"The Roots for a Palestinian Nahda"

Zulfa al-Sa'di and the Advent of Palestinian Modern Art

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of Zulfa al-Sa'di's paintings in the advent of modern art in Palestine. Although her work was largely prompted by the political context of 1930s Palestine, al-Sa'di also drew from a robust archive of images, newspapers, and texts, recognizing their value as agents of national unity. Her ability to bridge Islamic themes with Christian motifs, historical texts with contemporary media, politics with poetry, painting with photography, and art with nationalism made her work palatable to an Arab intelligentsia who sought to reconcile tradition with modernity. Additionally, this paper will consider the context in which al-Sa'di's oeuvres gained traction, most notably the 1933 National Arab Fair in Jerusalem. National fairs represented a pivotal shift in the production, consumption, and exhibition of culture. They not only facilitated the display of Palestinian art, but also informed its content and purpose. The paper demonstrates that al-Sa'di's apparently traditional portraits relied on an intrinsically modern system of representation underpinned by the fair's political agenda. By contextualizing al-Sa'di's portraits and reading them against her cache of historical and contemporary references, this article aims to give a more substantial account of al-Sa'di, giving back visibility and agency to her life and work and asserting her importance in the history of Palestinian art.

Keywords

Palestinian art; painting; photography; modernism; tradition; nationalism; nahda; archives; exhibitions; fairs.

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> Much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question – whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art – was not raised.
>
> – Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

In July of 1933, people from all over the Arab world gathered in Jerusalem for the opening of the First National Arab Fair. Organized in an era of British and French mandates, the fair sought to promote independence and Arab unity in the face of growing Western imperialism. The Palestinian newspaper *al-'Arab* described the fair as "the roots for a Palestinian renaissance [*nahda*]," and, more broadly, the grounds for "strengthening relations with neighboring Arab countries."[1] Held in the newly built Palace Hotel, the fair boasted Arab industrial and cultural innovations, avidly promoting the consumption of Arab goods among Arab nations. While the fair's industrial exhibits were motivated by national interests (*maslahat al-watan*), the cultural displays solidified its pan-Arab objective, conveying the urgency of the Arab nation's unified cause against imperialism (*qaddiyat al-umma al-'Arabiyya*).

Paintings, textiles, ceramics, and other arts and crafts graced the rooms and walls of the first floor. According to a 1933 issue of *Falastin*, "the fourth room," located in the northeast corner of the first floor (figure 1), contained "several alluring oil paintings that received admiration and amazement from foreigners before locals."[2] The article went on to list the artists or creators (*sani'un*) of the works on display, most of whom remain unknown. Among these artists was Zulfa al-Sa'di (1910–1988), a Palestinian woman who was only twenty-three years old at the time.[3] Her repertoire included traditional embroidery, paintings of landscapes and village life, and, most notably, portraits of anticolonial Arab leaders and thinkers.

The exhibition's guest book entries reveal a great degree of enthusiasm for al-Sa'di's portraits, often conflating her painterly skills with Arab national pride; and a devout appreciation for her embroidery, which "upheld her commitment to her roots."[4] In this paper, I will examine the subjects and methods of al-Sa'di's portraits in order to understand the content, intention, and reception of her work. I will specifically assess the men she chose to paint as their images, widely circulated in print media, assume ubiquity in the modern Arab imagination. Additionally, I will consider the display tactics of the 1933 exhibition, which showcased al-Sa'di's portraits together with her embroidery, blurring the classed and gendered distinctions between fine arts and crafts. The synthesis between al-Sa'di's graceful cross-stitching and politically motivated portraits, I argue, is not uncalculated. Rather, it demonstrates how both fine arts and crafts became conduits of a modern Palestinian visual identity.

On the surface, al-Sa'di's portraits appear to be traditional, however, her method of construction and politically motivated choice of subjects inflect them with a modern

character. This paper will assess al-Sa'di's portraits of the Hashemite Arab leader, Sharif Husayn Ibn 'Ali, his son, King Faysal I of Iraq, and the Egyptian poet, Ahmad Shawqi. Al-Sa'di's portraits of these three Arab luminaries participated in the fair's project of pan-Arab unity while also conveying a distinctly Palestinian experience of modernity, colored and informed by her encounters with British imperialism and Zionist settler colonialism. By studying the formal aspects of al-Sa'di's portraits, and engaging with theoretical debates around photography and nationalism, I hope to produce a more substantial account of al-Sa'di, giving back visibility and agency to her life and work and asserting her importance in the advent of modern art in Palestine.

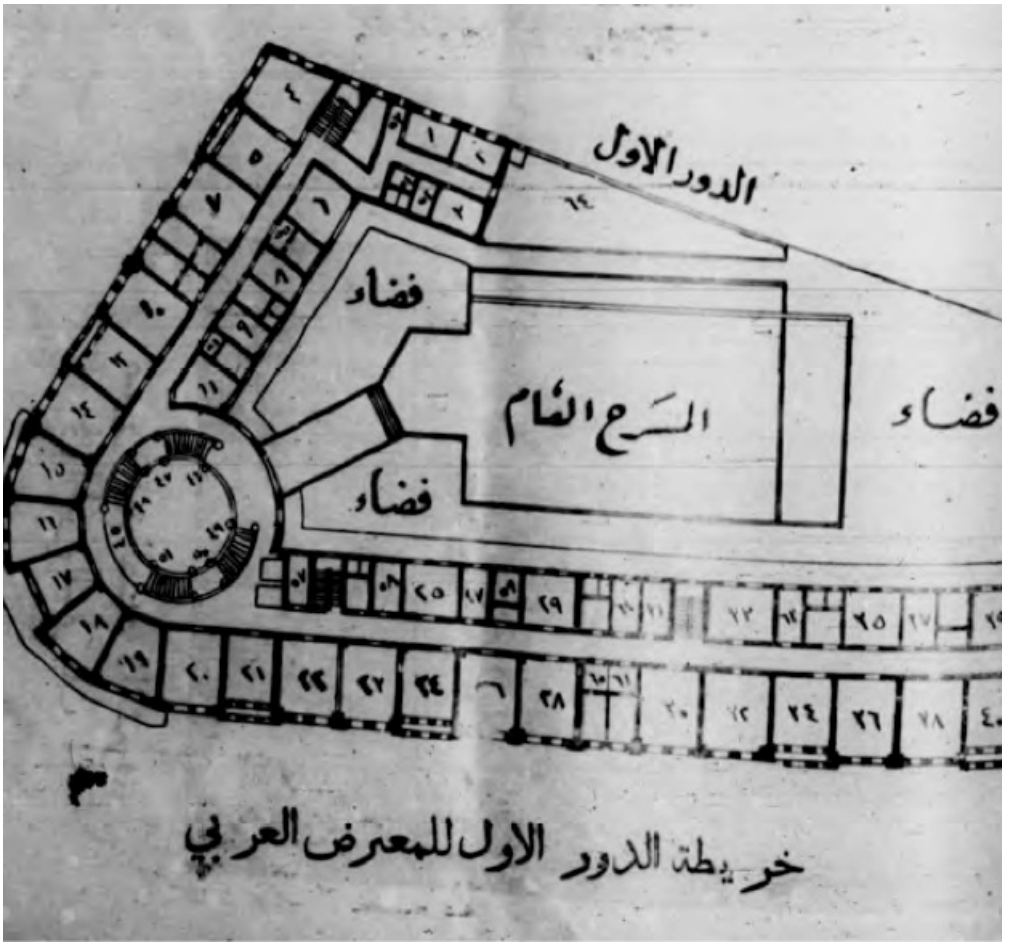

Figure 1. "Plan of the First Floor of the Arab Fair," *al-'Arab*, 15 July 1933, 25, Institute for Palestine Studies archives. Al-Sa'di's exhibition space was in the fourth room in the northeast corner.

Newspapers in Mandatory Palestine

Al-Sa'di's portraits of Arab national figures relied on a pervasive reservoir of images, printed and circulated in newspapers. During Mandatory Palestine (1920–48), thirty-eight new newspapers had emerged, eleven of which were dailies.[5] Daily newspapers were especially significant as they were able to keep up with the volatile political climate and erratic colonial fabric of Palestine. Al-Sa'di's portraits mimic the format of newspapers, combining both image and text. Her use of the image-text format signals the tremendous influence of print capitalism in 1930s Palestine, which came to be crucial in the development of a national Palestinian consciousness. Newspapers also contributed to the collapse of spatial and temporal barriers as they made the distant near, the singular multiple, the anonymous familiar, and the ephemeral archivable. Benedict Anderson describes the newspaper phenomenon as a ceremony of "simultaneous consumption," paradoxical in its private yet synchronized performativity. In this way, newspapers produce imagined communities as each member privately participates in the daily collective ritual of reading. The simultaneous "calendrical coincidence" and mass dissemination of newspapers therefore forge ties between populations who, despite their anonymity, are able to collectively participate in imagining their nation. This generates collective communities that willfully imagine and construct the modern nation.[6] In his theorization of modern nations, Anderson incorporates Walter Benjamin's concept of "messianic" and "homogenous empty time."[7] While messianic time is rupture, homogenous empty time is structured around the consistent renewal of equal, contingent moments, flowing in an uninterrupted stream of linearity. For Anderson, print capitalism can only exist in a vacuum of homogenous and empty time. It is wired into the calendars and clocks of modernity, activating a lateral, horizontal stretch of modern space-time. Here, simultaneity, contemporaneity, and linearity create the optimal conditions under which modern nations can emerge and endure. Newspapers play a central role in this horizontalization, cementing individual consciousness through their mechanical reproduction and "clocking" of a simultaneous space-time.[8]

Similarly, the replicable nature of photography lends itself to circulation and mass consumption, consolidating the image of the modern nation. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues that the reproducibility of photography obliterates the aura or fetishistic power in a work of art, rendering the "authentic" copy futile.[9] The mass dissemination of print media therefore eclipsed any need to refer to the original copy. In this process of painting after photography, al-Sa'di breaks the chain of mechanical reproduction. While her painterly intervention arguably bestowed a new aura upon her portraits, al-Sa'di's method is ultimately dependent on images. In fact, the intention behind her portraits might not have been understood had there not been such widely circulated photographic references. Her portraits were therefore popular precisely because they mirrored the celebrated images of Arab national figures.

Figure 2. The front cover of *Falastin,* 7 July 1933, Institute for Palestine Studies archives. The building photographed at the top is the Palace Hotel, where the 1933 fair took place. This cover also shows us the popularity of portrait photography in 1930s Palestine.

Sharif Husayn

Al-Sa'di's portrait of the Hashemite Arab leader, Sharif Husayn (figure 3), was based on a photograph that was widely disseminated during al-Sa'di's lifetime (figures 4–7).[10] The foreground of the original photograph featured a spread for Arabic coffee that was cropped out of several iterations. As Nisa Ari has observed, this strategic cropping preserved the dignity of the Sharif, whose royal stature demanded a serious political portrait devoid of domestic or leisurely displays.[11] Al-Sa'di's portrait also mimics the cropping and layout of newspaper prints as she replaces Husayn's embellished *rakwa* (coffee pot) and *finjan* (cup)with a commemorative poem:

> This is the one whose power is known to all the tribes
> He is known by the Holy House [the Ka'ba] and sacred lands
> This is the son of Fatimah, as you may know him
> By his grandfather, the final prophet of God
> —He died on Thursday at six in the morning on the eighteenth of Muharram in the year 1350 Hijri, June fourth, 1931.

The poem, written by the Umayyad poet, al-Farazdaq, had originally paid tribute to the Prophet Muhammad's great grandson.[12] By reiterating al-Farazdaq's verses, al-Sa'di venerates and memorializes the Sharif, affirming his piety and reminding us of his ancestral ties to the Prophet. While al-Saʿdi's formal style and integration of image and text recalls *Qudsi* (Jerusalemite) Christian icon painting traditions, her reference to the Prophet, the Ka'ba, and the Islamic date of Sharif Husayn's passing highlight the Sharif's religiosity and pan-Islamic doctrines.[13]

Al-Sa'di's decision to paint Sharif Husayn during an era of British imperialism is rather compelling given his former alliance with Britain. This alliance culminated in the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottomans who, to echo Husayn, "rejected God's word."[14] While Britain sought to curb Ottoman control for political reasons, the Sharif was largely motivated by his desire for a unified Islamic state. For Husayn, the Arab Revolt was not a secular, national uprising, but an Islamic-motivated insurrection that sought to overthrow the "impious" Ottomans[15] and preserve the tenets of Islam under a united nation or *umma* of Arab Muslims. In exchange for Arab compliance and manpower, the Sharif demanded that Britain recognize his control of an independent Muslim Arab state stretching from modern day Syria to Yemen.[16] While Husayn's request was excessive, or, as the British put it, "tragi-comic,"[17] they eventually came to an agreement. This agreement, however, was not clear-cut. Rather, it lay in a series of vaguely composed correspondences between Husayn and the High Commissioner in Egypt, Henry McMahon.[18] The lack of clarity around what constituted Arab territory, and the absence of a map with clearly defined borders later allowed the British to go back on their agreement. Nevertheless, Husayn agreed to McMahon's terms and joined forces with the British. Their alliance culminated in the defeat of the Ottomans who were forced to cede their control of the Middle Eastern territories. Despite the support and casualty of thousands of Arab troops, the British reneged

on their agreement with Husayn, seizing control of the majority of the Arab states and partitioning them into British and French mandate territories.

Al-Sa'di's painting of Sharif Husayn was therefore controversial. On the one hand, he had been a pawn in the Middle Eastern theatre of World War I; on the other, he helped facilitate Britain's imperial agenda. He may have been so blinded by his desire for a unified Arab state that he unknowingly helped enable the frenzy of British and French mandates. Despite his failed attempt at Arab independence, Sharif Husayn came to symbolize Arab unity. Al-Sa'di's use of Christian icon painting techniques for his portrait can therefore be read as a gesture towards religious coexistence and an invitation to pan-Arab unity and solidarity. This would have certainly expressed the national mood of the time as several newspapers condemned the sectarian rift between Muslim and Christian Palestinians, urging them to come together for the sake of the nation.[19]

Figure 3. Zulfa al-Sa'di, "Sharif Husayn," c. 1931, oil on cavas, 70 x 50 cm. Isma'il Shammout Private Collection, Darat al-Funun archives, Amman, Jordan.

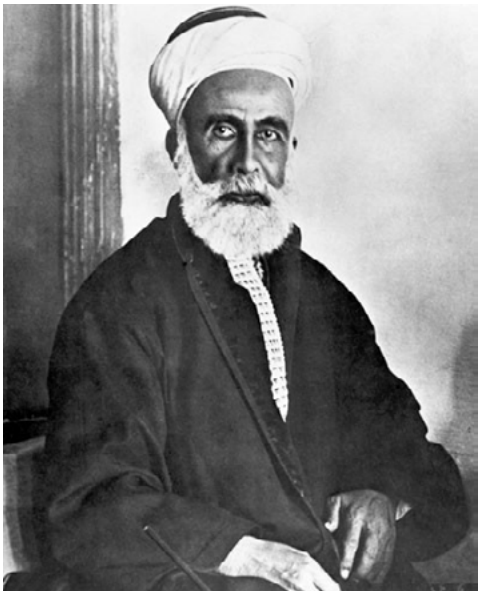

Figure 4. Photograph of Sharif Husayn, nineteenth century, photographer unknown, online at commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sherif-Hussein.jpg (accessed 16 July 2020).

King Faysal I

Al-Sa'di's painting of Sharif Husayn's son, Faysal I, King of Iraq (figure 8) is much more controversial as he had signed the Faysal-Weizmann Agreement in 1919, approving Zionist intentions for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.[20] The Faysal-Weizmann document was issued in English, which Faysal could not read, and poorly translated by the British colonial officer Thomas Edward Lawrence. Faysal had signed the documents with a stipulation stating that Jewish refugees are welcome to

Palestine under the condition that Palestine remains an independent Arab nation. Although Faysal's conditions did not align with the agreement, Zionists had continued to present the document as proof of prior Arab compliance. Moreover, while Lawrence had translated Faysal's caveat into English, neither the original Arabic nor its English translation were included at the Paris Peace Conference. The complete version of the agreement was not made public until 1936, when it was printed in an issue of the *Times*. However, by then America had already favored Zionist leadership.[21] Faysal had tried to convene with Britain in order to come to an agreement, and while he had not succeeded, al-Sa'di's decision to depict both him and his father could possibly allude to the fact that they were both deceived by the British.

Despite the controversy of the Faysal-Weizmann agreement, King Faysal was widely revered by Palestinians. His political philosophy of Arab *wihda* (unity) and *wattaniya* (patriotism) particularly resonated with nationalist political factions such as the Palestinian Independence Party, *Hizb al-Istiqlal*.[22] Unsurprisingly, the founder of the *Istiqlal* Party, 'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi, was a close acquaintance of Faysal.[23] (Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, the manager of the Arab Bank and the financial force behind the 1933 Arab Fair, and Nabih al-'Azmah, the director of exhibitions, were also members of al-Istiqlal).[24] Moreover, 'Isa al-'Isa, the managing director of the fair, was a staunch supporter of Faysal and had developed rapport with him from as early as 1918. During their first meeting, Faysal offered al-'Isa a job to work for him in Damascus, addressing him with the following words, "I know you, sir, through your *Falastin* newspaper, because we read it in the literary club in Istanbul and we greatly appreciate your efforts."[25] Al-'Isa accepted his offer and remained in his service until Damascus fell to the French. In 1932, Faysal invited al-'Isa to the Iraqi Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in Baghdad. It was after his return that he became "even more enthusiastic about the idea of an Arab Exhibition in Palestine," and "began to propagate this idea and write several articles on it."[26] Given al-'Isa's loyalty and admiration for Faysal, and Hilmi and al-'Azmah's association with Hizb al-Istiqlal, it is certainly possible that they commissioned al-Sa'di to paint Faysal or, for that matter, any other of her political portraits. Whether or not she painted them on her own terms is unclear.

Al-Sa'di's portrait of Faysal aptly communicates his exalted status, while maintaining a sense of sincerity. His earnest expression and graceful demeanor, characterized by the kind look of his downturned eyes and the slight curling of his lips, counters the droopy, solemn stare of his father. His suit and tie, perhaps a sartorial gesture towards a new and "modern" era, stand in sharp contrast to his father's traditional robe and turban. In his book on the Paris Peace Conference, Robert Lansing, the United States Secretary of State, dedicates an entire chapter to Faysal (then prince), describing, in abundant detail, his appearance, character, and overall bearing:

> The features of the Arab Prince were clear-cut, regular, and typical of his race […] His lips, which were partially hidden by a small mustache, were red and full, but did not indicate grossness or sensuality. His complexion was sallow and slightly mottled like the majority of those of pure Semitic

blood. His face was thin and, though with few lines and wrinkles, was strong and earnest in expression. His dark eyes were serene and kindly, but one could easily imagine that they would flash fire under the excitement of conflict or the impulse of violent emotion.[27]

THE KING of the HEDJAZ, and Grand Sharif of Mecca, who proclaimed his independence of the Turkish Government in 1916.

Figure 5. Unidentified newspaper clipping featuring Sharif Husayn's photograph, c. 1930s, in Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 39.

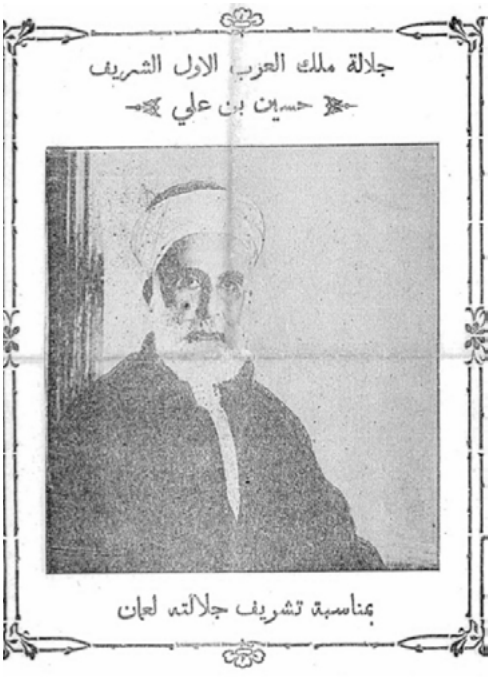

Figure 6. "The King of Arabs, His Highness Sharif Husayn Ibn 'Ali…On the occasion of welcoming his highness to Amman," *al-Nafir*, 17 January 1924, Institute for Palestine Studies archives.

Although laden with Orientalizing tropes, Lansing's gratuitous description of the king's facial features has a function of attestation, authenticating the truthfulness of al-Sa'di's portrait. But the realistic feel of al-Sa'di's portrait does not solely stem from her painterly aptitude. It is more so al-Sa'di's ability to depict the internal spirit and character of the leader that makes the painting so compelling. As Lansing noted, he was "the personification of a cause, the living inspiration to Arab unity and independence,"[28] and al-Sa'di's portrait seamlessly embodied the cause and its champion so that both were one and the same.

In September of 1933, Faysal passed away. Several Palestinian newspapers featured obituaries on the late king (figures 9 and 10).[29] The Palestinian newspaper, *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, published an entire issue in tribute to Faysal, and the featured photo appears almost identical to al-Sa'di's painting of him (figure 9). Al-Sa'di's text is visually comparable to the caption and poem included below the photograph in *al-Jami'a.* The fact that this issue was published months after al-Sa'di's painting had

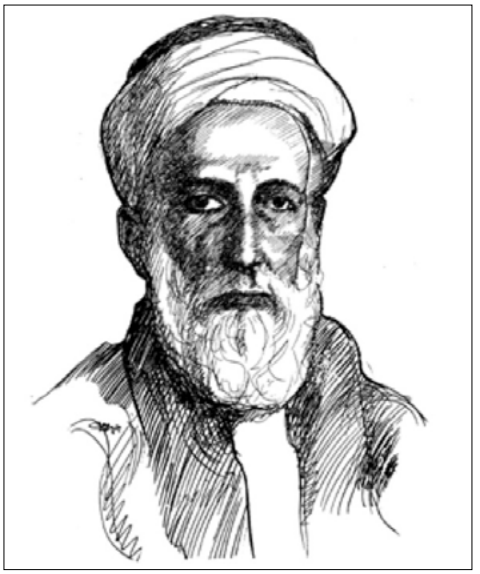

Figure 7. Sketch of Sharif Husayn by the famous Lebanese writer, Khalil Gibran, c. 1916, reproduced in "Al-Husayn al-Awwal, Malik al-Hijaz," *al-Funun* 3, no. 7 (July 1918): 508–12. Gibran's sketch indicates that this photo must have been widespread prior to the 1920s.

Figure 8. Zulfa al-Sa'di, "King Faysal I of Iraq," c. 1931, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm. Isma'il Shammout Private Collection, Darat al-Funun archives, Amman, Jordan.

been exhibited at the Arab Fair demonstrates the mutually performative nature of portrait painting and photography. While this photograph existed before al-Sa'di's painting, it is also important to consider that the structure and composition of portrait photography itself is based on painting. In this way, portrait photography is *a priori* informed by portrait painting. Moreover, the texts in al-Sa'di's paintings take the form and function of a newspaper caption as opposed to a painting title. As Benjamin articulated, "captions have become obligatory" in this age of mechanical reproduction, adopting "an altogether different character than the title of a painting."[30]

Ahmad Shawqi

Al-Sa'di not only painted political leaders, but cultural figures as well. A notable example is her portrait of the Egyptian poet, Ahmad Shawqi (figure 11). Shawqi served as the Khedive's court poet for twenty years, until the outbreak of World War I. By 1914, the British had overthrown the Ottomans, Egypt's Khedive was dethroned, and Shawqi, who had written numerous poems condemning Britain's colonial regime, was forced into exile.[31] One of his most well-known poems titled, "A Farewell to Lord Cromer," was written in response to a 1907 farewell speech delivered by the British colonial administrator and controller-general of Egypt, Evelyn Baring, Earl

of Cromer.[32] In his speech, Cromer noted the ungratefulness of the Egyptians, who failed to recognize "the instrumentality of England, that had raised them from the slough of despond."[33] Published within five days of Cromer's speech, Shawqi's poem condemned Cromer's arrogance and the violence and humiliation brought by Britain's colonial administration. Shawqi's poem was so widely circulated and celebrated among Arabs that the Lebanese Druze prince, Shakib Arslan, wrote, "We do not believe that there was in Egypt and the neighboring countries any man of letters or even any appreciator of literature who did not memorize Shawqi's poem and was not indebted to him for it."[34]

Al-Sa'di's painting is based on a photograph of Shawqi (figure 12). It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of this photograph, however, as we have seen with Benjamin, "to ask for the 'authentic' print" in this case "makes no sense."[35] For Benjamin, the emptying of authenticity further transforms art's ritualistic function into politics. In Mandatory Palestine, photography gained currency in its capacity to document a new age of revolutions and contestations (to echo Roland Barthes),[36] and newspapers spurred this very documentation. For Barthes, photography also "produces death while trying to preserve life."[37] The *click* is the decisive moment that determines the fate of the living object, before permanently transforming it into a "death mask."[38] It is the point at which the fleeting present is captured, preserved, and archived. The metaphor of the Barthean death mask particularly applies to al-Sa'di's portrait of Sharif Husayn, which notes the date of his death, and Ahmad Shawqi, which refers to him as the late (*marhum*) prince of poets. It is as though they died the moment al-Sa'di finished "capturing" them, permanently preserving their memory into a tangible archival record. The fact that al-Sa'di was aware of their recent deaths – down to the exact day and time in the case of Husayn – is a direct result of the newspaper phenomenon, which continues to compress space and time.


نكبة العرب الكبرى بوفاة جلالة الملك فيصل في «برن»
وقع الخبر على العرب ـ كلمة عن حياة الفقيد العزيز ـ المناداة بالامير غازي ملكا على العراق

Figure 10. "A Great Catastrophe Upon Arabs After the Passing of King Faysal in Bern," *Falastin*, 9 September 1933, Institute for Palestine Studies archives.

Figure 9. "A Commemoration of King Faysal," *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya,* 14 September 1933, Institute for Palestine Studies archives. Caption: "His Highness visited this Holy Land three months ago on his way to Europe. People were mesmerized by him. Today, he returns to it [Jerusalem] on his way to the capital of his kingdom [Baghdad] as a [deceased or lifeless] body, which holds with it the most prominent pages from the history of Arab freedom and independence. So may peace be upon him and may God bless him; the day he was born, the day he died, and the day he will be resurrected." At the bottom (last two lines) is a poem lamenting Faysal's death. Notice how the text is similar to al-Sa'di's.

The "Performative After-Effect"

Benjamin argues that the highly prescribed image-text format of print media gives us clearer "signposts," prescribing and naturalizing the meanings behind politically charged photographs.[39] Stephen Sheehi locates this naturalization in Arab portrait photography, which, he argues, was "performative rather than productive" as it did not produce any new social relations or discourses.[40] Instead, this "performative after-effect" reinforced existing social values.[41] Just as the photographs of Arab luminaries were printed, distributed, and consumed, so too were the political messages they signified. Al-Sa'di's portraits also exemplify the "performative after-effect" as they do not convey anything particularly new or modern. Rather, they solidify the image and message of Arab unity. But unlike the monochrome photographs that continue to be printed, replicated, and circulated, al-Sa'di's paintings, by virtue of the artist's hand and the medium's inimitability, cannot be reproduced. Moreover, while newspapers and photographic prints were reproducible commodities made with the intention to distribute and sell, al-Sa'di's paintings were not for sale. In the commercial playground of the 1933 fair, al-Sa'di's choice to exhibit for exhibition's sake rather than monetary gain particularly stood out. As a 1933 issue of *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya* noted, "Ms. Zulfa did not offer these works for sale, but rather exhibited them for honorable Arab audiences as proof of the Arab woman's skill, taste, and ability to stand out in the world of art and beauty."[42]

Figure 11. Zulfa al-Sa'di, "Ahmad Shawqi," c. 1931, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm. Isma'il Shammout Private Collection, Darat al-Funun archives, Amman, Jordan.

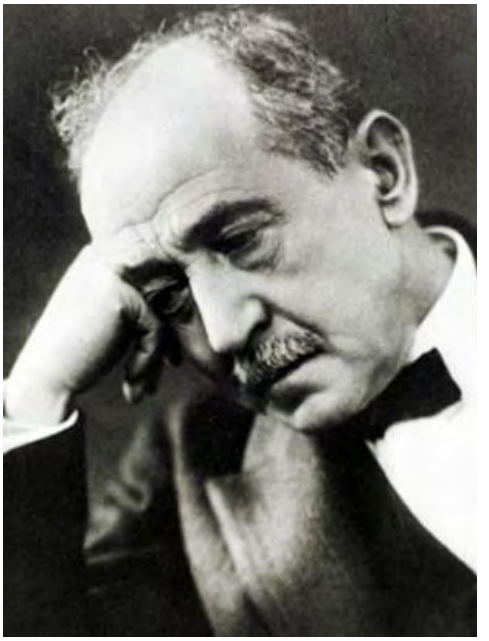

Figure 12. Photograph of Ahmad Shawqi, date unknown, photographer unknown, online at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmed_Shawqi (accessed 16 July 2020).

The Exhibition Guest Book

Al-Jami'a's comment hints at a more pervasive tendency to focus on the artist rather than her art, measuring the value of her work by her good "taste" and refinement rather than on its own merits. Indeed, much of the guest book comments called attention to al-Sa'di's conduct as an Arab woman.[43] A comment made by a man known as 'Abd al-Ghani al-Karmi reads, "We plead to God for more women like Miss Zulfa, so that the men of this nation can come together to revive the glory and civilization that has been wiped out."[44] Another man, referring to himself as the major general to the king of the Arab lands, praised al-Sa'di for her "nobility" (*nubula*).[45] Tanyus Nasr, the owner of *al-Ahram* newspaper, lauded "the wonderful artifacts made by this genteel (*muhadhaba*) Arab lady," which "stir up great hope that our women are on their way to a renaissance."[46] Another visitor, signing his name as "Abu Khaldun from Tulkarim," stated he was "very proud of the artisanal renaissance that is being carried out by young Arab women in Palestine," and hoped that the "young women of the future will follow in al-Sa'di's footsteps."[47] In keeping with the spirit of al-Sa'di's anticolonial portraits, he ended his comment with a political chant: "Onwards, onwards until we gain independence" (rhyming in Arabic: *Ila al-amam ila al-amam hata nayl al-istiqlal*).[48]

The exhibition guest book is one of the only surviving documents that can offer us a glimpse into how al-Sa'di's work was received, as well as the perceived role of women artists or cultural producers at this time. Based on the guest book comments, the value of al-Sa'di's work lay in her manners, decorum, and commitment to her nation. This is what made her a good Arab woman, worthy of admiration and praise. Al-Sa'di was therefore successful in that she managed to make "women's work" comport with nationalism and facilitate a male-driven march towards independence.

Arts, Crafts, and Gendered Space

Al-Sa'di's exhibition at the 1933 Arab Fair represented a turning point in the history of Palestinian culture, when arts and crafts were exhibited for aesthetic contemplation rather than lucrative gain. More importantly, it signified the moment in which visual art in Palestine came to be recognized as a viable means of national expression. Upon first glance, al-Sa'di's portraits appear to be traditional. However, as this paper demonstrated, they were very politically charged. In a similar vein, al-Sa'di's embroidery, which was exhibited alongside her portraits, was ideologized and mobilized for a national cause. In the eyes of her fellow countrymen, al-Sa'di's work presented an opportunity for the Arab woman's political "awakening" and participation in a national project. This project, however, was envisioned and led by men with gendered notions of nationalism, independence, and liberation.[49] After all, if al-Sa'di, who seemed to have reached the zenith of the Arab woman's awakening, continued to be excluded from the political sphere, what chance did her Arab sisters stand? In the words of one visitor, the greatest accomplishment she can aspire to would be "to become the director of an artisanal school for women, so that the future

generation of Arab women can benefit from her distinguished genius and creative taste."[50] Arts and crafts, which were branded as women's work and designated to the domestic sphere, were therefore viewed as appropriate avenues from which women could support Palestine's national cause. The public sphere, on the other hand, was designated for serious political matters. Although al-Sa'di's works were immersed in political, and therefore public, dialogues, the spaces they occupied—both in the fair and conceptually—were designed, controlled, and moderated by men. While the Arab Fair was public, it did not forego these gendered assumptions of space.

According to Habermas's definition, the public sphere constitutes "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed."[51] Art gave women a way to partake in the cause for Arab nationalism and fairs and exhibitions gave them a platform to present their work, intervene in political issues, and form public opinions. Fairs were therefore crucial sites of modernity that facilitated the display of Palestinian art and influenced political discourse and public opinion. They created a space for articulating and visualizing a modern Palestinian identity that informed and shaped Palestinian art and politics after 1948. In fact, al-Sa'di could have completely disappeared from history had she not exhibited her work at the fair. Nevertheless, al-Sa'di's participation in the fair was a complicated instance of visibility as her work was mediated, interpreted, and subsumed by men.

Conclusion

It is striking that we have no images or self-portraits of al-Sa'di today. Instead, her paintings of well-known Arab men come to stand in for her. It is very unlikely that any live sitters were involved in al-Sa'di's painting process. Instead, she would have relied on newspapers and photographs as a source of reference. The replicable nature of photography further lends itself to archives and, in this case, to the very archives I am exploring. As I engage with archives, I continue to recognize their power and implication in the project of history. Similarly, al-Saʿdi relied on an archive of images, newspapers, and texts, recognizing their value as agents of national unity. From al-Farazdaq's poetry, to *al-ʿArab*'s newspaper clippings, her cache of references helped bolster the historical significance and political impetus of her work. Her ability to bridge Islamic themes with Christian motifs, historical texts with contemporary media, politics with poetry, painting with photography, and art with nationalism made her work palatable to an Arab audience and intelligentsia who sought to reconcile tradition with modernity.

Due to the limited scholarship on al-Sa'di, I have had to piece fragments of newspapers and photographs, and carefully study her paintings and the exhibition guest book in order to develop a more representative and generous interpretation of her work. Doing this kind of historical patching is crucial for us to decolonize our archives and introduce these lost figures into global art histories. I want to particularly stress the importance of women in these pursuits as they tend to be excluded from Arab

narratives of resistance and progress. In the complex colonial realities of Palestine, women's liberation struggles have been downplayed at the expense of a unified anticolonial front; however, this unified front can only exist by leveling the playing field. We must therefore assess the politics of archives and of exhibition culture as well as the neglect of women in history, not only to restore and redeem these actors, but also to consider the ways in which our history has been dismembered from within.

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Endnotes

1 "The Opening of the Arab Fair in Jerusalem," *al-'Arab*, 29 April 1933.

2 "The Displays at the Arab Fair," *Falastin*, 21 July 1933.

3 For biographical information on al-Sa'di, see Isma'il Shammout, *Al-fann al-tashkili fi Filastin* [The Fine Arts in Palestine] (Kuwait: Kabs Press, 1989); Shammout, "A Palestinian Artist Presents Her Work at the National Arab Fair in Jerusalem in 1933," Lecture Notes on Zulfa al-Sa'di, 1998; and Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: 1850–2005* (London: Saqi Books, 2009), 68–69.

4 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book from the 1933 Exhibition at the First National Arab Fair," Darat al-Funun Archive, Amman, Jordan, entry dated 27 July 1933.

5 Mustafa Kabha, "The Arabic Palestinian Press between the Two World Wars," in *The Press in the Middle East and North Africa 1850-1950: Politics, Social History, and Culture,* ed. Anthony Gorman and Didier Monciaud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 103.

6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 33–36. See also Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon, *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 37–40.

7 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24–26. Makhoul and Hon, 38.

8 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24–25, 33.

9 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and trans. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 171.

10 Gannit Ankori suggests that al-Sa'di's painting of Sharif Husayn could be based on a newspaper clipping of the Arab leader (figure 5). This prompted me to develop Ankori's hunch and solidify the relationship between al-Sa'di's paintings and Palestinian print media. See Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 39. The photograph of Sharif Husayn was more prominently featured on the cover of a 1924 issue of the Palestinian newspaper *al-Nafir* (figure 6) and was also sketched by the Lebanese writer and poet, Khalil Gibran (figure 7). See "The King of Arabs: Husayn ibn 'Ali," *al-Nafir*, 17 January 1924; and "Al-Husayn al-Awwal, Malik al-Hijaz," *al-Funun* 3, no. 7 (1918): 508–12.

11 Nisa Ari, "Cultural Mandates, Artistic Missions, and 'The Welfare of Palestine,' 1876–1948," (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019), 278.

12 Ari points to this in her dissertation, "Cultural Mandates," 279.

13 Ari, "Cultural Mandates," 278–79.

14 C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Revolt in Arabia* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), 45.

15 Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 288–89.

16 For more on the history of the Arab Revolt, see Robert McNamara, The Hashemites*: The Dream of Arabia* (London: Haus Publishing, 2010), 60–82.

17 Ronald Storrs, *Orientations* (London: I. Nicholson & Watson, 1937), 178. Storrs also noted that the "partial sacrifice of his

[Husayn's] name before Islam," was "vital to our [Britain's] cause."

18 For more on the McMahon-Husayn Correspondence, see McNamara, The Hashemites, 47–49.

19 In 1929, the Christian founder and editor of *Falastin*, 'Isa al-'Isa, proclaimed that "national unity outweighs religious parity," and in 1930, he advocated for ethno-national unity among Muslim and Christian Arabs claiming, "before Christ and Muhammad we were, and always will be, Arab […] for what is [this country's] religion, but Christianity and its dear brother, Islam." Al-'Isa's comments are particularly important in our reading of al-Sa'di's work as he went on to be the managing director of the fair. Al-'Isa's cause for an ethno-national unity, along with the fair's pan-Arab agenda, would have certainly influenced al-Sa'di. See "Christians and Muslims are Brothers and Sisters," *Falastin,* 11 October 1930.

20 'Ali A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 186–90.

21 Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq*.

22 Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 131–32.

23 Muslih, "The Origins," 122–23.

24 Nadi Abusaada, "Self-Portrait of a Nation: The Arab Exhibition in Mandate Jerusalem, 1931–34," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 77 (Winter 2019): 128, online at (IPS) bit.ly/3lmKk8O (accessed 27 August 2020).

25 Noha Tadros Khalaf, *Les mémoires de 'Issa Al-'Isa: Journaliste et intellectuel Palestinien, 1878–1950* (Saint-Denis: Institut Maghreb-Europe, 2009), 73–74.

26 'Isa al-'Isa, "Min dhikrayat al-madi [Memories of the Past]," 62, 'Issa al-'Isa Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies Archive.

27 Robert Lansing, *The Big Four and Others of the Peace Conference* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1921), 164.

28 Lansing, *The Big* Four, 167.

29 See, for example, "A Commemoration of King Faysal," *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 14 September 1933; and "A Great Catastrophe Upon Arabs After the Passing of King Faysal in Bern," *Falastin*, 9 September 1933.

30 Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 171.

31 Donald Malcolm Reid, Whose Pharaohs? *Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 207–208.

32 Hussein Kadhim, "The Poetics of Postcolonialism: Two Qaṣidahs by Aḥmad Shawqi," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 28, no. 3 (1997): 182–83, online at www.jstor.org/stable/4183397 (accessed 7 July 2020).

33 "Lord Cromer's Farewell Speech delivered at the Khedival Opera House in Cairo on the evening of May 4, 1907," *Times* (London), 6 May 1907. Reprinted in Kadhim, "The Poetics of Postcolonialism," 209–15.

34 Shakib Arslan, *Shawqi, aw Ṣadaqat arba'in sanah* [Shawqi, or the Friendship of Forty Years] (Cairo: 'Issa al-Bani al-Halabi Press, 1936), 25. See also Mounah Khouri, *Poetry and the Making of Modern Egypt: 1882–1922*, vol. 1, in *Studies in Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill Archive, 1971), 73.

35 Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 171.

36 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 93–94.

37 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 92.

38 Barthes, *Camera Lucida.* See also Stephen Sheehi, "The Nahda After-Image, Or All Photography Expresses Social Relations," *Third Text* 26, 4 (2012): 401; and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

39 Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 173. See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Laver and Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993). In order to deconstruct a myth, one must question the values it naturalizes.

40 Sheehi, "The Nahda After-Image," 406.

41 Sheehi, "The Nahda After-Image," 402.

42 "What is Worth Seeing at the Arab Fair," *al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyya*, 10 July 1933.

43 For select English translations see Anneka Lenssen, Sarah A. Rogers, and Nada M. Shabout, "Viewing the Exhibition: Guest Book Entries for Zulfa al-Sa'di" in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents,* trans. Kareem James Abu Zeid (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 77–79.

44 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book."

45 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book." entry dated 28 July 1933.

46 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book,"

47 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book." entry dated 26 July 1933.

48 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book."

49 For more on the gendered notion of liberation in a Palestinian context, see Frances Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in the Accounts of the 1948 and 1967 Defeats," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 4 (2000): 492-94.

50 "Zulfa al-Sa'di's Guest Book," entry by Abd al-Raziq Mayri from Aleppo, Syria, dated 27 July 1933.

51 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 398.