

## **The Visual Economy of “Precious Books”: Publishing, Modern Art and the Design of Arabic Books**

Zeina Maasri<sup>\*</sup>

Technologies of printing, widening spheres of literacy and capitalist economies of publishing, among other global dimensions of modernity, have altered conceptions of the book and, arguably, standardized its visual and material form: binding, paper, size, typography and page layout. But still, the aesthetic form of books has been the object of modernist experimentation throughout the twentieth century. Poets, artists and designers, in association with editors and publishers sought to rekindle experiences of reading and seeing, text and image, knowledge and affect along specific philosophical or political visions and in, subversive or nostalgic, responses to particular traditions of bookmaking. Johanna Drucker contends that the artist’s book is “the 20<sup>th</sup>-century art-form par excellence”<sup>1</sup> and George Bornstein, in *Material Modernism: the Politics of the Page*, urges us “to recognize that the literary text consists not only of words (its linguistic code) but also of the semantic features of its material instantiations (its bibliographic code).”<sup>2</sup> Scholarship concerned with modernist aesthetic explorations of the visual and material form of the book, however, has excluded from its modernist framing book cultures that lie outside the geography of the West. Yet this very geography of margins, as Partha Mitter has argued, offers a vantage

---

\* Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Abboudi Bou Jawde for generously making his collections of Arabic books and periodicals available for my study and for his unwavering support throughout. I also want to thank Hala Auji, Bob Brecher, Sonja Mejcher Atassi, the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of CSSAAME for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 6.

point from which a critical decentering of the exclusionary Western foundation of modernism can be mounted.<sup>3</sup> Shedding light on the postcolonial Arabic book, this article contributes to a growing scholarship seeking precisely to “decenter modernism”<sup>4</sup> and expands the latter field of enquiry by bringing into play the design and visual economy of modern art books.

In her recent *Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and The American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*, Hala Auji centers her argument on how visuality, often disregarded, is crucial to the social history of the Arabic press. She rightly notes that the much-privileged textuality of books, and print culture more broadly, has to a great extent overshadowed the visual and material dimensions of printed books. Through this framework, the book’s typography, layout design, binding and size are examined as crucial markers of “visual literacy” in a moment of transition from scribal to print culture. The same problem can be extended to the study of Arabic publications from mid-twentieth century onwards, when, even more crucially, “vision was nominally ascendant”<sup>5</sup> and new techniques of image making and reproduction transformed the press and everyday media in the Arab world. Scholars of postcolonial Arabic literature, however, have repeatedly disembodied the texts they study from the visual and material form of the books and journals in which these have been published. Historians of modern art, on the other hand, have limited their attention, and even then only tangentially, to artists’ books. In these approaches book-making as an aesthetic practice is removed from the economy of publishing and the politics of the reproducible printed artifact.<sup>6</sup> But we need to understand how

---

<sup>3</sup> Mitter, Partha. “Decentering Modernism,” 540.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 531.

<sup>5</sup> Armbrust, “History in Arab Media Studies,” 37.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Guesdon and Vernay-Nouri, *L’Art du Livre Arabe*; Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*; Al-Bahloly, “The Persistence of the Image;” and Mejcher-Atassi, “Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East.” While

engagements with the book as a modern artistic medium were productive of new conceptions and visual economies of Arabic books. What role does this aesthetic practice play in a capitalist economy of publishing and in an everyday visuality of reading?

By being attentive to the fluidity across aesthetic practices in visual culture and to the economic dimension of these practices, the analysis inevitably directs attention to a disquiet troubling modern art history: art's alleged autonomy. On this, Jacques Rancière's argument against the dominant paradigms of the modernist view of the autonomy of art in the distinction drawn "between art forms and life forms"<sup>7</sup> provides a neat departure. He exemplifies his argument by looking at how modernist graphic design of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century blurs the distinction between sign and form, and between the form of art and the form of the everyday object. He writes in conclusion:

Accordingly, the surface of graphic design is three things: firstly the equal footing on which everything lends itself to art; secondly, the surface of conversion where words, forms and things exchange roles; and thirdly, the surface of equivalence where the symbolic writing of forms equally lends itself to expressions of pure art and the schematization of instrumental art.<sup>8</sup>

The short-lived *Silsilat al-Nafa'is* (Precious Books Series, 1967–1970) offers a paradigmatic case to examine the blurring of distinctions between words, art forms and everyday objects in the design of illustrated Arabic books. Published in Beirut, Lebanon, by Dar an-Nahar (1967–2018) and edited by modernist poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917–1987), the series saw the latter's aesthetic project expand from the editorial vision of his avant-garde Arabic poetry journal *Shi'r* (Poetry, 1957–1964; 1967–70) to the more "precious" materiality of books. Accordingly, it formed a node connecting transnational modernist art and literary circuits with book publishing. *Silsilat al-*

---

the latter might posit an exception in its attention to the politics of bookmaking, the study is specific to contemporary Iraqi artists' books.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

*Nafa'is* consisted in a series of carefully revisited and translated Levantine classics of world literature, ranging from ancient Sumerian and Biblical texts to Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, published in deluxe art book editions. As this article will demonstrate, the "material instantiation"<sup>9</sup> of these canonical texts as "precious" objects capitalized on the visual economy of modern art and design. For this purpose, al-Khal involved a number of prominent Arab artists, such as Paul Guiragossian (1926–1993), Dia al-Azzawi (b. 1939) and Shafic Abboud (1926–2004), to offer modern artistic interpretations of these classics into book form. This pioneering Arabic publishing endeavor was enabled by interlocking scales of political, economic and cultural changes which saw Beirut develop, in the 1960s, as a nodal site of modern Arabic literature, new printing technologies, transnational publishing and art markets. Relations between these fields are analyzed here through a multifaceted lens, focusing on the modernist Arabic book as at once a product of intellectual and artistic practice, a commodity in a capitalist economy of publishing and, primarily, a translocal artifact of visual and print culture.

### **A Lens on Translocal Visuality**

Dar an-Nahar's publishing project is situated historically at the threshold of contemporary globalization that characterize the "Global Sixties"<sup>10</sup>— at the juncture of a globally expansive "society of the spectacle"<sup>11</sup> with cultural revolutions and at the anxious interface of transnational modernist movements with radical processes of political and cultural decolonization. I use the formulation "translocal visuality" to capture the nexus of global visual economies with transnational circuits of modernism and thus to account for: the movement of printed image-

---

<sup>9</sup> Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Varon et al., "Time is an Ocean".

<sup>11</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*.

objects; artists, intellectuals and designers; and discourses about modern art and the realm of the visual, in its aesthetic dimension, as a force-field entangled with politics. I draw here on Deborah Poole's concept of "visual economy,"<sup>12</sup> which, as she convincingly argues, is more useful than "visual culture" for thinking globally about the circulation of images as part of a comprehensive social organization that is materially structured around issues of production and exchange. "It is relatively easy to imagine the people of Paris and Peru, for example, participating in the same 'economy,' " writes Poole; "To imagine or speak of them as part of a shared 'culture' is considerably more difficult."<sup>13</sup> I take her distinction as a cue for considering transnational circuits of modernism as conduits for globally pervasive visual economies rather than shared visual cultures. We can thus extend the idea of a ubiquitous visual economy when we discuss the circulation of technologies of production and reproduction. The visibility of modern printed forms, then — books, magazines, newspapers — with their respective typographic conventions, standardized paper formats and binding methods can be said to be shared between, say, European and Arabic publications. Likewise modern conventions of seeing/reading as embodied activities are also shared through the global circulation of visual economies of publishing and printing. But here again, these media do not necessarily constitute one and the same visual culture, not least due to the differences in scripts (Latin and Arabic) and writing/reading directions (left to right vs. right to left). In each instance, these aesthetic forms are translated, appropriated and reconfigured into the particularity of a given culture, its history and its demands in terms of visibility.<sup>14</sup> While

---

<sup>12</sup> Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> I am building here on a widely held critique of societal modernization theories that too quickly point towards global convergence in a reductive "acultural" conceptualization of modernity's global institutions and media technologies. Such critique argues instead that a cultural theory of modernity directs us to examine the push and pull of sameness and difference in the contingency of historical, political and cultural conditions: see Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, 16–17 and Gaonkar and Povinelli "Technologies of Public Forms."

there are, then, globally shared visual economies that emerge through printed media technologies and the expansion of capitalism, there remain divergences in visual cultures.

Dar an-Nahar's "precious books" series thus needs to be located not only within global visual economies of the modern book, but also within genealogies of Arabic book cultures in Islamic art history and, crucially, the shift from scribal to print culture characteristic of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Arab *nahda* (Renaissance). What political, discursive and aesthetic relations to the past was Dar an-Nahar's modern, artistic engagement with the book as a cultural form seeking to conjure, establish or subvert? In a cultural history that has privileged the word as an artistic form, whether in secular Arabic literary practices or in religious spheres and calligraphic materialization, what aesthetics of reading and seeing, of text and image, characterize the translocal visuality of Arabic books in this postcolonial historical conjuncture?

### **"A New Book for a New Public"**

A new book for a new public:

Lately, under the effect of various factors, including: continuous encounters with world libraries; the development of aesthetic taste thanks to art activities such as international festivals, collective and solo exhibitions and screening of the latest wonders of cinema; the ease of transportation which has shrunk the world, bringing Paris, or Moscow, or New York to Beirut, or Cairo or Casablanca; the opening of humanity's horizons in the explosion of geographic, territorial, linguistic, and religious borders, which has imparted Arabs with the ability to follow different facets of the truth.

Lately, after the Second World War, an Arab character with deep roots has emerged, authentic in knowledge, open to modernity, and sensible to our needs. This character created a need for an Arabic book made by it and for it, a book with unmasked thoughts, totally liberated from the backward pull of a bygone Arab golden era, a book in the spirit of the age, from an Arab lived experience, from our day and our techniques with prospects of keeping it for our future.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Khater, "*al-Kitab al-Arabi*," 5. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the author.

Thus wrote Nazih Khater, a prominent Lebanese art critic and journalist, by way of his review of *Silsilat al-Nafa'is*, the “precious books” series, a year after Dar an-Nahar’s launch of the project. He begins with a brief prelude about the history of Arabic book arts, stopping at the intellectual and printing legacy of the Arab *nahda* (Renaissance). The latter period, spanning from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the First World War, constituted a paradigmatic moment of socio-political change, cultural modernization and national definition, where the nascent Arabic press held a significant dual role in, on the one hand, the revival of an Arabic literary heritage and, on the other, the articulation of modern subjectivities through the translation and circulation of new concepts of nationhood, as well as globally interconnected radical ideas, scientific subjects and new literary forms.<sup>16</sup> Khater, however, laments the primacy of textual content and the disregard for the book as modern art form for Arabic readers. Indeed, as Auji observes, the *nahda*’s modernization impulse, materialized in an alternative visual form of the Arabic book, turned to a streamlined and standardized typographic design, which was stripped of the ornamental characteristics of illuminated manuscripts and traditional scribal techniques.<sup>17</sup> Dar an-Nahar’s “precious books” series thus marks, in his view, a second paradigmatic moment in the modern history of Arabic printing and intellectual life, following the advent of the Arabic press. In reclaiming the visuality of the Arabic book as an aesthetic form, Khater sees this publishing endeavor as presenting “a new book for a new public,” addressed to a modern, cosmopolitan and aesthetically attuned Arab subjectivity.

In the above passage, Khater vividly paints a budding moment at the threshold of contemporary globalization, as experienced from Beirut in the late 1960s. The interconnected

---

<sup>16</sup> On the history of the Arabic press see Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution*; on Arab identity and the role of the press during the *nahda*, see Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* and “Arabic Literary-Scientific Journals”; and on global radicalism, see Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*.

<sup>17</sup> This is especially the case of books printed at the leading American Press in Beirut: see Auji, *Printing Arab Modernity*, 127–129.

world of literature, art and leisure he describes signals an experience of “time-space compression”<sup>18</sup> brought forth by, on one level, the acceleration and global expansion of capitalist modes of production, greater speed of commodity circulation and associated patterns of consumption; and on the other, advancement in technologies of transport and communication, such as the jet plane and television. This, as Khater observed, “has shrunk the world” and in turn, intensified the mobility of cosmopolitan cultural forms and associated aesthetic experiences of taste. This new public culture, according to him, characterizes Arab cities such as Beirut, Cairo and Casablanca, in which a new Arab subjectivity has emerged, deeply rooted yet emancipated from the weight of heritage and anxieties over modernity. These fraught themes, which can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century *nahda*’s reflexive concerns, constituted nodal concepts in the intellectual debates of mid-twentieth century anticolonial struggles and ensuing cultural, and national, identity constructions. In his enthusiastic review, Khater sees in the “precious books series” an embodiment of a modern Arab society that has its legacy in the *nahda* but that “has surpassed the anxiety of searching and reached contemporary vanguard achievements.”<sup>19</sup>

His discourse, and the “new public” it summoned, is historically situated at the cusp of a long-standing debate that preoccupied Arab artists and intellectuals concerning the role of the arts in decolonization struggles, especially foregrounded in Beirut-based literary periodicals. The politicization of literature that seemed necessary to some at this historic moment<sup>20</sup> — such as novelist Suheil Idriss (1925–2008) and his pan-Arab literary journal *al-Adab* (1953–) — was questioned by others. Of note here is the position of Yusuf al-Khal and his journal *Shi‘r*. Joined by Adonis (pen name for ‘Ali Ahmad Sa‘id Esber, b.1930), Syrian-born pioneering figure of

---

<sup>18</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 240.

<sup>19</sup> Khater, “al-Kitab al-Arabi,” 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment.”



modern Arabic poetry, Yusuf al-Khal founded *Shi‘r* in 1957 and led a modernist movement in Arabic poetry from Beirut, providing a publishing platform for experimentation in modern modes of poetic enunciation for authors across many Arab countries. *Shi‘r* foregrounded a poetic practice that would embody the new aesthetic sensibilities of a modernizing Arab society and articulate novel affective horizons, composed in the zeitgeist of the day yet unscathed by political ideology.<sup>21</sup> Its variant of artistic modernism — subverting aesthetic traditions yet claiming artistic autonomy — was vehemently criticized for swimming against the Arab nationalist anticolonial tide politically and culturally, leading to the withdrawal of a number of its regular contributors, most notably its co-founding editor, Adonis.<sup>22</sup> Under financial and political duress, compounded with internal editorial dispute, the journal came to a temporary halt in 1964.

Khater was writing from Beirut four years later, at the juncture of intense political and cultural transformations regionally and globally: the humiliating military defeat of Arab states against Israel in the 1967 June war, provoking a disillusionment that laid bare the failed governance of post-independence Arab states;<sup>23</sup> the subsequent rise of the Palestinian liberation movement as an armed revolutionary struggle, with Beirut serving as an intellectual and artistic hub for the PLO’s media activities;<sup>24</sup> and the intersection of the latter with Third Worldist anti-imperialism, as well as with New Leftist politics and radical movements in Europe and North

---

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Utopia al-Madina al-Muthaqqafa*, 93–140.

<sup>22</sup> See Said, *Utopia al-Madina al-Muthaqqafa*, 149–162; and Amatheis, *Yusuf al-Khal*, 80–87.

<sup>23</sup> Postcolonial Arab states had not just failed to keep to their promise of reclaiming the Palestine annexed by Israel in 1948, but further Palestinian and Arab land (in Egypt, Syria and Jordan) was lost in this war, and in just six days: see Louis and Shlaim, *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*; on its effect on Arab artists and intellectuals see Kassab, *Contemporary Arab thought* and Lenssen et al., “Introduction the Longevity of Rupture: 1967 in Art and its Histories.”

<sup>24</sup> See Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*.

America.<sup>25</sup> In 1968, Beirut was in the eye of this globally interconnected storm and for a young Maoist like Khater, it was pregnant with promise.

“The new Arab public” conjured by Khater was at the cusp of political and cultural transformations that emerged from the fissures of the postcolonial Arab state project and in the interstices of an Arab nationalist discourse shaken from its triumphant certitude. In this context, al-Khal reissued a new edition of *Shi‘r* in 1967 (as a publication of Dar an-Nahar) and Adonis proceeded a year later to launch *Mawaqif (Positions)*, a new cultural journal that developed as a critical platform for an emerging generation of Arab artists and intellectuals on the Left.

Furthermore, Beirut had been developing in the 1960s as a nexus of Arab artistic encounter, aesthetic experimentation, intellectual debate and political contestation.<sup>26</sup> Through its burgeoning private galleries and authoritative art salons, the city played host to and acted as a regional market for emerging Arab artists.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to the increased authoritarianism of postcolonial Arab regimes, and the nationalization and strict regimentation of publishing in Arab socialist Egypt (a key pole of Arabic publishing since the *nahda*) the relative autonomy of Beirut’s publishing industry rendered it “the Mecca of publishing in and for the Arab world.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Lebanon’s publishing economy depended on a capitalist market of transnational exchange with very little state intervention or regulation.<sup>29</sup> This “Merchant Republic,” according to Carolyn Gates, was in line with the political economy of post-independence Lebanon, as envisioned by the country’s dominant commercial and financial élite and encouraged by the influx of capital following political transformations in the region, as well as oil revenues in the

---

<sup>25</sup> See Bardawil, “Dreams of a Dual Birth”; Christiansen et al., *The Third World in the Global 1960s*; Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive*.

<sup>26</sup> See Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, 553–559; Mermier, *Le livre et la ville*, 57–67; and Said, *Utopia al-madina al-muthaqafa*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> See Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe*, 119–21; and Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 124–25.

<sup>28</sup> Atiyeh, *The Book in the Islamic World*, 242.

<sup>29</sup> See Mermier, *Le livre et la ville*, 51; and Stephan-Hashem, *Tijarat al-Harf al-Matbu‘*, 75–77.

Gulf.<sup>30</sup> The state's liberal non-interventionist and open economic strategy "promoted import and triangular trade and financial and international services that made Lebanon the principal intermediary between the industrialized countries and the Middle East."<sup>31</sup> Publishing thus developed as one of the prime outward-oriented services of post-independence Lebanon and Beirut hosted an important transnational Arabic book fair, which was the first annual event of its sort in the Arab world.<sup>32</sup> The dynamism of Lebanon's publishing industry, Frank Mermier argues, contributed to the formation of a pan-Arab public sphere, with Beirut acting as its intellectual and literary node.<sup>33</sup>

Building on a legacy of printing know-how from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the current moment in turn precipitated material investment and technical expertise in new printing technologies, among which offset printing was a principal development. This technology, an improvement on the lithographic technique, enhanced the quality of printing images and relied on advanced processes of photomechanical pre-press reproduction and color separation. Offset printing, available in 1960s Beirut, was particularly suited to the reproduction of artworks and graphics in printed matter.

It is in this context — in the rise of Beirut as a nexus of pan-Arab publishing, formed by an influx of capital, printing technologies, intellectuals and artists, which conjugated the economy of publishing with political transformations in the Arab world — that Dar an-Nahar's

---

<sup>30</sup> Gates, *The Merchant Republic of Lebanon*. 84–85.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Beirut's Arabic Book Fair was initiated in 1956 by a politically active group of Arab Nationalist students at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and affiliated to the Beirut-based Arab Cultural Club; organized annually, it grew to become an important transnational event through the 1960s, moving its exhibition site from the AUB campus to other public venues by 1966: see *Khamsun 'Aman Tarikh min Zahab*. Cairo began organizing its own book fair in 1969, followed slowly by other Arab cities from the 1970s onwards: see Mermier, *Le livre et la ville*, 135–136.

<sup>33</sup> Mermier, *Le livre et la ville*, 86–87.

“precious books” project historically materialized, constituting in its publishing endeavor “a new book for a new public.”

### ***Silsilat al-nafa'is* : The Preciousness of Art Books**

Alongside re-launching *Shi'r* in 1967, al-Khal became editor-in-chief of Dar an-Nahar, a new publishing house that had just been started by the well-established Lebanese newspaper, *an-Nahar* (1933–). Published exclusively between 1967 and 1970, the short-lived new series of books conceived and marketed as *silsilat al-nafa'is* tightly corresponds to al-Khal's brief tenure at Dar an-Nahar, indicating his central role in this project.<sup>34</sup> *Nafis* (the singular form of *nafa'is*) refers to the preciousness of a valuable object as well as of invaluable knowledge. *Silsilat al-nafa'is*, in that sense, semantically links up the materiality and immateriality of preciousness as embodied in books:

Dar an-Nahar  
the publishing house that gave you the precious book (*nafis*)  
*Malahim wa assatir min al-adab al-sami* (Epics and legends in Sumerian literature)  
releases on 28 August 1967  
*Nashid al-Anashid* (Song of Songs)  
the oldest and most famed book of love  
edited with an introduction by Ounsi al-Hajj  
adorned with 16 coloured illustrations by Paul Guiragossian.<sup>35</sup>

This excerpt is taken from a full-page illustrated advertisement promoting the second book in the series. The dual authoring of this book by two leading figures of 1960s Beirut's modernist art and poetry scene, Paul Guiragossian (1926–1993) and Ounsi al-Hajj (1937–2014), foregrounds the aesthetic dimension of the “precious books” series as art objects. This aesthetic

---

<sup>34</sup> The period corresponds to when *Shi'r* was operational. As the latter ceased publication, al-Khal lost interest in the publishing house and was eventually dismissed from Dar an-Nahar in 1971: see Amatheis, *Yusuf al-Khal*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Advertisement for the book *Nashid al-Anashid* (Song of Songs) in *An-Nahar*, August 20, 1967.

rapprochement of literary and visual fields had just begun its experimental journey in modernist Arabic journals — successfully explored in periodicals such as the controversial *Hiwar* (Dialogue, 1962–1967)<sup>36</sup> — thus establishing a new model for printed publications in Arabic pursued in Dar an-Nahar’s books. Indeed, *Shi‘r* re-emerged in 1967 with a distinctly new design and visually prolific editorial approach that brought into its team contemporary artists such as Kamal Boullata (b.1942) and Waddah Faris (b.1940). The series thus carried on the vision of *Shi‘r* and translated its materialization in print from the relatively ephemeral serial edition of the journal to the more “precious” form of the book.

Moreover, the ad announced a multi-tiered pricing structure, including a limited deluxe edition of Dar an-Nahar’s *Song of Songs*, silk-bound, numbered and signed. The aesthetic dimension of “precious books” also embodied in its materiality the market logic of art objects transposed to the economy of publishing. Al-Khal was himself well versed in the vibrant art market and vanguard art scene that animated Beirut in the 1960s: the transnational flow of poets, novelists, literary critics and artists, Iraqi, Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian men and women, who met in, and weaved through, the city’s new cultural centers and burgeoning private art galleries. Indeed, the progenitor among these galleries, Gallery One, was established in 1963 by al-Khal with his wife, artist and critic, Helen al-Khal (1923–2009). Al-Khal thus transposed the symbolic capital he amassed in both *Shi‘r* and Gallery One to Dar an-Nahar’s publishing venture. Further to the limited deluxe edition, the release of the *Song of Songs* was accompanied by an exhibition

---

<sup>36</sup> *Hiwar* was connected to a global network of cultural journals intellectually and financially administered by the international Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF). The latter’s exposure in late 1966 as a covert CIA operation precipitated a crisis that compromised the various journals and their contributors worldwide: see Holt, “‘Bread or Freedom’ ” and my forthcoming “Cosmopolitan Radicalism”.

of the sixteen original paintings featured in it, which was celebrated on the cover of *an-Nahar*'s Sunday supplement as "an event in Arabic publishing."<sup>37</sup>

The "precious books series" sought to establish new aesthetic relations between carefully curated texts and the visuality and materiality of the printed book — the visual features of the printed page (typography, illustrations, color, composition) and the physical characteristics of the book as an object: paper, size, weight, binding material and technique. The series amounted to six volumes in total and consisted of illustrated books spanning from large format, hard cover, and stich-bound *beaux livres* — finely produced and printed books — to more experimental artists' books. It connected the visual arts in the Arab world with the commercialized mechanically reproducible world of publishing. The printed Arabic book was thus accorded special aesthetic value, with care extended beyond the textual content. Dar an-Nahar's books strove to advance the sensory dimension of the book as an object of aesthetic enjoyment and aimed to ensure high quality reproduction through the new technologies of printing becoming available in Beirut. Books were mostly printed in *An-Nahar*'s own printing establishment, Matabi' al-Ta'awniyya (Printing Cooperative). The latter expanded its technical expertise from the production of a daily Arabic newspaper to that of colored weekly supplements, illustrated magazines and now finely printed books.

Most titles had two editions: a numbered *édition-de-luxe* of 300 books cloth-bound in local silk from Mount Lebanon; and another edition of 3000, cloth-bound and printed on fine quality cotton paper. Books illustrated by prominent artists were dealt with more "preciously." For example, *Song of Songs*, illustrated by Paul Guiragaussian, was produced in fewer copies and in three editions, including a special edition of 15 copies that was sold with the original

---

<sup>37</sup> Anonymous, *al-Mulhaq*, *An-Nahar*, August 27, 1967, 1-2.

artwork. The paper and cloth notwithstanding, all editions were exactly similar in printing and binding. Yet the numbered edition was sold at more than three times the regular price.<sup>38</sup> With these distinctions, Dar an-Nahar tapped simultaneously into the convention of numbered art prints and the market logic of collectibles. And since the high price of the limited edition cut the costs of the standard one, “precious books” were put into the reach of middle class readers/consumers. Moreover, Dar an-Nahar promoted advance sales of the deluxe editions at a reduced price through pre-ordered sales coupons, thus securing production costs in advance.

In a capitalist economy of publishing the aesthetics of books undeniably added to their material value as commodities on the market, which rendered them exclusive, if not luxury, objects. Publishing thus constituted a capitalist endeavor that Dar an-Nahar, as a privately run establishment, was not impervious to. By labeling this series of books as “precious books”, it carefully marketed these publications as art objects and appealed to an intellectual and aesthetic Arabic reading public who already adhered to the modernist circle of al-Khal, *Shi ‘r* and Gallery One. This public was further enlarged through frequent advertisements placed in both *Shi ‘r* and *al-Mulhaq* (The Sunday cultural supplement of *an-Nahar*) targeting their readership.

Johanna Drucker notes, with regard to the confluence of art markets and the business of publishing in 19<sup>th</sup> century France: “The *livre d’artiste* took advantage of the expanded market of visual art which had grown in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with other luxury markets expanded by industrial growth, the accumulation of capital, and an educated upper middle class with an appetite for fine consumer goods.”<sup>39</sup> Her observation can productively be extended to the context

---

<sup>38</sup> The price of the regular book was LBP 15 (approximately USD 4.68), while the deluxe edition was sold at LBP 50 (USD 15.6); the limited deluxe edition of 15, including the original artwork by Guiragaussian, sold at LBP 1000 (USD 312). The average monthly wage was LBP 377 in 1966 and LBP 517 in 1974; the market exchange rate of the LBP to the USD was 3.13 in 1966 and 2.33 in 1974: see Gaspard, *A Political Economy of Lebanon*, 164 and 276.

<sup>39</sup> Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, 3.

of Beirut's 1960s, in which a consumer-oriented cosmopolitanism was staged through the city's manifold spectacles of art and leisure<sup>40</sup> and linked to a thriving tourist economy,<sup>41</sup> encouraged by the Lebanese state and benefiting from the inflow of oil wealth to the country's banks. This particular modality of Beirut, referred to in popular parlance as "the Paris of the East," is corroborated in Khater's characterization of the social context in which a new cosmopolitan public of art enthusiasts had emerged.

Nonetheless, describing these books simply as luxury commodities and reducing their production to a principally market-driven endeavor does not do justice to the intellectual and aesthetic care characterizing their content, form and production. In this regard, the recognition of Dar an-Nahar's publishing venture in Beirut is especially noteworthy, and most markedly evidenced in the consecutive prizes for best design awarded to its books at the Beirut Arabic Book Fair between 1967 and 1970.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, when appraising the aesthetic novelty of the "precious books" series, Nazih Khater notes:

This is new to the mutating form of the Arabic vanguard library. It is directly connected to the modern modes of living, which has changed the architecture and interior decoration of Arab homes. In part this change is expressed in the new place of the home library, which now sits prominently in the living room, especially in modern small apartments. It is also tied to relinquishing the Oriental spirit and replacing it with the architecture of international movements, which characterize the foundation of this era's civilization. The splendid (*al-mumtaz*) book with splendid design does not follow aesthetically predefined parameters. In other words, the book, as an aesthetic form, is designed by the artist – director (*al-mukhrij – al-fannan*); it is entirely his prerogative. The advent of the art director figure on the Arabic library is an important event, which undoubtedly will impact positively the course of Arabic books and the future of the Arabic library.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, 444–49.

<sup>41</sup> See Maasri, *Troubled Geography*.

<sup>42</sup> From 1960 onwards, Beirut's Arabic Book Fair annually bestowed awards for best book design (*ahsan kitab ikhrajan*) and best exhibition display.

<sup>43</sup> Khater, "al-Kitab al-Arabi," 5.



His account is important on many levels. It situates Dar an-Nahar's books historically within prevalent aesthetic practices of book production and within a context of changing cultural and aesthetic sensibilities in Beirut and the Arab world. It historicizes, and celebrates, a moment in which postwar architectural modernism was transforming the built environment of Arab cities,<sup>44</sup> when libraries formed part of the living room in modern apartments of the urban Arab middle class and, indeed, constituted an aesthetic component of interior spaces. Books as such assumed a double aesthetic function: held by the reader and sat on a living-room shelf. It is also revealing of the cosmopolitan modern aesthetic affinities in which the new publishing project and Khater's discourse are both embedded. Lastly, he foregrounds the typically invisible figure of the "artist – director" as an important protagonist in the modern appreciation of books as aesthetic objects. This last point indicates a local public recognition of the professional practice that is graphic design. In this vein, to characterize these books as simply market-driven luxury commodities is to undermine their historical significance in changing the aesthetic dimension of the Arabic book.

### **A Precious Series of Texts**

Dar an-Nahar's "precious books" series involved a modern interpretation of recovered canonical texts, geographically attributed to the Levant, dating as far back as ancient Mesopotamia and reaching all the way to modern world literature classics. The books encompassed a variety of textual genres, civilizational milestones and cultural traditions, including: Sumerian literature; Judeo-Christian Biblical narratives; folk Arabic poetic and musical tradition attributed to the 9<sup>th</sup> century al-Andalus (Islamic Spain); a celebrated Arabic literary text of the Abbassid era, the 11<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> See Arbid, "Practicing Modernism in Beirut."

Accepted/forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol: 40:1, pps. xx-xx. 2020, Duke University Press.

century *Maqamat al-Hariri*; and finally a new translation into Arabic by al-Khal of *The Prophet* (1923), originally written in English by the Lebanese-American émigré poet Khalil Gibran.<sup>45</sup>

The selection of texts in the complete series builds a narrative of civilizational genealogy comprising textual artifacts that can be attributed to the Levant which, nonetheless, hold world-heritage value. If intellectuals in Europe could claim ancient Greece in the formation of a “Western” civilizational ancestry and intellectual tradition, so could intellectuals of the decolonizing Arab East lay claim over ancient Mesopotamia and construct a narrative of civilizational continuity. While the European discourse of modernity disavows the Muslim Arab East in its intellectual genealogy, the latter, particularly Dar an-Nahar’s “precious books” series, expresses an overarching civilizational narrative that wants to dissociate the geographic imagination from exclusive ties to any specific religion and — even more — to celebrate diverse religious traditions and their interconnections in the cultural formations of, particularly connoted here, *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria) geographically referring to the Levantine Fertile Crescent. To be sure, European colonial intervention had dispossessed local populations from laying claim to this ancient past in the name of a world-civilizational heritage.<sup>46</sup> Al-Khal and Dar an-Nahar’s cultural narrative thus deliberately counters a history of archaeological interest in the Near East that was,<sup>47</sup> as Elliot Colla has argued in the case of Egypt, a conflicted terrain between European colonial institutions and indigenous nationalist claims.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> The series include the following six titles, arranged chronologically: *Malahim wa asatir fi al-adab al-sami* (*Epics and Legends in Sumerian Literature*, 1967); *Nashid al-anashid* (*Song of Songs*, 1967); *Yassu’ al-massih* (*Jesus Christ*, 1968); *Al-Nabi* (*The Prophet* 1968); *Ajmal al-muwashahat* (*The most beautiful muwashahat* 1969); and *Maqamat al-Hariri* (1970).

<sup>46</sup> See Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, chapter 2.

<sup>47</sup> I am grateful to Hala Auji for pointing this out to me.

<sup>48</sup> Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 17.

The first in the series was the 1967 *Malahim wa Asatir fi al-Adab al-Sami (Epics and Legends in Sumerian Literature)*, edited and translated into Arabic from original Sumerian texts by the renowned Lebanese author Anis Frayha.<sup>49</sup> The book comprises the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh; the Sumerian myth of creation, claimed to have a very close resemblance to the Book of Genesis in the Torah and the Christian Old Testament; theatrical epics, including that of Baal, the original form of the Phoenician epic of Adonis and Ashtarut (Ishtar); and the legend of the descent of Ishtar into the lower world. Ancient myths and historical archetypes, particularly from pre-Islamic Sumerian, Greek and Phoenician symbols such as Tammuz, Adonis, and Baal were central to modernist Arabic poetry of the 1950s and '60s, especially foregrounded by *Shi'r's* network of poets.<sup>50</sup> In particular, Jabra I. Jabra (1919–1994)—a leading modernist poet, novelist and critic, Palestinian exile and Iraqi citizen—translated in 1958 parts of James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, namely the section concerned with the ancient myths of Adonis and Tammuz. His translation would, according to literary critic Issa Boullata, have a profound effect on the aforementioned modernist Arab poets of his generation, which Jabra would then recognize as a movement and refer to it as a “Tammuzite School.”<sup>51</sup> This Arabic poetic sensibility also sourced its symbols from Judeo-Christian Middle Eastern narratives.<sup>52</sup> The modern Arabic reference to these ancient myths was not impermeable to competing nationalist discourses of “rebirth” in anticolonial struggles for liberation and cultural affirmation in the Middle East. This intellectual endeavor is commensurate with decolonization struggles elsewhere, whereby ancient glory is

---

<sup>49</sup> Frayha was professor of ancient Sumerian languages and cultures at the American University of Beirut and is the author of now classic texts on traditional Lebanese mountain village life such as *Isma'ya Rida*.

<sup>50</sup> Jayyusi, *Modernist Poetry*, 155.

<sup>51</sup> Boullata, “Living with the Tigress and the Muses,” 215.

<sup>52</sup> El-Azma, “The Tammuzi Movement,” 671.

culturally reclaimed within modern nationalist discourses.<sup>53</sup> Sumerian literature, in particular, references ancient Mesopotamia, historically the land between the Tigris and Euphrates, which roughly corresponds to modern-day Iraq and Syria. It is central to the Syrian Nationalists' myth of origin, which delimits *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria) geographically to the Levantine Fertile Crescent, with Mesopotamia as its civilizational cradle. The Syrian national narrative diverged from the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century Arab *nahda*'s revivalist model, which reclaimed the medieval Abbasid era as its professed "Arab golden age." Rather, like other Arab nationalist movements developing in the Middle East during the interwar period (1920–40s), the Syrian one involved quarrying the pre-Islamic era of traditions and civilizations of the ancient Near East, whereby early Islam formed only one stratum in the civilizational heritage.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the latter sits in competition with a dominant Lebanese nationalist version, whereby a Phoenician myth of origin underlines the cultural reclamation of a Mediterranean civilization tied to Europe.<sup>55</sup>

For a Mesopotamian theme to constitute the subject of the first in the series of Dar an-Nahar's illustrated books is not innocent of politics: national discourses conjuring up myths of origin cannot be. Yet it is not entirely subservient to forms of political instrumentalism either, and especially not under the editorial direction of Yusuf al-Khal, who had fought a relentless battle in *Shi'r* for an autonomous art, despite his political adherence to Syrian Nationalism. It points, however, to the sedimentations of politics in cultural practices and aesthetic affinities.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Aesthetics of 'Precious Books'**

---

<sup>53</sup> See Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, chapter 5.

<sup>54</sup> Gershoni, "Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism," 7.

<sup>55</sup> Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*.

<sup>56</sup> I am referring here to Adorno's theorization of art's double character: "Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy" (Adorno, "Art, Society and Aesthetics," 7). In this text, Adorno views aesthetic relations as "sedimentations" of social relations; the antagonism of the latter, however, appears as immanent problems of the former.

*Baghdad to Beirut by way of ancient Sumer*

<Figs 1–2 here>

Accompanying the text, *Malahim wa Asatir* included seven plates of drawings by Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi (b. 1939). Simple black lines give form to enchanted figures with big round eyes, floating, as ancient myth has it, betwixt the world of earthly creatures and the world of gods; and between the animate and the inanimate, the animal and the human. The figurative compositions are delicately bare, discreetly punctuated by the charm of Sumerian-inspired ornamental and symbolic motifs.

Al-Azzawi belonged to the second generation of modern Iraqi artists who strove to claim an Arab and Iraqi national identity through the arts. The search for a culturally grounded aesthetic form had been advanced in the 1950s through the Baghdad Modern Art Group, which was founded by the pioneering artist Jawad Salim (1919–1961).<sup>57</sup> The group sought to work within modernist conceptions and methods of art while recuperating an indigenous aesthetic that reclaimed Baghdad’s civilizational history and archeology, from the “golden age” of medieval Islamic art to as far back as Mesopotamian visual and material culture. As already mentioned this revivalist artistic practice, like its literary counterpart, was commensurate with struggles for cultural decolonization that have preoccupied artists and intellectuals in the Arab region, and in Asia and Africa more widely, from the mid-twentieth century onwards. In this fraught political conjuncture, artists sought to reclaim a cultural identity in and through their practice — a sense of locality and history suppressed by decades of European colonization and Western hegemony. Art-making thus constituted a site of colonial resistance, framed in constructions of a “national

---

<sup>57</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 28–29.

culture,”<sup>58</sup> while, crucially, motivating modern aesthetic experimentations.<sup>59</sup> Jawad Salim’s artistic explorations were foundational for the following generations of Iraqi artists as much as for a wider geography of modern art being formed and transformed in other parts of the decolonizing Arab world.<sup>60</sup>

Discursive formations of the decolonizing claims of “Arab” modernism cut across aesthetic fields. This materialized through the mobility of its enunciating subjects across disciplinary boundaries as well as national borders. The abovementioned Jabra I. Jabra, for instance, was active in the Baghdad Modern Art Group as both painter and critic, while his texts were published in Beirut-based journals such as *Shi’r*, *Hiwar* and, later, *Mawaqif*. The trans-disciplinary contributions to these journals, in conjunction with their pan-Arab distribution networks, enabled the transnational circulation of central concepts and competing claims of modernism. Al-Azzawi, in turn, would emerge as an important figure in this transnational circuit of social relations across aesthetic fields in the Arab world, notably in the connections he wove across the visual and literary arts, print cultures and politics.

His early work was shaped by the artistic approach of his predecessors in Iraq, most notably, again, the Baghdad Modern Art Group. His artwork, while decidedly modern in formal expression, referenced locally based historical themes, vernacular symbols and ancient myths.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, his artistic formation was informed by his initial studies in archaeology: “Antiquity was an incentive. Instead of following a European example, [I] seek inspiration from tradition [...] I began to depend on my heritage and to make use of historical forms — especially

---

<sup>58</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 233.

<sup>59</sup> See for example: Ali, *Modern Islamic Art*; Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi”; Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya*; Mitter, *Decentering Modernism*; Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*; Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité Arabe*.

<sup>60</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*.

<sup>61</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 121–25.

Sumerian art — as a consequence of my study of archaeology.”<sup>62</sup> Al-Azzawi’s discussion of his own artistic debut is indicative of the centrality of a quest for cultural identity, which he, among other Arab artists, sought to achieve in and through their aesthetic practice. Yusuf al-Khal’s choice of Dia al-Azzawi for Dar an-Nahar’s book, *Epics and Legends in Sumerian Literature*, could not have been more appropriate. It is at the same time illustrative of the transnational and trans-disciplinary networks of aesthetic relations between Baghdad and Beirut, which were advanced by al-Khal in both his journal, *Shi’r*, and Gallery One. From the mid-60s onwards, Baghdad’s pioneering modern art was regularly on show at Gallery One, among other galleries that followed suit, rendering Beirut, in al-Azzawi’s words, a “second capital for Iraqi artists.”<sup>63</sup> As a result, Al-Khal was familiar with the emerging young Iraqi artist through an exhibition of his work in Gallery One in 1966. Indeed this Beirut exhibition marked al-Azzawi’s debut, for he had exhibited his work only once before in Baghdad in 1965. Recalling this early phase of his career, al-Azzawi notes how Beirut was more than just a chance for him to exhibit but crucially a space of encounter and exposure to art from the Arab region.<sup>64</sup> Between 1966 and 1967, al-Azzawi was busy working on a series of black ink drawings thematically inspired by the epic of Gilgamesh and aesthetically referencing the ancient Sumerian material culture displayed in the Iraqi National Museum.<sup>65</sup> A selection of these drawings occupied the pages of the book issued by the new Beirut-based publishing house, an event that would render al-Azzawi’s artwork available in multiples to interested Arabic readers through Dar an-Nahar’s distribution network.

---

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Shabout, *ibid*, 122.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Azzawi, *Lawn Yajma’ al-Bassar*, 94.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Azzawi’s recollection was in the context of an interview given to *As-Safir* newspaper 28 October 1991, which was covering his return to Beirut with a tribute exhibition in 1991, just as the fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon was drawing to a close, see al-Azzawi *Lawn Yajma’ al-Bassar*, 306.

<sup>65</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 124–25.

The general layout of the book maintains an elegant sobriety in its generous 21x24 cm format. Text and image are brought together in a classical book composition, whereby illustrations occupy a single full-page facing a page of text. Ajjaj Irrawi, long-time graphic designer for *an-Nahar*'s newspaper, is credited with the book design. His know-how in modern Arabic typography ensures a systematic, albeit conventional, graceful layout of text with comfortable reading rhythm across the pages. The uncluttered white space across the pages of the book — generous margins and leading (spaces between the lines) — imparts an affinity with modern minimalist aesthetics, while materializing the symbolic distinctions that render it a highbrow publication. *Epics and Legends in Sumerian Literature* thus aesthetically conjugates two circuits of modernist discourses in the visual arts: the anticolonial quest for a, nationally inscribed, place-bound modernism in al-Azzawi's Sumerian-inspired drawings and the graphic purity of International Modernism articulated in Irrawi's design. Visually materialized as such, ancient Sumerian literature is modernized as a cosmopolitan cultural artifact, thus anchoring the editorial vision of the "Precious Books Series." The politics of sign, symbol, Arabic text, image and book-object merge to construct a seamless narrative of civilizational continuity, reclaiming ancient Mesopotamia as a Levantine cultural heritage, but with modern cosmopolitan appeal.

### *Disenchanted the Bible*

<Figs 3–4 about here >

Irrawi was responsible for the layout and production of other Dar an-Nahar illustrated publications, which won him and the emerging publishing house consecutive prizes at the Beirut Arabic Book Fair. Of note is the 224-page book, *Yassu' al-masih* (Jesus Christ), co-published with the Catholic Press (Imprimerie Catholique), originally a Jesuit missionary printing-cum-



publishing establishment dating back to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The book presents a unified and abridged Arabic version of the [Bible's] New Testament accompanied by colored reproductions of Christian icons. Ghassan Tueini, owner and director of *an-Nahar* newspaper at the time, and Yusuf al-Khal edited and developed the Biblical text in Arabic, relying, as Tueini assures us in the introduction, on agreed-upon scholarship in this domain. They based themselves on a modern Arabic translation of the Bible meticulously produced by the Jesuit establishment at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>66</sup> Unlike its religiously inscribed predecessor, this project aimed, Tueini notes, to place the Arabic Bible within a secular library of art books. Icons featured in the book not simply to adorn text, but rather were carefully curated as artworks within a stated conceptual and pedagogic aim. As exemplified in figures 3 and 4, the selection historically covered various aesthetic methods of Christian icons across wide geographical expanses, from ancient Egypt to modern Syria, through Byzantium, Russia, Eastern Europe and Greece. The book thus presented its Arabic reader with disenchanted icons, displaced from the Church, their religious aura disrupted by the secular visuality of the mechanically reproduced art book. Doubtless religious icons have long been reproduced in print form; it is however their modern aesthetic framing here as “artworks,” and the technological means to do so, that subverts their religious aura.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the text's modern “material instantiation”<sup>68</sup> as an art book displaces its religious function; indeed, the editors were keen to desacralize the textual content and appeal to a broad readership—not limited to adepts of Christianity—by entitling it *Yassu ' al-massih* (Jesus Christ) and advertising the book as a “a biography that would interest all readers.”<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> On Arabic translations of the Bible in 19<sup>th</sup> century Beirut see Issa, “The Bible as Commodity.”

<sup>67</sup> I rely here on Walter Benjamin's famous essay, “The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which he argues that, with modern technologies of reproduction, art was dislocated from the domain of tradition, where its “aura” had hitherto served the purpose of ritual, magical or religious.

<sup>68</sup> Bornstein, *Material Modernism*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> *Al-Mulhaq, an-Nahar*, August 4 1968, full-page back-cover advertisement.

Technically, this book, produced in Beirut, is a showcase of mastery in new printing technologies. The large format (19x27 closed) full-page color reproductions—with their sharpness of detail and richness of the very vividly printed icons—rely on the availability of advanced reprographic and offset printing techniques. It was produced at the Catholic Press, which historically held a leading regional role as a missionary press, printing among other publications fine quality Arabic editions of the Bible. Dar an-Nahar’s collaboration with the Catholic Press relied on the latter’s two-fold provision of expertise in that domain. The 1968 co-edition attests to the continued mastery of the Jesuit printing establishment since the *nahda*, contributing to Beirut’s re-emergence in the late 1960s as a service hub in new printing technologies for the Arab region.

### *Designing Modernist Luxury*

Irrawi’s graphic design imparts Dar an-Nahar’s *Beaux Livres* with a luxury stripped of decorative excess. His aesthetic approach is continuous with the *nahda*’s modernist printing; yet, as I elaborate below, unlike 19<sup>th</sup> century typographic minimalism,<sup>70</sup> the aesthetics of the 1960s “precious books” display a symbolic opulence. These aesthetics are contemporaneous with postwar internationalization of the “less is more” idiom of modernism in design, where beauty is ascribed to an economy of form that serves a utilitarian purpose, as consolidated especially in the teachings of the Bauhaus, and giving rise to a repeatable materiality across different disciplines of design, and beyond the German context, in the formation of a modernist design discourse. In the typography of books, its principles were expounded by the authoritative writings of, for instance, Jan Tschihold and Beatrice Warde. In particular, Warde argued for a modernist design

---

<sup>70</sup> See Auji, *Printing Arab Modernity*.

by elaborating a metaphor of “transparency” that rests on a symbiotic relationship between typographic form, as the container, and text, as the content.<sup>71</sup>

Warde’s modernist metaphor of printing transparency is clearly at work in Irrawi’s book design approach. Irrawi ensures a triad of correspondence between the content of the book as purveyor of knowledge, its form as aesthetic object, and in planning for printing as a reproduction technique. His artistry rests on the “humility of mind,” as Warde puts it, which displaces artistic self-expression with the “transparent page.” The displacement rests on a modernist equivalence in design drawn between art and industry. Nonetheless, his affinity with postwar modernist typography and graphic design is indicative of the international purchase of these aesthetics and their normativity in the visual economy of printed books beyond Europe. Indeed, the initially more radical modernist ideal that underpinned the minimalist aesthetic — ascribing aesthetic value to an economy of material and production — was co-opted into the service of market styles in a global visual economy from the mid-twentieth century onwards. “Less is more” was subverted to serve a surplus value in the stylization of products as commodities. Thus white unmarked surfaces in printed matter, more than any other visual arts, have come to hold the status of an authoritative value-laden aesthetic code.<sup>72</sup> The presence and absence of white surface act as signifiers that structure the aesthetic referential of publications respectively along hierarchies of taste: highbrow and lowbrow, elitist and populist, good taste and bad taste. Dar an-Nahar’s “precious books” series thus articulates the visual economy of art publishing in the opulence of white unmarked surfaces. This approach presents both continuity with, and disruption of, the *nahda*’s modernist aesthetic of the Arabic printed page. It is

---

<sup>71</sup> Warde, *The Crystal Goblet*.

<sup>72</sup> Robertson, “On White Space.”

continuous in the framework of a rational design scheme, denuded of ornament; yet departs from the *nahda* by displacing the modernist aesthetic to the visual economy of luxury art books.

Johanna Drucker notes that books of “fine printing” — *beaux livres* such as those of Dar an-Nahar — “are produced with close attention to all aspects of printing art, but are not generally innovative in form or concerned with explorations of books as artistic concept.”<sup>73</sup> Drucker’s distinction is pertinent in the context of her description of the “artist’s book” as a medium in 20<sup>th</sup> century art practice. While she aptly refrains from defining what an artist’s book is, she does nonetheless sketch out the contours of possibility by outlining the criteria for describing what an artist’s book is not. In brief, her outline excludes books that do not interrogate the communicative and aesthetic conventions of the book as a form and as an idea. This exclusion may very well apply to the books of Dar an-Nahar discussed thus far. However, one last book in the series poses the exception.

### *Deconstructing Maqamat al-Hariri*

<Figs 5–6>

Shafic Abboud’s *Maqamat al-Hariri (al-Hariri’s Assemblies)*, published in 1970, explores the printed book as an aesthetic and expressive form by way of a distinctly different approach.

Abboud (1926–2004) is a Lebanese artist who was based in Paris, where he pursued his artistic training and career shortly following Lebanon’s independence. He represents the artist of the diaspora whose hyphenated identity, caught between a Lebanese artist in Paris and a Parisian artist in Beirut, has preoccupied art critics and historians in both cities.<sup>74</sup> Abboud’s paintings are resolutely abstract. Despite critics attributing an “oriental” character to his painting, he was not

---

<sup>73</sup> Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books*, 5–6.

<sup>74</sup> Fani, *Dictionnaire de la Peinture*, 9.

concerned with the questions of cultural authenticity that would preoccupy Arab artists of later generations.<sup>75</sup> The book he conceived for Dar an-Nahar, however, presents from the outset a peculiar counterpoint. *Maqamat al-Hariri*, Abboud's title, is a celebrated literary Arabic text of the Abbasid era. The *Maqamat* text was among the literary classics revived in the *nahda* period and printed by the Bulaq Press in Cairo, among other regional presses.<sup>76</sup> In particular, a 1237 version produced in Iraq, executed by the Baghdad-based calligrapher and painter Yahya al-Wasiti, has been canonized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a fine example of illustrated Arabic books in medieval Islamic art history.<sup>77</sup> Crucially, the manuscript was hailed and referenced by Arab artists seeking to reconcile their modern figurative approaches with a local aesthetic heritage. Al-Wasiti was particularly foregrounded by the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950s, especially in the work of Jawad Salim.<sup>78</sup> And, with the naming of a prominent art gallery and a transnational art festival after al-Wasiti in Baghdad, in 1965 and 1972 respectively, subsequent generations of modernist artists, in conjunction with the Iraqi state, further consolidated al-Wasiti's canon.<sup>79</sup> It is in this context that we need to probe Abboud's peculiar choice of subject matter for his artist's book. The Lebanese émigré in Paris, abstract painter and supposedly uninterested in questions of cultural locality for his art, decides to reinterpret the much-touted exemplar of illustrated books from the perceived Arabo-Islamic "golden age." He was undoubtedly up for a challenge of the kind that makes an artistic statement.

Abboud selected seven Assemblies from the original to interpret in his visual and material exploration of the book as an artistic form. His completed project is composed of

---

<sup>75</sup> Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité Arabe*, 150-153.

<sup>76</sup> See Auji, *Printing Arab Modernity*, 107-109.

<sup>77</sup> See Clévenot, "Peintures," 114-115; Grabar, *Islamic Visual Culture*, 93-150; Contadini, *Arab Painting*.

<sup>78</sup> For an account of an itinerary of encounters, from Orientalist scholars to Jawad Salim, with al-Wasiti's *Maqamat al-Hariri*, see Al-Bahloli, "History Regained."

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

unbound folios, stacked and held in a hard cover portfolio. Graphically, Abboud's book appears as a deconstruction of a prototypical manuscript page. In the history of Arabic and Islamic hermeneutics, manuscripts quite commonly bore the marks of an interpretive practice of annotation, filling up the large margins surrounding the central text. These marginal glosses were written on a diagonal grid of lines, often in more than one grid and in alternating directions, differentiating one set of annotations from another. This popular scribal practice was reproduced in early 19<sup>th</sup> Arabic printed books; early printed editions of the *Maqamat* bear witness to the translation of this scribal practice into printing technologies.<sup>80</sup>

Abboud seems to have subverted this particular visual culture of Arabic manuscript annotation to explore it as an aesthetic device throughout his book. Fragments of text are entirely hand-written, but without adhering stylistically to any particular tradition of calligraphy. Pages are composed of dense lines of text following underlying baseline grids set in different directions. Fragmented text, rendered difficult to read linearly, becomes abstract visual form rather than decipherable linguistic code; lines, textures and rhythmically assembled planes impart an illusory depth to the surface of the paper. Moreover, Shafic Abboud's *Maqamat al-Hariri*, unlike al-Wasiti's version, contains no figurative representation. Amorphous brush strokes and abstract shapes resonate with the composition of written fragments. Abboud was making a double statement of artistic modernism here. The first is a decisively abstract formal interpretation of *Maqamat al-Hariri*, *contra* al-Wasiti's figurative canon. It is directed at a contemporary artistic practice in the Arab world preoccupied with the resuscitation of aesthetic heritage in quests for cultural authenticity. The second chooses the book as a form to subvert the traditionally hierarchical order of word and image, of reading and seeing. The artist here takes over as the

---

<sup>80</sup> Auji, *Printing Arab Modernity*, 107.

new author of the book and submits its original text to the sensory realm of the visual. The book-cum-artistic act performs a rebellious reversal of aesthetic priority in an Arab cultural tradition that has historically favored text.

This critical exploration of the book as a concept and aesthetic form locates Abboud's endeavor within the purview of artists' books, as defined by Drucker, and distinguishes it from other art books in Dar an-Nahar's series. Furthermore, at least two additional features of this book materialize the abstract category "artist's book" and its symbolic attribution. First, while the book is monochrome (black on white paper) — printed on offset machines at the publisher's press — the opening folio consists of a colored lithographic print. Abboud drew on and printed from lithographic stone at a specialized arts printer in Paris. Second, Abboud's *Maqamat al-Hariri* was printed in a numbered and limited edition of 300, 25 of which were hand-numbered and signed by the artist. Evidently Abboud's "artist's book" sold at ten times the price of other books in the series.<sup>81</sup> Unsurprisingly, it was awarded first prize at Beirut's Arabic Book Fair.

## Conclusion

Dar an-Nahar's "precious books" mobilized different modern aesthetic modalities of the book, from carefully produced art books to the more experimental artist's book. Moreover, different circuits of modernism crisscrossed in its publishing endeavor: from decolonizing Arab artists' quests for nationalist place-bound artistic modernism, as in al-Azzawi's Sumerian inspired art; to the counter-claim of Shafic Abboud, namely the subversion of aesthetic heritage and tradition; and passing through the visual economy of "transparent" design, as operational in Ajjaj Irrawi's typographic modernism, its symbolic luxury notwithstanding.

---

<sup>81</sup> The signed copies were sold at LBP150 while the rest at LBP75.

While the series as a whole thematically excavated a genealogy of texts from the Levantine Arab East, these books were meant to be read as “precious” textual artifacts of a world heritage. This intellectual endeavor articulates the tensions inherent within a cosmopolitan worldview enunciated from the margins; it is a cosmopolitanism underpinned by a decolonizing ethos demanding recognition of its place in the world. The material instantiations of these classical texts into modern aesthetic objects and the transnational circuits (from Baghdad to Paris) that are interwoven in this undertaking mark Dar an-Nahar’s art publishing as a complexly layered translocal aesthetic endeavor. Yousuf al-Khal’s modernist editorial vision is not only materialized in the textual imprint; it is embodied in and through the visuality and materiality of the book, itself an object of creative labor and printing technique. Furthermore, the cosmopolitanism that undergirds this brand of modernism, contrary to the standard art-historical narrative of post-independence Lebanon, was not uncritically Eurocentric and not simply framed by a Lebanese nationalist discourse.<sup>82</sup> Rather, its visual economy linked Beirut’s thriving modern literary and art scene with an emerging industry of publishing and associated printing competencies that operated in a transnational scope. This nexus forged a highbrow art publishing market that addressed an aesthetically attuned Arabic readership.

In the history of the printed Arabic book, Dar an-Nahar’s series was paradigmatic in reclaiming the visual and material form of the book as an aesthetic form, albeit tied to a capitalist economy of art publishing that rendered it a “precious” commodity. It wouldn’t be long before these modernist aesthetic explorations of the Arabic book were displaced from the service of capital to more radical politics of transnational publishing. That is the aesthetics of solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement, which reconfigured Beirut as a nodal site in revolutionary anti-

---

<sup>82</sup> See Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité Arabe*; and Rogers, “Daoud Corm.”



Accepted/forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol: 40:1, pps. xx-xx. 2020, Duke University Press.

imperialism by the close of the 1960s. The visual economy of *Silsilat al-Nafa'is* was right at the cusp of transformations in the Arabic book.

## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1970].
- Al-Azzawi, Dia. *Lawn Yajma' al-Bassar: Nussuss wa Hiwarat fi al-Fann al-Tashkili (A Color that arrests vision: texts and dialogues on Art)*. London: Touch Editions, 2001.
- Al-Bahloly, Saleem. "History Regained: A Modern Artist in Baghdad Encounters a Lost Tradition of Painting," *Muqarnas Online* 35, 1: 229-272.
- Ali, Wijdan. *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*. Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1997.
- Amateis, Jacques. *Yusuf al-Khal wa Majallatuhi Shi'r (Yusuf al-Khal and his journal Shi'r)*. Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 2004.
- Anonymous, *An-Nahar, al-Mulhaq*, August 27 1967: 1-2.
- Arbid, Georges. "Practicing Modernism in Beirut: Architecture in Lebanon, 1946–1970." PhD diss., Harvard University, 2002.
- Armbrust, Walter. "History in Arab Media Studies: A Speculative Cultural History." In *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*, edited by Tarik Sabry, 32–54. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012.
- Atiyeh, George N. *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995.
- Auji, Hala. *Printing Arab Modernity: Book Culture and the American Press in Nineteenth-Century Beirut*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016.
- Ayalon, Ami. *The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Bardawil, Fadi A. "Dreams of a Dual Birth: Socialist Lebanon's World and Ours." *Boundary 2* 43, no. 3 (2016): 313-35.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1968].
- Bornstein, George. *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Boullata, Issa J. "Living with the Tigress and the Muses: An Essay on Jabra Ibrahim Jabra." *World Literature Today* 75, no. 2 (2001): 214-223.
- Boullata, Kamal. *Palestinian Art 1850-2005*. London: Saqi, 2009.
- Chamberlin, Paul Thomas. *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Christiansen, Samantha and Zachary A. Scarlett. *The Third World in the Global 1960s*. Oxford: Berghan Books, 2015.

Accepted/forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol: 40:1, pps. xx-xx.  
2020, Duke University Press.

- Clévenot, Dominique. "Peintures." In *L'art du livre Arabe: Du manuscrit au livre d'artiste*, edited by Marie-Geneviève Guesdon and Annie Vernay-Nouri, 110–15. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2001.
- Colla, Elliott. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Contadini, Anna, ed. *Arab Painting: Text and Image in Illustrated Arabic Manuscripts*, vol. Book, Whole. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Dadi, Iftikhar. "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (2010): 555-76.
- Dagher, Charbel. *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art and Identity*. Milano: Skira, 2016
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Nicholson-Smith, D., New York: Zone Books, 1995.
- Drucker, Johanna. *The Century of Artists' Books*. New York: Granary, 1995.
- El-Azma, Nazeer. "The Tammuzi Movement and the Influence of TS Eliot on Badr Shakir al-Sayyab." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1968): 671-678.
- Fani, Michel. *Dictionnaire De La Peinture Au Liban*. Paris: Editions de l'Escalier, 1998.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar, ed. *Alternative Modernities*. Vol. 1. Duke University Press, 2001.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar, and Elizabeth A. Povinelli. "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition." *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003): 385-397.
- Gaspard, Toufic K. *A Political Economy of Lebanon, 1948-2002*. Boston: Brill, 2004.
- Gershoni, Israel. "Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, 1920-1945." In *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, edited by James P. Jankowski and Israel Gershoni, 3–25. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Grabar, Oleg. *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100-1800*. Vol. 2. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2006.
- Guesdon, Marie-Geneviève, and Annie Vernay-Nouri, eds. *L'art du livre Arabe: du manuscrit au livre d'artiste*. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France-BNF, 2001.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Holt, Elizabeth M. "'Bread or Freedom': The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and the Arabic Literary Journal (1962-67)." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44, no. 1 (2013): 83-102.
- Issa, Rana. "The Bible as Commodity: Modern Patterns of Arabic Language Standardization and Bible Commoditization in the Levant." PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2014.
- Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. "Modernist Poetry in Arabic." In *Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by Mohamed Mustafa Badawi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Kassir, Samir. *Histoire De Beyrouth*. Paris: Fayard, 2003.
- Kaufman, Asher. *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014.
- Khamsun 'aman tarikh min zahab: ma 'rad bayrut al-arabi al-duwali li-l-kitab 1956-2006 (Fiftieth Golden Anniversary: Beirut International Arabic Book Fair 1956–2006)*. Beirut: al-nadi al-thakafi al-arabi (The Arab Cultural Club), 2006.
- Khater, Nazih. "Al-Kitab al-Arabi" (The Arabic Book), *al-Mulhaq, an-Nahar*, August 4, 1968.
- Khuri-Makdisi, Ilham. *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Klemm, Verena. "Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizam*) and Committed Literature (*Al-Adab Al-Multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq." *Arabic & Middle Eastern Literature* 3, no. 1

Accepted/forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol: 40:1, pps. xx-xx.  
2020, Duke University Press.

(2000): 51-62.

- Lenssen, Anneka, Dina Ramadan, Sarah A. Rogers, and Nada Shabout. "Introduction the Longevity of Rupture: 1967 in Art and Its Histories." *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (2013): 14-18.
- Maasri, Zeina. *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming 2020.
- Maasri, Zeina. "Troubled Geography: Imagining Lebanon in 1960s Tourist Promotion", in Kjetil Fallan and Grac Lees-Maffei (eds.) *Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in the Age of Globalization*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016.
- Mejcher Atassi, Sonja. "Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq." *Art History* 35, no. 4 (2012): 816-39.
- Mermier, Franck. *Le livre et la ville: Beyrouth et l'édition Arabe*. Arles: Actes sud/ Sindbad, 2005.
- Mitter, Partha. "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery." *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008): 531.
- Naef, Sylvia. *A la recherche d'une modernité Arabe*. Genève: Editions Slatkine, 1996.
- Poole, Deborah. *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. London – New York: Verso, 2009.
- Robertson, Keith. "On White Space: When Less Is More." In *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, edited by Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, D.K. Holland and Steven Heller, 61–65. New York: Allworth Press, 1995.
- Rogers, Sarah. "Daoud Corm, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and the Origins of Lebanese Modern Art." *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (2010): 46-77.
- Said, Khalida. *Utopia al-Madina al-Muthaqqafa (The Utopia of an Intellectual City)*. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012.
- Sayigh, Yezid. *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Shabout, Nada M. *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*. Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 2007.
- Sheehi, S. *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004.
- Sheehi, Stephen. "Arabic Literary-Scientific Journals: Precedence for Globalization and the Creation of Modernity." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (2005): 438-48.
- Shlaim, Avi, and William Roger Louis. *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences*. Vol. 36, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Stephan-Hashem, Maud. *Tijarat al-Harf al-Matbu': Nashr al-Kitab fi Lubnan wa Tawzi'uhu fi-l-'Alam al-Arabi (The Trade of Typography: Book Publishing in Lebanon and its Distribution in the Arab world)*. Beirut: Dar al Saqi, 1993.
- Varon, Jeremy, Michael S. Foley and John McMillian, "Time is an ocean: the past and future of the Sixties," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 1:1, 2008, 1–7.
- Warde, Beatrice. *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*. London: Sylvan Press, 1955.

## Figure Captions

Figs 1–2

Accepted/forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Vol: 40:1, pps. xx-xx. 2020, Duke University Press.

Front cover and inside pages of Anis Frayha (ed.) and Dia al-Azzawi (drawings), *Malahim wa Asatir fi al-Adab al-Sami (Epics and Legends in Sumerian Literature)*, layout and typography by Ajjaj Irrawi, Dar An-Nahar, Beirut 1967. Hardbound with dust-jacket, size: 21x24 cm closed. Photographs by Agop Kanledjian, courtesy of Abboudi Bou Jawde's collection.

Figs 3–4

Front cover and inside pages of Y. al-Khal and G. Tueini (eds.), *Yassu' al-masih (Jesus Christ)*, layout and typography by Ajjaj Irrawi, Dar An-Nahar and the Imprimerie Catholique, Beirut 1968. Hardbound, size: 22x28 cm closed. Photographs by Agop Kanledjian, courtesy of Abboudi Bou Jawde's collection.

Figs 5–6

Front and back covers, and inside double-page, from Shafic Abboud, *Maqamat al-Hariri*, Dar An-Nahar, Beirut, 1970. The whole volume slides into a protective carton box, size: 17.5x35 cm closed. Photographs by Agop Kanledjian, courtesy of Abboudi Bou Jawde's collection.

Biography

**Zeina Maasri** (PhD) is a senior lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Brighton, UK. Before taking up her post at Brighton, she was both an independent graphic designer and an academic at the American University of Beirut (1999 – 2016) in Lebanon. She is the author of *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (IB Tauris 2009) and curator of related travelling exhibitions and an online archival resource ([www.signsofconflict.org](http://www.signsofconflict.org)). Among other publications, Zeina is co-editor with K. Bassil, A. Zaatari and W. Raad of *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography* (2002). She is currently finishing a new book on visual culture and politics in Beirut's global sixties (forthcoming with Cambridge University Press).