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The Real Face of Arabic Symbols

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The Real Face of Arabic Symbols

By

Leena Yahya Sonbuol

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
In Fine Arts Studio

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I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Eileen Bushnell, and my committee members, Clifford Wun, and Denton Crawford, for the guidance they provide to me while I was working on my thesis. Their doors were always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question not only regarding my artwork, but also about my life in the USA as an international student. They consistently allowed this paper to be my work but steered me in the right direction whenever they thought I needed it.

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ABSTRACT

This is a brief insight into my thesis: "The Real Face of Arabic Symbols". I have examined in depth the artwork I completed for my Masters of Fine Arts degree at Rochester Institute of Technology, the work for which was exhibited in the Bevier Gallery for two weeks during March 2017.

The aim of this study is to explore differences in symbolic language between the Eastern and Western cultures in visual arts and explain the misconception of Arabic symbols in the western world. It examines Arabic cultural symbols in contemporary art, and the creation of a symbolic language for a non-Arab audience to understand the real meaning of Arabic symbols. This symbolic language aided me in creating a new artistic perspective based on the generation of work in a different geographic location that altered the perception of these symbols. This body of work visually represents my experiences as a Saudi who has spent time moving between different cultures in the east and the west.
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INTRODUCTION

Symbols of Arabic culture became important to me when I first began living outside of my country. In particular, I became deeply aware of the deep gap between the cultural symbols of the Eastern and Western parts of the world, namely Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, or where I came from and where I live now.

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on Arabic cultural symbols that define beliefs in our world. My thesis show explains the misconception of about formal and iconic Arabic clothing and headwear, which in the West, have become negative stereotypes in the world often linking them, inaccurately, to violence, evil and injustice. These attributes, however, are the characteristics of individuals, who do not have a common identity, nationality, color, or religion.

My artwork does not merely reflect aesthetics, but rather creates images that reflect my feeling towards symbols of Arabic society. My thesis attempts to extend and clarify the understanding and knowledge of a different cultural symbol that have been purported to be symbols of international terrorism in western society. The challenge was to create a visual language with these maligned symbols that could be interpreted by audiences from various cultures in a new way, erasing differences between humans even when the artwork is viewed outside of its original geographic context.

Exploring the visual language of a culture’s symbols is central to my thesis. Eventually, I am hoping to pursue my Ph.D. in Art in the UK, thus introducing as a third culture into my artistic journey. I intend to expand my current practice which involves the linkage of diverse cultures in a manner that will erased boundaries between international audiences through the use of experimental, conceptual coding as the primary mode of visual communication.

I have been profoundly influenced by both tangible visual culture and the history that
informs artistic work. One of the artists who was very influential to me in this project was Shirin Neshat (1957 - ), an Iranian visual artist who lives in New York City and focuses on the social, cultural and psychological dimensions of women's experience in Middle East societies. Her work involves the manipulation of photographic images, onto which she uses Persian calligraphy to write poems.
Context Section I: Personal Background and Inspirations

My Hand Held a Symbol

One incident that I shall never forget happened nearly 25 years ago, when I ran home crying and upset, seeking the comfort of my mother and a way to erase the green olive-shaped birthmark on my right hand (Fig.1). I had been a victim of bullying by my classmates due to this distinct mark (symbol). My mother, upon realizing what had upset me, asked “Have you asked yourself why such a green symbol is on your hand?

Fig.1. the green olive-shaped birthmark, 2017
She explains to me that the olive is a blessed fruit, as it has numerous health benefits and is seen as a source of wealth in certain parts of the world. She told me that this mark on your hand is a symbol and reminder of what you can achieve and excel in, and it should be thought of as your inspiration. Therefore, this experience encouraged me to spent a great deal of my childhood and teens actively practicing various forms of visual arts. It also gave me the desire to observe the different symbols embedded in the art around me. Thus this question, which my mother asked me all those years ago, inspired me to grow up with an aspiration to become an artist who uses cultural symbols in her work. This questions provided a seed for this study, because I cherish my personal olive symbol dearly, and have often thought: What does this symbol mean? Why is it located in my right hand? Why is it in green?

In the book ’Sacred Symbols in Art’, the author explains that “The olive, is an emblem of peace and reconciliation.”\(^1\). Additionally, the book, Signs & Symbols in Christian Art mentions that: ”The olive has always been regarded as a symbol of peace, and appears as such in allegorical paintings of peace”\(^2\). Thus different messages from different sources have inspired me through the symbol on my hand to pursue the creation of work that strives to spread peace and tolerance between cultures.
The Gap

In 2014 when I said goodbye to the Arabic culture and moved to the US, I started to observe new symbols in this unfamiliar culture and attempted to find a connection between Eastern and Western society’s symbols. One of my beliefs is that a physical symbolic in culture plays an important role in establishing a society's identity. Symbols touch us deeply because they are an expression of an essential part of our identity. These symbols, as which can be objects, images, clothing and jewelry, reflect a message without the use of verbal language. But the message carried by the symbol (initially created for a good purpose) can sometimes become twisted and mutated into a message that has a more evil intent.

Anecdotal evidence, including information described in public media, suggest that the symbols that reflect Arabic society, such as dress codes, headwear and hijab, are sometimes rejected by the western world. This altered, outlook towards symbols of Arabic society became especially evident after the events of 11th of September 2001. According to Dr. Jonathan Matusitz: "The aim [was] to considerably jar the public order, to leave permanent psychological traumas [within] the audience, to commit terrorist acts that carry over long distances, and, by creating an uncomfortable feeling in the audience". This gap in public acceptance, inspired me to focus on the reality of Arabic cultural symbols and shed light on misconceptions regarding the Arabic symbols that hinder people's understanding and acceptance of a culture dissimilar to their own.
Nostalgia

Through my studies and explorations, I read the text “Evocative Objects: Things We Think With” by Sherry Turkle. This literature enabled me to understand more about my nostalgia towards visible Arabic symbols in art. I am interested in Arabic symbols because they are closely related to and remind me of my background, childhood memories and experiences that have become embedded in my very soul. I find myself constantly pondering them whenever I see objects and images related to these symbols. Consequently, I create artwork to represent these symbols, transporting them from my soul to real life, translating my sensory perception to visual perception through my artwork.

In the essay 'What Makes an Object Evocative?' Sherry focuses on the significant idea that when the object is lost, a subject is found. In general, people do not think about the value of the subject matter if they have an object. When they lose the object, they think more and more about the value of what they lost. This idea has inspired me to focus on the Arabic symbols that I lost moving to a Western culture, and this study is what I did when I lost them.

I believe that inanimate objects are things representing place and time, but my cultural experiences gave me a sense of the true meaning of these things. This meaning formed an outlet for my creativity, enabling me to pour my soul into my work. Before I came to the US, visible Arabic symbols, which I saw almost every day, never represented any feelings in my life. Now, while living in the US, I find these symbols have inspired me to create a number of pieces that represent my deep feelings and emotions towards the symbols that I miss.
Section II: Overview of the costume symbols of Saudi men

Arabic culture is one of the oldest cultures in the world, spreading over twenty two countries. At one time Arabic culture extended from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Sea in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean in the southeast. Even though different civilizations ruled these lands, some of them for hundreds of years, Arab people kept a part of their own civilizations as an aspect of their culture and daily lives. One of the reasons that Arabs preserved their culture for hundreds of years is that they believe that their culture is a major part of the identity of their land. Although there are differences between the Arab people based on their region of abode, Arab people share a common bond of history, culture and tradition.

Part of the Arabic culture is the formal Saudi Arabian clothes for men. Even though the official attire for men in every Arabic country is different in style, color, and form, they all preserve the original concept of the Arabic man's appearance. In the book, 'Arab Dress a Short History: From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times', the authors argue that “One aspect of the male wardrobe that resisted change even where the transition to Western attire become more or less complete was the headgear.”

Today, the style of the Saudi mens’ headwear consists of many parts. The keffiyyeh or kufiya (Arabic: كوفية kūfiyyah) is a small white cap decorated with white thread (Fig. 2). Secondly, a ghutrah (غمزمة) or shemagh (شماغ) (originally the turban) fashioned from a white square scarf decorated with red thread, and usually made of cotton (Fig.3). Finally, the agal (عقال) is a thick twisted black cord of silk thread, which was in the last century most commonly worn by Bedouin and peasants in many parts of the Middle East. The agal is worn on the top of the head to support the other parts (keffiyyeh and, shemagh) (Fig.4).
Fig. 2. the *keffiyeh*, 2017

Fig. 3. a *ghutrah*, 2017
Another part of the official male clothing is called the *Thawb* (ثوب) (Fig.5). The *thawb* is a robe that is made from cotton, and usually with long sleeves, similar to a long dress. The most common color is white, but a variety of colors such as brown, gray, and black are also worn. In common practice, Saudi men usually wear white and light colors in summer weather to reflect the sun’s heat and dark colors in winter to absorb heat and keep themselves warm.
Fig. 5. *Thawb*, photography, 2011
On a symbolic level, the headgear of a Saudi man (Fig. 6) reflects the values of the culture and traditions of the Arabic man. In other words, the man who wears the Agal has a character made up of virtues valued as, for example, good, honest, respectful, courageous, forgiving, and kind.

Fig. 6. The headgear of Saudi man, 2011
In the book *Two-Dimensional Man*: An essay on the anthropology of power and symbolism in the complex society, the writer states:

“Symbols are objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for multiplicity of meaning, to evoke emotions, and to impel men to action” \(^8\). Arabic symbols have multiple meanings that links them to the characters and personal traits of the predecessors who lived in the Arab lands.
Section III: Evolution

The first year of graduate school was all about experimentation and concept development. When beginning a piece, I usually do not have a clear final image in my mind, I allow my work to grow and evolve naturally. I used photographic images as a main resource in creating my artwork, in addition to painting, printmaking, sculpture, and Arabic calligraphy in order to create a new form of contemporary Arabic art. I found that one singular field of fine art was inadequate and insufficient to express my emotions, so I mix materials and techniques to convey my ideas without any limitations.

Although a woman within my Saudi community is not seen as the ideal person to discuss the symbols of male attire, I decided in the first year of graduate school to focus on the symbols of Arabic men for two reasons. To begin with, the average Saudi man might not have the courage to analyze his gender truthfully, or he might be unfamiliar with using art as a language to clarify his identity. Secondly, although focusing on the male gender is not acceptable for me in Saudi society because it might imply that I have a personal experience with the other gender outside my immediate family, something that is forbidden for Saudi women. I decided to break down this boundary of the common culture and to challenge my society to prove that there are should be no limits inhibiting Saudi women.

During the first semester, I worked on clarifying Arabic symbols based on their understanding within traditional culture, which I know from my photography background (Fig.7). I made the shemagh sculpture of silver wire and red crystal beads (Fig.8). I love this piece, but the abstraction of the shemagh structure made it difficult for the general audience to understand this symbol of Arabic culture in the artwork. Throughout my process of experimentation, one of the challenges that I faced working with Arabic symbols, was the lack of understanding that my mostly Westerners audience had for these forms.
Fig. 7. The *shemagh*, photography, 2011
I evolved and worked to develop the methods and techniques that I used to embed Arabic symbols in my work. I attempted to make the true meanings of Arabic symbols visible by juxtaposing them with analogous symbols with which my Western audience was familiar. In other words, I found various Arabic symbols analogous to other universal symbols that are more common in the Western world. For instance, the Agal is visually similar to the halo and both represent virtue. The basic definition of the halo is a circle of light shown around or above the head of a saint or holy person to represent their holiness. In the book 'Signs & Symbols in Christian Art', a halo or nimbus is a zone of light, generally represented as a circle, square, or triangle. It is placed
behind the heads of divine or sacred personages to identify their great dignity. I used
agal as a symbol of a halo to present the universal value of virtue embedded in both of these
symbols for my first project.

I spend a lot of time analyzing means and methods of embedding Arabic symbols in my
work and I attempted to identify another symbol that is familiar in the west culture and works with
Arabic symbols. Finally, at the end of the second semester, I discovered an infinity symbol (∞) in
the agal when I opened and unwound the thick twisted black cord (Fig.9). Infinity is forever,
meaning that this Arabic symbol will be forever. A dictionary states that the infinity icon is a
familiar symbol in different sciences and cultures, mathematics a number, like π, for instance, that
goes on and on, symbolized as ∞. Astronomers talk about the infinity of the universe, and religions
describe God as infinity.

Fig.9. An infinity symbol, 2017
As my work developed in my second year, I began to experiment with my hair and my daughter's hair. I began working with different methods of printmaking to achieve results that would provide me with the exact texture and form of real physical hair directly rather than from photography images (Fig.10). Working with ImageOn film, I placed the hair directly onto a coated plate. It was challenging to define the correct time for the exposure seeing as this was a previously undocumented experiment, and exposure times depended on the thickness and nature of hair.

![Fig.10. Hair experimental printmaking, 2017](image)

After an intense investigation into the methods and forms of intaglio type printmaking, I began to rethink and started to reframe my work to add a symbol for a woman in my thesis exhibition. In deciding to expand the gender of the symbols that I used, I added hair as a symbol for the Arabic woman. When I started to print the plates with the impressions of hair, I used the currently popular and stylish colors that girls currently use to dye their hair such as purple,
orange, and green (Fig.11.12.13). I found these colors did not convey my identity as an Arabic woman most of whom usually have black hair. As a result, I decided to use only the original color of my hair, which is black (Fig.14).
In 'Sacred Symbols in Art', the author states:

“In early art, colors were always used symbolically and until the old traditions were cast aside by later painters, certain colors were always associated with certain subjects and certain personages”.

Because colors are also symbols in relationship to certain subjects and reflect distinctive meaning going back hundreds of years, I decided to only use colors that convey certain meanings in my thesis work. My first choice was white. It is the symbol of light, faith, joy, life, and of religious purity, virginity, and innocence. It signifies honor and integrity in a judge, humility
in the rich man, and chastity in a woman \(^1\). My second choice was black as it is a very powerful color that also portrays high status in society, elegance and wealth. Black combined with other colors can create a very strong statement. Black is also a color that can be used in almost every design to add contrast, and make the other colors stand out more prominently. Finally, I chose red, a hot color that evokes the powerful emotions of passion, lust, sex, energy, blood and war. Red is a good color to use for forms that need to be emphasized over other colored elements \(^{10}\).

The conceptual symbols of these three colors helped me to reflect on the meaning of the Arabic symbols in my creations. Using these colors, I eventually created three pieces for my thesis called Virtue, Infinity, and He and I that also used international symbols as a means of clarifying the real meaning of well-known Arabic symbols.
The Body of Work

A-Virtue

As I discussed earlier, the headgear of a Saudi man reflects the virtue of the customs and traditions of the Arabic man, including goodness, honesty, respectfulness, courage, forgiveness, and kindness.

With the aim of my work is to focused on shedding light on Arabic cultural symbols and their meanings that are sometimes misunderstood and create boundaries between Eastern and Western societies, I embarked on the creation of a third artwork that investigated the symbolism behind traditional Arabic male dress.

This piece uses photographs that are seen as projections using three digital projectors. The size of this work is approximately equal to the height of an average Saudi man 168.9 cm (5 ft 6 1/2 in) according to Wikipedia\(^\text{11}\) and the images are projected directly onto the wall. Each of the three photos, present an Arabic man wearing a traditional black robe. On top of the figures, there is another image of hand written Arabic calligraphy that repeats one word, a word that describes a characteristics of the Arabic man that is related to the Arabic virtues. In Plato's theory of virtue, virtue is wisdom "الحكمه" (Fig.15), courage "الشجاعه" (Fig.16), and justice "العداله" (Fig.17). Plato found and considered virtue to be the essence of the soul. The soul has several components, and many of them are elements of excellence. For example, the excellence of reason is wisdom, of passion, come attributes such as courage, and of the spirit, temperance. Finally, justice is that excellence which consists in a harmonious relation of the three parts\(^\text{12}\).
Fig. 15, wisdom "الحكمه",  
Photography and Arabic calligraphy, 2017
Above every picture, an actual black agal is hanging from the ceiling. On the floor and under the agal, there are traditional sandals of the Arab man (Fig.18), allowing the audience to stand in the shoes of the Arab man and to contemplate how the light of virtue might come into their body.
Fig. 18, Traditional sandals of the Arab man, 2017

Although a majority of the audience are unable to read or understand the Arabic calligraphy, I used additional symbolic language to explain what I want to say and provide them with clues about the meaning. The name of the artwork is “Virtue” allowing the audience to understand the meaning of the Arabic text and consider how that meaning is related to Arabic men wearing traditional Arabic clothing. Additionally, the repetition of a single word in each picture emphasizes the significance of the meaning of the word; while the lack of color within the photo expands on the notion of “virtue” itself. Finally, the form of agal is similar to the shape of the “Halo”, and the “Halo” in the western world represent the virtue. Thus, I conflated Arabic symbols with those of western culture to lead the audience into considering the true meaning of symbols of Arabic culture (Fig.19).
Fig.19.20. Virtue, 2017
B-Infinity

Infinity is a black sculpture that presents the *agal* and symbolizes the infinity icon (Fig.21). The primary form is made of a PE-25mm plastic pipe. I used a heat gun to twist the pipe to form the infinity symbol. 1400 yards of black cotton thread was then used to cover the primary form of pipe. The smaller infinity elements circling around the larger form, are real *agal* that the Arabic man uses as a part of his headwear. I used more than 80 *agals* to visually enliven the main form.

![Infinity sculpture](image)

Fig.21, Infinity, 2017
The infinity sculpture represents the immortality of Arabic symbols and the desire to preserve our culture, tradition and heritage forever. The use of the *agal* as a representation of the Arabic character can be seen in the use of many small infinity symbols (*agals*) to emphasize the meaning of no end (Fig. 22) and to express the visual depth of the form. The ten foot long size of the piece serves to create a powerful visual presence, immersing the audience in the idea of immortality, and the possibility of leaving limited time behind. Additionally, the repetition of the pattern of the infinity symbols can also be seen as similar to DNA structures that represent life (Fig. 23). Finally, the location of the sculpture in the highest point in the gallery represent the true value of the symbol in Arabic culture (Fig. 24).

![The infinity sculpture](image)

*Fig. 22. Tens of infinity symbols, 2017*
Fig. 23. Simulation to DNA structures, 2017

Fig. 24. The location of infinity sculpture, 2017
C- He and I

He and I is a series of prints (a diptych, a triptych and four piece print) which describe the relationship between the male and female in Arabic society (Fig.25). Every piece consists of a different design and different stage of the relationship between the genders.

![Fig.25, He and I, Printmaking, 2017](image)

I used the original *shemagh* (šmāğ) (a turban), fashioned from a white, cotton square scarf decorated with red thread to represent the male, and the print on paper to represent the female. Each print is a large square shape allowing me to use an actual space to describe the important relationship between a man and woman.
in an Arabic society. The prints are made only using black and red Akua ink. The process for creating these prints involved two intaglio type techniques, the image of the shemagh representing the male, on an ImageOn plate and the image of the hair representing the female, on a photopolymer plate.

One of the challenging factors in my use of these processes is that I did not create a film, or use any computer programs to translate my images. Rather, I devised a process in which I used the actual physical objects, placed directly on the plates inside of the exposure unit. This process took me approximately two semesters to perfect, working until I achieved the correct exposure times to reveal the individual lines of hairs and thread clearly and accurately. The hair that I used it is my real hair and my daughter's hair. This allowed me to express the importance of hair as a symbol of my identity as a Saudi woman in a direct and personal way.
In Love:

The two parts of this work represent the beginning of the traditional relationship between male and female in Arab society (Fig.26) in which it is forbidden to have any interaction before marriage. During the period of engagement prior to marriage, each partner believes that he or she has found the other half to complete the gap in their life. Each half looks similar in everything except the gender. The long, straight hair and the real *shemagh* within this print represent the magic of imagination at this stage of the relationship.

Fig.26. in Love, printmaking, 2017
**In Relation:**

This work is a combination of three pieces that represent the final stage of a traditional marriage if it was a successful one, or the middle stage of a failed one (Fig.27). In this stage, there are no social borders in the relationship, so the connection is represented by real hair between the two horizontal images (Fig.28, 29). The third image represents the result of the relationship, a (child) who preserves part of the parent's identity. In this piece, I attempted to visually translate the image of a traditional marriage in Arabic society by simulating the difference between male and female, the original and the image and the color and the shape.

![Image of three pieces of artwork](image)

Fig.27. in Relation, printmaking, 2017
Fig.28, 29. In Relation, details, printmaking, 2017
In Different:

This work is made up of four pieces that represent the relationship when the marriage is a failure, and ultimately leads to divorce (Fig.30). Both partners go in different directions which creates a space in their lives. However, it is impossible to leave the meaningful relationship without remnants such as cherished memories, emotions, or even children. I symbolized these remnants by adding the real hair between every two horizontal images (Fig.31, 32).

Fig.30, In Different, printmaking, 2017
Fig. 31, 32. In Different, details, printmaking, 2017
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this collection of artworks has allowed me to explore diverse methods of expressing my passion for the language of symbols in my home culture (Fig. 33). I have learned many things during my thesis work. These include how to face new challenges when embarking on new projects, how to develop innovative ways of seeing and projecting concepts onto physical objects and how to create an artistic language to translate my ideas. All of this work and exploration resulted in the growth of my craftsmanship and skills within my art on a much higher level.

Fig. 33, my collection in the Bevier Gallery, 2017
On a conceptual level, my perspective has changed, enabling me to see the world on a much wider and deeper level. After four years in USA during which I have been exposed to a number of different nationalities and cultures, I have become more accepting of both the difference and the similarities between societies and cultures. I believe that this is the most important outcome of my MFA degree. I look forward to the future in which I hope to further extend and clarify the creation of an innovative and unique symbolic structure within my art that can be used to erase borders between different cultures.
Fig.1. The green olive-shaped birthmark, 2017
Fig. 2. the *keffiyeh*, 2017

Fig. 3. a *ghutrah*, 2017
Fig. 4. The agal, 2017
Fig. 5. *Thawb*, photography, 2011
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