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“Art brings man closer to God” - Art and religion in the thinking of Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh (1901-1957)

BY SILVIA NAEF

I have had elsewhere¹ the opportunity to show that there is no radical opposition in the Muslim religion to the image, contrary to what is generally said, especially in recent years and following the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff in 2015. Rather than promoting a rabid iconoclasm that will not even stop at murder, Islam's position has, historically, been that of avoiding the figurative image – and here again, we need to specify, of both humans and of animals, i.e. of all beings having vital breath (*ruh*) – in religious practice.

Secular images have existed most of the time and not just in secret, especially during the three great pre-modern Muslim empires, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal. Thus, when the “modern image” began to assert itself in the course of the 19th century in the Ottoman Empire, fierce opposition was rather rare.² Not only that, but one of the highest authorities

of Sunni Islam at the beginning of the 20th century, the reformist thinker Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), pleaded for not only the utility, but also the beauty of images, on his return from a journey to Sicily in 1903. By comparing painting to poetry, the great art of the Islamic world, ‘Abduh granted to the former its letters of nobility. By playing on the ambiguity of the Arabic term *rasm*, which can mean both painting and drawing, he concluded that there was no reason to believe that the Muslim religion would oppose such a useful form of expression³. Useful for illustrating textbooks and dictionaries, both essential items at a time when the education of the young people of elite society by modern methods had become a priority.

1 On the image in Islam, cf. Silvia Naef, *Y a-t-il une question de l'image en Islam ?* Paris, Éditions Téraèdre, new edition, 2015. Chapter 3 has been translated into English: Silvia Naef, “From Rarity to Profusion (1800 to the Present)”, transl. by R. G. Elliott, *Art in Translation* 6,1 (2014), pp. 77-120.

2 Johann Strauss, “L'image moderne dans l'Empire ottoman : quelques points

de repère”, in Bernard Heyberger and Silvia Naef (eds.), *La multiplication des images en pays d'Islam : De l'estampe à la télévision (17e- 21e siècles)*, Istanbul/Würzburg, Orient-Institut/Ergon Verlag, 2003, pp. 139-176.

3 Muhammad ‘Abduh, “Al-suwar wa-l-tamathil, wa-fawa'iduha wa-hukmuha”, in *Al-a'mal al-kamila li-l-imam Muhammad 'Abduh*, Beirut, Al-mu'assassa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirasat wa-l-nashr, 1972, vol. 2, pp. 171-214. Text translated into English: Muhammad ‘Abduh, “Images and Statues, Their Benefits and Legality (1904)”, in Anneka Lensen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout (eds.), *Modern Art in the Arab World*, Primary Documents, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2018, pp. 42-45.

Education and modernization were the leitmotifs of the time. And for this modernization to take place, it was vital to close the technological gap with the West that contemporaries had observed. It was for this reason that young people had to be trained in science and technology, including drawing and painting. Courses in these subjects would be part of the curriculum of the Ottoman Military School in Istanbul, where the Empire's first *alla franca* painters were trained in the 19th century. After that, art schools were opened in Istanbul (1883) and Cairo (1908). In Beirut, painters who had been educated in Europe opened workshops and taught the craft to young apprentice artists.

In this way, between the end of the 19th century and the early 1950s, a first generation of "pioneers" (*ruwwad*) appropriated the practices of easel painting and sculpture. The term "pioneers" clearly indicates to what extent this activity was perceived as unprecedented. Lebanese artist Rachid Wehbi (1917-1993), for example, recounted just how difficult his beginnings had been: "the profession of artist was unknown", he could not earn a living from it, and the public was unable to understand what a painting was⁴. Likewise, Iraqi artist Hafidh al-Droubi (1914-1991) recounts that while making sketches and painting during a vacation in the Lebanese mountains, one of his intellectual friends had advised him to drop such childishness.⁵ When trying to convince a friend to replace the landscape reproductions decorating his house with works of art, Iraqi artist Jawad Salim (1919-1961) was told that art was of interest only for artists.⁶ This tells us that, even if artistic practice was supported by the States, which considered it part of the modernization project, it had not yet become part of their cultural practices. The public largely ignored it or failed to see its utility, viewing it more as futile than as something prohibited or objectionable. Nevertheless, some artists like Hafidh al-Droubi and Moustafa Farroukh underwent family pressure at a young age.

Hafidh al-Droubi, from a modest Baghdad background, had started drawing from his boyhood.⁷ Raised in a religious family, by a mother practising embroidery, it was in primary school that he was introduced to drawing by Sheikh Ahmad

al-Sheikh Daoud. However, his parents opposed it, fearing he would be condemned to hell as the hadith promises to the makers of images.⁸ Later his uncle, who raised him after his parents' death, threatened to cut off his allowance if he did not stop this "devil's work".⁹ In 1950 this uncle welcomed him back from England where al-Droubi had gone to continue his art studies at Goldsmiths College "pale, sweating and with tears in his eyes" at the idea that his entourage might inquire about what his nephew had been studying abroad.¹⁰

Almost fifteen years his senior, the Lebanese Moustafa Farroukh (1901-1957) had had a comparable experience. Trained first in the Beirut studio of Habib Srour (1860-1938), then at the academies of fine arts in Rome and Paris, Farroukh was one of the most productive artists of the pioneer generation in Lebanon.¹¹ As he describes in his posthumous autobiographical account *My way to art*¹², he had developed a passion for drawing as a child, though nothing in his entourage encouraged him to do so. The only images he had seen, in the popular neighbourhood of Basta al-Tahta in Beirut where he had grown up, were on playing cards, or an engraving of a boat that had dazzled him at the age ten. According to his testimony, he drew everywhere, at school and at home. His family began to object to this practice, which they considered illegitimate (*haram*) because contrary to the Muslim religion. Frightened by the hadith which condemns painters to hell, since they will be unable to breathe life into their creatures, the young boy stopped drawing. It was the encouragement of the modernist Sheikh Mustafa al-Ghalayni (1886-1944) who promised him that he himself would breathe a soul into his creations, which would allow Farroukh to continue on the path of art.¹³

What is interesting in these testimonies is less the reticence of the artists' families towards the practice of drawing and painting, but the fact that this opposition did not prevent the aspiring artists from continuing in their paths. For me this shows that the discourse on the necessary modernization of Arab countries, including also "catching up" in the artistic field, prevailed over religious considerations and was part of a process of *tathqif* – disciplining or acculturating – as Kirsten Scheid has shown¹⁴.

4 Al-insan wa zilluhu mil'u rishati, Al-rassam Rashid Wehbe yarwi masiratahu al-fanniyya [The human being and his shadow fill my brush. Painter Rashid Wehbe narrates his artistic journey], *Al-Fursan* 577 (1989), p. 52.

5 "Liqa' ma' al-fannan Hafidh al-Droubi [Meeting with artist Hafidh al-Droubi]", *Al-Aqlam* 1,2 (1964), p. 108.

6 Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe - l'évolution des arts plastiques en Égypte, au Liban et en Irak*, Geneva, Slatkine, 1996, p. 334.

7 Sur Droubi, cf. Sarah Johnson, *Kaleidoscopic Modernism: Hafidh Drubi (1914-1991) and the heterogeneity of modern art in twentieth-century Iraq*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Berlin, Freie Universität, 2019.

8 "Liqa' ma' al-fannan Hafidh al-Droubi", op. cit., p. 108.

9 May Mudhaffar, op. cit., p. 15.

10 "Liqa' ma' al-fannan Hafidh al-Droubi", op. cit., p. 108.

11 On the artist's work, cf. the catalogue of his retrospective exhibition at the Sursock Museum: *Moustafa Farroukh, 1901-1957*, Beirut, Musée Nicolas Sursock, 2003.

12 Moustafa Farroukh, *Tariqi ila al-fann*, Beirut, Mu'assasat Nawfal, 1986.

13 For a detailed account, cf. Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, op. cit., pp. 136-137.

14 "Leading artists in Mandate-era Beirut felt compelled to paint nudes and dis-

This is also what comes across in the opening speech by the president of the association of Muslim scouts, Sheikh Muhi al-Din al-Nsuli, who hosted in his premises the young Farroukh's first exhibition on 1 January 1927, on his return from his studies in Rome. After presenting the painter as a "young Beirut Muslim", the sheikh referred back to the episode which had occurred in his childhood, affirming the need to abandon narrow ways of seeing things and not only to accept, but also to encourage art.¹⁵

As mentioned above, Farroukh had studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and then in Paris. Confronted with modern art, which he discovered in Parisian galleries, Farroukh was against the deconstruction of the image undertaken by modern painters such as Picasso and Matisse.¹⁶ And, throughout his career, he would produce a figurative art of an academic type, which could be considered as opposed to the precepts stated in the hadith.

However, Farroukh saw no contradiction between the practice of art as he conceived it and religion, as he showed in an article entitled "Religion and art" which appeared in a posthumous collection of texts.¹⁷ Farroukh is described as a believer, even if not very practising¹⁸, and his writing is full of religious expressions. But Farroukh's religiosity was not exclusive: thus, on passing his examination at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, he prayed in a church, "like 'Umar al-Khattab who had prayed in the arch of Ctesiphon filled with statues ...¹⁹". While still in the Italian capital, during the holy year of 1925, he participated in the processions and saw the Pope; he also copied famous Christian images (*suwar masihiyya*), which he gave as gifts or sold.²⁰

This non-exclusive religious vision is found in the text that we will examine more closely here. For Farroukh, the relationship between religion and the arts was essential: the arts glorify religion and bring out the best aspects of it, which is why religion has encouraged the arts and supported them

in their evolution and development.²¹ In places of devotion (*ma'abid*), we are fascinated, says Farroukh, by the force of art, by what the burin and the brush can produce. The colours recount to us the battles of the prophets and the blood of the martyrs, while the geometric lines, the arabesques and the beauty of the written line (*khatt*) reveal to us the obvious verses and deep wisdoms, expressing the services that religion has rendered to mankind for generations. They also reveal to us the difference between the state of barbarism and the age when man discovered faith in God, learned to help his neighbour and to show compassion for the poor and the underprivileged.²²

For Farroukh, the "message of art" is to bring man closer to nature and to the "tearing force" which produced the universe: art weaves the praises of God, the best of creators.²³ Looking at nature leads man to grasp what God created: "He who knows beauty loves God who created living beings, put life into them and embellished them with beauty."²⁴ God gave man hearing, sight and the heart for him to contemplate His work. He who aspires to happiness will turn to the book of God and to nature which, both together, will lead him to Him. Through the first, he will listen to the word of God, in the second he will see what His hand has created, and thus strengthen his faith. Most of the prophets and thinkers who enlightened the world were close to nature and appreciated its silence, which connected them with the higher spheres.²⁵ It was in nature that they observed the work of God and through it that they praised Him. Not only they, but many atheists have found their Creator by looking at nature with "the eye of an artist freed from desire and no longer weighed down by obtuse matter."²⁶ Finally, Farroukh concludes:

"Ultimately, art supports religion in its mission to reveal the greatness of the Creator; it brings man closer to God by opening for us a large window through which we look at nature and discover its treasures hidden from the eyes of worshippers of matter. Through the beauties of nature and its unveiled treasures, we come to know the greatness of God and benefit, through this view, from a little of His power, of His majestic sovereignty and of the beauties created by His wisdom; with His light he works on our lost hearts and tired souls and fills them with faith, trust and peace."²⁷

play them as part of a culturing process they called tathqif (disciplining or enculturing)". Kirsten Scheid, "Necessary Nudes, *Hadātha* and *Mu'āsira* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010), p. 203. Cf. also Silvia Naef, "Peindre pour être moderne Remarques sur l'adoption de l'art occidental dans l'Orient arabe", in B. Heyberger and S. Naef (eds.), *La multiplication des images en pays d'Islam : De l'estampe à la télévision (17e- 21e siècles)*, Istanbul/Würzburg, Orient-Institut/Ergon Verlag, 2003, pp. 189-207.

15 Quoted in Kirsten Scheid, *Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 2005, pp. 82-83, based on an article in the journal *Al-Kashaf* 1.1 (1927), pp. 52-56.

16 Cf. Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, op. cit., pp. 150-151.

17 Moustafa Farroukh, "Al-din wa-l-fann" [Religion and art], in Moustafa Farroukh *Al-fann wa-l-hayat, Maqalat tabhath fi-fann wa-irtibatih bi-hayat* [Art and life, Articles that explore the link between art and life], Beirut, Dar al-'ilm li-l-mala'in, 1967, pp. 59-62.

18 'Umar Farroukh, "Rajul wa-fannuhu [A man and his art]", in *Al-fann wa-l-hayat*, op. cit., p. 37.

19 Ibidem, p. 37.

20 Ibidem, p. 38.

21 Moustafa Farroukh, "Al-din wa-l-fann", op. cit., p. 59.

22 "Al-din wa-l-fann", op. cit., p. 60.

23 Ibidem

24 Ibidem

25 "Al-din wa-l-fann", op. cit., p. 62.

26 Ibidem

27 Ibidem

One could almost define this vision of Farroukh as “pantheist”, given the extent to which nature is described there as permitting access to God, were this vision not also full of expressions specific to the Islamic religion. Far removed from any idea of an opposition between religion – whichever it is – and art, Farroukh considers that art, expressing the beauty of nature, with nature being the expression that God has given to beauty, ultimately leads to the recognition of the creative power of God. In this way the sublimity of art becomes, for Farroukh, an expression of this power.

While practising a figurative art, the artist does not deny his Muslim religious culture but reinterprets it in a direction favourable to this practice. There is no contradiction between “the obvious signs” (*al-ayat al-bayyinat*) of God and a western-type art form. There is also nothing to forbid reproducing Christian images, praying in a church or representing, as in the image which illustrates the article “Religion and the art”, a young girl learning the Quran with a sheikh.²⁸ These reflections are consistent with what Farroukh considered to be the function of art. In an interview with the journal *Al-Adab* in 1956, the painter expressed his vexation at the evolution of art in Lebanon, which he considered as emulative of Europe-

an trends, and motivated solely by the lure of profit. He notes that the situation is the same in all Arab countries, whereas artists should not, according to him, “let jealousy creep into their minds, but should dissolve into the beautiful spirit and positive creation. This is the good soil in which true art grows and in which its noble message is fulfilled.”²⁹

For Farroukh, figurative and mimetic art becomes in this way, through the beauty it creates, a means of celebrating divine creation, of glorifying God. Nor is this conception alien to Islamic thought: ever since the Abbasid era, which had appropriated Greek philosophical thought, Beauty has been seen as the expression of divine goodness towards humans.³⁰ If the case of Farroukh is unusual, as few modern artists have addressed the relationship between religion and art, it is nevertheless interesting to see how the practice of art in the western manner can be supported by a painter who sees himself as a Muslim. In Farroukh’s eyes, making an iconic painting is not an act of hostility towards Islam, quite the contrary.

28 “Al-din wa-l-fann”, op. cit., p. 61.

29 “Al-fann .. wa-l-hayat al-‘arabiyya [Art ... and Arab life]”, *Al-Adab*, 4, 1 (1956), p. 3.
 30 Ghaleb Bencheikh, “Dieu est beau, il aime la beauté”, *Inflexions* 44, 3 (2020), pp. 137-144, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-inflexions-2020-2-page-137.htm>, consulted on 27.03.21. Cf. also Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*, Munich, C.H. Beck, 1999. English translation: *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, Translated by Tony Crawford, Cambridge, etc., Polity, 2015.

CRITICAL THINKING WITHIN ISLAM

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