

Ourouba

The eye of Lebanon

Edited by Rose Issa / Foreword by Georges Corm

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Foreword

by Georges Corm*

The works selected for this contemporary art exhibition, *Ourouba (Arabicity)*, constitute an invaluable source of expression of present torments. This is because Arab contemporary societies have best expressed themselves through the arts- in great novels, poetry, music or painting, and in so many movies depicting Arab suffering.

I have tried, in many of my writings, to demonstrate that the best way to grasp Arab collective consciousness is to travel inside its artworld. Before being a political or religious concept, *Ourouba* is a cultural view of the world specific to the Arab people, their rich history and their many artistic talents.

Irrespective of the emergence in modern times of different political entities, geographical diversity and socio-economic structures, Arabs continue to exist collectively inside a unified culture that creates indestructible bonds between them. This was the case in pre-Islamic times and it is still the case today. However, since the independences after World War II, many Arab societies have been subjected to armed aggressions, destruction and violence. This began with the dispossession of Palestinians from their ancestral land in 1948-49 and continued a few years later with the Franco-British and Israeli military aggression against Egypt in 1956. It is now reaching a climax with the violent turmoil that has affected so many Arab societies after the large revolutionary and popular movements of 2011.

The Arab world today is in a shambles: failed political regimes, savage armed attacks from outside and inside, flows of millions of miserable refugees, destruction of entire cities and aggressions against the rich archeological patrimony. In contrast, Arab artistic production is, more than ever, proof of the vitality of Arab culture. It contrasts sharply with the political and military dynamics of failure and self-destruction initiated decades ago.

What is remarkable in the arts of modern Arabs is the fact that they have kept embracing a love of origins, while at the same time opening themselves to world artistic

trends. This is true in poetry, novels and music, as well as painting. In this respect, one should note that Arab calligraphy could be described as the mother of artistic expression in Arab culture. This is not by chance. Arab language itself and its alphabet are the sources of Arts and aesthetics. It is a common denominator that no foreign intervention or military aggression will ever be able to disintegrate. Moreover, *The Eye of Lebanon* reminds us that if our country, Lebanon, has constituted an opener for contemporary Arab culture, Arab artists from other countries have followed the movement without hesitation.

Arab visual arts have expanded into many different styles and themes, as have music and literature. As testified by the great exhibition *Le Corps Découvert*¹ many Arab painters have unveiled the human body and particularly the female body. In fact, centuries ago, Arab poets initiated the many themes that love can inspire, including that of pure, virginal love transmitted to European troubadours. In the twentieth century, Arab artists did not hesitate to unveil the human body in painting or sculpture, proving that they had no inhibitions or constraints.

Georges Daoud Corm,
Les Hâleurs (haulers)
Oil on canvas, 44 x 66
cm, 1935



More recently, many female Arab novelists became famous with their crude descriptions of the way male dominated societies have oppressed them. Their novels give us in-depth descriptions of how Arab women in the most traditional societies are progressively shaking the ossified and oppressive family structures. While the male dominated establishment has misused religion to maintain regressive attitudes in Arab societies, thus weakening them and turning them into easy prey for foreign intervention and internal violence, artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians have acted boldly as dynamic counterweights. The lively artistic development in most Arab societies is spectacular proof of the falseness of orientalist theories about the Arab East or the

¹ Arab World Institute, Paris, 2012

whole Muslim world, claiming that Arab mentality is by essence exclusively constituted from an immutable narrow theological mind.

An unfortunate phenomenon is the relatively large number of Arab sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists that are describing the so-called 'Arab mind' as deriving from an exclusive 'religious' mentality. This can be explained by the wide influence of the Huntington thesis² about the existence of a 'clash of civilizations', adopted not only by many Western scholars, but also by some of their fellow Arabs and other Muslim scholars. Of course, such a growing trend creates the favorable atmosphere for more terrorism and legitimizes repeated foreign interventions in Arab affairs.

We must be grateful to our Arab artists that their work totally contradicts the simplified and stereotyped anthropological and political approach to Arab culture, which suggests that, by nature, it is opposed to modernity and modern values. The vitality of Arab artistic talents in so many fields should be encouraged and supported. Arts should not be viewed as an additional 'money machine', but as the reservoir of the dynamics of Arab collective culture that is maintaining life and creativity in oppressed and suffering Arab societies.

This new *Ourouba* exhibition, here in Beirut, is a very lively and challenging proof that Arab collective consciousness as expressed by its artists continues to show strength and vigor, despite all the destruction and violence affecting the Arab world.

Georges Corm

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² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World*, 1996