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THE VISUAL NARRATIVES OF THE HIGH RENAISSANCE:
FROM ALEPPO'S CIRCLE TO JUBRAN AND NEW YORK PEN-CLUB

OTARED HAIDAR
(Oxford University)

Abstract

The period between 1970 and the first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a mass migration from Bilad al-Sham towards several destinations, especially to Egypt and America. Among those who immigrated to America was a group of young writers from Syria, and Lebanon. Their aspiration was to take part in the project of modernity that was advancing in their homeland and to contribute to a cultural change. Furthermore, they aspired to interact with the international cultural community. To implement their collective project, they formed the famous group *al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya* (The Pen-Club), and founded several journals including *al-Funun*, *al-Sai'h*, *al-Huda*, and *mir'at al-Gharb*. This group of writers, referred usually to as the "*Mahjaris*/the expatriates", occupies a prominent place in the history of modern Arabic literature in general and the early decades of the twentieth century, which is termed as the period of the High Arab Renaissance in particular. One of the founding members of the Pen-Club was Jubran Khalil Jubran (1883 -1931), who is famous both in the Arab world and the west for his literary works. However, what many of Jubran's readers do not know, in both the West and the Arab World, is that Jubran was a great artist. This study will take an interdisciplinary approach to explore the interrelation between Jubran's writing and artwork. Hence, it examines the possibility of reaching new interpretations for Jubran's art and acquiring more insights into the sources and prototypes of his forms and themes. On the other-hand it will explore the interaction between his work and the contexts in which he lived and worked including his group, community, and the wider project of the Arab Renaissance.

Jubran had a lasting influence on Arabic literature and he pioneered many trends and movements in Modern Arabic literature. In America, he became a popular figure in 1960s counterculture and New Age movements inspiring some of the major works that were published at that time. As a young man, Jubran studied art in the United States and France while establishing his literary career. He left hundreds of drawings picturing different topics. Some of the central preoccupations that spread through his poems, and are present in his novels, pervade most of his paintings such as the intermingling of the material and the spiritual worlds. In his artwork, like in his writings and in his life in general, he tries to bridge his two cultural backgrounds: The Arabic and the Western within his exilic discourse. This spirit was captured by all those who knew him closely and accompanied his career such as his friend and mentor Mary Haskel who described him as 'living in two worlds -Syria and America- and is at home in none'.¹

However, both in Arabic and in Western historiography, Jubran's paintings and drawings were perceived as subordinate to his writings. In comparison to his poetry and fiction, they were viewed as an enterprise that did not initiate a large-scale project and did not have a major influence on Arabic or Western cultural production. Hence, most of the studies that dealt with his artwork focused on the influence of European artists and writers on him, especially William Blake. In fact these two poets-artists share many attributes. In addition to the thematic and the formal similarity, including the mystic and spiritual inclinations, both Blake and Jubran made their careers by practicing writing and art together.²

¹ See Jean Gibran and Khalil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*, the back cover.

² See Radwa Ashour, *Gibran and Blake: A Comparative Study* and Ghazi Fou'ad Brakis *Jubran Khalil Jubran fi Dirasa Tahliyya li Adabihi wa Rasmihi wa Shakhsiyyatihi*, p. 534.

This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach to explore the Arab American literary groups and their cultural projects. It draws on several approaches from social sciences and literary theory to examine the historical foundation on which Jubran built his understanding of the visual medium and his awareness of its interaction with cultural collective projects. By identifying a host of signals and motifs in texts and artworks that are worthy of consideration, I will identify their common discourse and inter-texts. I will also define some shared story lines between the visual and the textual narratives, and their relevance to his cultural project and the overall cultural project of the High Renaissance. The analysis will conduct a dual exploration of artistic and literary products to enhance the visual literacy, and to shed a new light on his individual and collective projects.

There is enough evidence that Jubran was familiar with the works of the nineteenth-century pioneers of the Arab Renaissance, including what is called now Aleppo's circle which was mainly led by Francis Marrash al-Halabi and Jibra'il Dallah. Their works of literature and thought were known to the teachers of the Levantine missionary schools in which Jubran and most of al-Rabita's members studied for years, and some of their works formed part of the curricula.³ In fact, Jubran had drawn a painting of his Aleppan predecessor who died ten years before Jubran was born. This portrait is the most popular one of Marrash and is often used for his book covers. As a Romantic and a novelist, Jubran might have wanted to acknowledge the major contribution of Marrash who is widely acknowledged as being the first writer to introduce Romanticism into Arabic literature and the one to write the first Arabic novel in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴ Nonetheless in both Arabic and Western historiography, Aleppo's circle is the most understudied episode of the Arab Renaissance and modernity. Accordingly, its influence on Jubran has never been explored.

The scattered biographical notes on the Aleppan circle of pioneers indicate that they closely interacted with visual arts. Jibra'il Dallah and Francis Marrash are among the writers who learned painting at the hands of the renowned artists of Aleppo's school of iconography, which is one of the earliest schools of modern arts in the region in its own right, and Dallah has left several paintings. Some recent lectures that were delivered by church leaders, and some e-articles that appeared on churches' websites include references to some paintings that were drawn by the two Aleppan writers in addition to some icons.⁵ Unfortunately, these lectures and websites do not provide any further information about the location or destiny of the artistic products of these two pioneers. Accordingly, the visual discourse is still excluded from the established historiography of the Arab Renaissance. In spite of the fact that Jubran enjoys more popularity and greater presence in the Arabic cultural history than the two Aleppan pioneers, Jubran's artworks are treated as aesthetic objects and excluded from the intellectual and cultural historiography and the studies of the Arab Renaissance, enlightenment and modernity.

It is well-known that a big number of the Aleppan iconographic works and paintings found their way into the Christian institutions of Mount Lebanon throughout the last few centuries. They still constitute one of the oldest collections among the holdings of several modern Lebanese churches and monasteries.⁶ However, since the undertaking of painting by the two pioneers was only popularized with the recent spread of new media among Syrian Christian organizations, this paper does not

³ See Marun Abbud, 'Francis Marrash', in *Ruwwad al-Nahda*.

⁴ For more about Marrash and his novel see Haydar Hajj Ismail introduction to Marrash's *Ghabat al-Haqq*.

⁵ See the article by Father Pierre Misri 'Renaissance Initiations by Christians of Aleppo in 17-18th Centuries', on *Jam'iyyat al-Ta'lim al-Masihi 'The Society for Christian Teaching'*, on <http://www.talimmasihi.com/lahout/0001-0200/0118.htm>, accessed 01-July-2010.

⁶ For more about the Aleppan icons in Lebanon, see Nidal Yusuf 'Tarikh Madrasat al-Ayqunat al-Halabiyya' on <http://www.esyria.sy/aleppo/index.php?p=stories&category=ruins&filename=201001202220111> accessed 07-03-2011, and the Aleppan icons in Belmont monastery, see "Ayqunat Halabiyya fi al-Belmont" about on: <http://www.serafemsarof.com/vb/showthread.php?t=4057>, accessed 07-03-2011.

emphasize that Jubran has seen their artwork. However, Jubran the child had enough knowledge about their lives and practices and he might have sensed very early the interconnection between their writings and their art within the overall project of the Renaissance.

Along similar lines, Jubran's art seems to have strong interrelations with his written work. There is a prevailing presence of high human values that can be defined as beauty, freedom and love, both in his art and his literary works. These values are even more strictly and precisely defined in Jubran's understanding of artistic expression and in his views about art. In a letter to his friend Mary, Jubran commented on the artworks of the International Exhibition of modern art in New York expressing his admiration of the beauty and free spirit that characterize the exhibition. However, he had reserved comments on the artworks themselves: "The pictures, individually, are not great; in fact, few are beautiful. But the spirit of the exhibition as a whole is both beautiful and great. Cubism, Omissionism, Post-impressionism and Futurism will pass away. The world will forget them. But the spirit of the movement will never pass away, for it is as real as the human hunger for freedom".⁷

On a similar note, Jubran and the thinker Ameen Rihani, his friend and fellow-member of New York's Pen-Club, criticized Cubism. In their remarks about Western art at their time, they found it to be representing a spiritual bankruptcy that prevailed during the interwar period, and they called these 'modernist' writers 'War artists'. Jubran detested the disfigured human faces and bodies, especially women's, and considered that to be a degradation of human meaning. Voicing his disapproval, he said "have these mad artists forgotten their mothers, sisters and lovers? Do they lack feeling? How can they defile the woman's body?". Furthermore, he commented that Cubism stands "in the face of beauty and art, and rejects the imitation and reproduction of nature".⁸

These comments resonate with the overall discourse of his literary writing. His long poetic work *Al-Mawakib* (The Procession) revolves around defining art as the secret immortal meaning of human existence that lasts after people perish. Nature is considered here to be the source of inspiration for art, beauty, love, freedom and human values.⁹ These ideas were established in the founding Romantic narratives of Marrash, especially *Ghabat al-Haqq* (The Forest of Truth), where nature is the setting for creativity, knowledge, human values and salvation.¹⁰ Marrash's discourse continued to inform the Romantic discourse in Arabic literature throughout the following stages.

In parallel with his literary writings, Jubran's artworks shed light on his intellectual project. Jubran's views about Western Modernist art explain his artistic response which is manifested by his inclination to exaggerate naturalism, realism, and simplicity. Obviously, Jubran's techniques and themes treat art both as an intellectual and aesthetic practice, a dual perspective that should also be applied to studying his artwork.

Jubran's views about Western Modernist art were shared and endorsed by his two close mates, Rihani and the artist Yusuf al-Huwayyik, in their writings and comments. As observed in some studies about Jubran and modern Arabic literature, these views are considered by modern literary criticism to be a sign of failure to read the modernist schools of Cubism, Surrealism Impressionism, and Futurism.¹¹ Placed by modern critics under the light of the Western theory of art, and judged within a Western context, Jubran's views on art will also look simplistic and reactionary. On the other hand, his art, which tones with his views, was also classified as falling short from the innovative and

⁷ The letter can be found in: Virginia Hilu, *Beloved Prophet* (London: Quartet, 1976), p. 129.

⁸ Quoted in Stephen Sheehi, 'Modernism, Anxiety and the Ideology of Arab Vision'.

⁹ See Jubran Khalil Jubran *Al-Mawakib* (The Procession).

¹⁰ Fransis al-Marrash, *Ghabat al-Haqq* (The Forest of Truth).

¹¹ See Terri DeYoung *Placing the Poet: Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq*, p. 154

modernizing attributes of the romanticism, and drawing on the hackneyed themes and techniques of the Symbolism. Along these lines, Jubran's written work is usually viewed as being completely detached from his art. Jubran the *littérateur* is acclaimed as "a new breed of Arab-avant-garde, especially in letters", whereas "romanticism was undercut in his artworks".¹² In the overall interpretation of the nature and roots of Jubran Stance towards modernity Stephen Sheehi considers his views to be ambivalent and confused. He also remarks that Rihani and Jubran's "stance towards modernism were ambivalent because of the specific predicament of the Orientalized colonial subject especially around World War One".¹³

In fact, Sheehi's study is very illuminating about this vital part of Jubran's work which is downplayed in the vast critical literature about the poet. However, his study itself displays some unresolved ambivalence. On the one hand, it rightly states that Western modernist art represents a response to the recent development in Western culture, which criticizes "the excess of this progress", and "manifests an attack on the moral and social progress" in the West. On the other hand, his analysis of the expatriates' reservations about the techniques of these modernist schools regards the Western modernist art during the interwar period as an absolute universal representation of modernity.

Drawing on Sheehi's insightful observation about the temporality of Western modern art, it is obvious that the *mahjaris'* different understanding of modernism is based on their different experience and different stance towards progressiveness. This understanding is related to a different context that did not experience the consequences of industrialization, capitalism and consumerism, all of which culminated with the two World Wars and the interwar period. In fact, by calling the modernist artists as the "War Artists" Rihani had established one of the earliest attempts to criticize the universalization of the Western modernist art, and to define it within its historical context.

Jubran and his fellow Romantics combined their Romanticism and modernism with approaches and values that are consolidated in the project of Renaissance such as the social responsibility, the interfaith discourse, the gender awareness, equality, and liberty. For the *mahjaris* who perceived themselves as the pioneers of a collective project that aspired to modernize their cultures, the modernist art represented a very individualist venture. Moreover, they viewed modernist western art as an episode in a western historical process that does not parallel with the vigorous historical process progressing in their homeland, to which they struggled to contribute.

The subversive discourse of the modernist art which is directed against the rushing towards modernity and uncontrolled progress, caused Jubran to distance himself and search for another prototype. Hence, his early artworks draw thematically and formally on several sources of the ancient Greco-Roman art.¹⁴ Moreover, his biographers note that he toured around Syrian museums and historical sites trying to learn more about the Syro-Mesopotamian ancient art, and gradually his artwork started to display motifs taken from the Near Eastern ancient cultures, and the Levantine popular culture.¹⁵ The ruins of Palmyra became a setting for his story "Miss of Beauty",¹⁶ and ancient Baalbak, and its temple of Ashtarut, (Astarte) the Syrian goddess worshipped through classical antiquity by Canaanites and Phoenicians, became the setting of his short story "Ramad al-Ajijal".¹⁷

Themes of Near Eastern civilizations, including Biblical motifs, feature large and abundant in Jubran's work, and dominate both his literature and art. The dominant presence of Christian tropes and

¹² See Sheehi.

¹³ See *ibid.*

¹⁴ See Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran, p. 299.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 147, and Suhail Bushrui, *The Essential Gibran*, p. vii and 93.

¹⁶ See *Dam'a wa Ibtisama*.

¹⁷ See *Al-Majmu'a al-Kamila*, p. 47.

images in his art and literature especially Jesus, intermingles with Syro-Mosepetamian references. These models are inspired by the primary sources of expression and creativity in his cultural imaginary, most notably iconography and the Bible. Iconographic arts and Biblical stories represent the first contact of the inspired child with the visual and fictional narratives in his national cultural heritage. In fact, these rich Biblical links are presented as part of the Syriac references in the work and the cultural imaginary of Jubran who believed that “The Bible is Syriac literature”,¹⁸ and that in the Near East “ancient generations and people moved from one state to another and from one religion to another”, or from Ashtarut (Astarte) to Jesus.¹⁹

However, Jubran’s art and literature subvert the discourse of social, religious and political power structures, which appropriate these major sources to derive their hegemonic discourse. His artistic models are characterized by their rebellious spirits, and his renowned literary characters such as Yohanna the Madman and many female characters are resistant and oppositional.²⁰ Both domains of Jubranian art and literature are dominated by characters that are rebellious, and are challenging conventions and categorizing. These characters represent Jubran’s aspiration for a collective change and for a larger social reform.

Jubran’s understanding of the social function of arts resonates with the recent studies that explore the political discourse in arts and emphasize its power to challenge the dominant discourse and to reinforce the subversion of existing systems.²¹ Nonetheless, in Arabic and literary historiography, Jubran’s work and achievements are, for the most part, studied individually and in isolation from the socio-cultural and institutional contexts with which he interacted and in which he lived and worked. There are many studies about his interaction with the American and European contexts, and about his relationship with Western individuals and groups, including the material in the bibliography of this article.²² However, Jubran’s interaction with the Arabic context in both the West and in the Arab World is not explored yet.

The powerful presence of Jubran in the current institutions of Arab media, academia, and in both the mainstream and the marginal circles, suggests that Jubran’s work has immensely influenced the Arab socio-political movements. Aware of the rising interest in fine art in the Arab World, Jubran used the visual medium to disseminate his socio-political ideas. The proto-feminist message, which characterizes the Arabic Romantic literature where women are cultural actors insisting on their rights, characterizes his writings.²³ Likewise, the female recurrent theme that dominates his art represents his own artistic undertaking on women’s issue.²⁴ This discourse finds its roots in the nineteenth century pioneers’ writings about social justice, equality and women rights. Hence, Jubran’s artworks should be studied in parallel with his literary works within the wider context of the Arab Renaissance.

The studies that explored Jubran’s art focused on his paintings and drawings, and completely ignored the several other channels that his art used, including book covers, newspaper’ designs, illustrations and pamphlets. These studies also ignored the role of the institutions, forums and media that interacted with his work and shaped his discourse. Taking these technical interactions into consideration makes it possible to observe how the fame and distinction that Jubran achieved enhanced the group unity, and the collective identity of Pen-Club group, the movement of the Expatriate writers, and the Arab American community around them.

¹⁸ See Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran. P. 313.

¹⁹ See his chapter ‘Between Astarte and Jesus’ in *Broken Wings, Al-Majmu‘a al-Kamila*, pp. 221-225.

²⁰ See ‘Yuhanna al-Majnun’, in *Al-Majmu‘a al-Kamila*, p. 69.

²¹ Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance*, p. 211

²² See for example Ashour, Brakis, and Jean Gibran.

²³ For examples, see ‘Marta al-Baniyya and Warda al-Hani’ in *Al-Majmu‘a al-Kamila*, pp. 58, and 85, respectively.

²⁴ See the numerous drawings and paintings of female characters in the cited books, especially Brakis, and Jean Gibran.

Social scientists have always recognized the role of art in informing about the existence of social movements and in creating a group-culture.²⁵ Aware of that, Jubran's art alongside his literary writings, catered to the inspirations and expectations of the community as well as to the collective cultural project of the Expatriate writers and the Pen-Club. Jubran participated in their cultural activities, and supported their journals with his prolific writings and drawings especially the two magazines of *al-Funun* and *al-Sa'ih* which are published by his two Syrian fellow members in the Pen-Club, Nasib 'Arida and 'Abd al-Masih Haddad respectively.²⁶ In addition, Jubran designed pamphlets that announced and promoted their cultural events among the expatriate Arab community and among the individuals and institutions that interacted with the Arab community. Jubran also designed book covers, and illustrations for the publications of the group, and some of his drawings were also used by American publishers.²⁷ Jubran's artwork was an influential medium that conveyed meaning and values. Charged with high emotions, gender implications and Near Eastern and Levantine cultural symbols, his artwork produced a message that resonates with his thought and literary works as well as with the ideals and aspirations of the community, the movement and the group, and gave them a sense of identity and coherence.

This discourse enabled the expatriate journals' readership to relate to the group and to its project and it enabled information and ideas to travel around among expatriate Arab communities as well as among their Arab compatriots back in their Arab homeland. On the other hand, using the visual sign system, Jubran's visual products were accessible to those who did not know Arabic in the wider American audience that followed the activities of the group. These visual products were more capable of developing international connections, audience and readership. Accordingly, Jubran's writings and art should be studied as a part of the collective project of Pen-Club group, and the expatriate-writers' movement.

Like the rest of his group, Jubran's project concentrated on implementing modernism as part of a constructive discourse that aspired to bring about a social progress in his homeland. His subversive modernist discourse aimed to challenge the established traditional cultural institutions in Arab societies and to undermine their systems.

Living and working in the networks of the Pen-Club, Jubran's textual as well as visual discourse on modernity interacted with the institutional as well as the psychological, intellectual and socio-cultural contexts in which he lived and produced his literature and artworks. He contributed to the cultural atmosphere and to the socio-historical progress of these contexts. On the other hand, these contexts shaped his career practices and discourse. Hence, his artwork should be studied as part of a group-culture and values. For a clearer insight into his project, his art should be examined by combining an epistemological and intellectual perspective with an artistic one.

In his art as well as in his literature, Jubran combined a humanist universal worldview, which draws upon the founding discourse of the Arab High Renaissance, along with models and motifs taken from his national heritage. Hence, besides being part of the Euro-American history, Jubran needs to be read from a post-modernist perspective within a pluralistic multicultural view which reads the cultural production of marginalized groups and emigrant literature.

²⁵ See Layman G. Chaffe, *Political Protest and Street Art. Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries.*

²⁶ See Jean Gibran for a sample of the journal *al-Sa'ih* cover of October 1921.

²⁷ For pamphlets, book covers and illustrations; see Jean Gibran, pp. 320, 343 and 335 respectively.

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