

Introduction

A Twofold Mystery

Why might a city find itself suddenly covered in murals? And how could subsequent generations forget that their town had once been painted?

This book is framed by this twofold mystery, though the closer we come to addressing these questions, the more we gather that they are themselves formed by puzzles. Who painted the pictures? What did they mean? How do we know of them?

While such conundrums may be the stock-in-trade of the Egyptologist or the student of Mesoamerican civilizations, they seem more unusual in the case of an artistic culture that thrived between the 1880s and the 1930s, especially as traces of the work were visible around the town close to the start of the twenty-first century. Such dating may, however, give us pause. To say that wall paintings existed in a place across this period presumes that we have evidence that this was the case. Since we no longer possess the art itself—and it is no longer remembered by the citizens of the town—we must rely on the reports of outsiders. Given the time frame, we might guess

that photographic records (figs. 1, 2) constitute the main body of evidence. Yet could this itself be suggestive of a deeper form of enigma?

We see photography as partial. We know that it does not offer a true picture of the world, but we also sense that it can speak only incompletely of life in the time before its own invention. When photographers apprehended novelties at the dawn of their own art form, who is to say that the subjects they captured were themselves newly formed in the world? When we are speaking of paintings that lay unremembered just decades after they had constituted part of the fabric of life, why should we trust the reports of foreign informants who claimed not just that their mode of visual capture was new but also that the subjects they seized had been freshly assembled in the world?

This is one of the fault lines on which this project rests. It depends upon visual records of a lost culture, but it knows that it cannot trust the judgment of those who captured the images. Luckily, most of the artworks captured on film can be seen as accidental artifacts of the photographic process or as backdrops



FIG. 2 The city seen from a distance. Untitled, anonymous photograph, ca. 1890. Collection of the author.

to the ostensibly foregrounded subjects of colonial documentation (see fig. 3). We may even hope that their lying outside the gaze of the photographer affords them greater evidentiary value.

In some cases, architectural and archival sources do seem to prove that the people of

the town began to paint their city at around the time it was conquered and occupied by outsiders. However, since neither its inhabitants nor visitors had traditionally been in the habit of pictorially recording their perceptions of the place (or describing its appearance in any great detail in writing), we cannot really know whether the newcomers were right in saying that the painting of the city coincided with their arrival. Indeed, almost all of the newcomers seemed oblivious to

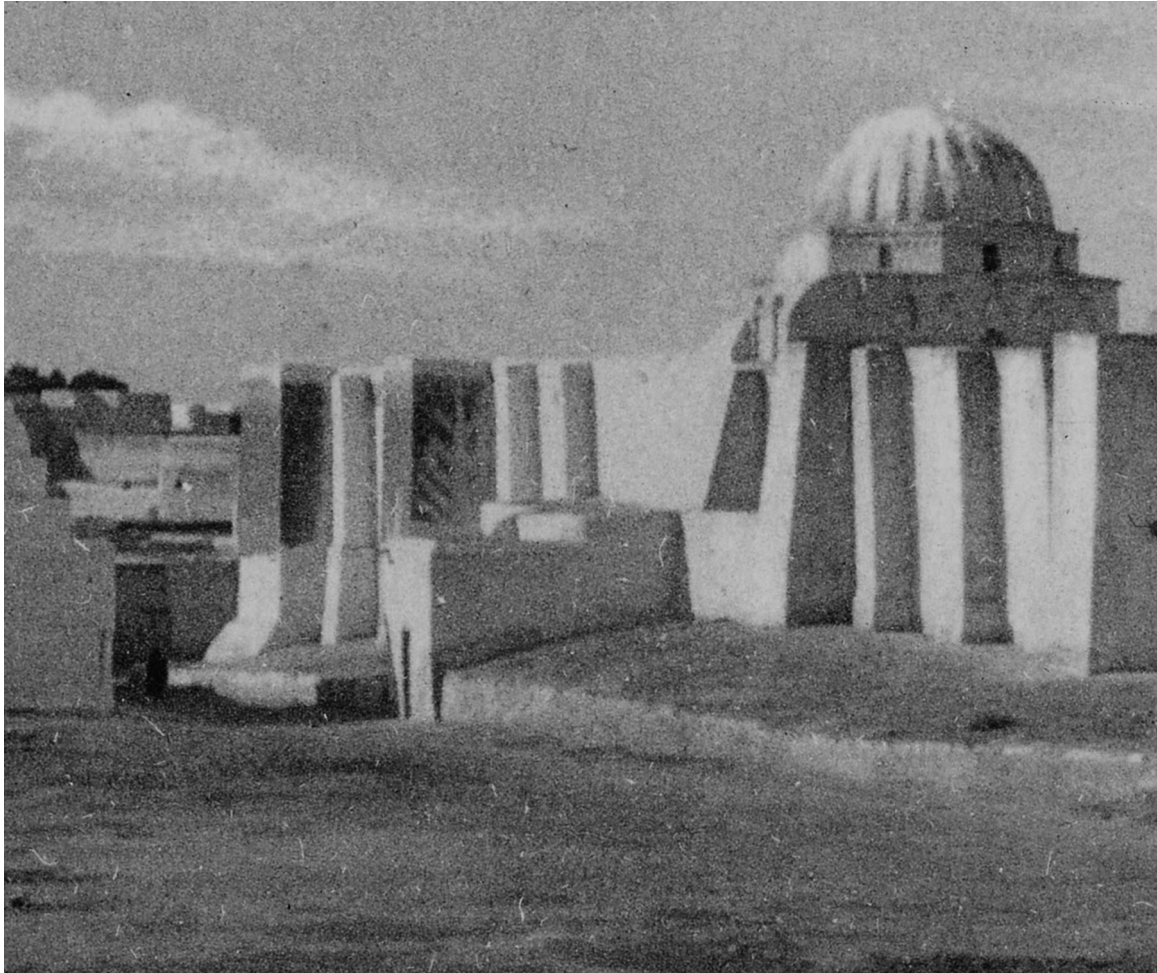


FIG. 3 Paintings on walls. Untitled, anonymous photograph, ca. 1885, detail. Collection of the author.

the existence of the wall paintings. Even paintings that were tens of feet tall might as well have been invisible to those engaged in documenting the character of the captured city.

This sense of uncertainty could be viewed as detrimental in terms of our ability to tell a

coherent story about the town's paintings. It could be perceived as a form of doubt—one that is debilitating in terms of our understanding of history—or it could be viewed as an enchanted proof of our arrival at a waystation lying at the frontier of the known and the unknown, a greater mystery that undergirds the analysis of discrete works of art.

Someone once wrote of an angel of history resting at just such a temporal cusp, watching the



FIG. 4 Sign on door. Untitled, anonymous photograph, ca. 1900. Location unknown. Collection of the author.

debris of the past pile up before her, but we ought not to worry that we do not have access to her supernatural understanding of space and time.¹ To some degree, a kernel of irresolution lies at the center of this work of explication, for fidelity to the works it discusses demands the retention and identification of forms of hesitancy. The pictures themselves proffer such lessons.

This is not to say that we cannot speak at all of these epic works of art that have for so long remained unnoticed relics in the backgrounds of largely unvalued photographs (fig. 4). Their scale and their longevity suggest that they spoke quite clearly in their own time, and while we may struggle to decipher their meaning as speech acts (or, more pertinently, to sense how these enunciations were heard by their audiences), the evidence we do possess demands that we attempt some mode of explication. Such a process of visual archaeology may constitute a first step toward establishing a much wider genealogy of

lost visual forms from other cities and settlements across the region where these paintings were found.

If we then go on to assume that the practice of public art on this scale was revolutionary, we may hypothesize that this city bore witness to a moment in its history in which the nature and practice of art were rethought. This is not to say that people of the town had formerly lived lives unmediated by aesthetics. As inhabitants of a storied center of civilizational significance, their quotidian experience of space had always been defined by the presence of the monuments and edifices on which that cultural reputation had been built.

Yet there must also have been some profound sense of change in their appreciation of the volumes and forms of that normative *civitas* for it suddenly to have become patterned and altered in demonstrative ways, not least since this sense of the remaking of perception was seen and re-seen

as one traveled through the town's streets. The interplay between the old and the new—and what novel modes of illustration were designed to relay to audiences about the relationship between the structures of history and the present moment—was surely related to the new conditions of life found in their *polis*.

At a moment when the boundaries of life and liberty were contracting, was art now magnified as a form of agency? Did aesthetic marks constitute signs of autonomy?

The visibility of this art must have played some part in the logic of its composition. We have already gathered that the outsiders betrayed no interest in its forms, so we may assume that it was illegible to them. Its size and its prevalence, however, seem to suggest that its significance could be understood by local people. As its marks were attached to the material heritage of the town and the values embedded therein, might we assume that its sign systems were largely drawn from “traditions,” whatever we mean by that term (often something far more pluralistic than might at first be thought)?

This town's reputation rested on its stature as a “holy city,” but its standing should not blind us to the complexities of analyzing forms of culture produced at a moment when its faith communities lay threatened. In such circumstances, it seems clear that fundamental expressions of religious truth, history, and fortitude would be communicated among believers, but we might expect that they would be articulated in recalibrated *idiomata*. If art offered one of the few modes of free speech in a public sphere that suddenly found itself constrained, aesthetics may have needed to innovate as well as express eternal verities.

This book's overall thesis is a simple one, for it argues that a set of paintings was made in a particular city so as to save the world at a time when it was imperiled. The neatness of that claim, however, merits eventual unpacking, term by term and idea by idea. It is written from the academic disciplines of history, art history, and Islamic studies, but it hopes to be *for* readers from (or interested in) the place it describes as well as those in and outside the academy who are concerned with the field of Islamic art, what it can be, and what it has been in the past.

The volume appears in a series entitled Refiguring Modernism, which is to say that it looks at cultural texts that were being produced at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. It does not, however, use or “accept” the term “modernism” or the constellation of expressions in its orbit, such as “the modern” and “modernity.”² Such ideas played no role in the artistic consciousness of the makers of the works studied in this book, nor for their primary audiences, and the insertion of such art into discussions of “transnational modernisms” or “multiple modernities” simply tends to dilute the artworks' force and deny their significance. As Sana Makhoul has asked, “Why do we have to define and categorize artwork from non-Western cultures by imposing on them Western definitions and terminology?”³

Indeed, there are great risks in comparing canonical works of European (or “global”) modernist visual culture with art such as that studied in this volume. The apparent pictorial similarities that lie across works made in very different places at the same moment threaten to push the paintings discussed here into dialogues with modernist

canons. The connections or imagined dialogues among works and cultures across space might then emerge as substitutes for the close reading of works within their own traditions.

The force of the works studied here is not at all attributable to their “proto-modernism” or their “anticipation of modernity,”⁴ nor is it really in any sense connected to specifically Western forms of “abstraction,” however much it may appear that two bodies of work are graphically connected. To believe otherwise is to be locked into interpretive models of “white circulation”⁵ and a set of arguments that have remained irresolvable in the history of art ever since connections were made between African figurative sculpture and the canon of high modernist European painting.⁶ Much more recently, the reception, promotion, and evaluation of Australian aboriginal painting have begun to be rethought along just such lines. What has been lost from (readings of) works that rapidly acquired canonical and market value because of their appeal to white audiences’ valorization of nonfigurative abstract painting?⁷

Such analytic impositions matter because they always take us away from the works themselves, the people who made them, and the audiences for whom they were made. They also tend toward the colonial assumption—articulated by Karl Marx and used epigrammatically by Edward Said—that “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”⁸ Instead, this book follows Said’s later assertion that “history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions.”⁹ It is a study of the unmaking and unpeeling of a stock of ideas and assumptions about people and

art in the Maghreb. It aspires to rewrite so as to hear and see beyond the silences and elisions of existing scholarship, which reflect not the lives of the people of North Africa but the mirrors that contemporary and later (generally Western) writers and scholars held up to their lives.

These are in no sense abstract claims, for at this very moment the category “modern Arab art” has progressed from its original designation, as an appeal to study and reevaluate underresearched artists, to become a hegemonic nexus drawing together disciplinary organizations,¹⁰ major collections,¹¹ new museums,¹² exhibitions,¹³ auction houses,¹⁴ art fairs,¹⁵ galleries,¹⁶ and academic and trade publishing initiatives in journals,¹⁷ magazines,¹⁸ documentary readers,¹⁹ popular books,²⁰ academic texts,²¹ educational resources,²² and a disseminatory web tracking far and wide across social media.²³ As is the case with all rapidly developing intellectual ecosystems, the consensual creation of a cultural category rapidly induces a form of amnesia as to a movement’s ideological beginnings. The “modern Arab art” program imagines itself to be counter-hegemonic, though which form of hegemony it counters it may now find harder to articulate.

If a Gramscian “war of position” was or is being fought in this arena, it seems much more plausible that such a conflict can be framed as taking place among Arab modernists²⁴ (as twentieth-century cultural producers and twenty-first-century interpreters) and Islamic or Islamicate artists and critics.²⁵ This struggle pitted, and pits, a largely bourgeois culture modeled on Western norms against an account of art grounded in the traditions of Islamic crafts, subsequently channeled toward temporary art

and the production of mechanically reproduced ephemera in the twentieth century. In its simplest form, this divide can be seen in relation to questions of value. Unique works of modern Arab art, produced by named and identifiable artists, acquire worth through their evaluation in the market and their place within the network of the gallery, the auction house, scholarship, and the museum.²⁶

The merits of the works studied in this volume cannot be indexed on a monetary scale or expressed in financial terms.²⁷ They were ethical, popular, and shared, and they only existed temporarily. They were also produced anonymously and could not be described as being singular, for they did not propose the expression of unique pictures of the world. Instead, they possessed force precisely because they replicated and referenced forms well known to their audience (forms conveniently indecipherable to Europeans). Paintings could thus be experienced instinctively rather than analytically, for they did not generally demand any kind of contemplative reflection, instead serving as daily presences in the world: they were a part of the architecture of being, made by women and men in the place where they lived. We might even say that they were art objects that were known rather than seen, perceived as much with the rest of the body as with the eyes, for they would be encountered routinely as elements of the city's fabric (fig. 5).

Another, more esoteric, way of looking at this art might be to describe it as a mind-altering substance. Paintings generated an alternate form of shared consciousness, one whose presence could be said to be akin to that of *djinn* and other spiritual beings whose invisibility was only partial.

There were those who could sense their presence and those who could not.²⁸

That none of the works still exist does not make them any less interesting. Indeed, to borrow an example from more recent culture, the mystique that surrounds iconic works of performance art often bears no relation to the material or visual preservation of such events. Equally, the artworks considered in this book are not of value simply because they have disappeared, though we ought to take seriously the aspiration of many of their artists to create work that was not meant to last for all time. This in no sense implies that such works formed a broader part of a narrative of "disappearing traditions" in the region, for the force of a work lay in its potential to reform and to be reactivated at future moments.

In another, quite specific, set of contexts that relate to the works studied here because of their location, an analogous set of debates has played out with regard to the history of African art in the modern era. Like Arab modernists,²⁹ the African artist is perceived to have entered history late, as we see, for example, in work that looks at modernism in Mogadishu,³⁰ the eternal modernity of Mami Wata,³¹ Ghanaian "African modernism,"³² surrealism in Egypt,³³ Congolese foreshadowings of Cubism,³⁴ or, in Nada M. Shabout's assessment, the arrival of modern art: "Modern art in Africa started in Egypt early in the twentieth century, following the efforts of Prince Yusuf Kamal and the establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908. Only after World War II did the rest of Africa accept modern art."³⁵ While the progressive desire to write Africa into modern history may have made sense in the overtly racist moment of the nineteenth and twentieth



FIG. 5 Toward the Mosque of the Sabres. Untitled, anonymous photograph, 1923. Collection of the author.

centuries, it always valued the cultures of Muslims and Africans for their potential rather than their actuality. This sense of charitable civilizational uplift brought with it insidious forms of prejudice, seen in summary form in Elsy Leuzinger's remarks from 1960: "The African cannot meet the

demands of the present and the future simply by taking up again the art of the past. The old ideas are being abandoned; the new ones have first to be identified and realized before the negro artist can set to work. At present he is in the act of breaking with the traditional content of his art. This makes it all the more impossible for Africa to turn back the wheel of history."³⁶

The prevalence of such critical lenses demands that we "turn back the wheel of history"

so that we might see that critics never understood the “art of the past” or “the traditional content of art” on its own terms but always as an adjunct to a broader story of humanity, difference, and progress. Africa, we will see, was “awake” in the period studied in this book, and both our evidence for its risen state and the means by which its wakefulness was induced can be seen to have been made in and by painting. To borrow from Rowland Olatinu, this work is an exercise in “seeking the African in African art”—and in identifying forms of language and thought that help us “see the Islamic in Islamic art.”

Such rousing art lay so far beyond the comprehension of writers like Leuzinger that it is perhaps not surprising that it lay unnoticed. For one thing, while it drew upon the kinds of eternal verities and structures that Europeans admired, it was also very much of its moment in its responses to the emergency of empire and the new forms of structural and immediate violence that European invaders brought to the world. Cities were painted because of the novel scope and forms of assault wrought by invaders, exemplifying a pattern, which we see repeated across North Africa, in which the greater the shock of such barbarity, the more need there was for art as a form of

protection, and the more visible such art needed to be in the public realm.

Not that the analysis of the meaning or purpose of such art should be restricted to considering its protective function. At the very least, our conception of “protection” would need to encompass forms of joy, love, and communion that lie beyond commonplace understandings of the term. Labelle Prussin alludes to the conceptual and linguistic limitations of scholarship in these realms when she notes that “the same prevalent theories of Western aesthetics that thwarted any true understanding of the African materials have also kept us from formulating a paradigm that could provide insights into the corpus of non-Western architectural phenomena,” going on to suggest that “the problems inherent in any analysis of non-Western architecture can only be solved by developing an entirely new intellectual perspective by which to view the basic elements on which architectural definitions rest.”³⁷ An aim of this book is to take tentative steps toward such new perspectives, though it worries about how “entirely new” any such frame of reference might be so long as it lies within the prison-houses of our ordinary and specialized forms of language.

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Rue Bab Djedid

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