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# THE EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PRINTMAKING: TECHNIQUES, IDENTITY, AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

*Printmaking is a multifaceted artistic field celebrated for its diverse techniques and creative methods. As one of the oldest art forms, it has evolved over centuries, spreading across the globe with its rich variety of practices. The 17th century marked a significant milestone with the works of renowned artists like Rembrandt, who excelled in techniques such as etching—a form of copper engraving. Today, printmaking continues to thrive, blending traditional methods with modern innovations, while serving as a powerful medium for cultural expression and artistic identity. This research explores the various types of printmaking, including stenciling, linocut, woodcut, etching, batik, and silkscreen, and examines their significance within the Arab world's artistic sector. It also delves into the relationship between cultural identity and artistic expression, highlighting how traditions, beliefs, and societal values shape the work of artists. Additionally, the study highlights key Arab artists and creators who have made notable contributions to the printmaking industry. The findings reveal that artistic expression is deeply rooted in cultural identity, offering profound insights into the traditions, experiences, and values of diverse societies. Through its ability to convey unique narratives and perspectives, printmaking not only enriches the artistic landscape but also fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities and richness of human experiences.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Printmaking, Identity, Culture, Arab World.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Art plays a major role in an artist's life, through which the artist can convey his/her issues, culture and ideas that he/she lived on to the audience, through which he/she tries to express what's inside the artist through the painting. The outside world began to know the different cultures and principles of the artist through art. Art can also change the way people think and crack open cemented opinions (Badghaish & Saat, 2022)

The Arabian artistic world is heavily influenced by Islamic principles and values and the Arabian artists are mostly noticed to explore different religious themes through their artworks. There are different art styles in the larger Arab world which are shaped by a range of regional norms and cultures as well as the mosques of the western side of the globe used multiple motifs of the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic countries in East Asia. These motifs in mosques represent the Islamic culture (Blair, 2020). The traditional artwork in the Arab and Islamic world has adopted diverse cultural elements, most essentially the Greek and Persian arts and cultures. A common aspect associated with the Islamic art of the Arab world remains a preference for calligraphy and geometric patterns over the depiction of animals and humans (Wien, 2017). However, the printing of figures and secular art, are both represented by eminent Arabian artists while the geometric patterns noticed in Islamic architecture are printed over Arabian ceramics, glassware and textiles (Sheehi, 2021). Printing is one of the art elements that has gained attention in the international art scene since ancient times, and the methods of hand printing are among the most prominent branches of art in which artistic creativity is combined with technical skill. Through the art of hand printing, Arab artists try to convey their culture, ideas and symbols to the global audience. (Al Saadi, 2020)

### 1.1. Objectives:

- To explore culture and identity in the printing artworks of Arabian artists
- To describe different types of art forms including stencils, engraving on Lino and wood, batik and silkscreen and their significance in the printing art sector of the Arab world
- To explore the relationship between culture and identity to artists
- To discuss the most important Arab artists in the field of hand printing

### 1.2. Methodology:

The secondary qualitative methodology is going to be applied to present this study on identity and culture in the printing of artwork with artists in the Arab world. To collect qualitative data, a range of secondary data sources including books, media publications, research papers, articles and peer-reviewed journals are paid attention to followed by collecting data relating to different types of printing art forms and their significance in Arabian tradition, the most eminent artists in the Arabian printing art industry and their contributions to the Arabian culture and its identity in the global art industry and the relationship between identity and culture to the artists. The qualitative data was then examined, analyzed and evaluated to present valid and authentic findings at the end of this study.

## 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previous studies presented a series of analytical essays enlightening how contemporary printing art is experienced in the Arab world. Different disciplines of History, Art History, Post-Colonial and Colonial studies and studies of North America and the Middle East stand to be considerably enriched from the publications of the intellectually rich anthology presenting a labour-intensive and vast gift of research and translation to the field of Arabian printing artwork (Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz, 2016). These studies provided a wealth of information about the compelling artists, communities and institutional details relating to a large variety of approaches to art creation and appreciation revealing around a hundred years (Naef, 2016). This way, the previous studies have polemicized and expounded the contradictions and principles of modernity, ambitions and motivations as well as strengths and shortcomings. In the entirety of these studies, they uncovered the intellectual arguments informing the creation and reception of art in the contemporary Arab world (Blair, 2020). Promoting a global printing art background to readers of a wide array of the Museum of Modern Art, contemporary printing artwork in the Arab World generously satisfies the requirement for a key source project in relation to this calibre and scope. Studies show that the content of Arabian printing artwork spans around twelve Arabian states extending from the late 1990s to the late 20th century (Wien, 2017). A repository of sources, the potential documents include previously unpublished and published, private and public studies by art researchers, artists, poets, authors, administrations and gallery owners each moderating and confronting

aspects central to the Arabian art world. The kind of media involves journal features, newspaper articles, artist letters, manifestos, institutional declarations, open letters, audience feedback and exhibition literature (Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz, 2016). There exist sixty-six documents including the bulk of the substance of books, eighteen research essays essentially commissioned for the project link strategically and contextually associated recurring content and themes. All these previous studies encourage the exploration of questions related to modern printing artwork, including the responsibility of the artist to society, the relationship of identity and culture to the artists, the way art is connected to life, the suitability of realism and abstraction to Arab expression and the negotiation of global, local and national identities and aesthetics (Abdelhadi et al. 2020).

### **3. TYPES OF PRINTMAKING WIDESPREAD IN THE ARAB WORLD:**

#### **1. Stencils:**

Stencils are images or patterns created by using paint or ink through a ready stencil that generally is made of plastic, metal or paper with cut-out sections through which inks are applied in the printing material in different patterns (Morphy, 2020). Stencils are applied in traditional Arabian art for designing intricate calligraphy or geometric patterns and are noticed in different decorative artwork as well, such as textiles, architecture and ceramics. It enables the artists to experiment with negative repetition and space which are considered to be prominent aspects in the aesthetic principles of Islamic artwork (Al Saadi, 2020).

#### **2. Engraving on Lino and wood:**

Engraving on Lino and wood is all about creating different types of designs or patterns into wood blocks or linoleum. In this artwork, paint is used on the raised surface followed by pressing blocks onto a fabric or paper for transferring the printing (Abu-Deeb, 2019). The engraving represents a traditional printing artwork that is employed for illustrating different types of religious quotes, creating decorative pieces and producing artworks that represent the cultural heritage of the Islamic religion of the Arab world. Additionally, engraving on wood and Lino is used in Arabic artwork aiming at producing textured, detailed print artwork featuring natural motifs, Islamic culture architecture and other forms of art (Petersen, 2017).

#### **3. Silkscreen:**

In Silkscreen, a fine mesh screen, made up of synthetic or silk materials is used for applying paint

onto the art surface excluding the parts that are kept impermeable to the paint by blocking stencil. This artwork is mostly used for designing on paper and fabric and has largely been adopted across the Arabian art industry for presenting conventional and modern artwork on garments and textiles (Mainardi, 2017). Silkscreen connects traditional art with modern artwork with being used popularly across the Arab world for creating durable and high-quality print works on different surfaces. Additionally, it presents versatility both in design and colour, allowing the artists to produce vibrant print artworks that are noticed to range from conventional designs to contemporary abstract prints (Morphy, 2020).

#### **4. Batik:**

Batik is a wax-resist process of dyeing used to design different patterns on fabrics on which designs are made using was followed by dyeing the same. The wax then resists the dye and the original color of the paint is printed in the areas covered with wax. Once the fabric is dyed, the wax gets removed and then the desired patterns are revealed on the surface (Al Saadi, 2020). In the Arab world, this form of print artwork has been used to present the cultural values of Islam to influence different regions by adapting traditional Islamic or Arabian designs and motifs (Abu-Deeb, 2019). The use of batik print in the Arab world shows the cultural exchange and the rich background of Islam presenting its interaction with other religions. Batik includes exclusive handmade designs rich with the creativity and skills of the artists while the method of dyeing resisted by wax incorporates detailing and depth in the artwork (Petersen, 2017).

The relationship of identity and culture to the artist:

When it comes to discussing the relationship of identity and culture to the artist, it can be said that an artist tends to explore the features that determine the social and cultural identity of a nation and its people (Petersen, 2017). They develop a sense of self-identity as a nation and as a society and question conventions and stereotypes while exploring characteristics including race, gender, heritage and nationality (Blair, 2020). In the diverse tapestry of experiences of individuals, art provides a powerful medium for celebrating and expressing identity and cultural heritage. From ancient Islamic culture to the contemporary Arab world, art continues to play a critical role in representing and shaping different identities of Arabians across the globe (Wien, 2017). The foundations of artistic expression lie in cultural identity which presents a profound understanding relating to traditions, experiences, beliefs and values

associated with various societies. Through multiple forms of arts like sculpture, painting, literature, music and dance, communities and individuals end up articulating their individual narratives and perspectives, contributing to the vast tapestry of world culture (Al-Yahyai, 2017).

An artist also remains committed to inclusivity and diversity which are reflected through their artwork which would speak volumes for the cultural identity and background of its creator. Art holds the power of transcending boundaries and bridging cultural boundaries, cultivating empathy, appreciation and insight into myriad ways through which humanity can express creatively itself (Al-Yahyai, 2017). By dint of their artwork, artists get the opportunity to celebrate and explore their cultural values, heritage, legacies and traditions for generations to come. Be it through conventional indigenous artworks or modern expressions impacted by global trends, every piece of art tells a story of adaptation, evolution and resilience (Wien, 2017). Also, art presents a platform for redefining and challenging cultural beliefs, presenting new interpretations and insights that promote openness and counter stereotypes. By demonstrating diverse narratives and voices, art motivates people to leverage nuance and complexity, contributing to a deep insight into the rich amalgams of human experiences (Shaw, 2019). With the modern world becoming hyper-connected these days, art and artists are playing a crucial role in connecting people worldwide, transcending cultural diversities and linguistic barriers among them (Al Saadi, 2020).

The most important Arab artists in the field of printmaking

Print artwork is a very powerful form of art which intensifies the personal touch of the artists, unlike digital art. The print artwork industry of the Arab World has been enriched by multiple eminent artists like Dia Al Azzawi, Laila Shawa, Ali Cherri, Nasser Al Yusuf and Kaman Boullata who all have presented impotent political and social issues besides spiting efficiently print artwork (Petersen, 2017). Their creations contributed to deepening and enlightening the insight into these issues in different Arabian states. The Art Criticism Model of Edmund Feldman presents the most profound and diverse form of art criticism allowing for identifying the aspects related to social commentary in the world of Arab printmaking artwork (Al-Yahyai, 2017). The model of art criticism of Feldman, which comprises analysis, description, judgement and interpretation collectively demonstrates the way printmaking is capable of presenting a nation with diverse social

commentary and the way Arabian artists create particular issues in the nation by means of printmaking artwork. The artists ended up documenting a rich background of Arabian art and culture in a global and regional context (Al Saadi, 2020).

Back in 1734, the famous Arabian artist, Abdullah Zakher first developed a printing press in Lebanon and started printing using the Arabian language employing a portable type. He mastered efficiently printing with all challenges without any formal teachers and training. The development of Muhamad Ali of printing presses across Egypt, namely the Bulaq Press remained one of his key accomplishments (Morphy, 2020). One of the eminent Iranian artists was Reza Abbasi who was the master of conventional Arabian miniature while Mir Musvvir was another efficient miniaturist whose style was unique and is known essentially for depicting Shahname, the Iranian epic novel. Kamal-ol-molk was famous for presenting Western real in his artworks which demonstrate different eras of Iranian history (Abu-Deeb, 2019).

One of the most prominent painter-calligraphers in the Arab world was Mohammad Ehsai who revolutionized modern Iranian painting and calligraphy with his exceptionally large artworks. The dimensions of his artwork are over 2 meters (Mainardi, 2017). Mohammad Al-Hemad demonstrated the contemporary Middle Eastern culture through his innovative inkjet print on shemagh wood, enlightening its significance in both the Western world and the Arab world and how it connects Arabs with the rest of the world. The print made by Ramlaa Al-Halal on aluminium, known as The Godfather, was created considering the PlayStation trends these days which leaves youngsters glued to the screens and unaware of the local old agendas. (Auji, 2016) Artist Nehemiah Saad (1912-1945) was one of the first pioneers of this art in Egypt, whether in the art of wood engraving (relief printing) or in the art of metal engraving (intaglio printing). Al-Hussein Fawzi (1905-1999) was the first Egyptian pioneer whose name became famous after Nehemiah Saad, achieving a great presence during the fifties and sixties (Mongy, 2021). Their works are characterized by the presence of Arab identity and culture through the symbols and connotations that they express in their printing works.

Printmaking has emerged as a significant artistic medium in the Arab world, with numerous artists making groundbreaking contributions that reflect the region's cultural, social, and political landscapes. One of the most notable figures in this field is Hassan

Abdel Fattah (1924–1994) from Egypt, often regarded as a pioneer of modern Arab printmaking. His mastery of woodcut and etching techniques, combined with his focus on themes of social justice and national identity, positioned him as a leading voice in the Arab art scene during the mid-20th century. Another influential artist is Rafa al-Nasiri (1940–2013) from Iraq, whose work in lithography and etching is celebrated for its innovative integration of Arabic calligraphy and abstract forms. Al-Nasiri's prints often explore themes of exile and displacement, reflecting his personal experiences and the broader struggles of the Arab world. In Morocco, Farid Belkahia (1934–2014) experimented with printmaking as part of his broader exploration of traditional Amazigh (Berber) symbols and motifs, creating works that bridge the gap between heritage and modernity.

#### 4. RESULTS

With the enrichment of social media, modernization and transforming socio-cultural and socio-economic situations, the scene of art in the Arab world has dramatically changed and evolved over the past couple of years. An increasing number of young, bold artists have confidently emerged all across the region. The print artworks created by them present contemporary themes, mediums and ideas while these days the Arabian artists end up provoking debates and discussions through their creation (Morphy, 2020). Like the other Western art forms, identity, crisis, gender issues, space and freedom become all new subjects of the modern art

scene of the Arab world. There are artists that prefer to stick to their ancient roots of sculpture and calligraphy, having said that a majority of modern Arabian print artists now bend to combined mediums like painting on archival paper and normal paper, gouache technique, paints on wooden desks and even on aluminium for presenting their artworks (Mainardi, 2017). However, when it comes to displaying and showcasing their art and talent, there exists always a requirement for a platform in which creative individuals become capable of coming, brainstorming and gaining encouragement.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, it can be concluded that artists belonging to Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Palestine and Tunisia resent the viewer with different perspectives from what largely is noticed in the mainstream media relating to their origin. Their artworks in the printing industry speak about their rich identity and culture, whether through cartoons, political satire, graphics or graffiti. Furthermore, their artworks reflect the desire of an artist to highlight their identity and culture, no matter whether it is rooted in their history, transforming or contemporary. These art forms are mirrors of who they were, are and who they are going to become. The Arabian art creators in the print artwork sector tended to create artworks including diverse traits that have been outcomes of the inspirations they gained from the social, cultural, geographical and environmental milieus and also from the rich historical heritage of the country.

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