

Miniatures And Icons As A National And Religious Expressive Style, And Their Impact On The Concepts Of Identity And Belonging In Contemporary Palestinian Art

Taghreed Jamal Ahmed Sughayyar

Head of the Decoration and Interior Design Department

Faculty of Arts and Educational Sciences, Palestine Technical University – Kadoorie - (PTUK)

ID Orcid (0009-0003-7054-3545)

taghreed.soughayar@ptuk.edu.ps

The study aimed to highlight a particular aspect of expressive arts, specifically icons and miniatures, and their role in narrating stories through a pictorial style. Initially rooted in religious themes, the study later addressed folk tales within Palestinian history.

The research methodology employed a descriptive approach, as the sources of information were derived from personal accounts without any documentary evidence. A significant challenge was the careful creation of models linked to Palestinian heritage to avoid distortion and misrepresentation. The research questions included: How is art connected to identity? What is the role of miniatures in Islamic art in general and Palestinian art in particular? What is the role of icons in Christian art in general and Palestinian art specifically?

Palestinian art, in all its forms, has played an essential role in affirming Palestinian identity through artistic symbols created by artists that have been passed down through generations. Miniatures and icons embodied religious ideas and folk tales, serving as a form of visual documentation. Therefore, efforts should be made to revive this form of art through art schools and specialized institutes, incorporating these topics into curricula at schools and universities.

Keywords: Miniatures, Icons, Collective Identity, Religion, Heritage.

Introduction

Arts in general, and visual arts in particular, include painting, photography, miniatures and icons, sculpture and pottery, weaving and embroidery, etc... express the human being in all the details of their existence: their reality, dreams, sense of belonging, identity, and full

engagement with others. They also reflect how individuals interact with their existence in life and the noise of this life, which compels them to absorb its content in all its forms, whether simple or complex, including those belonging to the invisible world. These come in the form of symbols connected to the individual and their existence, carrying their details to embody identity and history. Such symbols distinguish individuals from other civilizations through a unique color and form, linking them to their land, sense of belonging, and religion.

All forms of expression come together as a tapestry of concepts, intertwining to create a unique, expressive style that connects meaning and ideas. This style affirms the legitimacy of that identity, illustrating it in all its manifestations and reinforcing it within the individual's reality. Thus, the legitimacy of expressing the homeland, humanity, and various issues arise, reflecting the individual and different aspects of their social, economic, and national life. In all their forms and diverse settings, the arts serve as a prime example. Each geographical region has its distinguishing features, with unique ideas connecting it to its roots and expressing its environment. Through these characteristics, the region communicates with the world and opens up to other civilizations, presenting an image that strengthens its presence and identity.

In all their forms, the arts are closely connected to the expression of identity and heritage. They thus create a visual tapestry grounded in historical memory, with ideas as their backbone. These elements harmonize to form creativity that is characterized by its emotional spirit, resulting in artistic works that blend skilled craftsmanship with innovation. This interplay subsequently shapes their role in storytelling and historical narration. Therefore, the artwork must be linked to artistic heritage to convey the general concepts to its audience. The audience may be from the younger generation, who need to be informed about their history and heritage, or they may be from a global level. In both cases, the artwork should be presented in a beautiful and skillful manner, incorporating innovation in expressing one's identity. Thus, The artwork emerges as unique, with a distinct mark that expresses beauty and vitality. All of this is achieved without disregarding the deeply rooted symbols used to represent one's origins—especially in the Palestinian context. Through the harmony of concept and execution, the artwork strengthens the connection between the individual and their land and homeland.

Since art is the soul and essence of the human being, it is essential for art to be connected with religion. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali says here: "Whoever is not moved by spring and its flowers, or the lute and its strings, has a corrupted temperament for which there is no cure" (Al-Ghazali, part. 2, p. 269). This highlights the need to address the religious aspect within the body of the research, as religion has played a fundamental and important role throughout the various stages of history. In turn, it has served as a significant pillar in enriching and supporting the visual arts in all their forms. Religion constitutes a fundamental element of both individual and collective identity, especially in the current context of a return to cultural specificities and religion as a reaction to openness and the manifestations of globalization. Art- and literature as a form of it—remains an essential part of people's lives and the fabric of societies. Art has thus become a tool for expressing the thoughts and realities of the individual (Al-Qahtani, 2021). Therefore, its connection to art is an inevitable matter, despite the complexity and controversy of this relationship.

Research Importance:

This study explores miniatures and icons as tools of artistic expression in contemporary Palestinian art and their role in solidifying Palestinian roots in the land, aligning with the concept of permanence and immortality for Palestinians in their homeland. It also examines the religious perspective on these forms of art and their impact on historical and religious issues.

Research Problem

Care and caution must be exercised when creating symbols and elements from popular heritage and identity to avoid distortion and misrepresentation. Art is a symbol of culture, a tool of resistance, and a weapon of truth in all its forms and meanings. It, in turn, deepens the concept of existence and the attachment to land and identity.

Research Methodology

The research follows a descriptive approach, as what has been lost in Palestine far exceeds what remains due to the occupation situation.

Research Questions:

1. How is art connected to identity?
2. What is the role of miniatures in Islamic art in general and Palestinian art in particular?
3. What is the role of icons in Christian art in general and Palestinian art in particular?
4. What is the relationship between religion and art regarding inspiration and enrichment on one hand and restriction and employment on the other?

Palestinian Art Historically

The Palestinians are a people with a deeply rooted history on their land that spans thousands of years. The Arab Canaanites have inhabited this land since prehistoric times (before reading and writing). They settled, began cultivating the land, and constructed homes—not common activities during that period. Archaeological evidence and agricultural tools have been discovered from a time when Jews did not inhabit the land, indicating that earlier residents lived on this land before anyone else (Suweidan, Tarek).

The Palestinian presence continued to expand and develop, establishing centers and communities along the Palestinian coast. Throughout those ages, Palestine became a target for invaders, frequently subjected to occupations that sometimes lasted for centuries. However, there remained a continuous Palestinian presence despite these challenges. During the Canaanite period, Palestinians created a distinctive art form influenced by neighboring civilizations such as Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures. This influence was natural, as Palestine is geographically situated between the two civilizations (Figure 1) (Al-Sahli, 2018).



A Canaanite inscription in AL- Quds (1)

Palestine remained under this influence until the recognition of Christianity, which became the dominant religion. During this period, icons were painted in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and this art spread to other churches in Palestinian cities. With the advent of Islam, Islamic art began to flourish and expand throughout the region, and manuscripts that contained miniature art- illustrative images accompanying texts and beautiful decorations for page borders started to emerge. Palestinian history during this era is very rich with these manuscripts, which were distributed across many libraries, the most important of which is the Ahmadiyya Library in Akka (Figure 2). Among these manuscripts was The Fadail Bayt Al-Maqdis by Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Muhammad Al-Khatib Abu Bakr Al-Wasiti. This manuscript and a large collection of others were seized by the occupation and is now held in the Hebrew Library in Al-Quds. Meanwhile, in Gaza, we lost more than seven hundred manuscripts during the Al-Aqsa Flood War, where the Baptist Library was bombed in September 2023. Since that time nearly two thousand years ago, the bonds of art were severed, and the artistic connection and communication between creative talents disintegrated due to the invasion and occupation of Palestine by foreigners over the centuries and in successive periods. However, the Palestinian presence in the land of Palestine has never ceased since their earliest existence, even during this latest occupation.



A decorated book from Al-Ahmadiyya Library (2)

In Palestine, people belong to two official religions: Islam and Christianity. Some have received academic education, while others are self-taught. Drawing the arts paved the way to establishing the nucleus of national art, and the nature of the artist's role in the artistic process and its type were linked through his proximity or distance from his connection to politics and the successive events in Palestine after the Nakba in particular (Al-Ahmad, 102).

The division of the homeland significantly contributed to the lack of communication among male and female artists, whom we consider pioneers of Palestinian art in its various forms. Palestinian art suffered from a breakdown of cohesion due to geographic and demographic division. Palestinian artists were forcibly separated from each other, dispersed across the lands affected by the 1948 Nakba, the West Bank, and Gaza, as well as those who were displaced beyond the borders of Palestine as refugees in neighboring countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, and others who emigrated to various countries around the world. Due to the wars and conflict in the region, Palestinian artists in their early stages were not aware of the developments in modern art movements around the world. However, despite all of this, the Palestinian artist never forgot their identity and culture, which remained the central element in expressing their art.

The history of Palestinian realistic art can be divided into four stages:

1. The First Stage: The Early Years (1795–1955). During this period, icon painting emerged as one of the oldest traditions in image-making, as found in manuscripts. In a later stage, the masters of this art delved into Western artistic techniques. However, the uprooting of Palestinian society from its roots stifled the natural development of authentic local art.

2. The Second Stage: The Pioneers (1955–1965). During this period, the pioneers, who grew up among the refugees, shaped a new Palestinian art.

3. The Third Stage: The Prospectors (1965–1995). This stage includes art produced in exile and on national soil. During this period, the role of the artist was to convey the suffering of the Palestinian community from oppression and injustices perpetrated by the occupation, thus creating an expression of Palestine's collective identity.

4. The Fourth Stage: Present Day (1995–2024). In this stage, new styles have emerged. Visual arts have expanded for several reasons, including the growing number of artists, exposure to and influence from other art forms through travel, and the spread of technological techniques, most notably the multi-faceted and diverse methods of conceptual art.

The Palestinian artists emerged from a deep need to depict what had happened to them, especially after the 1948 war and continuing to the present, including the Al-Aqsa Flood war in 2024, where they faced oppression, injustice, and persecution. These injustices confined the artist's mission to expressing them, reminding others, and learning from them. It was natural for the artist to adopt a realist approach in conveying their reality and providing an honest portrayal of it (Blata, 1971).

Thus, the Palestinian artists rejected obscure and abstract formalist styles, distancing themselves from gratuitous and non-committed art. Instead, they embraced a commitment to the just cause, blending the artistic with the political and ideological. Realism converged with the concept of commitment in art, whether as a method or as an expression of a stance, as it became a demand that fulfilled the goals of those who called for an inciting, enlightening, and expressive role for art (Al-Jabri, 2010). See Figure (3).



From the events of the Nakba 1948 (3)

Realism and commitment, which align with the principle of understanding, together adhere to the idea of providing the essentials of what must be conveyed to the world and what must be achieved through the process of delivering the message. Artistic works act as notifications exchanged between the sender and the receiver. Thus, visual arts have become the tool that captures the emotions and concerns of Palestinian society. On one hand, the audience receives and views these works, making them accessible for public consumption. On the other hand, they play a significant role in stirring emotions and raising awareness. Its role is not to harmonize or satisfy desires by following beauty but rather to serve a national purpose. It conveys a message that is read by the eye, with the goal of critique, incitement, and raising awareness.

Icons in Palestinian Art History

“Icon” originally comes from Greek, meaning “image.” It became a term used during the era when Christianity was recognized, marking the beginning of church construction and directing art toward serving religion. Icons are typically found on wooden panels and feature colored images depicting religious events and saints' portraits. At their core, the icon serves as a religious, educational message with a powerful impact. The use of simple color language conveys teachings and elevates believers' emotions toward eternal life. Figure (4) (Ziadeh, 2022).



The icon of the Church of Saint Games in Al-Quds (4)

In addition, the icon is considered a sermon and a drawn book, recorded in a simple, universal language that everyone can understand, regardless of tongue. The illiterate can interpret it through its simplicity, like reading a book or listening to a sermon, while the educated can grasp what written works often fail to express. Illiterate people, unable to read books, can still recall the courageous deeds performed by the saints and those who faithfully feared God. In this way, they are inspired with zeal to undertake heroic and glorious actions, worthy of praise at all times, exchanging earth for heaven.

Icons dating back to the Byzantine era, when Christianity was recognized, played a central role in the art of pictorials among Palestinians. This began to manifest in the philosophy of art and became more apparent starting in the 18th century. The Church of the Nativity, the birthplace of Christ in Bethlehem, played a significant role in the development of visual arts, particularly icons. Religious art began to serve the church and Christian teachings, spreading the faith beyond Palestine to other parts of the world. In this way, visual arts supported religion on the one hand and contributed to Palestinian art on the other. The role of the monks began here, guiding those interested in this type of art, which initially took the form of a craft for earning a livelihood. This led to the emergence of a group of artists later called the “Al-Quds School.” These artists learned from the monks who came from Europe to serve the church in the Holy Land, bringing their skills in visual arts in general. The prevailing denomination in Palestine was Orthodox Christianity. With the arrival of the Russians, who belonged to this denomination, Palestinians learned skills from them, which allowed their talents to grow and develop. Consequently, this art style was born, merging Christian teachings with Palestinian heritage.

The artists of the Al-Quds School excelled and became renowned for their icon painting, which became an integral part of the identity associated with the holy city. No pilgrim visiting Al-Quds or Bethlehem from around the world returns without acquiring a piece of this art to take home as a souvenir or gift. The sizes of these icons varied from small to large. The smaller ones were available for sale to pilgrims and visitors. The larger icons were custom-ordered for specific designs to be placed in various locations throughout the holy city to commemorate significant sites. These icons are numerous and spread throughout Palestine, and they continue to adorn the walls of monasteries, even those far removed from the main Palestinian cities. See Figure (5).



Byzantine icons (5)

Byzantine Christian icons were infused with Palestinian characteristics at all levels. Although the art is Christian with Western influences and follows the Byzantine tradition, the small details developed by the Jerusalem School instilled a Palestinian spirit in this type of art. They transformed the features of the saints into Arab characteristics, resembling popular and legendary heroes found in Islamic miniatures and pictorial arts, which were prevalent in various forms of Arab and Islamic visual heritage. Arab features, such as round faces and hazel, almond-shaped eyes, dominated the depictions of the saints. In the Church of "Saint George," there is an image of Mr. Al-Khidr on horseback, where the artist changed the horse's usual red color to a gilded crimson adorned with star-shaped decorations. Additionally, Mr. Al-Khidr is depicted wearing a turban resembling the Ottoman sultan's turban. Although the title of the icon is written in Greek, the rest of its details are crafted in Arabic, the language of the people of Palestine (Blata, 1990).

The artist Hanna Al-Qudsī recognized the importance of documenting his paintings by establishing the artist's identity and linking it to his homeland. He began signing his name on his artworks and is credited with associating the name of the Al-Maqdesi artist with the city of Al-Quds. He would write his name followed by the word "Al-Qudsī." This indicates that he is from the city of Al-Quds rather than being a family name. Thus, it became a Palestinian practice for all artists of the Al-Quds School. For example, the names of artists like Hanna Al-Qudsī, Yohanna Saliba Al-Qudsī, Nikola Theodoros Al-Qudsī, and Mikhael Mahna Al-Qudsī

reflect this trend. He played a significant role in documenting and affirming identity in this context. Religious art then evolved into secular art in the 20th century. The Al-Maqdesi artists Khalil Al-Halabi (1889–1964) and Nicola Al-Sayigh (1863–1942) were among the first to transition from religious painting to secular art, influenced by their Russian teachers and their attempts to imitate them. Thus, the artistic movement began to take on a new role through their efforts, and they played a key and fundamental role in developing Palestinian art (Ernest, 1971).

With the onset of the British Mandate in Palestine and the departure from Ottoman control, the West influenced the artistic movement in Palestine. As missionary campaigns flowed into Palestine and the British provided facilities for travelers and visitors, a new type of art emerged, influenced by the incoming artists who were increasingly accepted and adopted a new painting style. These artists would carry their supplies and paint outdoors or wherever they wished. The style of painting on an easel began to emerge. This approach had been established in Europe for centuries but reached Palestine only after the British Mandate and the arrival of artists who settled there. (Al-Sahli, 2018)

This new style motivated some artists to imitate this art form, relying on personal imitation and effort based on their observations rather than through formal study at an academy, as was the case at the College of Arts in Egypt or some other Arab countries. They began experimenting with new imported tools, teaching themselves and developing their works and techniques to establish a school that would educate future generations. This was notably led by the Palestinian artist Khalil Al-Halabi (1889–1964), who specialized in icon painting, and the artist Jamal Badran from Haifa (1909–1999), who focused on Islamic art, particularly miniatures. They ventured into using photographic techniques to document the natural landscapes of their birthplace (Jan 2020). Figure (6) for a natural scene by Khalil Al-Halabi.



A natural scene by Khalil Al-Halabi (6)

In 1906, the settlers established the Bezalel Academy of Arts, the first art institution in Palestine, located in Jerusalem. They had taken over the building from a Palestinian family in the city center (Figure 7).



Bezalel Academy (7)

It was prohibited for Palestinians to study there, so the new generation of artists, such as Faisal Al-Taher, Jamal Bayyari, and Khalil Badawi from Jaffa, as well as Dawood Zalatimo and Mubarak Saad from Al-Quds, taught themselves through experimentation, measurement, and observation under challenging circumstances. Women also entered this field, though they were few, with notable figures such as Zulfa Al-Saadi (1905–1988), who learned under Nicola Al-Sayigh and focused on painting icons and national figures (Figure 8). Another prominent artist was Nuhail Bishara (1919–1997), who studied art in Italy; her drawings depicted scenes from Al-Quds and its ancient streets, featuring women wearing traditional Palestinian dress. As for Soufi Al-Halabi (1906–1998), who studied in France, she was influenced by the French school, producing paintings of natural scenes, olive trees, and orchards, all inspired by the Palestinian countryside.



Painting icons by Zulfa Al-Saadi (8)

The seeds of Palestinian art did not have the opportunity to grow in the major urban centers until the signs of the Palestinian Nakba began to emerge, characterized by violence between Jews and Palestinians. This continued until 1948, when the Nakba occurred, leading to Palestinian displacement and the fragmentation of the land and its people, including the artists, who experienced the same grief and suffering. The number of artists was already small, and communication among them diminished. Some engaged in defending the land, such as Badawiya Al-Taher, who was killed in the Battle of Jaffa, while the artist Bayyari died in his home, overwhelmed by despair, injustice, and poverty; he was a creative artist who painted beautiful scenes of Jaffa's neighborhoods. Others were forcibly displaced to refugee camps in neighboring Arab countries, including prominent figures like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra from Bethlehem and Ghassan Kanafani from Akka. As a result, the artistic process came to a

standstill, as the conditions no longer supported the continuation and development of art in the region (Maha Aziza, 2013).

Miniatures in Palestinian Art

One of the traditional arts is miniature painting, which is a pictorial art associated with storytelling. It acts as a beautiful and simplistic image that reads alongside the text, free from complexity and pretentiousness. Despite its small size, it plays a significant role, paralleling books and manuscripts' literary and scientific content. This type of pictorial art became famous in Islamic countries and some Asian cities, as well as in Europe after the twentieth century when pioneers of art schools were influenced by Islamic art styles and aesthetics after World War I. This art form is also applied to the decorative lines and margins of pages adorned on various materials, including wood, bone, leather, ivory, metal, paper, and other substances. It serves as a recording tool for social and environmental events related to beliefs, customs, and traditions, documenting incidents and stories from heritage, architecture, clothing, and folklore. As a result, it has gained significance and evolved (Allam Naimat, 1975). Figure (9) for a folkloric Palestinian miniature by the Palestinian artist Ghazi Naim.



Folkloric Palestinian miniature (9)

The Muslim artist excluded the third dimension in miniature painting, focusing solely on the length and width as a style in Islamic art, which is associated with abstraction, a fundamental aspect of this genre. Abstraction is characterized by the absence of imitation and replication of reality; the artist relies on visual tricks through proximity and distance alone. Thus, there are two main elements in miniatures: the color area and the dividing line between them. Consequently, color remained confined to the blocks that form the artwork. The human element is fundamental in miniatures, followed by other elements such as the defined space of the artwork and supplementary components like animals, tools, and furniture, among others. Artists focused on the form and character of architectural elements, allowing viewers to recognize the country of origin of the artwork through the distinct materials used in construction, the shapes of doors and windows, arches, and even the details of decorative units. Figure (10) is a painting by Palestinian artist Suleiman Mansour titled “Mother and Child,” which embodies this concept.



Mother and Child Painting (10)

Miniatures depict scenes from events within manuscripts or books, carrying numerous values, including the narrative of the moment illustrated through various images and scenes. They also arrange the elements of the scene in a way that highlights different directions and locations with beautiful and well-considered geometric distribution, while sequencing the events of the story. Miniatures are rich in color and diversity of visual scenes, featuring precise details and a variety of striking surfaces. This richness ensures that the viewer does not feel bored while contemplating the image, as it resembles a scene viewed from a bird's eye perspective, allowing them to take in the entire composition at a glance. (Figure 11).



Iranian Miniature (11)

In Egypt and the Levant, there was a surge of creativity similar to that of the Islamic world, where artists excelled in this type of art. Miniatures found their place in various forms of manuscripts, including social, economic, and legal documents. However, this flourishing was stifled by the Ayyubids, who adopted a strict Salafi legal approach to the arts. The artistic prowess of Egypt and the Levant, which included Palestine, transitioned from miniatures to pottery. This evolution showcased the capabilities of several masters whose names are inscribed on plates, such as Muslim, Saad, Ghaybi ibn al-Tabrizi, and Sharaf al-Abwani. These works remain preserved in museums worldwide and witness a unique skill today.

In Palestine, there is often confusion between miniatures and icons. While they share significant similarities in idea and execution, their function and use differ. Icons are religious stories painted on the walls of churches or depicted in religious books, while miniatures focus on social, political, and cultural life and are often found within manuscripts and books.

The importance of miniatures lies in their ability to give the text value and enhance its reading through visual elements that are connected to the information recorded in the manuscript or book. They played a major role in decorating manuscripts with beautiful ornaments and borders. One of the most famous examples of this is *Maqamat al-Hariri*. Figure (12).



A Scene of *Maqamat al-Hariri* (12)

Miniatures evolved and developed their own schools and talented masters. Craftsmen specializing in this art began to compete, each striving to showcase their work with unique value and in a new form. They took pride in their distinctive creations, always introducing something new compared to their predecessors, and thus, miniatures became a highly important art form. Over time, miniatures gained high prestige and immense importance, becoming a refined art form recognized for its value. Specialists in this field became well-known, and these images played a significant role in understanding various societies, including both Arab and other communities. These visual depictions made it possible to uncover details about lifestyles, customs, and dwellings that could not be learned from books alone. Thus, miniatures played a crucial role in documentation and preserving cultural heritage.

In Palestine, which is an important part of the Islamic world, and due to its geographical location as a passage from the Levant to Egypt and vice versa, there has been a focus on documentation through Islamic manuscripts. These varied between literary, mythical, and scientific works, as well as personal family albums that document the history of extended families. All of these reflect, through imagery, the flourishing of many specialized schools in decoration and painting. Imaginary painting, which contradicts reality, is considered one of the most important characteristics of Islamic art. This feature was utilized to attract the viewer's attention to the artwork by linking contradictory elements within the same piece. For example, it may combine night and day in the same image or focus on architectural representation in the artwork, or focusing on the intricate details in the beautiful and diverse decorative units, which clearly reveal fundamental characteristics of the caliph's personality, thus indicating his wealth and nobility through the image. (Riyad Awad).

Suppose we want to explore miniatures in Palestinian history. In that case, it is natural that their place is in manuscripts, as Palestine is rich in historical manuscripts from the days of the

Jebusites and Canaanites to the present. Some of these were created on stone or on leather. Every city in Palestine has manuscripts that contain specific information. For example, during the Canaanite period (3000 BCE), we have found no evidence of this era other than stone inscriptions and what was found on leather or papyrus, which has not survived to the present day, unlike the situation in Egypt. However, most of what the Canaanites left us in Palestine during the first millennium BCE has been lost or damaged, as the materials used for writing were papyrus and parchment (Ahmed Al-Maraashli, 1984).

In the second millennium BCE, Jericho's manuscripts were found in Qumran and preserved in clay jars, similar to how the pharaohs stored their manuscripts written on leather. As for the manuscripts of Bethlehem, they are often associated with those of Jericho. What was found there pertains to the history of Jesus Christ and is preserved in the Church of the Nativity library. In Al-Quds, which the Jebusites established, they left behind stone inscriptions and some artifacts, which are very few and rare. As for manuscripts, they left nothing. During their time, there was no paper writing or even writing on leather until the first millennium BCE, similar to their Jebusite ancestors. When Al-Quds was opened by the Rashidun caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab in the fifteenth year of the Hijra, the first and most important historical manuscript after the Islamic conquest was written: the Assurance of Umar (Figure 13). It was formulated in Aelia and was an agreement between the Muslims who conquered Al-Quds and the city's inhabitants from all communities.



The Assurance of Umar manuscript (13)

In Gaza, some of the oldest manuscripts include a collection of papyrus sheets containing official letters and administrative records. Researcher and historian Hossam Abu Al-Nasr (from Gaza) stated that he personally examined these manuscripts and found no miniatures in any of them. It is important to note, unfortunately, that these manuscripts were located in the Al-Omariah Library, which was set on fire during the recent war on Gaza (Al-Aqsa Flood 2023/2024), and all of them were lost in the fire that followed the missile strikes on the site.

There is a Jewish sect living in Nablus on Mount Gerizim known as the Samaritan sect. Most of Nablus' manuscripts are in the possession of this sect, which has lived there since ancient times. These manuscripts are in the form of ancient scrolls, thought to be related to the Torah, and associated with the books that document the rituals and practices of the Jewish faith. Some

Jewish rabbis suggest that these books are the original, unaltered Torah, parts of which were lost either due to theft or destruction over the long passage of time. It is believed that the first Jewish capital was on this mountain. After occupying Palestine in 1948, the main Palestinian cities preserved their manuscripts in their libraries. In Haifa, manuscripts can be found in the Carmel Library, and in the Great Mosque of Jaffa, there are manuscripts from the city of Jaffa. The most important manuscript, “Fadail Bayt Al-Maqdis,” is located in the Ahmadiyya Library in Akka, Figure (14). It was authored by the preacher of Al-Aqsa Mosque, Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Ahmad Al-Wasiti, in the 5th century AH. This is the only surviving copy, which was preserved in the library of the Ahmed Pasha Al-Jazzar Mosque in the city of Akka, northern Palestine. However, 26 pages are missing from it. The manuscript was seized by the Jews and is now located in the library of the Hebrew University in Al-Quds.



Fadail Bayt Al-Maqdis manuscript (14)

Perhaps the first person to bring attention to this manuscript early on was Abdullah Mukhlis, a member of the Arab Scientific Academy in Damascus. He mentioned it in an article published in 1930 in the academy’s journal, highlighting its value and author, Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Ahmad Al-Wasiti, and noting that it was preserved in the library of Ahmed Pasha Al-Jazzar Mosque in Akka.

This is a unique copy, with no other like it in the collections of Arabic manuscripts. It seems that, following this attention, the Egyptian National Library took an interest in this manuscript, along with the other writings in the collection. In 1932, Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Hafiz Al-Tijani transported it from Akka to Cairo, where it was photographed. The original was then returned to its place in Palestine.

The country’s exposure to colonization and continuous wars has resulted in the loss of most of its valuable historical manuscripts, which documented key stages in Palestine’s history. Many of these manuscripts were taken to Turkey during the Ottoman rule. However, the most significant documentation came from the Orientalists who accompanied Napoleon to the region, as they created some of the most important paintings of Palestinian cities. These works were considered crucial in documenting that era, with a large portion being taken to France while the rest is preserved in global museums. The most valuable manuscripts were located

in Gaza and Beit Hanoun, and the most important mosques that housed them were destroyed during World War I.

After the Israeli occupation in 1948, most of the important and historical manuscripts were either destroyed, burned, or stolen. What remained is now housed in Israeli museums and libraries. This was followed by the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. From the Great Omari Mosque alone, approximately 700 manuscripts were taken, and their whereabouts remain unknown to this day.

It should be noted that we need to find out whether these manuscripts contained any miniatures. What is certain, however, is that the manuscripts reviewed by Palestinian researcher Hussam Abu Al-Nasr in Gaza were free of any miniatures or illustrations.

The rest have no reliable information about their contents, as they have not been documented by any specialized researchers to date.

Religion and its relation to enrichment and inspiration, on one hand, and restriction and employment, on the other, in the arts.

Religion has played a role in restricting the movement of the arts throughout the ages in all its forms. It has limited the freedom for the arts to soar and explore the realms of creativity on all levels. This is because religion has tied art primarily to serving its purposes. If we look back at Christian and Islamic arts, being the two largest monotheistic religions, we find that art was primarily employed in their service. It cannot be denied that religion has served as a rich and fundamental source for the arts. Thus, Christian and Islamic art developed distinct identities, each differentiated from the other and closely tied to their respective religious concepts and doctrines. This distinction enabled both to become sources of creativity and essential avenues for presenting and shaping themes. Conversely, it also constrained their use of these themes. Therefore, art's role in religion cannot be overlooked, as it involves the reproduction of religious heritage and raises questions about faith. Furthermore, it addresses the core of religious beliefs and critiques them as well (Al-Ghazali, part. 2, p. 269).

According to researchers in Eastern studies Sylvia Naef, there is a controversy regarding images depicting living beings, as the Old Testament clearly prohibits drawing images of gods. The dispute surrounding this issue, especially in the eighth and ninth centuries AD, cannot be overlooked, particularly regarding the depiction of Christ and his mother or the prohibition thereof. This prohibition originated from the Catholic Church, while Orthodoxy surpassed this ban and the associated debate, producing its distinctive and enduring works to this day in the creation of icons that adorn its religious churches.

In the successive Christian eras, the issue of prohibition gained considerable attention. Although the purpose of icons was purely religious at the beginning of the Christian era, and they were regarded as a tool for spreading Christianity, the disagreement among religious leaders intensified to the point that icons were completely rejected. Even today, some Christian denominations still hold onto their conviction regarding the prohibition and conduct their prayers in front of religious icons.

The word “icon” is of Greek origin, meaning resemblance, example, or image. It has specific religious characteristics made according to this template and is religiously associated with Jesus Christ and his mother Mary, as well as stories from the Christian religious traditions (Mari Bette Fischer).

As a form of honoring Christian religious figures who performed heroic and enduring deeds in the service of the religion, icons were created as a tribute and acknowledgment of their contributions. This is according to the Anba Takla website, which is one of the Orthodox Christian websites. The purpose of the image here is to bring the concept closer to facilitate the understanding of the meaning. It is more relatable to people and helps capture their attention on the event. As a result, the idea becomes more ingrained and significantly impacts emotions and feelings, making it a desirable tool for learning.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, the Western Catholic Church gradually began to acknowledge images and paintings. However, before that, it did not accept the idea, fearing the worship of idols and the influence of pagan traditions. In the 16th century, the dispute resurfaced three centuries later when Christian clergymen advocating for religious reform removed images and statues from churches and monasteries. Martin Luther King had warned that such images would lead to a deviation from religious thought towards blasphemy.

According to the texts of the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” and through the Catholic Church, the encyclopedia defined the laws permitted by God, which were granted to humanity since ancient times. All forms of worship were free from images and statues, as stated in the text: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, Jehovah your God, am a God who demands exclusive devotion.” (Exodus 20:4, 5) Since God requires “exclusive devotion,” He condemns the practice of worshiping and praying before statues or images, including icons and all carved crosses or religious symbols.

On the other hand, some believe that images are a means of expressing religious thought through icons and what has been painted on church walls or within religious books in churches. They do not see any prohibition against expressing religious concepts through images and statues. On the contrary, they view it as a way to connect the texts of religious concepts with reality (Afif Bahnassi, 1979).

When viewing the icon, both thought and emotion are elevated, soaring into a world unlike the real one, a world where ideals and values are manifested. Thus, we do not stop at mere decoration and aesthetics; rather, we ascend to the spiritual realms of creativity and values, which are attributes of the saint depicted in the icon. To the extent that the viewer feels their emotions become a part of this saint’s emotions in a beautiful spiritual connection.

In Egypt, which was a pioneer in this field, the idea of painting on wooden panels emerged during the Greco-Roman period when artists painted the faces of the deceased in color on wooden panels that were placed on coffins (Fayum Portraits School). See Figure (15). The practice of painting faces in this manner continued into the early Coptic period, following the

Fayum Portraits School. Additionally, the Copts of that early era also painted images of birds, fish, and animals on similar panels dating back to the 4th century AD. It is widely believed that the method of painting icons on wooden panels was derived from this concept (Tharwat Okasha, 1994).



Coptic Icon in Fayum (15)

The art of icon painting is considered one of the branches of Coptic art, which in all its forms is the heir to the Pharaonic civilization of Egypt and the subsequent blending and merging of civilizations that coexisted with Egyptian culture. It is not surprising that Egypt was a pioneer in this field, given its location, artistic history, and Pharaonic heritage in painting and pictorial art. All of this contributed to Egypt's advancement and innovation in the art of Christian icons, using them as elements to bring people closer to religion and beautify churches. Coptic art played a highly significant expressive role, drawing on inherited artistic values from Egyptian art.

1. Since the religious concept is constant and unchanging, depicting three-dimensionality and depth was avoided. The focus was limited to two dimensions: length and width. These two dimensions are fixed and do not change direction, unlike the third dimension, which shifts with the viewer's eye. The Coptic artist, like the Egyptian artist, adhered to this approach.
2. The study of the size of the mass and its position within space was approached through a mathematical process, creating a sense of beauty that evokes a feeling of stability within the overall composition of the artwork.

As for Islam, it had its own perspective on the arts in general, and on painting and drawing, including icons and miniatures, which are the specific focus of our study. There was a belief that Islam opposes depictions, particularly those where humans are the central focus. However, the reality proves otherwise. Islam, throughout its history and geographic diversity, has been rich in various forms of art, including painting, sculpture, and decoration in all its forms—whether on wood, copper, or leather. Unfortunately, in our present time, there is a fierce attack by infiltrated groups who are demolishing this historical Islamic art, claiming that it is forbidden and against Islamic law and religion. However, these claims are false and do not reflect the true Islamic reality or its beliefs (Afif Bahnassi, 1979).

The researcher Dr. Musfer Al-Qahtani wrote: “Considering the achievement of legal benefit when examining matters is one of the objectives of Sharia, which preserves what brings benefit and prevents harm. Often, the discretion of the jurist in contemporary issues is based on the consideration of the authority of the unqualified interest, for which there is no specific

textual evidence in Sharia to either affirm or reject it. However, it falls within the noble Sharia's broader objectives, and most scholars acknowledge its validity. (Al-Qahtani, Musfer, 2021)

From this, it can be concluded that there is no text in the Quran that prohibits images. As the prominent historian of Islamic art, Oleg Grabar, emphasizes, Islam accepted the role of icons and miniatures, as they do not contradict the established principles of Islamic belief, nor are they inconsistent with Islamic law. He acknowledges that in the early stages of spreading the Islamic message, statues were prohibited because they were associated with idols and idol worship prior to the establishment of the Islamic call. However, regarding paintings and drawings, there is no indication that Islam called for their destruction or burning.

The existence of certain extremist and deviant groups who have strayed from the normal course of life in various fields, including the arts, has led to a rejection of anything related to art, such as painting and drawing. These groups act against human nature on the one hand. On the other, they fight and destroy everything authentic and connected to the roots of civilizations, including Arab-Islamic civilization. They are directed groups aiming to destroy and erase history. An example of this is the destruction of the ancient Arab city of Hatra, which was founded before Islam, as well as the ruins of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh (Al-Jabri, Muhammad, 2010).

When Muslims initially sought to avoid certain forms of art, particularly sculpture, it was for religious reasons aimed at distancing Muslims in the early stages of the Islamic call from idols, which were the dominant form of worship before Islam. Additionally, Muslims wanted to break free from the influence of the Christian Church, which was dominant in the Levant and Egypt, as Christianity was the official religion in those regions at the time. Therefore, Muslims sought alternatives for the visual representation of humans. This does not mean that they did not excel in this field; rather, the issue was related to the prohibition of exact replication of living beings, particularly humans. Thus, they began using decorative motifs of plants, flowers, and fruits, representing them in murals and mosaic floors, as well as in painting and stained-glass art. These artistic expressions are beautifully manifested in the remarkable legacy left by the Umayyad caliphs in the desert palaces of the Levant, as well as in religious structures like the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque and the revered Dome of the Rock. Following this, other artistic experiments emerged, such as wood carving, characterized by abstract forms and highly intricate geometric patterns (Afif Bahnassi, 1979, p. 19).

The Palestinian researcher Hussam Abu Al-Nasr states, "The art of Islamic miniatures has continued to develop and spread to this day, with a large group of painters in Arab and Islamic countries still working in this field." Among them is Mohammed Racim from Algeria, who excelled in the art of miniatures and preserved its Islamic principles. He incorporated contemporary elements into the execution and composition of his works. The art of miniatures took root in its birthplace, Iran, which remains the largest country dedicated to this form of art to this day. Many artists continue to work in this field, and their art has evolved to the point where it has influenced various contemporary art movements in Europe, including Expressionism, Abstract art, and modern visual schools. An art specialist would notice the

significant similarities between the art of miniatures, folk art, and iconography. There are many commonalities among them in terms of concept, purpose, and method of execution.

With the advancement and creativity achieved by Muslim artists in the art of miniatures, their works have become akin to rich artistic paintings filled with diverse elements arranged in an artistic composition that does not bore the viewer. On the contrary, these works captivate the observer, drawing them into realms of enjoyment and wonder upon viewing. Thus, they create a unique and distinctive artistic expression in terms of form, content, and the subjects they address, which encompass reality, imagination, myths, and folk tales.

Thus, a new art form asserted itself strongly in the Islamic world. With the extensive geographical distribution of the Islamic state, this art helped foster a sense of connection and belonging to the same civilization despite the vast distances and the diversity of cultures, including Byzantine, Persian, and Indian in these regions. This art merged within the crucible of Islamic thought and arts, becoming an essential and vital part of it. There are countless examples throughout the Islamic world in cities such as Al-Quds, Cairo, Aleppo, Damascus, and Granada (Tharwat Okasha, 1994).

The Impact of icons and miniatures on the concepts of identity and belonging in contemporary Palestinian art.

The Palestinian people have borne the responsibility of resisting the occupation out of fear for their land and identity. To achieve this, they employed various methods, including community awareness and education. These efforts aimed to inform the public about the reality of the Palestinian situation and the ongoing loss of their land. The artist, as part of the Palestinian community, expressed this diversity by embedding Palestinian heritage in his artistic works. In addition to showcasing the heritage found in embroidered items, such as furniture and clothing, artists used various visual expression techniques, including icon art, miniatures, photography, oil and color painting, sculpture, and relief. This was done to make the occupiers understand that people have an identity that will never fade over time. On the contrary, each generation passes the torch to the next, ensuring that no aspect of their heritage, history, geography, or culture is forgotten in any field (Al-Raheb et al., 2013)

Palestinian visual art has its own uniqueness compared to global art in terms of its geography and modernity. However, the same artistic schools can be found on both sides, differing only in how the artist approaches and engages with the artwork. Palestinian artists tend to emphasize their identity by preserving heritage, which is represented in our research by icons and miniatures. They have significantly contributed to preserving Palestinian cultural heritage and identity through various methods, starting from the early 1940s. As awareness of the real danger posed by the Jewish presence aiming to seize the land began to grow, groups advocating for a revival in Palestinian visual art started to emerge. This movement took a new direction for several reasons, including the political, social, and economic situation. They began to search for what is realistic, as was the case in the rest of the world, looking at the realities of their situation in hopes of contributing to addressing the struggles faced by society at that time. This included concerns about the future, especially following the end of World War II, the armed clashes with the Jews, and the issues surrounding the defense of their land.

Thus, European influences began to emerge, considering society's standards and culture to refine artistic works. However, after the formal seizure of the land, the arts shifted towards heritage and how to preserve it, as it reinforces roots and affirms collective identity and history. Palestinian artists took it upon themselves to enhance and root the discourse in their artistic works. They left no aspect related to Palestinian history unexamined, including popular tales, customs, and traditions, connecting all of this to authenticity and heritage. They sought to reframe these elements with a sense of innovation and contemporary renewal. After a long struggle, they succeeded in linking popular drawings to Palestinian heritage. Moreover, they went beyond this by expressing contemporary life and the emergence of thought.

All of this did not divert them from their primary cause, which was to affirm the right to the land. Each artist adopted their unique style of expressing their art, whether intentionally or not, leading to a diversity of techniques that enhanced the artistic and cultural understanding of Palestinian history (Al-Jabri, Muhammad, 2010).

Some consider preserving Palestinian art a vital necessity for understanding the present and its changing manifestations. Therefore, it is essential to have an objective understanding that forms the foundation of the artistic process, supported by knowledge, awareness, history, and social aspects. When measured by wisdom and reason, it should be subjected to the realities of modern life and its conditions. Any work that embodies creativity in its form and reference must raise fundamental questions, such as: What is its identity? Where and how can we find it in the works attributed to it?

To address the pressing questions related to identity, Palestinian artists began developing the elements and tools associated with visual composition to enhance their perspectives on contemporary art. They began to seek sources of inspiration in Palestinian art and the cultural and popular arts they inherited. In light of the political, social, and economic conditions they face, they found that cultural heritage is their lifeline, connecting them to their history and civilization from ancient times. It serves as the primary source of knowledge and values upon which successive generations have relied, encompassing customs, traditions, folk songs, music, and poetry. Through this, they can achieve a comprehensive lifestyle linked to the transmission of this rich cultural heritage across generations, which can be derived from two sources: Either through what is passed down via memory and conveyed orally, documented through audio recordings or written texts, or obtained from books that have served as references for historical knowledge (Ernest, 1971).

Islam, the Arabic language, and customs and traditions serve as the connecting link between art and culture. Islam has played a significant role in transforming concepts of social and political life, as well as altering the notions of communities through the enlightened ideas brought by the Islamic faith to humanity, which aimed to reform the social and intellectual systems of society. The Holy Quran and the Sunnah (Prophetic traditions) served as references for correcting the course of society towards establishing a new intellectual modernity for Arab life. This led to a clear acceptance of matters that had been rejected prior to the advent of Islam. Since Arabic is the language of the Quran, it became the nurturing ground for the new Arab thought, guiding it towards growth, development, and elevation.

In essence, customs and traditions, which complement religion and language, should be among the most important components of any nation's culture, playing a crucial role in preserving the heritage of identity and its historical value. Unfortunately, they have become a burden on the development and growth of thought, hindering its progression towards globalization and the acquisition of modern intellectual growth that aligns with the realities of our current era and the advancements and diversity of thought that characterize modern life, along with the blending of various cultures from different peoples. It is natural for cultures to interact with one another, enriching each culture with new and beautiful values that contribute to its development in line with the progress and changes in the world. This interaction is driven by several factors, including globalization, which has transformed the world into a small village where ideas can be exchanged and transmitted easily from one place to another. Geography is no longer a barrier to cultural interaction. If we look at the Arab world as an example, we find many instances of mixed cultural diversity that are difficult to separate. For example, the Amazigh culture is an integral part of Moroccan society, the Kurdish culture is intertwined with Iraqi society, and the Armenian culture is part of Lebanese society. There are many examples and numerous models within Arab communities, including the roots of Arab culture, which stem from earlier civilizations that have influenced the formation of its culture. All of these elements have formed the overall fabric of Islamic culture and thought, which in turn laid the foundational lines for art, later shaping what is known as Islamic art. This art style has established broad lines that artists within the Islamic world adhere to, with some minor variations imposed by geography and context (Tharwat Okasha, 1994).

Conclusion

The artistic heritage, encompassing various elements and forms, has been comprehensive of all that history has documented in diverse artistic expressions such as painting, portrayal, sculpture, icons, miniatures, mosaics, and more. This heritage extends from ancient times to the present, reflecting the cultural and intellectual developments that societies have experienced throughout the ages. It represents the history that has been built over the years up to our present, reflecting our past with all its richness in various aspects of life and society. It has provided the educated class of writers, artists, and politicians with a force that draws them toward enhancing the identity of the Palestinian and Arab persona from ancient times to the present. This is precisely what this elite segment of society has advocated for in order to keep it alive, given its role in affirming identity.

There are many sources of Arab culture, which are diverse in nature and have motivated artists and intellectuals to affirm their identity for its authenticity and rich history. Artists have demonstrated this through their works, emphasizing their identity and authenticity, expressing their love for their homeland, and highlighting the importance of their social and political commitment in this artistic production. This has played a key role in documenting the concepts and values that strengthen their national belonging. This artistic momentum and the significant role played by Palestinian artists and thinkers have placed a burden and responsibility on the contemporary art movement to reassess and analyze these heritages, linking them to the contemporary artistic movement, which is advancing rapidly due to the technological

revolution. This aims to affirm and protect Palestinian identity from loss and erasure. “What heritage has created spontaneously, the visual artist tries to employ intellectually, according to their artistic visions that vary with style. Consequently, it emerges from its narrow confines into the world without losing its uniqueness or disconnecting from its environment.”

With the responsibility that Palestinian artists bear and their awareness of their essential role in shouldering this responsibility, they have sought to combine cultural heritage with contemporary practical advancement. Their aim is to achieve benefit through their artistic works that convey a message of documenting heritage in a visually appealing manner filled with passion. Artworks emerged that were executed with new contemporary techniques, embodying the substance and value of Palestinian heritage. These works combined the essential idea of Palestinian heritage with modern, innovative styles of execution, particularly in the realm of traditional arts. However, in our specialized topic on icons, this skill remained in the hands of church guardians and artists who embodied Christian religious themes. As for the miniatures, they have unfortunately been victims of the political conflict in Palestine and were targeted during the war. This is because miniatures belong in manuscripts, as they express events and stories from the documented history within those manuscripts. Most of what was left in our ancient libraries was seized by the occupation, and it was not well documented, making it difficult for us to discuss and prove its existence.

Today, since this style of art is connected to Islamic thought and is considered a profound means of expression, it has caught the attention of modern artists who have used it as a style in Expressionism and other modern visual schools. It is essential that we return to adopting this style in our teaching methodologies at our universities and reintegrate it into the crucible of pioneering artistic and intellectual curricula.

Recommendations:

1. The loss of a significant part of Palestinian art, including miniatures, due to occupation and successive wars places a responsibility on all those interested in the arts, particularly the Ministry of Culture, to work on researching everything related to this subject, collecting it, and documenting it.
2. The adoption of miniatures and icons as a teaching method in universities, as they are an important form of documentation for stories depicted in images that illustrate events.
3. Palestinian history and folklore contain a wealth of popular and historical tales, forming a repository of topics that specialists can explore to connect them with illustrations in the style of miniature art.
4. Preservation of cultural symbols and icons: This is achieved by depicting and embodying Palestinian cultural symbols such as the flag, the Palestinian key, traditional Palestinian attire, and historical and natural landmarks. This effort helps maintain the identity, history, and culture of the Palestinian people.

5. Transmitting traditions and customs reflects ancient Palestinian practices and promotes their transfer between generations, contributing to the preservation of the Palestinian people's cultural identity and heritage.
6. Reviving folk heritage: The art of miniatures and icons serves as a means to revive Palestinian folk heritage by embodying historical, popular, and religious stories and expressing their values and beliefs.
7. Participation in community cultural life: The production of Palestinian miniatures and icons encourages engagement in community cultural activities, whether through art exhibitions or cultural events, thereby enhancing cultural awareness and appreciation of Palestinian heritage.
8. Expression of suffering and resilience: The art of Palestinian miniatures and icons reflects the daily suffering and resilience of the Palestinian people. By depicting these experiences, it raises awareness of the challenging conditions faced by the Palestinian people and their ability to endure.
9. Promoting unity and solidarity: The art of Palestinian miniatures and icons strengthens unity and solidarity among Palestinians, both within Palestine and in the diaspora. By depicting the values and principles that unite the Palestinian people, it fosters strong bonds among community members.
10. Global awareness: Palestinian miniatures and icons play an important role in disseminating Palestinian culture on a global scale.

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