory course in Russian language in 1975, he was admitted to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Easel Painting. In 1981, he graduated with his work "Refugees", executed under the supervision of the renowned Soviet artist, Tair Salakhov (b. 1928).

Hezzi, Fayrouz Toufik (b. 1954)

Born in Yabroud, Syria, Fayrouz Hezzi started his formal education at the Fine Art Institute in Damascus, where he spent two years. After moving to Moscow, and completing the one-year Russian language preparatory course, he was admitted in 1975 to the Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art. Fayrouz Hezzi graduated in 1981 with a project consisting of a mosaic exterior, entitled “National Epos”, for the House of Culture in Syria. The work was executed under the supervision of the prominent artist, Klavdija Tutevol (1917-1980). Fayrouz Hezzi continued with his postgraduate studies, which he completed in 1985 with the submission of his thesis “*Kritika formalizma i modernizma v sovremennom izobrazitel'nom iskusstve Sirii*” (Criticism of Formalism and Modernism in Syrian Contemporary Art), written under the supervision of the prominent art historian, Mikhail Alpatov (1902-1986). He currently lives and works in Russia in a small town near Moscow called Tver.

Irani, Nazem (1930-2014)

Nazem Irani was born in the town of Yaroun, Casa of Bent-Jbayl, South Lebanon. His father was a commercial painter, and young Nazem used to help him, working as a painter-decorator in local Palestinian villages and small towns near Yaroun (Lahoud, 1974, p. 217). Irani received his formal education from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts between 1950 and 1953, having been granted a scholarship from the Ministry of Education. He specialized in painting and sculpture (Chahine, 1982, V. I. p. 60). In 1953, he briefly taught in the same institute while simultaneously working for a local magazine (Darsky, 1958, p. 46). In 1955, Irani received first prize at the Autumn exhibition for his work “Our Enterprises”, and, in 1955, he was awarded a medal for his submission of “Freedom” at the Biennale Exhibition in Egypt (Darsky, 1958, p. 46). In 1957, he brought his graphic works, “A Peasant Woman” and “The Hand”, to the Soviet Union as part of a group exhibition of contemporary art at the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students (Darsky, 1958, pp. 45-46; Darsky & Prokof'ev, 1959, p. 24).

In 1960, Nazem continued his education at the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Sculpture. He graduated with honors in 1966 with his sculpture “Sorrow”, executed under the supervision of the famous Soviet sculptor, Nikolai Tomsky (fig. 5). Describing the sculpture in his graduation presentation, Nazem Irani stated: “This theme has a universal meaning, not only for our country, but for all the countries around the world. It is sorrow about death. This is related to periods of war as well as to periods of peace ...”²⁷. The work was positively received by the Institute’s management, and, on 14 July 1966, Professor Tomsky

²⁷ Extract from the graduation committee report, 1 July 1966. Archive of Personal Files, Moscow Art Institute. Personal file of Nazem Irani.

issued a letter to a director of the Department of Sculpture at the Moscow Art Fund requesting a copy of Irani's graduation work "Sorrow" to be executed in metal²⁸.

In January 1976, Irani briefly returned to Moscow to continue his postgraduate studies, but he left after a few months, explaining in his letter to the Institute's management that he must return to Beirut, since there was a serious shortage of art teachers, and his help was required at home²⁹.

Nazem Irani taught in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Lebanese University. In the early 1970s, he established an art and sculpture atelier in Badaro-Tayyouni, Beirut. During one of the air raids on Beirut between 1975 and 1976, Nazem Irani's workshop was demolished. His graduation work "Sorrow" was destroyed (Korshunov, 1981, p. 30). With the war in Lebanon came the breakdown of economic order and the disruption of social life. In turn, the development of the arts came to a complete standstill, leaving artists in a state of despair. After the support of both government entities and individual patrons completely ceased, a considerable number of artists left the country. This included Irani, who, in the early 1980s, immigrated with his family to Sydney, Australia (N. Irani, personal communication, 2017-18).

Nazem Irani is the recipient of numerous awards, including Khalil Gibran's Global Award, which he received in Sydney, and the 1967 sculpture prize award from the South Lebanon Exhibition (l'Exposition du Liban-Sud), where he exhibited two of his works, "Femme Orientale" and "La Campagne" (Richard Chahine, archive documents)³⁰. Nazem Irani also participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Lebanon and Australia (N. Irani, personal communication, 2017-18). Among his known existing works are: a painting called "Red Horses", which Irani executed in 1977 and gifted to the Russian Cultural Centre in Beirut, where the painting remains today (T. Chouman, personal communication, January 2018); a relief plaque called "Al-Ghadab Al-Sate", executed in 1969, in the collection of Saleh Barakat (S. Barakat, personal communication, February 2018); and 6 works in the collection of the Ministry of Culture of Lebanon (S. Barakat, personal communication, February 2018). Although Irani was not active in political life in Lebanon, he could not stay away from the dramatic events that transpired in his own country. In the 1980s, he worked extensively on political posters, creating one of his most famous images, "We will resist", which was designed for the Lebanese National Resistance Front / Ministry of the South in 1983 (Maasri, 2009, p. 26, cover and fig. 5.8)³¹.

²⁸ RGALI, Fund 2459, Inventory 3, File 29. Correspondence with the Ministry of Culture of the USSR and other government entities regarding foreign students' education.

²⁹ Archive of Personal Files, Moscow Art Institute. Personal file of Nazem Irani.

³⁰ Retrieved 9 January 2018, from

<http://artmodernemv.gov.lb/index.php?r=museum/collection/index>

³¹ Also, retrieved 24 January 2018, from <http://www.signsofconflict.com>

Fig. 5. *Nazem Irani. Sorrow, 1966. Gypsum, 137 x 90 x 75 cm.*



Source: Moscow State Art Institute, Graduation Artworks Archive.

Khleif, Mohammad Qassem (b. 1952)

Born in 1952 in Tadmor (Palmyra), Syria, Mohammed Khleif arrived in Moscow in 1974 to complete his Russian language preparatory course. In 1975, he was admitted to the Art Institute, the Faculty of Graphic Art. He graduated in 1981 with his work “My Motherland”, created under the supervision of the prominent Soviet graphic artist, Nikolai Ponomarev (1918-1997). Not much is known about his recent artistic endeavours. In 2010, he had an exhibition in Palmyra³².

Lakhdar, Rabehi (b. 1956)

Rabehi Lakhdar was born in El Harrach, Algeria, in 1956. After completing his Russian language preparatory course at Kiev State University in 1977-78, he was admitted to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art in September 1978. In 1984, he graduated with an art project involving two mural decorations for Moscow State University. They were entitled “Lebanon’s Peaceful Life” and “Eternal Traditions of Algeria”, and were executed under the supervision of the Soviet artist, Klavdija Tutevol. Preparatory drawings for the graduation project were gifted to the Algerian Embassy in Moscow.

Moula, Madjid (b. 1954)

Madjid Moula was born in Blida, Algeria, in 1954. Upon completion of his preparatory Russian language course at Kiev State University in 1977-78, he was

³² Retrieved 11 January 2018, from <http://www.discover-syria.com/news/6583>.

accepted to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Sculpture, in September 1978. He graduated in 1984 with a sculpture project called “Houari Boumediène”, executed under the supervision of the Soviet sculptor, Pavel Bondarenko. Currently, he lives and works in France (K. Bellatreche, personal communication, February 2017).

Mustapha, Tayeb (b. 1953)

Algerian artist Tayeb Mustapha was born in Taza, Morocco. In 1977 and 1978, he studied the Russian language at Donetsk State University. Then, in 1978 he was admitted to the Art Institute in Moscow to join the Faculty of Sculpture. He graduated in 1984 with an art project called “Algeria”, executed under the supervision of the Soviet sculptor, Mikhail Baburin (1907-1984).

Al Nasser, Nassir (b. 1954)

Born in 1954 in Hama, Syria, Nassir Al Nasser was admitted to the Moscow Art Institute in 1975 after completing his one-year Russian language preparatory course. He graduated in 1981 from the Faculty of Sculpture with an art project called “Motherland”, executed under the supervision of the Soviet sculptor, Nikolai Tomsky.

Ouaida (Aouïda), Milad Boutros (b. 1955)

Milad Ouaida was born in Ghazir, Lebanon in 1955. Upon completion of his Russian language preparatory course at Donetsk State University in 1978, he joined the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art. He graduated in 1984 with an art project called “Lebanon today, yesterday, tomorrow”. In 1984, he continued his postgraduate studies at the Russian State Academy of Fine Arts - Research Institute of Art Theory and History, graduating in 1989 with his thesis, “*Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo Livana epohi novogo I noveishego vremeni*” (Modern and Contemporary Art of Lebanon).

He participated in numerous group exhibitions in Lebanon, including the 1991-92 and 1995 autumn salons at the Sursock Museum (“Musée Nicolas Sursock”, 1991; “Musée Nicolas Sursock”, 1995 (as Aouïda Milad), p. 16). He has been teaching at Lebanese University for many years.

Ouis, Farid (b. 1955)

Farid Ouis was born in Hussein Dey, Algeria in 1955. He completed his Russian language preparatory course at Kiev State University in 1978 and, the same year, was admitted to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Easel Painting. Ouis graduated in 1984 with an art project entitled “After the Earthquake”, executed under the supervision of the Soviet master, Tair Salakhov.

Shamma, Abdel Mannan (b. 1937)

Abdel Mannan Shamma was born in the city of Homs, Syria. He began studying art between 1950 and 1958 under the supervision of the pioneering drawing artist and teacher, Subhi Shouaib³³. In 1958, Shamma won his first art prize and received a scholarship to go to Moscow to study art. In September 1959, after completing his one-year Russian language preparatory course at Moscow State University, he was admitted to the Moscow Art Institute, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art. In July 1965, he graduated with honors after completing a project called “National holiday” (last known location – the Ministry of Culture in Damascus), executed under the supervision of the Soviet artist, Alexander Deyneka (1899-1969). While staying in the USSR, Shamma took part in the design of murals for the new Young Pioneers Palace in Kostanay, Kazakhstan, which opened in February 1963 (Bogdanov, 1983, p. 48).

After his graduation, Shamma briefly returned to his native Homs, where he taught from 1965 to 1966 at the Teachers Institute. In 1966, he won a grant for post-graduate studies and left for Moscow again. In 1971, he received his post-graduate degree from the Institute, making him the first Syrian artist and researcher to be awarded an academic qualification in the fine arts. His thesis was written under the supervision of the prominent art historian, Mikhail Alpatov, and the Soviet artist, Dmitry Zhilinszky (1927-2015). It was entitled “*Istoki monumental’noi zhivopisi I ee khudozhestvennue traditsii na territorii sovremennoi Siriiskoi respubliki*” (Historical Sources on Mural Art and its Art Traditions in Contemporary Syria) (also see Shamma, 1971, pp. 26-29). In addition to writing a thesis, as a part of the degree requirements, he executed a decorative design for Seven Fountains Square in Damascus. After returning to Syria, he was appointed to the teaching staff of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University. Among Shamma’s well-known works is a decorative panel, “Modern Syria” (25 x 3 meters), used to adorn the main entrance of the International Fair in Damascus in 1966 (Bogdanov, 1983, p. 48). Shamma participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including an exhibition of Syrian artists in the USSR in 1976 (“Vustavka”, 1976). He also participated in the traveling exhibitions of the Museum of Oriental Art in 1979-83, 1980 (“Khudozhniki Sirii”, 1980), 1981 (Starodub, 1982, p. 51), 1984 (“Sovremennaya zhivopis’”, 1984), 1986 (Bogdanov, 1981, p. 167) and 1987 (“Sovremennoye”, 1987). In 1969, the Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow acquired some of Shamma’s works for its permanent collection (fig. 6) (“Sovetskaya kultura”, 1969). These were the first works by a contemporary Arab artist to enter the government museum collection of the USSR.

³³ Subhi Shouaib attended the Teachers' College in Damascus in the early 1930s, and then taught in the town of Salamiyyah. In 1933, he found employment teaching art education in secondary schools in Homs and Hama (Lenssen, 2014, p. 385).

Fig. 6. *Abdel Mannan Shamma. Palestinian Refugees, 1969.*
Oil on canvas, 100 x 120 cm



Source: Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow

Al Tall, Zuhair (1953-1996)

Born in 1953 in Zebdani, Syria, Zuhair Al Tall started his formal art education at the Baghdad Fine Art Institute in 1973-74, and later continued his education at the University of Damascus. In 1975, after completing his one-year preparatory course in Russian language, he was admitted to the Art Institute in Moscow, the Faculty of Painting, the Workshop of Monumental Art. He graduated in 1981 with a project called "The Eternal Road", executed under the supervision of the prominent artist, Yuri Korolev (1929-1992). Al Tall also completed a series of stained glass windows, entitled "People of Syria", for the reception hall of the Syrian embassy in Moscow (N. Al Tall, personal communication, November 2016). After his graduation, he returned to Moscow the following year and later completed his postgraduate studies in 1986, under the supervision of the art historian, Mikhail Alpatov, for whom he wrote his thesis on the development and formation of Syrian art after the declaration of independence in 1946 - "*Razvitie sovremennogo izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva Sirii*" (Development and Formation of Syrian Contemporary Art).

Fig. 7. Zuhair Al Tall. Series of artworks.



Source: Personal archive of Nina Al Tell.

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³⁴ The article was researched and written with the aid of a large collection of press clippings in the archives, and the private collections of artists and critics. In some cases, it was impossible to confirm the page numbers or precise dates for the clippings. Whenever an exhibition catalogue or brochure did not have a given author, it has been listed under the title of the exhibition.

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Interviews

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