Transformations of Visual and Applied Arts in the Modern Muslim East: Comparative Ethical Perspectives on Identity, Modernity, and Cultural Dynamics

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Posted Date: 2 September 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202509.0219.v1

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 doi:10.20944/preprints202509.0219.v1

Article

Transformations of Visual and Applied Arts in the Modern Muslim East: Comparative Ethical Perspectives on Identity, Modernity, and Cultural Dynamics

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Abstract

Background: Visual and applied arts have historically played a decisive role in shaping collective consciousness, political imagination, and cultural identity within Muslim Eastern societies. From the nineteenth century to the present, these forms of artistic expression have functioned not merely as aesthetic creations but as communicative tools, bridging religion, politics, and society. The encounter with Western modernity, colonialism, and orientalist perceptions significantly transformed the function, reception, and ethical dimensions of visual art in the Muslim East. **Purpose**: This study investigates how visual and applied arts in the modern Muslim East have acted as mediators of social change, reflections of political authority, and instruments of cultural transformation. Particular emphasis is placed on the ethical implications of these artistic developments and the comparative dynamics between traditional Islamic values and imported Western modernist discourses. **Methodology**: The research applies a comparative-ethical and historical-analytical approach, drawing on primary and secondary sources from art history, Islamic cultural studies, and social philosophy. It integrates textual analysis of artworks, exhibitions, and critical debates with theoretical perspectives from modernity studies, postcolonial thought, and cultural sociology. **Findings**: The findings suggest that visual art in the Muslim East was instrumental in disseminating new ideas of freedom, individuality, and collective identity. At the same time, the encounter with Western forms generated tensions, leading to orientalist misrepresentations and internal disputes about authenticity, morality, and tradition. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, elite patronage—particularly from Gulf states—has transformed Arab contemporary art into both a globalized cultural commodity and an elite-driven enterprise, raising questions about accessibility, representation, and public engagement. **Discussion**: The dual role of visual and applied arts emerges clearly: on one hand, as a liberating force capable of challenging established religious and political paradigms; on the other, as a field vulnerable to commercialization, political instrumentalization, and cultural alienation. Ethical concerns thus arise over whether modern Muslim Eastern art adequately reflects the lived realities of societies or predominantly serves elite, Western, and institutional agendas. **Actuality**: The actuality of this research lies in its critical reflection on contemporary debates about cultural identity, decolonization, and globalization in the Muslim East. In an era marked by geopolitical instability and rapid modernization, understanding how art mediates between tradition and modernity is essential for grasping broader processes of social transformation. Moreover, by situating visual art within ethical, comparative, and intercultural frameworks, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to reassess the role of cultural production in shaping political authority, public consciousness, and civilizational dialogue.

Keywords: Visual and applied arts; Muslim East; modernity; identity; cultural transformation; Orientalism; Arab art; political authority; social change; elite patronage; comparative ethics; globalization; decolonization

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1. Introduction

The visual and applied arts in the Muslim East have undergone profound transformations over the last two centuries. These changes reflect broader encounters between Eastern traditions and Western modernity, shaped by colonial interactions, technological innovations, and philosophical debates about identity and representation. Historically, art in Islamic societies was deeply interwoven with everyday life, religious practice, and material culture—manifested in architecture, ornamentation, textiles, and calligraphy. Unlike the Western tradition, which increasingly emphasized figural representation, Islamic visual culture privileged abstraction, geometry, and symbolic forms.

With the rapid advancement of technology in the nineteenth century, particularly the invention of the camera, Western visual art shifted away from imitating visible reality toward experimentation with abstraction, subjectivity, and expressive freedom. This evolution resonated across borders, compelling Muslim Eastern artists to confront new aesthetic paradigms. The incorporation of these modernist trends into Eastern contexts, however, was neither linear nor uniform. Instead, it involved processes of adaptation, negotiation, and at times, resistance (Asadov, 2023:76).

The aim of this study is to trace the development of visual and applied arts in the contemporary Muslim East, focusing on how Western innovations—such as photography, Cubism, and abstraction—interacted with and transformed traditional Islamic artistic forms. Special emphasis is placed on the ethical and cultural implications of this interaction, particularly the tension between originality and imitation, tradition and modernity, and local identity versus global artistic currents.

2. Historical Shifts and Western Influences

The cultural and technological advancements that emerged in the West during the mid-nineteenth century compelled artists to seek new directions. In particular, the invention of the camera in 1840 prompted painters to move away from merely replicating visible reality and instead pursue more personal and expressive forms of artistic inquiry. Innovations in visual and applied arts—new forms, shapes, and color concepts—quickly found resonance in modern social life.

The rapid progress of technology began to transform not only social life but also the working and cultural environments of individuals, thereby expanding the scope of visual and applied arts. Even those branches of art traditionally considered abstract took on new meanings and adapted to modern life. Especially in the field of plastic arts, a different kind of value emerged within industrial, economic, and social contexts. This transformation altered the relationship between humans—particularly artists—and objects, paving the way for new artistic movements that came to be known in art history as the "fragmentation of the object." This new period, which began with Cézanne and developed through Cubism, was shaped by the fundamental parameters set by Braque and Picasso. It gave rise to a modern artistic understanding, further enriched by movements such as Expressionism, Dadaism, and Futurism, which left a lasting mark on twentieth-century visual and applied arts.

3. Encounters with the East

From the early twentieth century, European artists in search of new perspectives began to engage with the East—particularly with the colorful and multicultural cities of Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Turkey. They reflected the lives of Eastern peoples in their artworks. Renowned artists such as Paul Signac, August Macke, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Victor Vasarely, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Pierre-Elbert Marquet, and Maurice Denis not only portrayed the lives of Eastern individuals but also frequently drew upon Eastern artistic motifs. These encounters significantly influenced how artists in the Muslim East began to view modern art.

By the twentieth century, as art was liberated from the dictates of nature, both Western and Eastern artists increasingly turned their focus toward the human being. This transformation was also driven by the impact of nineteenth-century philosophy on both global politics and modern art. The

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rise of philosophies centered on the human condition encouraged new artistic directions and contributed to the redefinition of the classical understanding of the human figure in artists' minds.

A key feature of modern visual art is its ability to materialize concepts that were once considered abstract in classical art, while also seeking to explore even deeper levels of abstraction. Artists such as Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Constantin Brâncuși, and Kandinsky pushed the limits of abstraction to extremes. Yet even these pioneering modernists eventually turned to Eastern thought in their search for the abstract. Kandinsky's 1904 journey to Tunisia, for instance, influenced him to depict not only color and form but also spiritual force—an element previously absent from his works. The introduction of theosophical sentiments into painting gave rise to a new kind of visuality, endowing the depicted emotions with cosmic, ritualistic, and aesthetic character (Celik, 1992: 113).

Unsurprisingly, these developments led some European art circles—especially among suprematists like Malevich—to advocate for a complete break from artistic traditions of the past.

4. Photography and the Rise of Technological Art in the Muslim East

Photography was introduced into the Muslim East in the mid-19th century, shortly after the invention of the camera in 1839. However, its application in print and painting arts only became widespread around 1910. The philosophical reflections of Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* profoundly shaped modern understandings of technological tools in art. In this essay, Benjamin argued that the emergence of photography and cinema transformed the very nature of art—particularly painting—causing it to lose its "aura" and original meaning. With photography, the human hand was no longer the primary tool of reproduction; instead, reproduction became the responsibility of the camera lens and the viewer's eye (Najaf ve d., 2025).

Benjamin further noted that photography and cinema gave rise to the mass production of art. Once produced for elite or sacred purposes, art became an object for mass consumption, subject to capitalist circulation and social evaluation. This shift detached art from its classical values, redefined its symbolic nature, and turned it into a medium of visual representation and social critique.

The Scientification of Art

Innovation in modern art was no longer tied to symbolic continuity but to the deliberate break with inherited traditions. Movements such as Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism played decisive roles in this break, reflecting both artistic and scientific progress. By the mid-20th century, scientific perspectives increasingly intersected with art, a convergence described as the "scientification of art." This process drew art into abstract, conceptual domains, while simultaneously positioning it as an explanatory medium for the masses.

Between the 1960s and 1990s, the rise of video art exemplified this transformation. Video became both a mass medium and a method for reproducing film, theater, and live performances, giving rise to the notion of "art within art." While photography, cinema, and video all belong to the broader category of visual arts, each introduced new scientific-technological concepts, shifting the emphasis from contemplative symbolism to performance, technical execution, and multimedia creativity (Alper, 2013).

As a result, new domains of art emerged, including:

- Performance Art
- Spatial Art
- Video Art
- Temporal Art
- Environmental Art

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- Installation Art

In these forms, the object itself became "de-objectified," imbued with symbolic and conceptual meanings that reflected the artist's intentions.

5. Installation Art and Its Role in the Muslim East

Installation art is designed to create immersive spaces, where the viewer is invited to reflect on personal experiences while participating in the artistic process. In the Middle Eastern context, installation art has frequently been mobilized as a medium for political expression, particularly during revolutions and coups. Scholars Nicolas de Olivera, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry emphasize this participatory dimension, noting that Robert Storr's 1992 exhibition *Dislocations* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, established installation art as a major movement. Storr's later writings highlighted the performative nature of installations, where spectators become co-creators of the artistic event (Olivera vd., 2005: 73-79).

In Muslim Eastern countries, installation art has not only challenged traditional exhibition practices but also blurred the boundaries between galleries, social spaces, and political forums. By embedding artistic meaning in spatial arrangements, installation art fosters dialogue between concept, audience, and environment. It thereby transforms art into a dynamic function of the masses rather than an exclusive domain of elites (Olivera vd., 2005: 41).

Tradition, Identity, and Contemporary Relevance

In the Muslim East, installation art often integrates traditional cultural elements, enabling artists to reconcile modern abstraction with historical memory. This integration reflects the broader tendency of Muslim societies to preserve traditions across social, political, moral, and familial domains. For example, in Turkey, the revival of Ottoman identity in painting, theater, cinema, and television since the late 20th century has revitalized traditional aesthetics while simultaneously advancing new forms of abstraction (Said, 2013: 67).

Historically, the introduction of European art concepts into the Muslim East was closely linked to military and educational reforms. Military schools in the Ottoman Empire, Qajar Iran, and Egypt trained students in European-style disciplines, exposing them to Western artistic developments. Early modern artists such as Osman Hamdi Bey, Şeker Ahmed Pasha, and Süleyman Seyyid in Turkey, and Mohammad Ghaffari (Kamāl al-Mulk) in Iran, embodied this synthesis. Although trained in Western techniques, they maintained connections with Eastern life, producing works that merged lived realities with modern visual perspectives (Najaf ve d., 2025: 17-19).

6. Characteristic Features and Ethical Dimensions of Modern Visual and Applied Arts

From the second half of the 19th century onward, modern artistic ideas began to influence the Muslim East, though their full impact was felt only in the early 20th century. Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan encountered modern art indirectly through Ottoman reforms, while Egypt, after Napoleon's 1798 invasion, established direct contact with Europe. Under Muhammad Ali Pasha, Egyptian students were sent abroad to study modern painting, sculpture, and applied arts, later returning to teach these disciplines in newly founded institutions.

The Ethical Mission of Art

One of the defining features of modern Muslim Eastern art has been its ethical mission. Amid political upheavals, social dislocation, and economic crises of the 19th and 20th centuries, artists assumed moral responsibility to guide, educate, and enlighten their societies. While inspired by modernity, these artists remained deeply attached to Islamic notions of morality (*akhlaq*), rooted in the Qur'an and elaborated in Islamic philosophy, jurisprudence, and theology (Su, 1965).

The brush and the pen were perceived as sharper than the sword: art was not only a reflection of beauty but also an instrument of resistance, social critique, and moral reform. This dual role—art

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as aesthetic creation and art as ethical mission—remains a central characteristic of visual and applied arts in the modern Muslim East (Rizvi, 2014: 76).

7. Ethical Upheaval, Intellectual Responses, and the Humanist Turn

The profound and multifaceted decline experienced across the Muslim East in the nineteenth century precipitated a rupture in public morality. The collapse or weakening of institutions that had historically sustained ethical life—legal, political, and spiritual—generated a widespread crisis of meaning. In response, new politico-religious movements emerged, propagating *Mahdist* ideas as classical pathways to collective salvation.

In parallel, an emergent intelligentsia—writers, poets, journalists, educators, and artists—nourished by Western rationalism, framed the solution to political and moral disarray in terms of mass education and enlightenment. Consequently, modern artists in Muslim Eastern societies assumed a dual role: creative practitioners and humanist advocates for civic and moral renewal (Asadov, 2025: 514-515).

7.1. Second-Generation Ottoman Painters and the Paris Connection (c. 1840–1860)

The second generation of Ottoman painters—Osman Hamdi Bey, Şeker Ahmed Paşa, and Süleyman Seyyid—who trained for periods in Paris, developed a clear consciousness of art's formative power in public life. They helped establish the *Mekteb-i Osmanî* (Ottoman School) in Paris (1857–1864), supporting Muslim students studying in France and institutionalizing modern art education (Dolmaci, 2010: 17).

7.1.1. Osman Hamdi Bey's Institutional and Iconographic Legacy

Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910) articulated a program that simultaneously celebrated national identity and safeguarded material and spiritual heritage. His initiatives included: the first regulation on the protection of historical monuments in Ottoman Turkey; foundational archaeological research; public promotion of antiquities as shared heritage; the establishment of the Imperial Museum of Archaeology; the discovery of the "Alexander Sarcophagus"; and, crucially, the founding of the *Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi Âli* (Academy of Fine Arts), which became the nucleus of modern art education (Najaf ve Najafov, 2025: 17).

Artistically, Hamdi Bey employed modern techniques to reframe traditional lifeworlds. *The Theologian* (often discussed under similar titles) portrays a madrasa scholar immersed in study—less a documentary of nineteenth-century Ottoman education than a symbolic evocation of the learned ideal from the eras of Ibn Sīnā or Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī. The work functions as a visual ethics: a reminder of the civilizational vocation of knowledge and pedagogy (Asadov, 2021).

7.1.2. Ş. eker Ahmed Paşa and Süleyman Seyyid: Pedagogy, Nature, and Taste

Şeker Ahmed Paşa's dictum that painting should convey "taste and education together to the public" captures this generation's pedagogical ethos. Süleyman Seyyid's *Apples* stages a nature-inspired romanticism through modern color, light, and composition—an early break with the classical Islamic suspicion of mimetic naturalism, while retaining symbolic detachment of objects (Dadi, 2017: 78).

7.2. Republican Reforms and the Socialization of Art

Ottoman society's deep-seated resistance to cultural change slowed the diffusion of modern visual culture. Under the Republic, reforms catalyzed institutional transformation. Educational reform—most visibly the alphabet change—expanded literacy and gradually permeated social life. While religiously inflected reservations continued to shape public attitudes toward figural arts, the new state employed sculpture and public monuments (War of Independence, Atatürk) to anchor a modern political imaginary and normalize new civic aesthetics.

The People's Houses and Village Institutes disseminated modern visual and applied arts nationwide; art classes entered secondary curricula from 1925. These initiatives positioned art as a civic pedagogy aligned with the republican principle of populism (Asadov, 2024: 69-70).

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7.3. The "Çallı Generation" and Painting as National Narrative (1914–1930s)

Artists such as İbrahim Çallı, Hikmet Onat, Namık İsmail, Ruhi Arel, Avni Lifij, and peers—many of whom witnessed or fought in the War of Independence—translated national experience into a vivid painterly chronicle. State-organized "homeland tours" embedded modern painting within local geographies, entwining aesthetics with nation-building.

The 1929 founding of the Independent Painters and Sculptors Association (by figures including Refik Epikman, Cevat Dereli, Şeref Akdik, Mahmud Cuda, and others) consolidated art's public role. The first catalog, *Yeni Doğan Türk Resmi* (Newly Born Turkish Painting), announced a synthesis of conceptual and applied art. Works by Ali Çelebi (*Masked Ball*, *Barber*), Zeki Kocamemi (*The Wicked Men*, *Atatürk's Funeral Ceremony*), and Hale Asaf (*Self-Portrait with Palette*) departed decisively from inherited iconographies, provoking debates over national style versus cosmopolitan modernism. Critics such as Elif Naci argued for the "Turkification" of pictorial language—an early articulation of modernism's local rooting (Başbuğç 2009: 67).

7.4. After 1950: Social Themes, Urban Realities, and the Turn to Interior Worlds

Post-1950, socialist and socially conscious themes entered painting (e.g., Cemal Tollu's *Bodrum Exiles*; Halil Dikmen's *Dancers in a Circle*), while urban life and new female subjectivities (e.g., Nuri İyem's *Women at Home* and *Slum Beauties*) signaled a modern social identity distinct from the Ottoman past (Gören, 2002: 35).

From the 1970s onward, Turkish painting consolidated as a field defined by stylistic plurality and individual authorship. Surrealist tendencies (Naci İslimyeli, Utku Varlık), and personal mythologies (Ergin İnan's *Figure Behind the Insect*; Ekrem Kahraman's *Void*) foregrounded the artist's inner world. The pedagogical drive remained, but the artist's primary inquiry shifted to self-reflection and the phenomenology of perception (Kuru, 2017).

8. Modern Iranian Art and the Kamal-ol-Molk School

In Iran, modern art education coalesced under Mohammad Ghaffari (1845–1940), known as Kamal-ol-Molk, court painter to Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh Qājār. Following travels in Europe after 1896, Kamal-ol-Molk founded the *Sanāye-ye Mostaẓrafeh* (School of Fine Arts) in Tehran, training hundreds of painters and sculptors over fifteen years. His students established schools in Tabriz and Isfahan, often providing free instruction and recruiting talented youth (Najaf ve Najafov, 2025: 18).

Kamal-ol-Molk engineered a synthesis of late-Qajar classicism and European naturalism, reintroducing nature as a living, ethical, and didactic force. He modernized without erasing tradition—evident in works such as *Persian Musicians*, which rearticulates miniature aesthetics through modern pictorial means. Sculptors (Ashtiyani, Vaziri, Sedighi) and painters (Yasemi, Heydarian, Tajvidi, Behzad, Mossaver-ol-Molk) carried this synthesis into the public sphere; exhibitions de-sensitized audiences to figural depiction and live representation, easing anxieties about visuality and building an art public (Guler, 2015).

9. Egypt: Aristocracy, Institutions, and a Mass Aesthetic

9.1. From Khedival Patronage to National Cultural Policy

Under Khedive Ismail (1863–1879), Egypt sought alignment with European modernity. Cultural policy mobilized modern art to fashion a "new Egyptian social identity": European artists were invited; the Cairo Opera House opened with Verdi; urban space accrued public sculpture; and a major painting exhibition (1891) showcased local and foreign work. By the early twentieth century, political parties appropriated art as a vehicle of mass nationalization. In 1908, Prince Youssef Kamal inaugurated the Cairo Academy of Art, staffed by European instructors in painting, sculpture, decorative arts, and ornament.

The Academy's first generation—Mahmoud Mukhtar, Mohamed Nagy, Mahmoud Saïd, Ragheb Ayad, Habib Gorgi—defined Egyptian modernism. Mukhtar's sculpture established an international profile for thematic, symbolically charged works. (Bloom vd., 2009)

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9.2. Radical Modernisms and Ethical Continuities

While a strong radical tendency urged a break with the "Pharaonic" past (and at times foregrounded Arabism), other artists preserved ethical and vernacular continuities. Ragheb Ayad's bazaars, caravans, and dancers are unmistakably Egyptian; Mahmoud Saïd's canvases render the strange, chromatic, dreamlike modernity of nineteenth–twentieth-century Egypt (Housny vd., 2025: 877). Photographic and post-photographic modernisms (e.g., Van Leo in the 1940s) extended Egyptian visuality into idioms that influenced global popular culture and cinema.

10. Contemporary Themes and Ethical Analysis in the Muslim East

Modernization reframed the agenda of visual and applied arts across the Muslim East. Themes once marginal to classical aesthetics assumed centrality:

- Nature (from ritual/cosmological to living and phenomenological)
- Aesthetics (from symbolic ideal to human beauty and quotidian form)
- Space (from sacred architectural order to urban/social topologies)
- Political Representation (satire, caricature, propaganda, counter-imagery)
- Urban Life (migration, slums, new leisure, consumer culture)
- Women (visibility, agency, labor, domesticity, subjectivity)
- Identity (national, religious, regional, diasporic)
- Ideology (socialism, nationalism, Islamism, liberalism)
- Social Violence (war, displacement, repression, memory)
- Moral Education (*akhlaq* as artistic mission)

Publications such as *Molla Nasreddin* exemplify the fusion of image and political discourse, marking a decisive departure from purely decorative functions toward ethically charged communicative art. Photography, posters, printmaking, and later broadcast and digital media democratized visuality, decentering elite patronage and broadening audiences (Inan, 1987).

At the conceptual core lies the Islamic category of akhlaq (ethics), a comprehensive framework with jurisprudential, philosophical, and theological articulations. In the modern period, *akhlaq* provided artists with a normative language to mediate between tradition and modernity, aesthetics and pedagogy, and individuality and community.

11. Synthesis and Outlook (Preview)

Across Turkey, Iran, and Egypt—as emblematic cases—modern visual and applied arts navigated the tensions of imitation and invention, rupture and continuity, elitism and mass address. Institutional reforms, schools, academies, and exhibitions forged publics for art; artists alternated between nation-forming narratives, social critique, and introspective modernisms. The result is a heterogeneous but intelligible field in which ethical intention, technological mediation, and localized modernities coevolve (Durak, 2011).

12. Arab Modern and Contemporary Currents: Egypt to the Gulf

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Mahmoud Saïd, ***Untitled***, 1938, oil on wood (Arab Museum of Modern Art). Saïd's oeuvre exemplifies an Egyptian modernism that fused vernacular subjects with cosmopolitan technique, translating the social imaginary of a rapidly transforming society into chromatic, dreamlike canvases.

12.1. Saudi Modernisms and the Emergence of a Public Aesthetic

Modern art established durable footholds across Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia during the twentieth century. In Saudi Arabia, a vigorous art school emerged with hundreds of practitioners. Representative figures include Abdul Halim Radwin (1939–2006), Muhammad al-Salaam (b. 1955), Safiya Binzagr (b. 1940), Munira Musli (b. 1954), Taha Sabban (b. 1948), Ahmed Felamban, Abdullah Hammas (b. 1953), Ali al-Ruzaiza (b. 1947), Abdulaziz Ashur (b. 1963), Ahmed Mater (b. 1979), Abdulnasser Ghraibeh (b. 1973), Manal al-Dowayan, Shadia Alam, and Raja Alam. These artists combined aesthetic ambition with civic acuity, challenging restrictive readings of Wahhabi-Saudi norms and re-anchoring art in lived social dynamics (Housny vd., 2025: 875-876).

12.2. Feminist Interventions and the "Body–Space" Concept

Manal al-Dowayan's deployment of light, photography, and installation underscores a feminist critique of the devaluation of women's identities, while the works of sisters Shadia and Raja Alam foreground the cultural centrality of women's agency. Al-Dowayan's *My Name is Asma* isolates "simple yet meaningful" spaces to articulate a distinctly Arab-Islamic "body–space" phenomenon—where corporeality, memory, and public presence co-constitute meaning.

12.3. Regional Diffusion and Institutionalization

The Saudi and broader Arabian Peninsula scenes radiated influence into Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Yemen. From the 1970s onward, governments and royal courts established academies, endowed residencies, and sponsored overseas study. This institutionalization broadened technical repertoires, diversified media (photography, video, installation), and multiplied exhibition platforms, while also introducing tensions between elite patronage and public address (Burchardt, 2012: 89).

13. Visual Art as Civic Pedagogy: Identity, Women, Freedom

Modern visual art in the Muslim East has operated as a civic pedagogy—an instrument of seeing, naming, and recognizing collective experience.

13.1. Identity as a Generative Theme

"Identity consciousness" became a central motif: artists translated national struggles into legible imagery, configured maternal allegories of homeland, and narrated collective dignity and loss. These works often carried more mobilizing force than institutional curricula, rendering history and aspiration in vivid, mnemonic scenes.

13.2. Women as Social Subject and Ethical Measure

The image of the woman—ubiquitous across modern Eastern Muslim art—recast women not as symbols alone but as social subjects endowed with agency, strength, and ordinariness. For many audiences, these paintings and photographs constituted first encounters with the female body as a civic presence rather than a doctrinal abstraction (Bulut, 2004).

13.3. Freedom, Subjectivity, and the Everyday

Modern art mediated the idea of individual liberty through composure, self-possession, and quotidian dignity—e.g., İbrahim Çallı's pre-WWI *Woman in Green Dress*, where simplicity, confidence, and human presence displace ornamental allegory. In doing so, art proposed that choice and personhood are intrinsic civic goods (Komissarov, 2004).

13.4. Moral Pluralism and the Texture of Life

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By representing domestic interiors, streets, neighborhoods, and peasant lifeworlds, artists argued visually for moral pluralism: diverse codes and habits generate ethical richness rather than decay. Chromatic openness—"the pouring of purity into colors"—signaled that human value, not merely transcendental order, structures moral life.

14. Critical Reflections: Orientalism, Media, and Conceptual Imports

14.1. Mediated Gazes and "Disguised Orientalism"

Segments of modern and contemporary production, cinema included, have reproduced a Western-shaped desire to "see" the East—an aestheticized Orientalism sometimes internalized by regional practitioners. Mass-market series and films set in the Gulf further amplified tropes of luxury, prohibition, and contrast with "the West," flattening complex social textures (LeGassick, 1972).

14.2. Internalization and Epistemic Vulnerabilities

From the onset of modernization, Eastern intellectuals often imported Western categories and diagnoses without adequate filtration. Unexamined adoption of extreme or contestable ideas fostered epistemic dependency, enabling narratives that cast colonizers as "saviors" and indigenous polities as "barbaric"—with durable effects on self-perception and policy horizons.

14.3. Scholarly Lineages and the Production of the "Knowable East"

Classical Orientalist scholarship (e.g., philological standardization, curricular canons) made Arabic-Islamic materials accessible to European audiences but also codified frames through which Eastern subjects were to be known. The result: a resilient split-screen—poetic East vs. despotic East—that artists and critics continue to negotiate or contest.

15. Patronage, Marketization, and Public Disconnection

15.1. Art Fairs, Private Collecting, and Price Regimes

Since the mid-2000s, Arab collectors have become prominent actors in the global art market. High-profile purchases at international fairs—masterworks acquired at nine-figure prices—signaled financial capacity but also risked decoupling art from civic function, redirecting symbolic capital to private prestige rather than public culture.

15.2. Opportunity Costs and Curatorial Drift

During moments of social crisis (e.g., the Arab Spring), segments of the art world prioritized market momentum over documentary, community, or memorial functions. This drift narrowed the interpretive bandwidth of exhibitions and sidelined grassroots narratives.

15.3. Reconnecting Art and Publics: Policy and Practice

Mitigating disconnection requires: (i) public mandates in museum governance (education hours, free access tiers, multilingual mediation); (ii) curatorial quotas for community-based practices and archives; (iii) artist fellowships tied to civic outcomes; (iv) regional acquisition policies privileging underrepresented geographies and women; and (v) ethical patronage codes (conflict-of-interest and transparency standards) (Akrimah, 2025: 960-961).

16. Conclusions: Visibility, Agency, and Ethical Modernities

Visual and applied arts in the Muslim East have been indispensable not merely for representation but for recognition: enabling millions to see rulers and institutions, to encounter the ordinary life of others, and to recognize themselves as historical agents. Newspapers, posters, photographs, and canvases demystified the once-sacralized figures of shahs and sultans, humanizing authority and catalyzing shifts in political imagination.

Art also conveyed a will to live—a sensibility of light, color, and possibility—diffused further by mass media. Yet these emancipatory currents were shadowed by imported conceptual frames,

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disguised Orientalism, and market logics that sometimes detached art from public missions. Even so, visual ideas, once seen, are cognitively durable: they reconfigure memory and expectation in ways that censorship, orthodoxy, or volatility cannot fully erase.

The contemporary challenge is to sustain ethical modernities: modernisms anchored in *akhlaq* (morality) and civic reciprocity; institutions that mediate between elite resources and public benefit; and critical vocabularies that provincialize imported categories while elevating local knowledge. Where artists, curators, educators, and patrons align around these commitments, the visual cultures of the Muslim East can continue to generate forms that are aesthetically rigorous, socially intelligible, and ethically responsive.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments: The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the International Meetings and Conferences Research Association of Azerbaijan (IMCRA) for providing access to academic resources and facilitating research activities. The author also extends sincere appreciation to colleagues and peers at the journal *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems (SEI)* for their valuable insights and continuous encouragement during the development of this study.

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