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Traditional Clothing of Kuwaiti Women

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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

TRADITIONAL CLOTHING OF KUWAITI WOMEN
by

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Thesis Approval

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Abstract

In this thesis, I present my artwork of “traditional clothing of Kuwaiti women” completed for my Master of Fine Art at the Rochester Institute of Technology. This work has been a culmination of my feelings about the symbolic meaning of traditional clothing as well as my knowledge and experience gained throughout the master’s program. My learning curve has been reshaped in terms of method and school of art: I was plunged into oil painting as an art method to produce realistic art in all of my artwork before joining the master’s program, but I became more inspired to monoprinting to produce abstract art throughout my master’s courses. In this document, I trace the development of the work, which evolved as a theme and as a method. It has also evolved as a conceptual artwork. I also explain what techniques and materials I used to achieve the purpose of this work, which is to depict the symbolic Kuwaiti women’s clothing. This artwork is simply a presentational form of a Kuwaiti cultural symbol, which reflects my identity and voice as a Kuwaiti artist.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment:.....	1
Abstract:.....	2
Introduction:	4
Section I: Context and Influences	5
Section II: Evolution.....	6
Section III: Body of Work.....	11
Conclusion:	15
Bibliography:	16

Introduction

Cultural objects such as clothing may hold symbolic meanings. In Kuwaiti, women have their own cultural clothing that are not simply objects used to cover their skin. Rather, they are representational of their identity. Many Arab women in the West do not wear their cultural dresses outdoor, most likely because they want to avoid being stereotyped as “evil”. Moreover, many Arab women in Kuwait do not put on cultural Kuwaiti women’s clothing, which includes ‘abaya’, a silky head-to-toe black cloak for reasons other than being stereotyped. For example, many young Kuwaiti women nowadays tend to wear Western garments, such as mini- skirts, short tops, and leggings as a result of living in a globalizing and globalized world. These reasons triggered my artwork, which focuses on the preservation of the symbolic cultural heritage of Kuwaiti women’s clothing.

My artwork is not simply figurative art derived from traditional Kuwaiti women’s clothing; rather, it is a presentational form of a Kuwaiti cultural symbol. The purpose of this thesis is to place emphasis on and preserve symbolic Kuwaiti clothing. My artwork can be seen as a message to the world and Kuwaiti society that Kuwaiti cultural clothing must be safeguarded. Initially, I used the simple figurative form of a traditional Kuwaiti woman with head veil, called a hijab. In essence, I started with photographic realism to express the figurative. I started using realism as a method based on my educational background. Later, abstraction started to grow in my artwork. It was not easy to move from realism to abstraction, because my work was based on the former method. In abstract artwork, I have used different materials and techniques, including printmaking. In the printmaking, I used silk fabric and many colors and layers. I also combined my emotions at the time of making my work.

Though based on abstract artwork, my work is based on a realistic representation of a subject matter: traditional Kuwaiti women’s clothing, which is visible in the real world. Using an abstract process to present a cultural symbolic form of Kuwaiti women’s clothing has helped me achieve my emotive goal objectives. My goal is to reinforce a sense of cultural identity through producing aesthetic images about women’s clothing in my culture.

Section I: Context and Influences

The idea of my thesis work stems from my personal experiences in family and society. My family has a long history of clothing and textile business. My great great grandfather used to import many kinds of textiles. Our family is part and parcel of a traditional society in Kuwait and is concerned about preserving heritage, including traditional clothing. I come from a big family of 11 members including four sisters and four brothers. My mother used to make sure we, the daughters, wore traditional clothing and she was used to knitting our shawls and scarves. We were influenced by our mother's interest in traditional clothing. As a grown up, I have been concerned about losing such interest in this important heritage. I have been observing how Western clothing including leggings and skirts are influencing Kuwaiti women—a phenomenon that should be addressed. I started to highlight the importance of Kuwaiti women's clothing in college. In my art education, my projects focused on heritage in general and traditional clothing in particular.

In addition to the social, cultural, and historical influences, my art work has been inspired by a few artists including Ann Hamilton, Kiki Smith, and Paul Klee. These three contemporary artists have their particular themes and techniques. For instance, Ann Hamilton is known for installations, textiles, and printmaking. Her art making served as an invocation of voice and community. In one of her best-known works *Blue Indigo* (1991), Ann used workers' clothes to echo the history of the laborers in Charleston, South Carolina (Simon, 2006). In the same way, my art work focuses on women's clothing to invoke the sociohistorical traditional clothing of Kuwaiti women. I am also influenced by Kiki Smith, a feminist artist who depicted women's folklore, body parts, and clothes. She used screen printing to produce women dresses and scarves (Weitman, 2003). Paul Klee is another influential artist who is known to be part of Expressionism. He also developed his color theory shaping 12-color wheel based on six rainbow colors. Paul Klee produced many art works using media such as oil and etching.

Section II: Evolution

My artwork is a symbolic representation of a cultural component of Kuwait, that is, traditional clothing of Kuwaiti women. It has started as figurative realism. First, I was interested in depicting traditional Arab women's clothing. I have joined the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program at Rochester Institute of Technology with a predetermined theme about traditional clothing of Arab women, namely the hijab. In fact, in my first semester of my first year in the MFA program, the first project I completed was a painting of Vermeer: *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665) (Fig -1-). I felt it looks like a traditional image of a girl with veil, which is similar to hijab. To produce this image, I used oil painting as a technique. Oil painting had been the only technique I learned and used before enrolling into the MFA program. In Fig-1-, I wanted to represent my theme as it is without artificial artistic conventions. My painting of *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* is not typically identical to that of Vermeer's, most likely because of the different experiences and background of my life and Vermeer's.



Fig-1-

Throughout the first semester of the MFA program, I became more captivated and inspired by traditional clothing of Kuwaiti women, namely the abaya. However, I did not have a clear image in mind; rather, I wanted to show the aesthetic image of the traditional abaya of Kuwaiti women. As I progressed in the first year, I learned about printmaking, a technique that I was not familiar with before joining MFA. In particular, I learned about the printmaking processes of woodcut relief, screen print, and monoprint. I was influenced by the traditional processes of woodcut relief and monoprint.

Initially, I used woodcut relief to depict the traditional clothing of Kuwaiti women. Fig - 2- (produced using fabric) and Fig -3- (produced using Masa paper) are examples of my earlier

work in the MFA program. I used a camera as an expressive medium to create an image of a traditional Kuwaiti woman engaged in a weaving process (turning raw cotton into thread). This was a photographic practice of Edvard Munch, who used to take pictures of his surroundings and then paint (Hodin, 1972; Wood & Varley, 1989). I adopted Munch's photographic practice in which he changed the features of photographs when he used to paint them. His photographs seemed to challenge the real picture the camera snaps by altering the atmosphere and the lighting (Eggum, 1989; Wood & Varley, 1989). To produce this work, I altered the atmosphere and colors of the image. I carved a block of wood using a chisel. The carving in both figures have different visual effects. In Fig -3-, I used hot colors of yellow and red for the background to reflect the hot weather in Kuwait. In fact, colors can be used "symbolically" as they can be "associated with certain subjects and certain personages" (Goldsmith, 1912, p. 76).



Fig -2-



Fig -3-

Later, I used another technique of art production, that is, collage. I assembled different forms including acrylic paint, tissue paper, and fabric, in order to produce two images of tradition clothing of a Kuwaiti woman. Fig-4- and Fig-5- depict the tradition clothing of abaya. I transferred the image by Modge Podge, which is a white liquid put on the surface of the picture. I then turned the image around on canvas. I used multi acrylic color to create a background and to give quality to the image. Furthermore, color can give weight and dimension according to Paul Klee (Fischer, 1966). In coloring the background, I used lines, shapes, and tonal value. In Hodgkin's work, he asserted that, "color is the means by which his paintings do the bulk of their communication" (Litt, 2006, p. 4).



Fig -4-



Fig -5-

Next, I learned and used another process of printmaking. It is typography in which I manipulated the visual design of the image. I used screen printing to create the image and monoprinting to create the background. Fig -6- is an image of a Kuwaiti woman wearing a traditional abaya. I collaged different shapes and lines to give quality to the image as well as to build a relationship between the image and background. This work was influenced by Kiki Smith, who used printmaking to depict women's body parts and dresses (Weitman, 2003). Kiki Smith depicted women's condition to nature. In this image, however, I used screen printing to exhibit the aesthetic image of a Kuwait woman wearing a black abaya. I also used monoprinting to add color to background to show that the black color of clothing does not necessarily reflect emotions like 'fear' or "death" (Goldsmith, 1912). It is, rather, a color that portrays a cultural symbol in society.



Fig -6-

All of the images above are in a figurative form, even though the techniques to produce them were different. My previous artwork was all in a figurative form, because I was influenced by realistic art to represent the visual appearance of Kuwaiti women and their traditional clothing. However, a key development in my final work is the progression from figurative realism to abstract art. As reading and learning more about abstract artists, I became more inspired by their work starting to think about how to represent the theme of traditional clothing of Kuwaiti women in a visual image that is accurately depicting the symbolic clothing, not the figure of women.

Before producing the final abstract artwork, I started with several experiments. Among these are Fig- 7 and Fig-8. In both images, I used monoprint process where in Fig-7- I printed a piece of fabric with colors (yellow, blue, and green) on canvas coated with gesso. In Fig-8, I used the same process, but the canvas was not coated with gesso. I tried both ways to find out the visual effects and the impact of transparency medium. While working on these experiments, I felt as if I was wearing an abaya –a positive feeling of pride that has helped me shape the final product.



Fig-7



Fig-8

As I moved forward to producing the final work, I also tried another experiment where I produced (Fig-9-) and (Fig-10-). In these two images, I used monoprint on cooper plate. I coated a piece of fabric with ink. I found it a challenge to produce this work, because I was not sure how

much ink I would add to successfully complete the work. After numerous attempts, I was finally satisfied with the final images (Fig-9-) and (Fig-10-). Fig-9- is an image of abaya from the side, where there is a saturated color in the middle of the image. On the other hand, Fig-10- is an image of abaya from the front; its colors seem to be more natural and the gestures of the object are more apparent than those in Fig -9-.



Fig-9-



Fig-10-

These experiments helped me to decide how to create my final project. My final project is a symbolic image of traditional clothing of Kuwait women. I used monoprinting on different grounds, in order to discover the visual forms that suggest the symbolic clothing of Kuwaiti women.

Section III: Body of Work

The artwork produced in this thesis reflects a cultural symbol of Kuwaiti women's clothing. In this abstract artwork, I heighten the importance of traditional Kuwaiti women's clothing: the abaya. Abaya is more than a mere fashion; it is a cultural symbol of traditional Arab women, in general. Producing this work can contribute to the preservation of such a cultural symbol. As a Kuwaiti woman artist, I believe that all cultural symbols should be presented in artwork, which can communicate significant messages. Through this work, I believe I am conveying a message to the viewers that Kuwaiti women possess a cultural identity reflected in the abaya and many other cultural symbols.

In this section, I introduce the image of abaya in nine different forms. I used monoprinting in all of the forms on different grounds, including white copper plate paper, canvas with gesso, and copper plate paper coated with a layer of coffee. The purpose of using multiple grounds is to affect the viewers visually. Though the traditional Arab abaya is black, I use bright colors in my work reflecting contemporary art. Furthermore, I produced images that are similar in terms of gestures and scale—that is, I used visual repetitions, in order to draw the viewer's attention to different points across the surface of the canvas.

The following images of my work represent different themes stemming from the emotions I have had while working on each one of them.

Feeling of Pride

Fig -11- and Fig -12- were the first two images I started working on. I was excited and glad to produce a presentational form of a Kuwaiti cultural symbol in an abstract artwork. I felt proud to depict a Kuwaiti woman's garment in my master's completion project. Though it was a challenge to produce all of the images, I felt to work on these two images was harder than others, simply because they were the first two to start with, and thus I was careful to present them as authentic images as possible. The feeling of pride is represented in the gestures and moves of the silk fabric--in the images, the fabric looks moving with pride. Indeed, abaya is not simply a fashion, rather it is a symbol that Kuwaiti women should be proud of.



Fig-11-



Fig-12-

In Fig -11- and Fig -12-, I depict the same image of abaya on two different grounds. In Fig -11-, I used white copper plate paper, and in Fig -12-, I used canvas coated with white gesso. In both formats, I did not use frames aiming to allow the viewer to imagine the object of abaya as if it was dressed by a woman. In regard to color, I use yellow in both images because it reflects the hot weather in Kuwait. The gestures and colors in these two images are similar. I am repeating the same gesture and color so that the viewer would see different points across the background. However, the colors in Fig-12- are more subtler than in Fig-11, because they are printed on canvas.

Feeling of Pain

The life of a human being goes through different stages and feelings. I began working on my project with a feeling of pride. However, at some point I felt sick while working on Fig-13-, Fig-14-, and Fig -15-. The images in my project, as I have mentioned earlier, are reflections of those feelings. Fig-13-, Fig-14- are similar in terms of gestures, because I worked on them at the same time when the feeling of pain started. Fig-15- was a later product when I began to feel better.



Fig-13-



Fig-14-



Fig-15-

In Fig-13-, Fig-14-, and Fig -15-, I used white copper plate on which I printed the images. I also coated the silk fabric with different types of ink. Then I put the plate on a press bed through a press using moderate pressure. Though the theme is the same, pain, I used different subtle colors with different gradations. These images are also different in terms of the level of transparency. The colors in Fig-15- are more transparent than those in Fig-13- and Fig-14- reflecting the level of pain I had had. My feeling of pain started as working on Fig-13- and Fig-14- and thus the colors in these images are less transparent than the colors in Fig-15-, during which I was recovering.

Feeling of Leaving for Home

People outside of their home countries may have different preparations and mixed feelings when it is time to go back home. On the one hand, I will miss the host country, the United States of America. On the other hand, I feel ready and excited to leave for my home country. These feelings are reflected in Fig-16- and Fig-17-.



Fig-16-



Fig-17-

In Fig-16- and Fig-17-, I also used copper plate paper, but this time, coated with a layer of coffee. I used coffee to reflect the weather full of dust in my home country. In this way, I am preparing myself to leave for home. In both images, the gestures and movements of the abaya look alike and express departure where I used turquoise and purple as quiet and clean colors reflecting my feelings of stability.

Conclusion

This thesis has shed light on a cultural symbol of Kuwait: the traditional clothing of abaya. In this artwork, I used new art methods and techniques that I have learned throughout the Master of Fine Arts in Rochester Institute of Technology. The methods and techniques of printmaking were first introduced to me when I began my master's program. Moreover, this artwork exemplifies my progression from figurative realism to abstract art. Not only has the printmaking process in abstract art helped achieve the goals of the thesis, but it has also been a practical learning in RIT.

However, several challenges and feelings are associated with the production of this artwork. I was challenged to present a symbolic component of my culture and to pay the viewers' attention that a piece of clothing can be a cultural symbol. To overcome such challenges, I expressed my emotions in the artwork through the gestures and movement of the silk fabric that represents the abaya. Thus, the artwork was discussed in terms of my feelings of pride, pain, and departure.

As a step forward, I will present my artwork in an exhibition in my college at home. I will talk about the process, methods, and techniques of my work, with the hope to bring change to the current process, methods, and techniques used in Kuwait.

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