A Study of the Identity Representation in Iraqi, Non-Figurative, Abstract Paintings

Abstract:
During the early years of the twentieth century, modernism took over the art scene in the west and consequently, abstract art turned into the most prevailing and the most significant phenomenon in the world of art. However, artistic creation in the practices of western academic disciplines was common in Iraq from the late nineteenth century to 1930s. Shortly after, the Iraqi artists became familiar with modern art movements and abstract painting due to studying in Europe. In Iraq, abstract art reached its summits during the mid-twentieth century which coincided with the strong efforts made towards the formation of a national unity and Iraqi nation. Therefore, it is worth further research to find out how the Iraqi artists created their national art traditions using western abstract art disciplines, or whether Iraqi abstract art is an independent type despite adhering to the examples of the western abstract artworks.
The current paper aims to introduce Iraqi abstract art with a focus on abstract features and inspiration sources of modern Iraqi artists in order to appreciate how identity have been represented in Iraqi abstract paintings and what factors have determined the theme and content of the artworks. Hence, the abstract paintings and their relation to the figurative concepts and their representational essence have been discussed. In addition, a number of non-figurative abstract artworks of five modern Iraqi artists from 1950 to 1980 have been chosen to be analyzed and described as the statistical society. Finally, these artworks have been analyzed for their representation of the national identity according to historical, political, and social documents. According to the study, it can be specified that the main narratives of abstract works are based on Iraqi national identity, which alters from Arab nationalism to Iraqi nationalism; in Hashemite Iraq, Arab nationalism or Arab unity movement or pan-Arabism dominated the intellectual atmosphere of Iraq. Since the 1930s, along with the movement of pan-Arabism, the national consciousness was also formed and hence “pan-Arabism of Iraq” turned into the main national identity in Hashemite Iraq which ultimately insisted on components such as “Arab” and “Islamic” Iraqi people.
Iraqi nationalism became prominent after World War II and 1950s and the tendency toward regionalism and local nationalism highly accentuated parallel to Arab nationalism. Thus, Iraqi artists managed to create abstract artworks by combining the formal and conceptual components of Islamic, ancient and Mesopotamian heritage and folklore culture with that of modern western art expressions and presentations. In these works of art, calligraphy and Arabic letters, Islamic geometric motifs, symbols and Mesopotamian signs and folkloric elements are boldly used. They all represent Iraqi identity (Arabic-Islamic-Iraqi) despite being non-figurative.
The results show that this strong emphasis on “identity” is in relation to the social, political and intellectual developments in Iraq; because “identity” has been a major challenge since the formation of Iraq in 1920. Therefore, emphasis on national identity in modern Iraqi art is perfectly in line with the modern Iraq nationalistic discourse. On the other hand, representing “identity” originates from the nature of Islamic art which, since its advent, have endeavored to represent a different identity from other religions. Islamic geometric art represents a successful attempt of Islam in creating a distinct form of art that is exempt from figurative and iconographic Christian art and represents an

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Islamic identity. Islamic calligraphy, as one of the most important forms of Islamic art, became a symbol of Islam in the conquered countries due to the necessity of reading Qur’an and saying prayers and copying the Word of God in the early years of Islam.

Gradually, the letters lost their relation to readability and letters, calligraphy and artistic representation turned into a way of independent expression in the world of Islam. These new representations still offered the spiritual and the sacred aspects of the Word of God. So far as Islam was considered as the true nature of Arab nationalism and the most important Iraqi cultural heritage and considering the emphasis of Islam on Qur’an and Arabic language, the Iraqi artists used Arabic letters and calligraphy abundantly in order to give identity to their abstract artworks.

**Keywords:** Abstract Art, Iraqi Painting, Identity, Non-Figurative, Representational

**References**

- Holy Quran

**URL:**