

# Art Education in Twentieth Century Syria<sup>1</sup>

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When the Syrian-German painter Marwan (1934–2016) told his father in the early 1950s that he intended to become an artist, the latter suggested he study architecture instead; this was also a “creative” profession, but one with somewhat better prospects for actually earning a living was his argument.<sup>2</sup> But Marwan’s mind was set and he began to take private lessons in painting and drawing, moving to Berlin in 1957 to pursue further studies and subsequently became a successful painter and art professor in his new home. Marwan’s father’s worries are hardly unique to Syria; parents in every country often worry about their children’s choice to study art. And yet, art had been a viable career in Syria since the French mandate authorities established the *Institut français d’archéologie et d’art musulman* in 1922 in Damascus, and initiated programs to train artisans and artists and included drawing classes in school curricula. These classes might be seen as the first attempts at an institutionalized art education in Syria, but it was only in 1959 that a genuine art academy was established. Until then, private tuition remained an important pillar of artistic training.

In the Arab world, the interest in studying and practicing drawing and painting in the European modality is closely linked to the concept of modernity. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, a general feeling of despair grew among intellectuals: faced with the challenges of European colonial expansion, the Arab and Muslim world, it was felt, would need to cast away redundant cultural habits and work to “catch up” with the modern achievements of Europe. For the intellectual elite, the practice and appreciation of fine art was an essential part of this idea of modernity.<sup>3</sup> It became common to decorate the formal rooms of homes with paintings and frescoes instead

1 Due to the difficult political situation in Syria, which makes on-site research impossible, this article will include images that give an idea of artistic practices in Syria from the period of the French Mandate and early post-independence era. These might not be direct illustrations of the arguments presented here but give an idea of general artistic concerns.

2 Marwan, personal communication.

3 See Scheid 2010 for a discussion of notions of modernity as linked to the practice of fine art in the Arab world.

of traditional ornamentation.<sup>4</sup> But while visiting artists were seen working and works of art were found in the cities of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, a young person who wanted to pursue studies in fine art was mostly forced to travel, to Istanbul or the European capitals. More opportunities were opened after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and even more came with national independence, but, with the exception of Cairo, where the art academy was established in 1908, it was not until well into the twentieth century that other cities got their professional art schools: Beirut in 1937, Baghdad in 1941 and, as mentioned, Damascus as late as 1959.

In what follows, I will attempt to trace the development of art education in Syria from the early days of modern art practice up until the early period after the establishment of the *Institute of Plastic Art* in Damascus. A researcher could hardly choose a more challenging task. Not only are sources scarce and often ambiguous but what is available can prove frustratingly inaccurate, often fragmented and largely anecdotal. Literature sometimes provides different dates for the same events, details as to which artists participated in which activities can be lacking and, often, sources are not cited.<sup>5</sup> And the ongoing conflict in the country makes field research at present impossible, something that would be sorely needed in order to close some significant gaps in our knowledge. At present, one can only hope that this will be possible in the near future.

Since artistic training and practice never happens outside the social and political contexts it is located within, I will relate the question of art education in Syria to the political frame within which artists and educators had to navigate, whether under colonial rule (Ottoman and French) or since Syria became an independent state.

## Oil painting and the quest for modernity

Faced with the political and cultural threats of an aggressive European expansion and its accompanying attacks on Muslim thought and social organization, an intellectual movement began to grow in the Arab and Muslim world during the nineteenth century that was intent on making their societies fit to compete with Europe. In Egypt, Rifa'ā al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), who served under the reformist Khedive Muhammad Ali (1769–1849), passionately advocated modern scientific education as a prerequisite for a society that is prosperous and just.<sup>6</sup> For Islamic reformist thinkers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1845–1905), the need to respond to European critics like Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and their arguments that Islam was

4 See Al-Sharif 1984–1985, p. 8; Bank 2016, pp. 1285–1286; Barakat 2003, p. 133; Naef 2003, p. 190; Weber 2002, pp. 165–169.

5 See also Bank 2016 for a discussion of problems related to available literature on early artists in Syria.

6 Livingston 1996, p. 552.

per se hostile to reason led to attempts at developing an Islamic modernism that accommodated the pursuit of rational knowledge and reforms in the social sphere, thereby drawing on both European rationalism and pre-modern Islamic reform movements. The underlying feeling of the writings of these thinkers and their heirs was that the Arab and Muslim world had regressed and needed to overcome what was perceived as social and cultural backwardness and to cast away archaic mores. In this way, the Arab world would achieve modernity and be ready to face the Western threat. In the cultural realm, new literary and musical forms were introduced as indexes of modernity, and also the appreciation and practice of fine art in the European modality was ascribed this enculturating role.<sup>7</sup>

For would-be artists in the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire there were only limited choices when seeking training. Some artists studied with European artists who were living and working in the region, but mostly, training was sought far from the artists' homes, in Europe or in Istanbul.<sup>8</sup> Oil painting and drawing technique were taught in Ottoman military elementary and secondary schools since the nineteenth century, although mainly for military purposes.<sup>9</sup>

The first generations of Arab artists who began to practice European style oil painting is often referred to as *ruwwad* ("pioneers"), a somewhat misleading term as it somehow implies the non-existence of any prior visual artistic practice. Yet, traditions of two-dimensional, figurative imagery did exist prior to the advent of European-style painting. In the case of Syria, Wijdan Ali mentions "wall painting" by which she means painting on wooden panels, painted ceramic tiles with depictions of the holy cities and floral and geometric designs, Christian icons, painting on glass, and painting on textiles.<sup>10</sup> These traditions appear not to have been seen as artistic precedents of any influence by the first generation of painters.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of "art" (*fann* in Arabic) became increasingly defined as art in the European sense, i.e. an academic practice applying a stylistic language taught at European art academies. The traditional practices, hitherto referred to as *fann*, lost their importance and became known as *al-fann al-islami* ("Islamic art"), just as they were generally known in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

One of the first Syrian artists to pursue fine art as a career was Tawfiq Tarek<sup>13</sup> (1875–1940), who after initial studies in Istanbul was forced to leave the city after hav-

7 See Bank 2016, p. 1285; Naef 1996, p. 10; Naef 2003, pp. 192, 203–204; Scheid 2010, p. 203.

8 Naef 2003, p. 202.

9 Shaw 2011, p. 31.

10 Ali 1997, pp. 85–86.

11 Lenssen 2014, p. 13. Later artists did take some of their inspiration from earlier visual traditions, for example, Fateh Al-Moudarres often referenced Christian icons in his work, see also Lenssen 2014, p. 227.

12 Naef 2003, p. 191.

13 When transcribing Arabic names, I have chosen to use the most common spellings as they appear in international literature for the sake of readability and recognition. This does not correspond to standard linguistic rules.

ing been briefly imprisoned for his political activities. He subsequently studied drawing, land surveying and urbanism at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, from where he graduated in 1901 and returned to Damascus.<sup>14</sup> Tarek remained faithful to his academic training throughout his career as an artist, using his skills at realist painting to address issues of social and political concern.<sup>15</sup> His younger colleagues Abdulwahab Abu al-Saoud (1897–1951) and Michel Kurché received their artistic training in Beirut and Cairo or Paris, in the case of Abu al-Saoud, who also worked as a writer and actor, through somewhat informal means.<sup>16</sup> Kurché received his education at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. While Abu al-Saoud painted in a realist style and, like Tawfiq Tarek, produced a large number of works celebrating important moments of Arab history, Kurché is known as an “impressionist” painter. This term is widely used for a broad range of works by Arab *ruwwad* painters. It does not, however, include the optical scientific and avant-garde aspects of French Impressionism, but should be seen as referring to light-suffused renderings of fleeting scenes and landscapes.<sup>17</sup>

The early artists were enabled to study in Europe by their affluent backgrounds. No state structures existed in the Ottoman Empire that could have assisted young artists wanting to pursue studies abroad. And neither did the French mandate authorities show much interest in aiding young Arabs who showed an interest in modern art, despite the considerable educational reforms they undertook in other realms. Thereby, several Syrian artists had successfully completed their studies in France and upon their return to their home country applied their knowledge as artists and teachers.

## Private versus state under the French Mandate

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, Syria came under French rule in 1920 after a brief period of independence as the Arab Kingdom of Syria. Under French rule, a tentative institutionalization of the art scene was begun, although private initiatives remained the driving forces in expanding the place for modern art in Syria.

While the pursuit of fine art was clearly not among the priorities of the Mandate authorities, they did create the *Institut français d'archéologie et d'art musulman* in 1922. Located in the Damascene 'Azm Palace, the aim of this institution was to create a centre that incorporated a museum and a library, and where exhibitions, lectures and courses

14 Qashlan 2006, p. 18.

15 See Bank 2016 for a discussion of this artist and the critique inherent in his work.

16 Lenssen 2014, p. 20.

17 For a discussion of the term “impressionist” in relation to Ottoman painters, see Shaw 2011, p. 181.

were organized. It also served as host to visiting artists and scholars.<sup>18</sup> The *École des arts décoratifs* was a part of the institute and offered courses on traditional handicraft, including drawing as well as courses on techniques such as wood and stucco sculpting, glass work, ceramic and different textile working techniques.<sup>19</sup> The stress on traditional arts and handicraft as opposed to modern fine art is explained by an idea that was common among the French authorities according to which these constituted the “authentic” artistic expression of the country, but had fallen into a state of stagnation and now needed to be brought back to its former “purity and refinement.” The students for these classes were carefully selected and recruited with the aim of forming a local elite, and the teachers were recruited from among the “skilled workers of the city.”<sup>20</sup> The school seems to have changed its name several times and gone through different stages of re-organization. It continued its work (although with a fluctuating level of activity) until 1930, when it was closed amid accusations of fraud and antiquities trafficking against its director, Eustache de Lorey.<sup>21</sup>

While the activities of the French institute served the goal of creating a favorable image of the French among the local populations, and its program did not include any direct support for Syrians wishing to study modern painting, the institute does seem to have functioned as a kind of catalyst for the art scene in Damascus, albeit through more indirect means. During the mandate, the school system was expanded and thus, artists found new opportunities for work, as art and art history formed part of the French education curriculum.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, visits from French and other European painters also appear to have been inspirational for the local art scene.<sup>23</sup>

While the living conditions of artists certainly improved with the establishment of various teaching positions, there remained a lack of exhibition infrastructure and a similar lack of institutional frameworks for education in modern art for which private initiatives sought to compensate to some extent. Among the elites, engagement with fine art was encouraged as a meaningful action and was regarded as a means to improve societal conditions. Thus, members of the Muslim Scouts were called upon to attend exhibition openings and appreciate the works exhibited.<sup>24</sup> The Scouts also appear to have occasionally organized exhibitions themselves. Kirsten Scheid mentions a celebratory exhibition organized in Beirut in 1927 upon the return of the Lebanese painter and Scout troop member Moustapha Farroukh from his studies abroad.<sup>25</sup> However, any similar exhibitions in Damascus are not known to me.

18 Avez 1993, p. 23. The name of the palace is generally transcribed as “Azem” in French literature.

19 Avez 1993, p. 34.

20 Avez 1993, pp. 28–29, 35.

21 Avez 1993, pp. 62–67.

22 Lenssen 2014, p. 23.

23 Shabbout 2007, p. 20; Al-Sharif 1984–1985, p. 10; Ali 1997, p. 89.

24 Lenssen 2014, p. 27.

25 Scheid 2010, pp. 209–210.

When it comes to exhibition activities during this early period, information is in general disappointingly limited. Wijdan Ali mentions that pioneering artists gathered in small groups to hold sporadic exhibitions and that these were encouraged by foreign missions and embassies. The first group show in Syria appears to have taken place in 1928 as part of the *Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Crafts* and the second one during the Damascus Fair of 1936. Unfortunately, no information about the participating artists remains.<sup>26</sup> Thereby, artists had a central role in organizing these activities. Mamdouh Qashlan mentions that Tawfiq Tarek started an art association called *The Fine Arts Club* with a group of artists from different fields in the 1930's, but does not provide much detail on the activities of the association.<sup>27</sup>

The artist and art historian Elias Zayat mentions exhibitions organized by artists who had studied in Europe and Egypt and had returned to Syria to teach. One such exhibition seems to have taken place in 1940 at the Faculty of Law of the Syrian University, with a second following in 1944 at the *Al-hurriyyah Institute*, and a third at the *First Preparatory School* in Damascus. But Zayat does not provide much further information on these events, writing that the sources available for them provide very few details.<sup>28</sup> A more structured initiative with an ongoing program of activities was the *Studio Veronese*. Established in 1941 by a small group of artists as a new venue for debates and presentations of art, the group organized painting sessions with live models as well as meetings and discussions focused on various issues related to art, philosophy and modernism.<sup>29</sup> Although started with the sole motive to promote modern art, over time the Studio became more involved with national issues. Out of the Studio developed the *Arab Association for the Fine Arts* which had a more distinct national outlook. The Association saw its mission as the promotion of a distinct role for the arts and artists in a future independent Syrian state, thus linking aesthetic concerns with clear, political goals.<sup>30</sup>

While certain structures were established under the French Mandate that constituted elements of an organized, institutionalized art scene, after independence, the young Syrian state began to create structures for the production and presentation of art. And although training still needed to be sought abroad, a program of scholarships was implemented that enabled young artists to travel for their studies, regardless of the financial situation of their families.

26 Ali 1997, p. 89.

27 Qashlan 2006, p. 17.

28 Zayat 2008, p. 19.

29 Lenssen 2014, p. 30. Members included Mahmoud Hammad, Adham Ismail, Adnan Jabasini, Nasir Shoura, Salah al-Nashef, Rashad Qusaibati, Mahmoud Jalal (1911–1975).

30 Lenssen 2014, p. 32.

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**Fig. 1** Tawfiq Tarek: *Self Portrait*, 1936, pencil on paper, 29 x 23 cm, National Museum, Damascus, Photo: Delphine Leccas. Tawfiq Tarek, an important *ruwwad* artist, is often mentioned as the first modern artist in Syria by Syrian art historians. He is known for his paintings of “nationalist” character, but also for his portraits and was an important figure of the Damascene art scene during the Mandate period.

**Fig. 2** Tawfiq Tarek: *The Artist’s Wife*, 1936, pencil on paper, 29 x 23 cm, National Museum, Damascus, Photo: Delphine Leccas.

**Fig. 3** Subhi Shuaib: *Water Porter*, 1936, watercolor, 21 x 17 cm, Atassi Foundation. Subhi Shuaib’s portrait of a member of the Syrian working class is a good example of the character of art production during the Mandate and already points toward the interest in popular classes and their lives that became major concerns of some post-independence artists.

## After independence

After independence, the Syrian state began organizing an annual fine arts exhibition. The first of its kind was titled “Exhibition of Hand Painting” and took place in 1950. The somewhat curious title testifies to the still-developing category of fine art in Syria and suggests an understanding of painting as the work of skilled artisans, rather than of fine artists in the modern, European sense. With this exhibition, the presence of modern painting in Syria was institutionalized and artists were offered an annual event at which they could present new works to their audience.<sup>31</sup> While the establishment of an annual exhibition in Damascus ensured regular exhibition opportunities for artists, serious training still had to be sought elsewhere. To facilitate this, Syria entered a joint agreement with the Italian government in 1952 to send art students to Italy to study at the *Accademia di Belle Arti*.<sup>32</sup> The students received a small stipend from the Italian government, a grant for art supplies, library access and exhibiting opportunities. They were required to remain politically neutral and, upon their return to Syria, to offer their services to the government by taking up positions in rural preparatory schools for the same amount of time as their fellowships had lasted.<sup>33</sup>

In general, the Syrian art scene of the early independence era appears to have been vibrant and to have offered plenty of opportunities for artists. In 1950, Damascus was host to a travelling exhibition organized by the office of the UNESCO Director-General in Paris that comprised of reproductions of modern European paintings. This proved highly inspirational for the local artists and was welcomed as an important opportunity for study, as they only rarely had the chance to see paintings at close range and mostly had to rely on images in books.<sup>34</sup> Private initiatives also contributed with a number of artist-run associations that organized exhibitions of the works of their members: The *Syrian Society for Arts*, *Society for Lovers of Fine Arts* and *Association of Syrian Artists for Painting and Sculpture*.<sup>35</sup> For many Syrian art historians and critics, the independence of Syria marks the beginning of serious artistic activity in the country and the starting point of a real “Syrian” art. Thus, Afif Bahnassi defines it as “the rebirth of a nation, whose origins date far back in history.”<sup>36</sup>

31 Lenssen 2014, p. 13.

32 Lenssen 2014, pp. 127, 139.

33 Lenssen 2014, pp. 139–140. Among the artists who took part in this program were Adham Ismail, Mamdouh Qashlan and Fateh al-Moudarres.

34 Lenssen 2014, pp. 46–47.

35 Zayat 2008, p. 18.

36 Bahnassi 1974, p. 1.



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**Fig. 4** Mahmoud Jalal: *Tent of a Beduin Family*, 1951, watercolor, 22 x 30 cm, National Museum, Damascus, Photo: Delphine Leccas. A concern with the popular classes was common among many artists of the early post-independence era. It was especially their connectedness to the soil that was seen as expressions of a genuine national feeling.

**Fig. 5** Khaled Moaz: *Farm of Imran*, 1955, watercolor, 66 x 55 cm, National Museum, Damascus, Photo: Delphine Leccas.

**Fig. 6** Khaled Moaz: *Sheikh Muhieddin Ibn Arabi*, 1955, watercolor, 56 x 66 cm, National Museum, Damascus; Photo: Delphine Leccas. Paintings of significant landmarks and landscapes served as expressions of national belonging and connectedness to Syrian history. Here the tomb of the Sufi sheikh Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) in Damascus with its surrounding greenery is depicted as part of an almost pastoral idyll in the city.

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At the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, important changes in the social and political realm were ushered in. From 1958–1961 Syria joined Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR) and with this, took over Egyptian structures, also in the field of art and culture. 1958 saw the establishment of the *Ministry of Culture and National Orientation* with branches in Cairo and Damascus. It included a *Directorate of Plastic Arts*, another of *Applied Arts* as well as departments dedicated to exhibitions, popular arts, prizes and acquisitions, and monuments and statuary.<sup>37</sup> With these institutions came an official cultural policy, whose guidelines called for a general cultural outlook to “develop Pan-Arab awareness and help citizens to improve their social standing, boost their morale and strengthen their sense of responsibility, and motivate them to cooperate, make sacrifices and intensify efforts to serve their country and humanity.”<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that the ministry did not prescribe a particular style of painting, as was common in other authoritarian contexts such as the USSR and the communist states of Eastern Europe that sought to enforce socialist realism on artists. The ministry also gave artists the freedom to choose which subject matter they wanted to focus on in order to achieve the stated goals.

One year into the UAR, an art school was finally established in Syria. The *Institute of Plastic Art* in Damascus was inaugurated in 1959 (it was re-named *Faculty of Fine Arts* in 1963 when it became a degree-granting faculty) and staffed mainly by Egyptian teachers, with some notable Syrian artists among its faculty. During the first year, courses were given in painting and sculpture with engraving, décor, and architecture being added to the curriculum in the second year. The Institute was thought of as a site for cultivating good taste and high aesthetic standards and should offer citizens opportunities for self-actualization, and eventually lead the country toward more revolutionary social goals.<sup>39</sup>

After the collapse of the United Arab Republic in 1961, the school’s administration urgently needed to replace the Egyptian teachers who had hitherto formed the art school’s main teaching staff. Through the help of international organizations and exchange programs, international artists from Poland, Bulgaria, Italy and France were recruited to fill the positions. One artist in particular, the Italian painter Guido La Regina became an influential figure during the time of his tenure (1964–1967), both at the school and on the local art scene. A proponent of avant-garde practice as well as education, his approach to abstraction laid the foundation for an important movement of formal experimentation and inspired a number of Syrian artists to look towards the Arabic script as the basis for their abstract compositions. Not only did La Regina introduce entirely new approaches to the production of art, his way of teaching was just as experimental and led to a rethinking of art-pedagogical methods among his

37 Lenssen 2014, p. 218.

38 Al Khatib/Yazaji 2010, p. 6.

39 Lenssen 2014, pp. 218, 286, 291–292.

Syrian colleagues. Thus, music was introduced with the aim of encouraging students to explore the relations between color and sound and to reach into realms that lie beyond the visible.<sup>40</sup> It was argued that the approaches to teaching and producing art undertaken in Damascus were in fact “more modern” than those practiced in Rome, where the antique academic traditions were still dominant. In Damascus, on the contrary, the fact that an entirely new curriculum was being created allowed for a true break with illusionistic tradition and constituted a “new step according with the spirit of new thought, new outlook, and the new Arab human.”<sup>41</sup>

The lively culture of artistic freedom and experimental approaches to producing and teaching art that flourished at the Faculty of Fine Arts lasted until 1967, the year that changed everything in the Arab world and led to an entirely new outlook among artists and cultural producers in general. Shocked by the events of the Arab-Israeli War of that year, during which Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel, artists staged a spontaneous demonstration in the Yusuf Al-Azmeh square in central Damascus, bringing posters and drawings which testified to their horror at the events of the war. The need to communicate directly with the public necessitated a more activist artistic language and led many artists to favor more outspoken, figurative work and abandon abstraction. While some artists warned against this stance, representational art came to be seen as having a greater potential to connect with society in a meaningful way, a notion that was quickly taken up by the Ministry of Culture. In addition to its annual autumn exhibition, it also sponsored several other exhibitions that year with the aim of addressing the contemporary pain felt by artists and public alike. The themes were given by the titles of these exhibitions: one was titled “Aggression”, the other “Mobilization.”<sup>42</sup>

This ideological stance became the standard within the context of state-sponsored artistic events in the years to follow. But while many artists did feel a genuine commitment to their society and to broader issues of the political situation in the Arab world, the rigidity of the frame within which art was taught, produced and presented by state structures had a stifling effect on artists. The vibrancy of the earlier years is largely lacking in later works, many of which are driven by feelings of lurking dangers and anxiety. The artist Boutros Maari has referred to this phenomenon as “art angouissé” and “art violent” and related it directly to the bitterness that followed the Arab cause’s defeat after the disaster of 1967.<sup>43</sup>

40 Lenssen 2013, pp. 54–57; Lenssen 2014, p. 303.

41 Mahmoud Hammad, cited in Lenssen 2014, p. 304.

42 Lenssen 2014, pp. 319–321. See also Lenssen 2013 for a general account of the impact of the events of 1967 on the art scene in Syria.

43 Maari 2006, p. 363.

## Artists between freedom and censorship

Artists and the state have been closely tied to one another since Syria received its independence and their relations have often been conflictual in nature. While the immediate post-independence era was characterized by efforts at state-building and artists saw themselves as taking a central role therein, the Pan-Arab culture policy initiated during the UAR was the beginning of policies to monitor and influence the work of artists, a tendency, that continued after the dissolution of the UAR and that became even more pronounced after the Baʿth party came to power through a coup in 1963. In several ways, the state tried to intervene in artists' production and forced them into the defensive position of protecting themselves from what they perceived as an illegitimate interference. Such measures to control and guide artistic production are a typical feature of authoritarian states. Contrary to high modernist notions of the autonomous artist, working in a sphere separate from the concerns of the world, art is here regarded as a powerful tool, a tool that can and should be used to disseminate certain ideas and ideologies. At the same time, it is a tool that needs to be strictly controlled, lest its influence on society run counter to the wishes of those in power. In such a system, art is regarded as imminently powerful by all who participate in its production, distribution and control.<sup>44</sup>

The contradictions of cultural and artistic policy under the Baʿth regime is illustrated by its changing promotion of different artistic approaches. In the early years of Baʿth party rule during the 1960s, the Ministry of Culture promoted the country's abstract painters on the international circuit of biennials and exhibitions and even sought to bring their work into harmony with the socialist model promoted by the ruling party.<sup>45</sup> The Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus enjoyed a culture of free experimentation during these years and its teachers were expected to provide education that corresponded to contemporary curricula. But despite the positive impact this had on the wider art scene in the country, the Directorate of Plastic Arts under the leadership of Afif Bahnassi sought to exert more direct control over the work of artists. Thus, artists wishing to submit work to the autumn exhibition of 1965 were asked to keep to the theme of "national art." When a number of artists protested, Bahnassi responded by asserting that rather than imposing restrictions on artists, the policy represented increased support, especially for those artists who wanted to work outside the gallery and market system. The protesting artists succeeded in reversing the policy, but they had also been reminded of the fact that the state saw itself fit to intervene in the field of artistic production wherever it felt compelled to do so, and that it held the view that art should stand in the service of the state and its goals.<sup>46</sup>

44 Sjeklocha and Mead 1967, p. 61. For parallels to a different context, namely the use of cinema in Iran by the state to promote Islamic values and mores, see Naficy 2002, p. 29.

45 Lenssen 2014, pp. 314–319.

46 Lenssen 2014, pp. 282–283, 302.

When discussing Syrian art in the years after c. 1965, Afif Bahnasi has written that it had “left behind traditional movements in modern art” in favor of a more “authentic and original” art. He also insisted that artists’ commitment was not officially imposed but rather came from a free and spontaneous engagement and testified to the artists’ strong links with social reality.<sup>47</sup> As the reaction of artists after the defeat of 1967 mentioned above shows, artists in Syria were indeed strongly engaged with their society. But as the protests surrounding the autumn exhibition of 1965 and its theme of “national art” shows, artists did not necessarily hold the same views as state officials of how “commitment” should be articulated.

Working within the context of an authoritarian state presents artists with an entire array of difficulties. They are placed in a precarious situation, in which being able to work and steer clear of persecution requires a constant balancing act between their aesthetic concerns and interests as citizens and cultural agents on one hand, and the regime’s system of control and coercion on the other. The fact that artists still succeed in producing meaningful art testify to their relentless search for new modes of expression and for ways to circumvent obstacles in their training and production of art.

## Conclusion

Artists in Syria have at all times been forced to navigate often hazardous terrains. The changing political systems, first under Ottoman and later French colonial rule and a series of more or less autocratic regimes following independence, have meant that artists have often been preoccupied with everything but the actual production of art.

For a very long time, since the so-called *ruwwad* artists, getting the desired training required travelling far away from familiar surroundings. Artists were driven by the wish to learn skills deemed necessary for a civilized, modern nation and upon returning to their home country, eagerly shared their knowledge as educators and initiators of various artistic activities.

The institutionalization of the art world began during the French Mandate and was continued after 1946, when Syria became a sovereign state, culminating in the establishment of a Ministry of Culture in 1958 and a genuine art academy in 1959, the Institute of Plastic Art, later re-named the Faculty of Fine Arts. However, with these institutions also came greater efforts by the state to intervene in the education and production of art. The Faculty remained a bastion of free expression and experimentation until 1967, where the Arab defeat in the Arab-Israeli War led to a general change in cultural and artistic outlook.

47 Bahnasi 1974, p. 23.

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