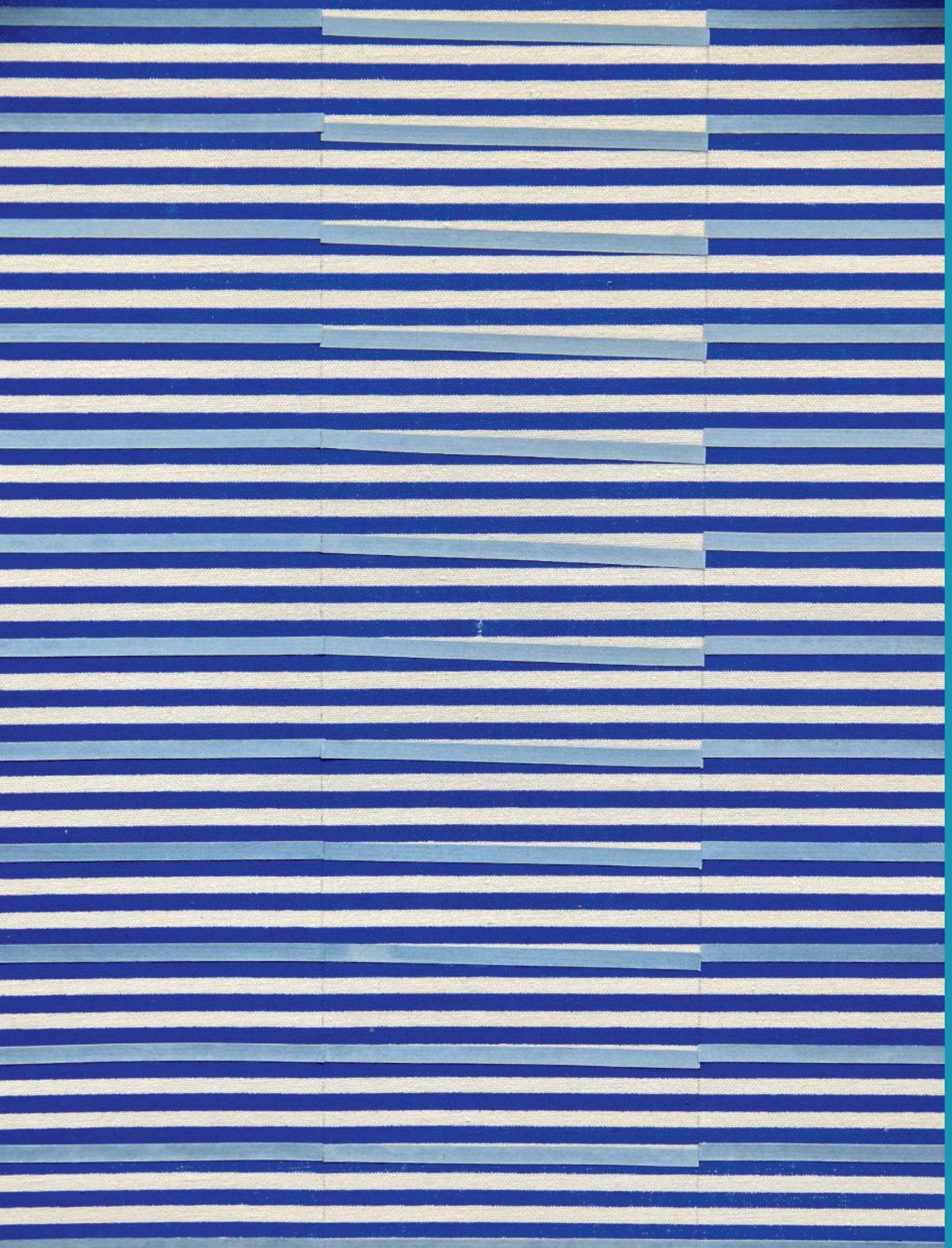


TEMPORAL CONTINUITIES

Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi

(previous pages)
Mehdi Moutashar
Zone B# 76A, 1976
Acrylic and collage on canvas
455 × 52 cm
K2195 (cat. 272)

← Mahmoud Mokhtar
When Meeting the Man, 1929
Bronze
H. 44 cm
N0112 (cat. 259)

In 1951 Jewad Selim, the pre-eminent Iraqi sculptor of the twentieth century, along with his close friend and associate Shakir Hassan Al Said announced the birth of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (see above, p. 61). The group heralded a new school of painting, which aimed at synthesising the 'civilisation of the contemporary age, with all the styles and schools of plastic art that have emerged from it' with the distinctive attributes of eastern heritage and civilisation.[1] Thus, the notion of 'inspiration from tradition' or *istilham al-turath* was born. Reflecting on this approach almost half a century on, Al Said explained to art historian Nada Shabout, 'We wanted to clarify to Iraqi artists in general, and to ourselves as an art group in particular, that *istilham al-turath* is the basic point of departure to achieve a cultural vision through modern styles.'[2]

The concept of seeking inspiration from heritage, and of being informed by one's local histories and visual traditions, was in no way unique to Iraqi art. Rather, it was a phenomenon that was shared across geographies of decolonisation. Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar, for instance, turned to Neo-Pharaonism in his creation of the *Egypt Awakening* monument in Cairo in 1928. Modern artists in the Maghreb were inspired by Amazigh motifs and amulets, as well as the Tifinagh alphabet. Artists in Algeria argued in the 1960s that magical signs 'were an element of popular culture that – despite enduring transformations under foreign influence – had been at the centre of local artists' and artisans' creative efforts "since the Roman period"'.[3] Similarly, Iranian artists active in the Saqqakhaneh movement, including Parviz Tanavoli, Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram and Massoud Arabshahi among others, drew inspiration from Persian calligraphy, Shi'i shrines, and local symbols and motifs. Art historian and critic Hamid Keshmirshekan states that Saqqakhaneh artists could be in fact considered successors to Iranian craftsmen of earlier centuries – miniaturists, illuminators, calligraphers, and goldsmiths'.[4] This view is echoed in cultural historian Shiva Balaghi's seminal text *Iranian Visual Arts in 'The Century of Machinery, Speed, and the Atom': Rethinking Modernity*, where she notes that Iranian artists imagined new ways to exist within a modern society by such approaches, like translating the motifs of

classical literature into colloquial visual languages, adding a secular dimension to Shi'i symbols and iconography, and by disrupting and overturning the traditions of calligraphy and miniature paintings that were fundamental to what was known as 'the art of the book', for example. In her words, 'Iranian artists made use of pre-existing materials and symbols in Persian culture and infused them with new constellations of meaning'.[5]

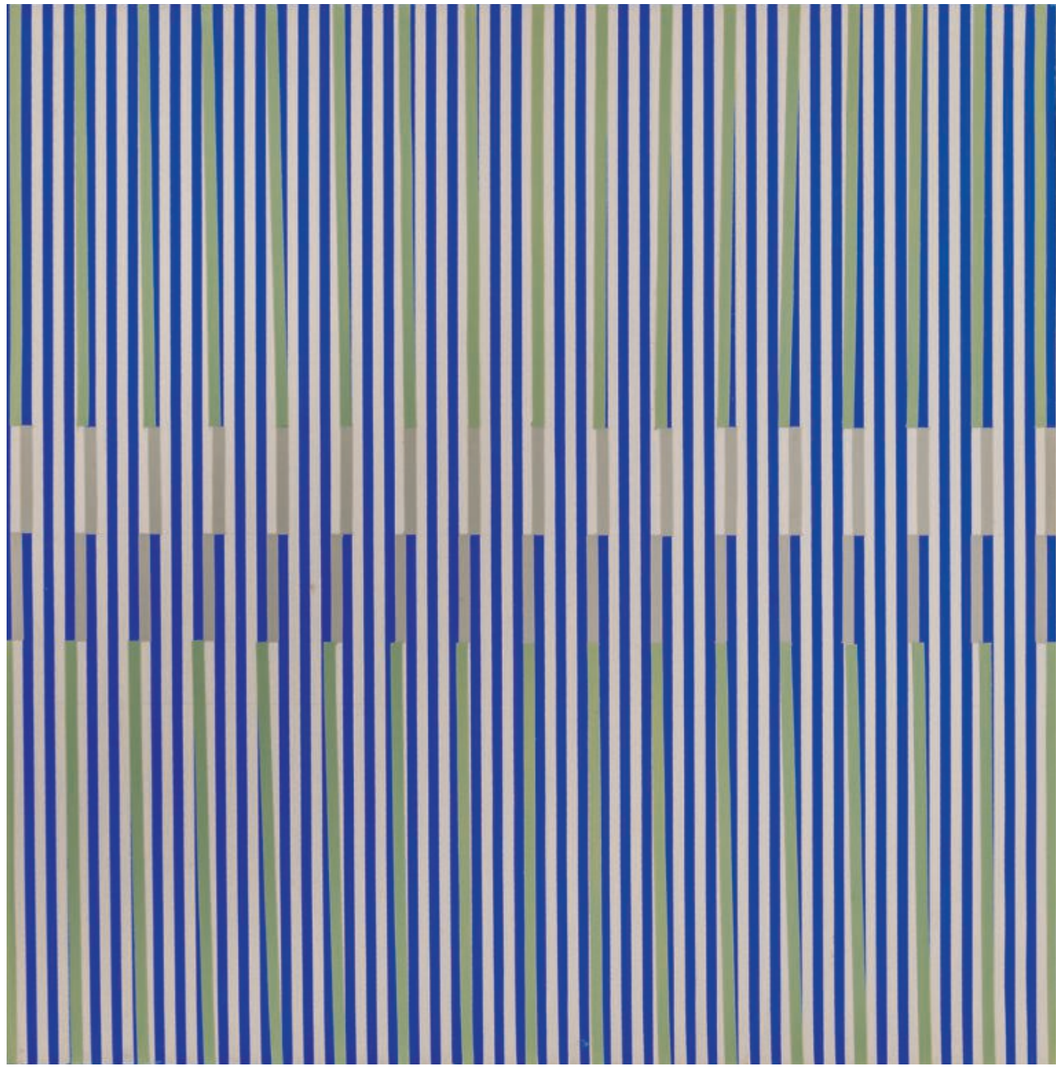
The Farjam Collection is, perhaps, unique in that it offers viewers an opportunity to observe and detect clear continuities in the visual, material and technical approaches that artists adopted across a number of historical periods and in multiple geographies. The Collection is an apt embodiment of the very notion of *istilham al-turath*, demonstrating through physical objects an intrinsic interconnectedness of artistic and cultural production across several centuries in an expansive region that stretches from South Asia to North Africa.

This is evident, for example, in the work of Palestinian-Saudi artist Dana Awartani held in the Collection (cat. 71). Through her meticulously crafted sculptural pieces, Awartani not only takes a deep dive into the study of geometry and its historical role in the formulation of a distinctly 'Islamic' aesthetic, but also calls into question the ever-tenuous relationship between fine art and craft. She challenges the commonly accepted art historical relegation of craftsmanship to the domain of minor arts, and expands our reading of mathematics, geometry and the act of making as an artistic faculty.

Similarly, Iraqi artist Mehdi Moutashar's work marries the past with the present by bringing together the non-objective and minimalist qualities of international abstract movements that originated in the early twentieth century, with the tradition of Islamic geometry and mathematically constructed compositions (cats 272–4). Through its elegant simplicity, it transcends the attribution to any one particular geography or historical time period. It is at once irrefutably contemporary and forward-looking, while being reminiscent of the *Mu'allaqat* (The Suspended Odes), whose origins are thought to lie in the Islamic world of the eighth century CE.

While the motifs in Iranian-Armenian-American Marcos Grigorian's carpets held in the Farjam Collection (K2225, p. 74) draw from a multitude of artistic traditions – in true testament to his diverse roots and exposure to various cultures and geographies – his technique of making rugs was significantly informed by working with masters from what we often term the 'Islamic world'. In his own words, 'In 1958, a loom was installed in my studio and with the help of master weavers in Tehran, Iran, I learned the secrets of the ancient technique in rug weaving.'[6] Grigorian challenged the notion of an oriental carpet, and brought together Islamic, Christian and distinctly modern approaches to create work that echoes history, while presenting the viewer with an image that is completely new.

In this way, artists not only amalgamated elements of history with their experiences of modernity, but also found avenues for avant-garde experiments and a trailblazing reinvention of the past. Despite the novel approaches they developed, it remains a challenge to discuss and frame their work in art historical terms. Well into the twenty-first century, and notwithstanding decades of earnest scholarship



↑ Mehdi Moutashar
Zone B# 4, 1976
Silkscreen and collage on cardboard
60 × 60 cm
K2194 (cat. 272)

by academics and researchers, modern and contemporary artistic production of the region is still often seen through a western lens. The so-called global art canon – while gradually shifting – has for a long time been dominated by a very narrow account of modernity's origins. In the words of Timothy Mitchell, 'In many uses, the modern is just a synonym for the West (or in more recent writings, the North). Modernization continues to be commonly understood as a process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across ever-expanding regions of the non-West.'[7] Much work remains to be done in reframing global histories and expanding the vocabulary, vision and genealogies of global modernism. It is aided by efforts like exhibitions organised by the Barjeel Art Foundation, including *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary* (2015–17) and

← Marcus Grigorian
The Golden Rooster, designed 1960,
woven 1998
229 × 125 cm
K2225

Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s (2020–22), along with publications featuring some of the world's leading scholars in the field.

The Farjam Collection, through its rich gamut of works originating in what has for a long time been perceived as the periphery of artistic production by mainstream historical accounts, is a powerful forum in asserting the unique and remarkable voices of artists from North Africa, South and West Asia, and in dispelling misconceptions about artistic production in these geographies. Collective efforts in presenting a truly global artistic landscape, and drawing attention to multiple concurrent and distinctive histories of modernisation, aid in countering narratives that relegate regional art to an exercise in mimicking, safe imitation and performative westernisation.

Professor Nada Shabout writes in *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* that 'what is meant by *istilham* is a return to the past, to tradition, for the purpose of discovering contemporary aesthetics, based on the conviction that a spiritual relationship exists between the past and the present irrespective of temporal distance'.[8] What the Farjam Collection offers is an unparalleled opportunity to revisit the region's past through the prism of cultural and artistic production, and discover in it the deep-rooted kernels of contemporary aesthetics that continue to sprout despite the said 'temporal distance'.

The author would like to thank Suheyla Takesh for her assistance in researching this essay.