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## Art in Qatar between Modernism and Postmodernism: Yousef Ahmed as a Case Study

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### Abstract

The article discusses the development of art and art movements in Qatar. Throughout the paper, I examine modern and postmodern arts and highlight the roles of different factors that could influence artists in their move between modern and postmodern art and vice-versa. The forms of art developed during the modernist and postmodern periods were influenced by the traits of the people. For example, the modernists constantly searched for the abstract truth of life, while the postmodernists did not believe in the abstract truth.

It is important to recognize that postmodern culture is a reaction against the culture of modernism. The works of postmodern artists create reality, whereas those of modernist artists reflect reality. During history, political crisis, natural crisis, economic development and social move have always played fundamental roles in art practice and movement in the world. Through studying art movement of the Qatari artist Yousef Ahmed and his transitions between modern and postmodern art, this paper analyzes the reasons that might drove post-modern artists to look back at modernism. The paper addresses this question: why did Yousef Ahmed return to modernism after his huge success as a postmodernist artist? Through looking at the question, we realized that the reason for such move it could be the individuals' real experiences in the real world. Yousef Ahmed had to look back to modernism to move from metaphor to reality so that he could better express his attachment to his culture.

**Keywords:** Qatari Culture, Arts in Qatar, Yousef Ahmed, Postmodernism, Qatari Identity.

### Introduction

This paper discusses art in Qatar by looking at the Qatari key artist Yousef Ahmed and his transitions between modern and postmodern art. It asks why Yousef Ahmed returned to modernism after his huge success as a postmodernist artist over a period of forty-two years. Generally, the primary reason why artists might look back at modernism is that it represents a linear approach to history.

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The modernists strove to cultivate a concept of progress, an instrumental understanding and conception of rationality and creativity, and a technological approach to human affairs<sup>1</sup>. According to scholars such as Donald Miller who favor postmodernism, modernism led to divisions, exclusions, dichotomies, and possibly even violence. However, when postmodernism emerged, it turned out to be pluralistic, open-ended, and complex. As opposed to reflecting the complexity of reality, the postmodernists opted to depict it metaphorically<sup>2</sup>.

Metaphors are allusive and suggestive. As a result, they are well-suited to expressing the experiences that people have in the world. The reality is not in the metaphor but in individuals' real experiences in the real world. By depicting reality metaphorically, postmodernists created a culture or an ideology of a new working class symbolized by laborers<sup>3</sup>. As opposed to doing real, practical work, they emphasized that there was always a better world than the one portrayed by the modernists. Perhaps Yousef Ahmed had to look back to modernism to move from metaphor to reality so that he could better express his attachment to his culture. Modernism acted as a dividing line between the past and the present. It supplied a blueprint that could assist postmodernist artists in searching for new forms of expression<sup>4</sup>.

In his postmodernist approach, Yousef Ahmed used a specific visual language. He employed this language to express the aesthetic values and principles of his sociocultural context metaphorically, using palm leaves, Arabic calligraphy, and the color of the Qatari desert. In contrast, when working in a modernist vein, Yousef Ahmed reflected his Qatari and Arabic identity directly by depicting old Qatari neighborhoods. Therefore, I ask in this paper why Yousef Ahmed felt the need to represent his identity and attachment to his own culture and why he chose that period in the history of art for inspiration. To find the answers we have to look first at modern and postmodern art: their beginnings, development, meaning, and differences, as well as their values in the art world.

### **Modern and Postmodern Art**

Modernism and postmodernism are terms for artistic movements that developed in the twentieth century. The main way that modernist and postmodernist art are distinguished is by the approximate date ranges during which these movements were practiced—dates settled on by art curators, institutions, historians, and critics<sup>5</sup>. Individuals such as critics and curators recognized and acknowledged distinctive shifts and characteristics that signified the ends of given eras of art<sup>6</sup>. According to Auslander (2009), "modern" describes the period running from the early 1860s to 1960s. "Postmodern" describes the period and forms of art that were created from the mid-1960s to the

present, that is, the artwork that developed after the second world war<sup>7</sup>. It is important to stress that the approach to art in the modern era was more analytical, theoretical, and objective than the approach to art in the postmodern era. Postmodern art is subjective in its approach and nature<sup>8</sup>.

The forms of art developed during the modernist and postmodern eras were influenced by the attributes of the people. According to an article published by Miami Dade College, the modernists constantly searched for the abstract truth of life<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, the postmodernists did not believe in a universal truth or abstract truth. Similarly, while the modernists worked to develop a coherent worldview, the postmodernists strove to remove the distinctions between the high and the low<sup>10</sup>. The approach in each era was influenced by the events happening at the time, the artistic discipline, the materials used, and the intended meaning. For instance, the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution influenced the modern era<sup>11</sup>.

The postmodern era was more peaceful and influenced by the year of information, innovation, and change. As a result, the artwork created in the period reveals the peace, change, and transformation witnessed during the information age. The world war I was the primary influence on art in the modern era<sup>12</sup>. With this foundation understood, my core focus is on the philosophy of production of modern and postmodern art.

Modernism was founded on idealism, a utopian vision, a concern with the experiences of human life and society, and a belief in community progress<sup>13</sup>. Postmodernism was a reaction against modernism<sup>14</sup>. In the modernist era, people assumed that certain truths and universal principles in religion and science could explain reality. As a result, modernist artists experimented with processes, techniques, and form instead of subjects<sup>15</sup>. Such experiments provided excellent opportunities to reflect on their experiences in the modern world.

First, postmodern artists and historians challenged the idea and understanding of universal principles and certainties. They argued that individual experiences were more concrete than abstract principles. Conversely, postmodernism developed out of skepticism and the direct suspicion of reason. This means that the modernists focused on simplicity and clarity while the postmodernists championed the complex and contradictory layers of actual meaning<sup>16</sup>. The postmodern approach that emerged was pluralistic, open-ended, and complex. As opposed to reflecting the complexity of reality, the postmodernists opted to focus on it from a metaphorical standpoint<sup>17</sup>.

Modernism in art was expressed through the realistic works of Gustave Courbet (The Art Story 2021) and the paintings of Jackson Pollock<sup>18</sup>. Postmodernism was characterized by artists such as Jean Michael Basquiat<sup>19</sup>.

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The forms and style of art in the two eras differed. For instance, modernist styles included Fauvism, Expressionism, and cubism, and postmodern styles included Pop Art, Land Art, Conceptual Art, and Body Art. For example, the paintings of an impressionist, Claude Monet, represented the modernist era, whereas the Pop Art paintings of Andy Warhol represented postmodernism. However, it is important to note that modernist and postmodernist painting techniques, colors, and modes of presentation were completely different.

When comparing modernism and postmodernism, it is vital to highlight that the artists of the modernist era were aware of the Enlightenment that took place in the eighteenth century, progressive industrialization, and the increasing detachment of society from traditions, norms, and practices. They had an unquestioning belief in progress that was depicted in their art. Moreover, they had an understanding of society and the world around them. This understanding influenced the many works of art that were created during the era<sup>20</sup>. For example, Barbara Kruger made artworks that were critical of capitalism. Other artists were influenced and motivated by the struggle for civil rights and women's rights in Western nations. In the postmodern era, traditional artistic media such as paper and canvas were slowly replaced by newer media. Postmodern artists used everyday materials but integrated classical forms of art. For example, collages were a popular form of art in the 1960s. Then, other movements emerged, such as Body Art, for which the artist used his or her body as the primary medium artistic medium. These inventions led many postmodernist artists to abandon the object as the primary subject for art, creating a pathway for the emergence of performance art<sup>21</sup>. Marina Abramovic, who focused entirely on performance art, was one of the artists who were active during the postmodernist era. Marina's success has shown postmodernism offered an avenue for women to play a leading role in the art world.

Modernism accepted the concept of objective reality, which was rejected and denounced by the postmodernists. For example, postmodernists such as Derrida, Lyotard and Merleau-Ponty outlined the concept of an objectively perceivable and comprehensive reality. They argued that no objective identity or truth existed. There were also differences between modernism and postmodernism in the treatment of forms and space. For example, modernists created and painted their works on canvas. In contrast, postmodernists produced works that filled space<sup>22</sup>.

In summary, this exploration has shown that modernism began in the seventeenth century. It featured a secular worldview, scientific mindset, and discourses of reason and progress. Modernism emerged around the time of the second industrial revolution that happened in 1879. That implies that it was an era marked by a sharp decline in the stability of social classes. The postmodern

era was the period that followed modernism. According to critics, it emerged immediately after World War II. Postmodernism was ambivalent about exteriority, Western hegemonic values, and realism. It was also characterized by the beginning of professionalism in art practice, high levels of literacy, and a sense of urban alienation. Also, critics who have written about postmodernism consider it antiauthoritarian, that is, they contend that postmodernist artists did not acknowledge the authority of a single definition of art or single artistic style. Their approach collapsed the distinction between popular culture and high culture and between everyday life and artwork. For some, who broke the established rules about artistic styles, postmodernism introduced a new era of freedom, creativity, and a sense that anything and everything could be produced or created<sup>23</sup>.

### **Modernism: Sociopolitical Context, Aesthetic Values, and Ideals**

In the era of modernism, individuals had to follow a set of strict rules to become authentic and recognized artists. During that time, art was more manly and goal-oriented. Although modernist artists focused on specific events that took place in the real world, they tried to make their artworks and styles unique<sup>24</sup>. The lifestyles and experiences of wartime called for art styles that depicted things that were familiar to people and represented their current environment. For instance, the modern period was challenging and strongly impacted by the war. Equally, Europe experienced challenging financial conditions. This implies that the primary sociopolitical factor that shaped modernist artwork was the development of modern industry and the rapid growth of cities following the horrific experiences of World War I<sup>25</sup>.

Modern art was based on an utopian vision of society, human life, and progress. People were moving forward after the harrowing experiences of the war. Artists focused on diverse truths offered by both science and religion to understand and explain reality<sup>26</sup>. Aesthetically, modernist artists focused on purity, content, form, harmony, and faithfulness of their works to the experience of human life. The medieval world and the modern era introduced classical assumptions about world order, harmony, and beauty<sup>27</sup>. The renaissance marked the rebirth of classical aesthetic values after the Middle Ages. The modern era offered a foundation on which the visual arts were extended into diverse new forms, approaches, and aesthetic attitudes.

The damage, destruction of property, displacement, and death caused by the world war I ruined the expectations and experiences of the modernists. Change in their expectations influenced their aesthetic values and outlook as they changed the world and art<sup>28</sup>. The end of the war was marked by a change in the aesthetic values of the modernists. The art they produced portrayed a more

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optimistic climate, progress, and new developments. Any form of art that was influenced by the events of this period was referred to as modern art. Famous artists in the modern era included Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, and Jackson Pollock. Artists such as Édouard Manet were well-known in the modern era because they depicted experiences and scenes of modern life with a contemporary aesthetic<sup>29</sup>.

Battlefield experiences and the aesthetic values and ideals of the modern era stressed the importance of the human form and perspective in the visual arts. At the time, cultural and social roles were shifting. For example, independent landowners and middle-class residents of cities replaced royalty and religious institutions as patrons of the arts. Importantly, the industrial revolution meant that the rising middle-class had money to spend, a high level of education and literacy, and leisure time. The visual arts depicted contemporary life in a way that met people's expectations<sup>30</sup>.

Language was foundational to modernist aesthetics value. Artists and patrons in the era valued individual taste. Society believed that taste provided the immediacy, diversity, privacy, and understanding offered by visual art. Typically, if someone likes a painting, they can experience it without having to analyze the experience. Moreover, a style that pleases one individual may not please another. As a result, modern philosophers, artists, and critics perceived that an artist's production was shaped by the artist's taste. Therefore, every artist worked to develop a style in which to depict objects, experiences, or environments that were important to specific people or communities<sup>31</sup>.

Modern artists refused to mimic premodern artists in their style and approach. For example, the modernist Édouard Manet bridged the conversion from Realism to Impressionism in his painting. He disregarded academic conventions, challenged social mores, and painted contemporary urban scenes of common people. His new approach shocked many artists, experts, audiences, and art critics. However, he inspired modern artists to continue to draw attention to the media in which they worked<sup>32</sup>. This was the main reason why modern art provided an avenue through which movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, and Impressionism were formed. In the process, the modern era provided the environment through which creativity in visual art emerged as an important value for artists, such as painters, musicians, actors, and critics<sup>33</sup>. Their aesthetic values and approaches to art provided gave philosophical form to the subjectivism of the visual experience.

### **The Challenges and Reflection of Culture in Both Models**

Culture in both modernism and postmodernism looks at how artists' background, education, locations, and experiences significantly influenced what

they created and their openness to formal experimentation. Modernism emphasized coherence, universality, and social progress (MoMA 2021). Equally, the modernists treated a wide range of subjects linked to architecture, music, the changing nature of society, and religion. In their approach, modernists rejected all of the art of the past and offered a new, modern vision of the world. In so doing, they created artworks imbued with a personal vision and a personal touch. In contrast, postmodern culture showcased ideological and historical change. The culture of postmodernism critiqued the cultural narratives of modernism, including its beliefs in social holism and progress, as contradictory and incomplete.

The modernists discarded conventional methods of depicting composition, color, and perspective. Their most significant challenge was to provide their audiences with a link from the traditional, premodern approach to artwork to the new environment that had been influenced by transformational change. Scientific discoveries reinforced the attitudes reflected in modernist artworks. The culture around them made modernist artists question the solidity of the real world and the reliability of their understanding and perception. Culturally, modernist artists' beliefs and visionary system helped them completely abandon the traditional modes of representation and depict the world through their knowledge of physical appearance. Even though critics considered their works incomplete and contradictory, the modernists challenged the traditional model of art and created a path through which they attained independence in painting, vision, and thought.

Another major challenge in studying modernist art is that many of the artworks of the modernist era are not accurately defined with the date of creation. They are classified based on the sub-movements that developed within the culture of modernism. The lack of cohesiveness in modernist culture created a path for the emergence of postmodernism, with its culture<sup>34</sup>.

A critical element of postmodernist culture is the value placed on specific elements rather than the whole. Postmodernism challenged modernism's focus on the whole. For instance, the modernists were more concerned than the postmodernists with the artwork as a whole or the universality in culture, arts, and politics. The greatest challenge faced by the postmodernists was to change the attention from the universality or holistic approach to a radical focus on a particular element within the art<sup>35</sup>. For example, in postmodernism, culture is represented through prominent features such as non-representationalism, non-linearity, and pastiche.

Moreover, in art, the postmodernists emphasized historical eclecticism and collage. The cultural influence of postmodernism is evident in the works of



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Mark Tansey, a renowned American painter. In his works, he depicted historical figures, architectures, and scenes in an anachronistic manner. They also showcased reality, the norm, and everyday life. For example, in an artwork titled *Purity Test*, painted in 1982, he presented Native Americans in traditional dress riding on horseback. The history and culture of postmodernism celebrated collaboration. Even more, it reflected the postmodernist culture and determination to abandon the stylistic and temporal historical continuity that was characteristic of modernism.

The modernist artists utterly rejected the ideals of realism and certainty introduced during the Enlightenment. They focused on breaking away from the conventions of representational art and conventional painting methods. They also abandoned the traditional rules of composition, perspective, and color. Also, religious beliefs were challenged during the modernist era. Since the world was transitory, the modernists focused on creating an environment in which artists could devise and depict their own visions<sup>36</sup>.

A close analysis of both modernism and postmodernism reveals secularization as a major challenge that influenced the artists of both movements. Modernism arrived first and created an opening through which loss of faith and belief in personal and earthly affairs occurred. The modernists emphasized the significance of understanding natural events through reason instead of relying on revelations, gods, spirits, and prayer<sup>37</sup>.

The main challenge for modernist artists was to embrace the future of laboratories and scientific inventions rather than taking a traditional approach to everyday life. Additionally, people in the premodern era envisaged history in cyclical terms. However, the modernists and post-modernists depicted an always advancing and dynamic future. However, it is crucial to understand that postmodern culture is a reaction against the culture of modernism. In postmodernism, culture is seen as a repository of data. By preserving data, it has shaped and given meaning to the modern world. The works of postmodern artists create reality, whereas those of modernist artists reflect reality.

This describes art in America and Europe, but modern movements in art in the Arab world did not begin until the twentieth century. Some artists in the Arab world work from the beginning in the postmodernist style and others moved back and forth between modernism to postmodernism. In the following discussion, we will examine the development of art in the Arab world by looking at the artistic development and production of a Qatari artist, Yousef Ahmed. His career offers insights into the Arab art world.

### **The Beginnings of Yousef Ahmed as an Artist: Experimenting with Modernism**

Yousef Ahmed, who was born in Doha in 1955, is considered, along with others from his generation, as a pioneering artist who received his art education abroad. In 1976 he obtained his BA from Helwan University in Cairo and in 1982 an MA in fine arts from Mills College in the US. Throughout his journey as an artist, Yousef Ahmed has dedicated himself to endorsing the exclusivity of Arab art. He established a foundation and infrastructure for the arts in Qatar and taught art for several years in different organizations in the country, including schools and Qatar University. In addition to influencing the Qatari arts world, Yousef Ahmed has also had an impact on other ventures in Qatar. He was a consultant for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, founded and organized the Weaponry and Orientalist Museums in collaboration with Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed Al-Thani, and founded the Friends of the Fine Arts Society<sup>38</sup>. He has won several awards and certificates for his activities, including the first prize at the International Plastic Art Festival, Baghdad in 1986; the bronze medal at the second Cairo International Biannual Exhibition in 1986; the Golden Palm Leaf Award at Riyadh's first GCC States' Plastic Artists Exhibition in 1989; the grand prize at the Seventh International Asian Biannual Dhaka in 1999, and many other prizes. Yousef Ahmed described the beginning of his passion for arts and how he discovered his artistic talent:

Having been brought up in a time when everything was simple and housework was always done manually, I saw my mother washing our clothes by hands in the middle of the backyard and noticed her breath. Sometimes I accompanied my eldest sister to the sea to have our clothes washed there. Seeing the wet clothes hung over a rope in the middle of the backyard, with all their colours, flowered, designs, features and materials, and the water dripping on the sand and the reflection of the sun over it, made a wonderful scene for me<sup>39</sup>.

All these elements formed Yousef Ahmed's experience of visual culture, which he recalled later in his artworks. The first material that the artist used to express himself and his talent was the charcoal from his mother's kitchen. He used to collect the charcoal after his mother finished her cooking, and drew his work on their house's walls or cement floor. Furthermore, Yousef Ahmed is explained that his first real exhibition was displayed on the wall of the family home. He drew works directly on the wall and also hung his paintings. Then he invited people from the neighborhood to look at his artworks, with the encouragement of his father, who played a major role in enhancing his self-confidence and artistic talent during Yousef's youth in Qatar<sup>40</sup>. It was a time when the concept of art did not exist in Qatar, and people still had no idea what art and art appreciation could mean<sup>41</sup>. His beginnings as an artist were

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influenced by the modest lifestyles then common in Qatar when the oil revenues were not as vast as they are now. Thus, life in Qatar was very simple, and people were content and satisfied with having no more than life necessities. From the beginning of his career, an intellectual curiosity directed his work. He is an artist who is very much attached emotionally to his culture and environment, which is very clear from the objects that he uses in his work, including charcoal, calligraphy, textiles and, lately, palm leaves<sup>42</sup>. Every work that he produced in the early stages of his career showed that his interests were in illustrating objects, experiences, or environments that were important to his identity and community. In his artistic production, he draws on his childhood memories, in what he describes as a journey that opens a door to understanding other parts of his paintings<sup>43</sup>. Yousef Ahmed explains his insistence on using local, culturally specific materials in his paintings in the following words:

I refuse to detach myself from the past. Instead, I insist on linking the past with the present. So the local or traditional materials are just tools to link the past with the present as well as to remind the current generation about their roots. I have never used modern-style materials in my artworks, as I feel they are indeed strange for me, unlike the old ones, which remind me of my childhood and the beautiful era<sup>44</sup>.

With his use of traditional materials, Arabic letters, and palm leaves, we can see that the artist is influenced by his nostalgia in his art. The Cambridge Dictionary defines nostalgia as a feeling of pleasure that is accompanied, at the same time, by a slight feeling of sadness as people think about things that happened in the past and feel a longing for these days. For instance, they might feel nostalgic for their schooldays or feel nostalgia when hearing old songs again. These memories of the past are inspirations for future actions<sup>45</sup>.

In his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, David Lowenthal explains that nostalgia for the past and one's culture is a spiritual and physical appeal that reflects a desire to satisfy the longing for the past<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore, Jerome de Groot argues that nostalgia without purpose is a blank trope<sup>47</sup>. Thus, through nostalgia and by recalling the past, people express metaphorically their longing to fill the gaps between the present and the past. Nostalgia serves the purpose of highlighting heritage, identity, culture, and socio-economic changes.

Nostalgia-infused concepts and ideas can elicit original ideas in art. In artistic and literary works, nostalgia for works of art produced in previous eras, such as modernist artworks, can affect stylistic choices and models in the present. While looking at the influence of nostalgia on modernist art, it is vital to consider two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia<sup>48</sup>. Reflective

nostalgia in modern art accepts that the past is past. Therefore, instead of creating special experiences, it helps to evoke emotions and feelings linked to recollection of memories<sup>49</sup>. For instance, modernists rejected the history and the conservative values in the artwork. Nostalgia influences the depiction of objects and subjects. Also, artists are influenced by the work of their contemporaries to experiment with innovative artistic forms, using lines, shapes, and colors.

In artwork, a tendency to abstraction is fundamental. Abstraction helps the artist to perceive things beyond the tangible. Modernism provided the opportunity to explore unknown zones by inviting creativity and innovation into the process of artistic creation. Another influence of nostalgia on modernism in art is the emphasis on processes, techniques, and materials. It is astonishing to understand what inspired different artworks. Modernism invites nostalgia by evoking the diverse social and political agendas that drive society. Because modernist artists were generally utopian, modernism creates an ideal vision of human life, society, and human beliefs.

Restorative nostalgia strives to romanticize the good old days, contrasting them with the current challenging and harsh reality<sup>50</sup>. The form of nostalgia that can result from using modernism in an artwork is felt while observing a portrait titled *Andre Derain* (1905) by Henri Matisse. It is painted in the fauvist style. The Fauves were painters who tried to break with traditional approaches to depicting the world. The painting shows subjective interactions and responses to nature that are expressed through the high-keyed, bold brushstrokes and vibrant pigments that are applied directly from a paint tube.

Additionally, modernist art can depict social realities. For instance, a feeling of nostalgia can trigger the need to represent reality as something imaginary. For example, the painting *Bottle and Fishes* (1912) by George Braque displays the revolutionary cubism invented by Pablo Picasso that strove to represent reality. Nostalgia leads to the need to create paintings that offer different views and perceptions of the subjects in the same picture. This approach not only gives the painting a fragmented look but also makes it abstract. Therefore, the influence of nostalgia in the creation of modernist artworks tended to offer new possibilities for artists who strove to develop new approaches to portraying the world around them. In sum, viewing artworks created during the modernist era helps artists to develop new abstract styles and approaches. For this reason, the nostalgia that characterizes modernist artworks is anchored in the past but provides a jumping-off point for the art of the future.

Thus, modernization, with its new aesthetic ideals and values, attracted Yousef Ahmed's attention to the importance of the visual arts. Consequently, during the modernization of the state—a time when social roles and cultural life

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began to change under the influence of globalization, the artist focused on presenting his original identity. He wished to demonstrate the possibility of harmony between the Qatari cultural heritage and modernization. The more the country has modernized and globalized, the more he has attached himself to the tangible materials of his past. He developed this emotional stance in response to developments in the world and the transition to modernity<sup>51</sup>. Through the use of nostalgia and re-use of cultural materials in his paintings, Yousef Ahmed has created a visual reflection of his culture and has been able to maintain an attachment to his past<sup>52</sup>. His art has developed and changed through the use of multiple cultural materials<sup>53</sup>. For instance, when he began to work as an artist, he depicted his heritage and culture realistically. When he chose to bring everyday life into his paintings, he depicted his real surroundings, as in figure 1. His approach to realism was based on a utopian vision of his cultural heritage and society and his concern about the changes and developments that had begun to occur in the local community. In the works that he created in his modernist style, he focused on simplicity and clarity. This style provided him with the core elements that he needed to move toward surrealism. Qatar's modernization at that time provided an ideal environment for an artist such as Yousef Ahmed to be more visually creative. He began to develop aesthetic values through which he interpreted his aesthetic subjectivism.

### **Artistic Maturity and Yousef Ahmed's Transition to Postmodernism**

In 1974, after participating in the Al-Wsiti Festival in Baghdad, Yousef Ahmed embarked on a total transformation of his artistic style, moving from realism to surrealism. At this point, he moved from modernism to postmodernism, focusing on the complex and contradictory layers of meaning. This was a time when postmodernism was reflecting what could be called the "culture of consumption"<sup>54</sup>. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by the widespread production of postmodern forms in the worlds of architecture, poetry, painting, and literature. These works were characterized by a high degree of formalism and depicted consumer culture. Postmodern society developed the idea that nothing unified or absolute exists behind reality. Postmodernist artists argued that the representation of reality was not possible at all<sup>55</sup>.

Thus, Yousef Ahmed challenged his own experience and went beyond reality, trying to balance a rational image of life with his interior life of the unconscious and dreams. He found magic in unforeseen beauty, through which he expressed his enthusiasm for challenging traditional values and norms and searched for freedom<sup>56</sup>. He began to use calligraphy in his paintings. This allowed him to experiment with the different possibilities that Arabic letters could offer while maintaining his Qatari and Islamic identities (fig. 1). He also employed traditional Qatari textiles that were used in the past by women (fig. 2).

Thus, his aesthetic values and identity and the socio-cultural context of modernism are reflected in his artistic production.



Fig. 1. Yousef Ahmed, handmade Qatari palm leaf with Arabic calligraphy, 2013. 55 x 55 cm. (Ahmed, *The Dancing Letters*. 2013, 45).

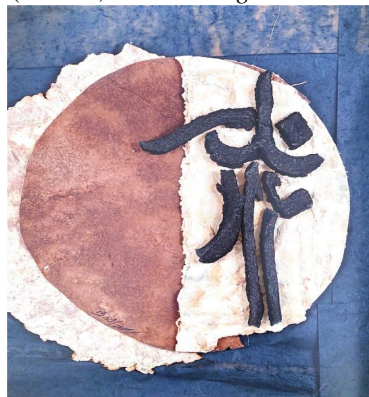


Fig. 2. Yousef Ahmed, handmade Qatar palm leaf with Arabic calligraphy, 2013. 55 x 55 cm. (Ahmed, *The Dancing Letters*. 2013, 40).



Fig. 3. Yousef Ahmed, *The Light Movement* (2011). Mixed media and handmade Qatar palm leaf floating in a black frame, 180 by 180 cm. (Ahmed, *Full Moon Love Letters* 2013, 49).

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Ahmed's new style brought him attention beyond national boundaries, and he developed a global audience<sup>57</sup>. In his postmodernist phase, which lasted from approximately the mid-70s until 2017, he combined surrealism with the use of traditional elements. During that period he challenged the notion of certainties and took a skeptical approach as he developed his style, creating contradictory layers by using materials from his own culture. However, it is important to clarify that when Ahmed created art in his postmodern style, he used techniques, colors, and compositions that were completely different from those he used when working in his modernist style. His postmodernist approach reflected his high level of professionalism, literary knowledge, and sense of urban alienation. He broke down the distinctions between popular art and everyday life in his art. In sum, he broke the established rules about artistic styles. Through his postmodernist style, he introduced a new era of creativity and freedom, as well as the idea that anything and everything could be expressed artistically. He was motivated to free himself from the limitations of modernism and adopt postmodernism because it offered more artistic freedom. That freedom came with the power and authority to defy the rules that defined what art was and could do<sup>58</sup>.

It is worth noting that during the modernist era, artists did not have the freedom to express their emotions through their color choices. Some artists rebelled against the rules for how colors could be used. Around the 1890s, Paul Gauguin and his group of painters, for example, produced a painting titled *Harvest: Le Pouldu*. The painting revealed the ability of artists to express their feelings in their artwork through the use of simplified colors and forms instead of painting exactly what they observed. This style of painting was unique and made them feel as if they were different from other modernists<sup>59</sup>. The discovery of the ability to express emotions through color paved a pathway for Serut, Gauguin, Cezanne, and Van Gogh to lay a foundation for postmodernism through their post-impressionist style of art. Their breakthrough provided the foundation through which conceptual art developed in the 1970s. Conceptual art then cleared the way for performance art, Arte Povera, and installation art. Additionally, ideological shifts in philosophy, politics, and ways of life resulted in changes in the art industry. According to Donahue, the end of modernism, which occurred around the 1960s, was accompanied by major cultural changes. Changes in culture, norms, and values triggered the change witnessed in the art industry<sup>60</sup>.

When I encounter Yousef Ahmed's postmodernist paintings, these are the feelings and words that spontaneously cross my mind: mysterious, puzzling, floating. The artist is free in spirit and mind, works in a carefree fashion, and is deeply thoughtful. His works are strangely spellbinding. At first glance, the

viewer sees only a contextless mass created by diverse painting techniques. Randomly drawn Arabic letters interlaced with each other and intersect with different objects on the canvas, such as palm leaves and traditional textiles. The use of sand color is a reflection of the deserts of Qatar. Within these cultural elements, different shapes are integrated. Each shape in the painting sits in its proper spot and yet none seems to be easily understandable for ordinary viewers. The ordinary viewer might have the feeling that he or she recognizes various elements and materials in the painting but cannot really decipher the meaning of each paint. This ambivalence is a methodical one: the components in Yousef Ahmed's paintings are repeated and borrowed from numerous styles of postmodernist art. In these paintings, the elements come together as gaily disguised actors depicted in a limited range of colors, resulting in an almost dramatic expression of local culture. Here and there, elements of the Qatari and Islamic cultures are included, referencing the artist's culture and identity.

Despite the success of his postmodernist approach and the freedom of expression that he enjoyed, Yousef Ahmed decided to return to modernism in 2017. The question is why the artist chose to go back to his initial modernist subjects when his postmodern paintings had gained him an international reputation and were sold at national and international auction houses such as AlBahie, Sotheby's, and Christie's.

### **Yousef Ahmed's Shift from Postmodernism to Modernism**

In 2017 Qatar experienced a sudden blockade that was instituted by its neighbors: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. At this time, the artist revisited his artistic style and shifted suddenly from surrealism to realism or, we shall say, he returned from postmodernism to modernism. This raises the question of why the political incident influenced Yousef Ahmed's artistic style? What did the move to realism or modernism mean for him at that time?

Donald Miller's book *The Reason of Metaphor* emphasized the importance of the replacement of the modernist vision with the postmodernist model to help save the world from potential wars, violence, and destruction<sup>61</sup>. However, the national crisis and other incidents such as growth in population and increased overconsumption of unsustainable resources forced artists to move from postmodernism to modernism to reflect on their nation, the future, culture, and the challenges they were witnessing<sup>62</sup>. This in its turn leads us to ask how a national crisis such as the blockade influenced artists to move from postmodernism to modernism to reflect on their suffering, culture, and nation.

The philosopher Kant commented in his book *The Critique of Pure Reason* about the perplexing battle for validity between the natural sciences and humanities, which both represent empiricism and rationalism. Kant insisted that



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awareness and reason are the appropriate bases for knowledge and discovery as they influence and guide each other in the pursuit of truth. As he puts it, thought without content is vacant and views without awareness or perception are blind. Kant's logical analyses highlights for us that all shifts are the results of self-critique. Therefore, the approach of self-critique reflects a significant turning point in an individual's transition to modernism or from one stage to another<sup>63</sup>. Hence, Yousef Ahmed's shift toward modernism might be a result of a self-assessment that led him to revise the artistic approach that he had practiced for around 42 years and decide that it was time to return to modernism so that he could express his own culture and identity more directly, that is, in an artistic language that people of all social classes could understand.

Perhaps the primary reason why Ahmed felt compelled to return to modernism is that it represents a linear idea of and approach to history. Modernism strives to cultivate the concept of progress as well as an instrumental understanding and conception of rationality and creativity and a technological approach to human affairs<sup>64</sup>.

Modernism functioned as a rupture between the past and the present. It contained a blueprint that could assist postmodernist artists who were searching for new ways of making art and new forms of expression<sup>65</sup>. The modernist era is a critical benchmark for postmodernist artists for a variety of reasons. First, modernism introduced experimental art, an approach that adopts unfamiliarity as a key or dominant element. Modernist artists strove to make their artworks as unique as possible and different from all other artworks. This implies that modernist artists strove to become more creative and unique in their approaches and models<sup>66</sup>. Therefore, modernism always functioned as a reference point for postmodernist artists who struggled to create solutions to the social problems that they witnessed.

Also, the modernists had the technological savvy to understand the transforming world. Because they understood how the world was changing, they were able to conceive of the shifts required to create a new and better society, both on a personal and political level. Another important issue that forced postmodernist artists to return to modernism to depict their nation and culture was the element of individualism in the modernist world. In modernist works of art, the individual holds a more important position than society. Modernist artists were concerned about how individuals would adapt to the ever-changing world<sup>67</sup>. The modernist approach offers the opportunity to understand how each individual will triumph over the challenges and obstacles in their immediate environment. Therefore, the postmodernist artists had to shift their focus from their era and look back to modernism to understand the diverse interventions that could apply to their national and cultural crisis.

The blockade, as a national crisis, strengthened Yousef Ahmed's emotional attachment to his culture and identity and influenced his artistic style. He had been working in a postmodernist style but had to adopt a modernist style to depict the world around him directly rather than metaphorically. He created art pieces that are appealing to his audience. Furthermore, Yousef Ahmed organized his first exhibition during the blockade. It opened in January 2020 at the Mohammed bin Jassim Museum, which is located at the heart of downtown Doha Msheirb. The title of the exhibition was taken from that of a historical song, "Layen Yatree Alae Lawal" (When I Remember the Past)<sup>68</sup>. The exhibit included 34 impressionist paintings, such as *Musheireb and Al Jasra*, that depicted traditional life in the old neighborhoods of Qatar; in these paintings, the artist embodied a visual language<sup>69</sup>.

The political uncertainty of that period inspired Yousef Ahmed to recall old Doha and the modest social life that characterize the city before oil sales transformed it. Especially during the blockade, Qatari society of an earlier era represented an ideal example of unity. The circumstances triggered the artist's emotions, and he used his skills to navigate his relationship with his society, culture, and heritage. He engaged in nostalgia and visually documented old Doha while asking important questions. For example, what kind of relationships connected the Qatari people with one another before the oil boom? How has that relationship changed? In the paintings in his exhibition, the artist returned to his childhood neighborhood, Al-Jasra, and depicted the urban transformation of Doha. Through his paintings he critically examined Al-Jasra and showed how it was influenced by the periods of modernization and postmodernization that followed the discovery of oil<sup>70</sup>. This exhibition revealed how the sociopolitical context of modernism led Yousef Ahmed to integrate his nostalgic feelings into his artwork. Ahmed described the influence of the blockade on his style:

When the blockade happened and the Arabian Gulf social fabric [was] damaged, an eagerness to return to the past overwhelmed me. I felt this was the right time to go back and find myself within my paintings; to express my identity and cultural heritage and document the places, alleyways, houses, roofs and grounds where I used to live peacefully with my bigger family, the Qatari community, when life was much easier and people bonded together<sup>71</sup>.

By going back to his childhood, the artist was able to create innovative, creative, and appealing artworks that conveyed the meaning of his cultural heritage and the environment around him. The political shock of the blockade allowed the artist to acknowledge his need to create artworks that appealed to his generation and simultaneously would allow future generations to understand the value and meaning of their culture. He further described his return to modernism as an attempt to express the value and heritage of a place. As he puts it, "since

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art became alienated in this period, I worked on presenting an exhibition to communicate the language of image and painting to the public and the world. That is why the exhibition was successful and one of the most important exhibitions in my artistic career<sup>72</sup>.

In November 2021, Yousef Ahmed opened Mahalat, another exhibition of paintings inspired by modernism. For the paintings in Mahalat, he followed the same artistic approach that he did for those included in his earlier exhibition (Layen Yatree Alae Lawal) at the same museum, the Mohammed bin Jassim House in Msheireb. These back-to-back exhibitions that depicted Qatari history and culture were admired by most Qatari as well as other visitors<sup>73</sup>. Both exhibits conveyed the spirit of old Doha, a city in which major transformations have taken place. Old Doha and the contemporary city were not separated into two spaces. Rather, the experience of the old city, including houses, two *furjans* (neighborhoods), *da'ais* (alleys) and even some shops, seemed to stimulate the retrieval of the memory of shops that are mostly no longer in their original locations; those that remain have been redeveloped in a style suitable for a city center built in a modern style<sup>74</sup>. The attendance at these two exhibitions was very impressive. Moreover, newspapers, magazines and the local television stations all reported news about the exhibitions and the comments of the visitors and described the way that Yousef Ahmed depicted the Qatari cultural heritage in his paintings<sup>75</sup>.

Many of the visitors to the exhibition Mahalat commented that the paintings allowed them to learn about an important historical era in Msheireb that deserved documentation. The artist evoked this era in his paintings so that they have become an important source of documentation on the region as well as on the history and development of the State of Qatar<sup>76</sup>. The importance of this exhibition lay also in the fact that it displayed the most prominent buildings that were located in Al Kahrabaa Street in Msheireb, from shops to historical monuments. This shows reflects the importance of the arts in the process of documentation and how they can be used to show things that no longer exist to people of the present and subsequent generations<sup>77</sup>. The press coverage focused on the role of the exhibition in raising awareness of the value and importance of the historical monuments and sites that were important in the development and renaissance of Msheireb and in enhancing the national identity of members of the community<sup>78</sup>. The exhibition linked community members to their history, preserved memories of the past, and enhanced their connection to the state, which confirms the importance of the arts and their role in evoking history and highlighting the past, with all its nobility and uniqueness<sup>79</sup>.

The remarkable number of attendees at the opening of the Mahalat exhibition reflected the position of the arts in society and the richness and the interest that people take in artworks that depict their own culture and history. In

addition to the urgent desire among the public to contemplate such paintings and the scenes they depicted of a cherished past that was of moral and historical value to the Qataris, Mahalat revealed many details of landmarks and places through Ahmed's distinctive artistic style. The choice of the location for this exhibition was also significant because the paintings reflected the nobility of the place itself. So this place came to be a valuable location for such distinguished paintings. Their presence asserts that the renaissance that Qatar is witnessing today is an extension of the development that Msheireb witnessed in the seventies and eighties of the last century. The paintings were also considered by the visitors to document an important historical stage in the country's history<sup>80</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

For the artist Yousef Ahmed, the art world became a more challenging place to thrive as his career progressed. His artistic skills were dedicated to the ever-demanding search for quality and unique art production. It was crucial in this paper to highlight that Yousef Ahmed, as a postmodernist artist, had to look back at the model offered by modernism because it fostered experimentation in the arts. At the beginning of his journey as an artist, modernism was a critical benchmark for his development as a postmodernist artist for a variety of reasons. First, modernism introduced experimental art, an approach that adopts unfamiliarity as a key or dominant element. In his modernist period, he strove to make his artwork as unique as possible and different from all other artworks but to ensure that it directly reflected his cultural heritage and identity. Yousef Ahmed strove to become more creative and unique in his approach and models<sup>81</sup>. Therefore, the modernism was an effective reference point for his postmodernist artistic style.

However, later, in struggling to convey his own cultural heritage clearly through postmodernism, he found a solution by returning to modernism. This was a reaction to the national crisis of the blockade: the postmodernist artist returned to modernism to best portray the Qatari culture around him. In sum, modernism for Yousef Ahmed provided concepts of transformation and futurism that helped him to depict his culture, the economic challenges faced by Qatar, and the national crisis. Thus, as a modern artist working in different mediums, he is acknowledged and rewarded for creating art pieces that appeal to his audiences. His contemporary artistic production became a tool for expressing his emotions and his attachment to his Qatari culture and identity. He expressed this by creating innovative, original, and appealing artworks that convey the meaning of Qatari culture and the world in which it exists. His paintings will allow contemporaries and members of future generations to understand traditional Qatari culture and how the Qatari people accommodated harsh circumstances, created meaning, and moved forward.

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## الفن في قطر بين الحداثة وما بعد الحداثة: يوسف أحمد كدراسة حالة

مريم إبراهيم الحمادي، قسم العلوم الإنسانية، كلية الآداب والعلوم، جامعة قطر،  
الدوحة - قطر.

### ملخص

يناقش المقال تطور الفنون والحركات الفنية في قطر. حاولت في هذه الورقة فحص الفنون الحديثة وفنون ما بعد الحداثة، وألقيت الضوء على العديد من العوامل المختلفة التي يمكن أن تؤثر على الفنانين، في انتقالهم بين الحداثة والفن ما بعد الحداثي والعكس بالعكس. تأثرت أشكال الفن التي تطورت خلال فترات الحداثة وما بعد الحداثة بسمات الناس. فعلى سبيل المثال، بحث الحداثيون باستمرار عن الحقيقة المجردة للحياة، بينما لم يؤمن ما بعد الحداثيين بالحقيقة المجردة.

من المهم أن ندرك أن ثقافة ما بعد الحداثة هي رد فعل ضد ثقافة الحداثة. تخلق أعمال فنانين ما بعد الحداثة الواقع، بينما تعكس أعمال الفنانين الحداثيين الواقع. خلال مراحل التاريخ المختلفة، لعبت الأزمة السياسية والأزمة الطبيعية والتنمية الاقتصادية والحركة الاجتماعية دوراً أساسياً في ممارسة الفن والحركة في العالم. من خلال دراسة الحركة الفنية للفنان القطري يوسف أحمد وانتقالاته بين الفن الحديث وما بعد الحداثة، تلقي هذه الورقة الضوء على الأسباب التي دفعت فنانين ما بعد الحداثة إلى الرجوع إلى الحداثة. وتطرح الورقة سؤالاً: لماذا عاد يوسف أحمد إلى الحداثة بعد نجاحه الكبير كفنان في فن ما بعد الحداثة؟ من خلال البحث في السؤال، أدركنا أن سبب هذه الخطوة يمكن أن يكون تجارب الأفراد الحقيقية في العالم الحقيقي. كان على يوسف أحمد أن ينظر إلى الحداثة للانتقال من المجاز إلى الواقع حتى يتمكن من التعبير بشكل أفضل عن ارتباطه بثقافته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة القطرية، الفنون في قطر، يوسف أحمد، ما بعد الحداثة، الهوية القطرية.

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