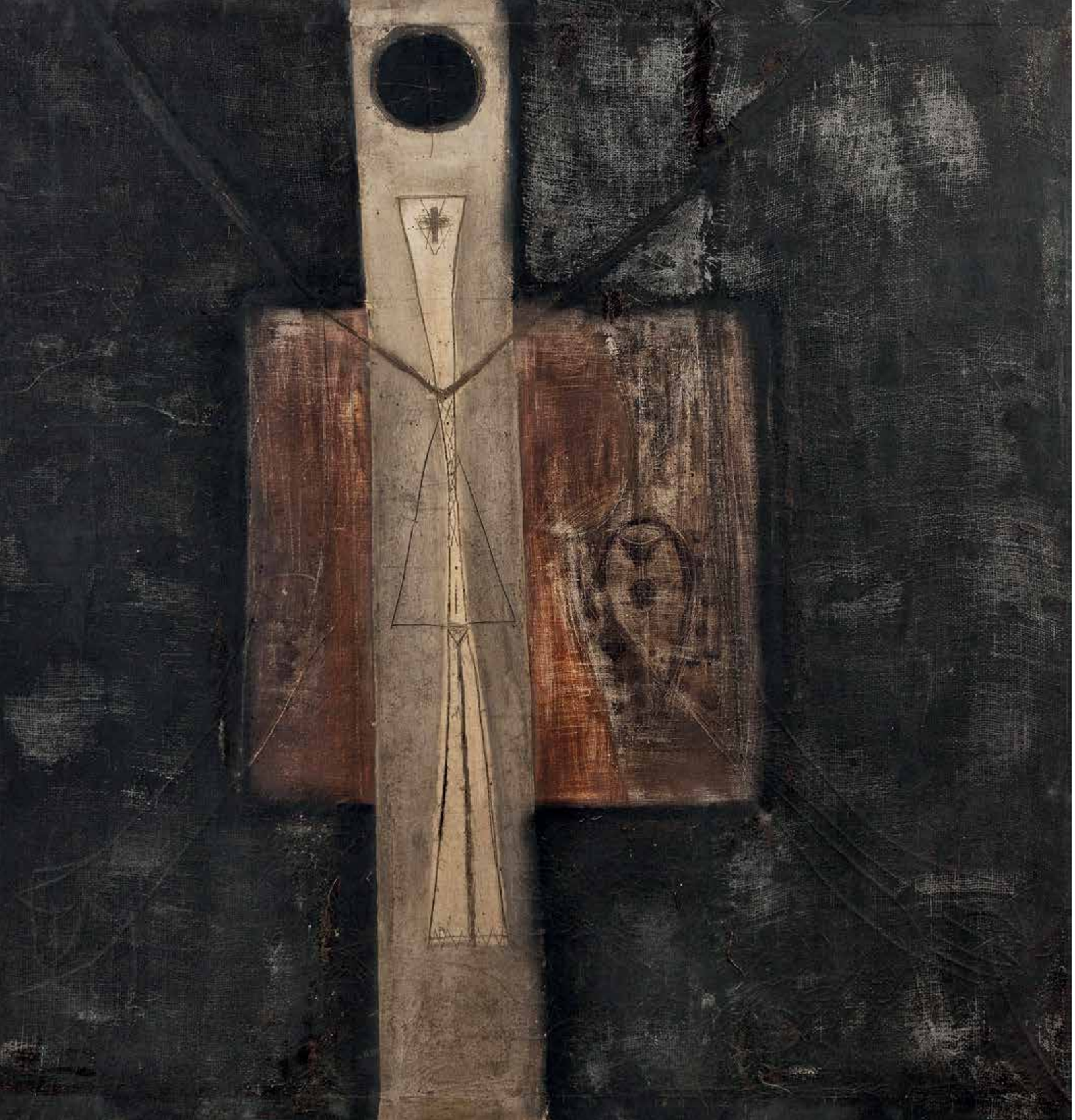

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi

TOWARD ABSTRACTION: The Case of Kuwait in the 1960s

Around the middle of the 20th century, what was then the British protectorate of Kuwait witnessed the emergence of a fine art movement that began to employ modern techniques of easel painting, the most prominent member of which was Mojib al-Dosari (1922–1956). After being orphaned as a child, al-Dosari went to live with an uncle in Basra, Iraq, then returned to Kuwait.[1] Following a period of study in Egypt and London, during which he contributed writing to a publication funded by the Kuwaiti government that targeted students at various levels and advocated for the importance of visual arts in the development of national culture, he became the first Kuwaiti to earn a university degree in visual art. In 1952 al-Dosari returned again to Kuwait, where he began teaching art at the recently founded Shuwaikh School and died at the age of 34, following a sudden illness. Only thirteen of his works survive, depicting landscapes and female figures in traditional Gulf attire.

In addition to the small number of Kuwaitis who traveled abroad to study art in the 1950s and '60s, a group of art teachers and art practitioners from neighboring Arab states moved to the emirate to participate in the development of the cultural sector. The most prominent of these were Nubian-Egyptian artist Nasr al-Din Mohamed Taher (1935–2007) and his compatriot Yahya Swailem (born 1944), both of whom painted primarily in oils and concentrated on the depiction of human faces and figures. By the early 1960s, however, a growing number of Kuwaiti artists had already started to adopt abstraction as their primary mode of expression in painting, sculpture,[2] and printmaking, in contrast to most of their mentors, who continued to produce representational work. This shift to abstraction was years and sometimes decades ahead of other countries on the Arabian Peninsula. What could have led to this seemingly improbable development?

A number of factors coalesced to contribute to the transition in Kuwaiti art production from figuration to abstraction, not least of which was the country's sociopolitical disposition at the time. The emergence of abstraction—and of a more or less formalized sphere of culture in general—was a not indirect consequence of the atmosphere of social and political openness the country was experiencing in the mid-20th century. Another element was the immense

Munira Al-Kazi, *Untitled*, c. 1960–65 (detail, p. 187)

oil revenues Kuwait started to accumulate and invest in strategic sectors of the economy, such as culture and education. Additionally, Kuwaiti artists found in abstraction a fertile ground onto which they could project both their Western and their Eastern influences, along with locally rooted elements such as traditional spiritual practices, Islamic motifs, and Gulf crafts.

In the early 20th century the Arab Gulf states were considered one of the least developed regions in the Arab world. Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates were never full colonies of the British Empire and therefore had not benefited from the infrastructure developments that other territories, such as Aden (in present-day Yemen), had. It was only with the discovery of oil in Kuwait and Bahrain in the 1930s and '40s, and its widespread export, that systematic education was introduced into these countries, along with major development projects such as schools and hospitals. By the 1960s the first generation of students were graduating from Kuwait's school system at a faster rate than the newly established Kuwait University could accommodate. Hence, a new strategy of offering scholarships for higher education abroad was introduced, and it so happened that the artists Khalifa Qattan, Munira Al-Kazi, and Jafar Islah were among the earliest recipients.

Prior to the discovery of oil—in fact, as early as 1919–21—Kuwait and Bahrain had already witnessed major popular movements seeking the formalization of political and civil rights.[3] While Bahrain's movement was largely contained by the government and opposition leaders were sent into exile, the Kuwaiti experiment fared much better. The rule of Sheikh Abdullah al-Salim al-Sabah (1895–1965), who assumed power as Kuwait's emir in 1950, was an especially transformative time for the country. Al-Salim ushered in an era of unprecedented political participation for a Gulf monarchy, the likes of which only a few countries in the wider region had seen. As the British Mandate was coming to an end in 1961, Kuwait's twenty-member National Assembly met over the course of six months to draft a national constitution that would recognize political and civil rights, notably freedom of speech. Al-Salim's reign was also transformative for Kuwait's nascent art scene, marshaling its evolution from infancy to a position of relative maturity and setting the stage for the production of compelling modern works that would soon be collected by major museums the world over.

During the 1950s numerous art-related events in Kuwait occurred in rapid succession, including, in 1953, the first solo exhibition by an artist born in Kuwait to be held in the country. The artist was Khalifa Qattan (1934–2003), and the exhibition was held at Al Najah School in Kuwait City.[4] A few years later, in 1958, Kuwait's Education Council, a precursor to the Ministry of Education, organized the country's first public group art show, the Arab Championship Exhibition, coinciding with a major literary festival also taking place in the capital. Featured works tackled a number of politically pertinent themes, including underdevelopment, the struggle against colonialism, and the contentious notion of "backwardness" in relation to local political and economic conditions. The following year, on May 4, 1959, the first Spring Exhibition of Fine Arts was inaugurated in the theater of Al Mubarakiya School, starting an annual tradition that endured for many years to come.[5] Another milestone was the founding of the popular magazine *al-Arabi* in 1958, which covered culture, literature, and society and whose intended audience was all Arabs, not just Kuwaitis.

By the early 1960s the government of Kuwait had started sponsoring artists—including Qattan—to take sabbaticals from their regular jobs and join the Free Atelier (established 1960) to create art as full-time "professional artists."[6] Another sphere that saw major positive change in Kuwait under al-Salim was theater and the performing arts. A considerable number of plays were staged that tackled social and political taboos and challenged conventions. Not only did women take part in the dramatic arts and perform publicly on stage and television alongside men during this time—which contrasted with some neighboring states, where public performance by women was prohibited or at least frowned upon—but the performing arts community also engaged in innovative experimental projects that interrogated customary notions of gender. For instance, in 1962, popular Kuwaiti actor Abdul Aziz al-Nimish began to play a female character, which gradually evolved into the role of "Umm U'lewy" (Mother of Ali), a comical take on a middle-aged woman, who appeared on stage side by side with male and female actors alike (fig. 26). All of these developments coincided with the emergence of a new generation of Kuwaiti artists who took advantage of the atmosphere of political and social openness. Just as for their predecessors and peers in other parts of the world, for these Kuwaiti artists abstract art was a radical step in representation and expression. Their objectives, sources, and influences, however, were inherently different from those of their counterparts around the globe.

Fig. 26. Kuwaiti actor Abdul Aziz al-Nimish (right) in the role of Umm Saad, playing opposite fellow actor Khaled al-Nafeesi in the soap opera *Darb al-Zalag* (The Slippery Slope), which first aired on Kuwaiti television in 1977

Some of the earliest experiments in nonrepresentational painting in Kuwait were conducted by Indian-born artist Munira Al-Kazi (born 1939). Al-Kazi came from a prominent Saudi-Kuwaiti merchant family that—like many of its Gulf peers—relocated to India in the first half of the 20th century, only to migrate back to Kuwait as the economic situation improved following the oil windfall. In her works of the 1960s, Al-Kazi created abstracted representations of individual human figures and groups in oils and gouaches as well as in etchings and other prints. Saleh Barakat, a connoisseur of contemporary Arab art and founder of Beirut's Agial Art Gallery, who briefly worked with Al-Kazi in 2005, says that the artist's practice has long been centered on the subject of fertility and the female body.[7] One of her works in the present exhibition, *Untitled* (p. 187), previously

owned by the late Lebanese architect Assem Salam, depicts a stylized female figure with a tiny navel and triangular pudendum. Another work of this period, the 1962 gouache *Conception* (fig. 27), includes several comparable motifs, including the triangle, the circle, and the square. It also features circular forms that bear a similarity to a particular type of woven straw basket used to store dates and other dried foods in the Gulf region—possibly a reference to local heritage. Al-Kazi's works were in such high demand in Kuwait in the 1960s that she, along with Iraqi artist Issam al-Said (1938–1988), was selected to exhibit in the inaugural show at Kuwait's influential Sultan Gallery in 1969 (fig. 28).[8] Moreover, to demonstrate that the audience for Al-Kazi's abstract works of the 1960s extended well beyond the Middle East, *Conception* was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1965.

Fig. 27. Munira Al-Kazi, *Conception*, 1962. Gouache and gold spray paint on brown paper, 30½ × 20½ in. (77.5 × 51.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Frances Keech Fund

In addition to being a time of great promise, the early 1960s was also a time of rising political tensions in Kuwait. The impending British withdrawal coincided with a 1961 declaration by Iraq's then-leader Abd al-Karim Qasim that the emirate was rightly part of Iraq and that Iraq would "correct" the situation by annexing it. To counter these threats, Kuwait turned, in part, to the unlikely channel of culture to assert its independent identity. Art historian Muayad H. Hussain writes, "At that time the Kuwaiti government needed to promote Kuwait regionally and internationally as a modern country in all aspects, including art and culture, and to change the stereotype of it being a desert land rich only in oil. The ultimate goal of that promotion was to declare Kuwait an independent state and to join the Arab League and the United Nations alongside other regional and

Fig. 28. Grand opening of the Sultan Gallery, Kuwait City, 1969, showing cofounder Ghazi Sultan (left) and Minister of Education Sheikh Abdullah al-Jaber (right) near a work by Munira Al-Kazi

Fig. 29. Khalifa Qattan, *Bird's Evolution,* 1962. Oil on canvas, 22⅞ × 33½ in. (58 × 85 cm). Collection of the artist's family, Kuwait

international associations and organisations."[9] This strategy was manifested not only in the funding of art exhibitions but also in the establishment of numerous media networks, including, in addition to *al-Arabi*, Kuwait Radio (1951), Kuwait Television (1961), and a number of Arabic and English newspapers.

It was within this atmosphere of economic prosperity and political strain that Khalifa Qattan formulated the artistic theory he called Circulism (fig. 29). In a 1967 interview, the artist explained the genesis of the theory as a rejection of Cubism stemming from the latter's concern with breaking up and reassembling visible, three-dimensional form and space. Instead, Qattan strove to explore physical matter in a more fundamental manner, to understand the workings of its minute constituent elements, "because everything—as is well known—is composed of atoms, and the atom is an expression of the circular orbits of electrons around a nucleus, and this is the smallest thing in existence."[10] While Cubism was steeped in technical and formal experiments, Circulism, according to the artist, "manifests man's instincts and his continually renewed objectives, which have neither a beginning nor an end." Amid such seemingly innocuous artistic endeavors, however, Qattan did not shy away from candidly declaring the political dimension that underpinned his work during this era of regional tensions: "In the paintings

I've made, I've tried to show the truth, namely that our people defend themselves and that defending oneself is a duty that is affirmed by all people and all nations." The establishment in Kuwait of independent artistic identities and movements was therefore, at least in part, a deliberate declaration of political and national autonomy and self-determination.

Fig. 30. Jafar Islah in his studio in Berkeley, California, 1968–69

Among the younger members of the first generation of abstract artists in Kuwait is the painter Jafar Islah (born 1946). In 1967, while still an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley (fig. 30), Islah encountered the writings of 10th-century Islamic philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi, along with Japanese Zen teachings, both of which captivated him. In a 2019 interview, Islah stated that it was "really amazing that at that time I had to find out that *less is more*." Compounding this realization was a chance conversation with his mathematician neighbor, who introduced him to the notions that "zero is the biggest number" and that "the universe started from zero," because "when there is zero you can go all the way to infinity"[11]—novel concepts that intrigued him and stimulated his imagination. Islah's journey toward abstraction took off when he wondered if he could "paint space." This led to the creation of a series of works in which Islah often included subtle details to "trick the eye," so to speak, and encourage viewers to keep moving and circulating their gaze. *The Void* (1967; p. 182), for instance, invites viewers to move very close to decipher the true color of the surface, which appears to be black at first but is in fact made up of twenty different colors of paint laid on top of one another. Within a large dark rectangle—which takes up the entire picture plane—a smaller rectangle is framed by a thin white line, which, at the bottom, takes a tiny jog. The artist refers to this undulating line as an "organic form," and it may reference the female body.

In the same 2019 interview, Islah also makes a determined point about the "false impression in books of art that abstract art was started in the West."[12] One need not look beyond the kilim rug—long produced in a very wide area stretching from the Balkans and North Africa to Pakistan, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—to find evidence of the use of nonrepresentational forms in artistic expression (fig. 31). Geometric forms were present in local crafts, architecture, and body art in this part of the world for hundreds of years before the Western world accepted abstraction into its modern art museums. In his foreword to the 2016 book *The Dance of Color in the Anatolian Kilim*, Islah states that the "only difference between

Fig. 31. Yüncü kilim from Balikesir Province, West Anatolia, 19th century. Wool, 80¾ × 47¼ in. (205 × 120 cm). Private collection

[centuries-old kilims and modern abstract art] is that [the kilims] were meant to be viewed on the floor rather than on the wall."[13] Having said that, Islah also does not dismiss Western impact on his art out of hand. For example, he credits Paul Klee's *Senecio* (1922), presently in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel, with being the influence for *Colors with Black and Gray* (1968; p. 183).

As can be surmised from this brief overview, Kuwait had, compared to other states of the Arabian Peninsula, a relatively developed abstract art scene in the mid-20th century. This may be attributed partly to its earlier discovery of oil, which allowed the government to invest in education and grant scholarships to universities in Egypt and the West. Perhaps its proximity to Iraq, where abstract art movements—including Shakir Hassan Al Said's One Dimension and Madiha Umar's Hurufiyya (see pp. 42–46)—were flourishing, also played a role. However, these factors alone fail to explain not only why Kuwait produced a greater number of artists working in an abstract mode but also why their work was welcomed and respected locally. A plausible reason could be that the advent of abstract art in Kuwait coincided with the birth of a new state and a new constitution, with its guarantees of civil liberties such as freedom of speech and of expression, along with thriving music, television, and theater scenes that tolerated gender-bending displays as early as the 1960s. All of these elements were largely missing from other (equally wealthy) Arab Gulf states, where freedom of expression was restricted and the political environment constrained. Abstraction could then potentially be seen as an artistic manifestation of the progress achieved by Kuwait in its journey from British protectorate to independent nation-state. While these factors did not cause the birth of abstraction, they did nevertheless create an atmosphere where experimental and bold ideas were not only tolerated but celebrated.

NOTES

1. "Kuwaiti Personalities: Mojib al-Dosari" [in Arabic], *Derwaza News*, last modified December 20, 2016, http://kw.derwaza.cc/home/Details?id=585947798c42532414289ec8_1.
2. Among the artists who engaged in abstract sculpture are Khazal al-Gaffas (b. 1944), Ibrahim Ismail (b. 1945), Essa Sagr (1940–2000), and Sami Mohamed (b. 1943). Ismail also painted (see p. 237).
3. Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "The Blog; The Civil Society Movement in the Arab Gulf States," *Huffington Post*, last modified May 25, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/units-of-the-civil-societ_b_720583?guccounter=1.
4. Muayad H. Hussain, "Modern Art from Kuwait: Khalifa Qattan and Circulism," PhD diss., Department of History of Art, University of Birmingham, 2012, 1.
5. Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "The Blog; Kuwait Art Museum Succeeds Where Others Have Failed," *Huffington Post*, last modified June 2, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kuwait-art-museum-succeed_b_2996769.
6. Hussain, "Modern Art from Kuwait," 54.
7. Saleh Barakat, WhatsApp interview by the author, May 15, 2019.
8. Kristine Khouri, "Mapping Arab Art through the Sultan Gallery," *ArteEast: The Global Platform for Middle East Arts*, Spring 2014, http://arteeast.org/quarterly/mapping-arab-art-through-the-sultan-gallery/.
9. Hussain, "Modern Art from Kuwait," 54.
10. Sulayman al-Shatti, "Interview with the Artist Khalifa Qattan" [in Arabic], *al-Bayan*, no. 20 (October 1, 1967): 29–32, published in a translation by Kareem James Abu-Zeid in Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 296–301.
11. "Conversations on Practice: Jafar Islah in Conversation with Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi," *YouTube*, January 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW7fFEKEvE8.
12. Ibid.
13. Jafar Islah, "Foreword," *The Dance of Color in the Anatolian Kilim* (Kuwait City: Burgan Bank, 2016).