

Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East

Edited by Sherifa Zuhur, The American University in Cairo Press 2001, 456 pp.

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Colors of Enchantment is obviously an expression of love. The book's metaphorical title, its beautiful front cover depicting a human figure against a colorful background, and the back cover showing a scene out of an Iranian contemporary play are more than mere aesthetic illustrations of the volume's contents. They represent the double concern of the editor to express, not only the state of the art(s) in the middle East but also the personal and creative side of both the subjects, the writers of the articles, and the objects of their study - theaters, actors, singers, painters and dancers.

The book's editor, Sherifa Zuhur, who has studied such famous Arab singers as Asmahan and Farid el-Atrash, has put together a collage of different writers and subjects as she presents her readers with prominent examples of several contemporary arts in the Arab world. The resulting thick volume is a companion to her earlier editorial enterprise, *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* (AUC Press 1998) also published by The American University in Cairo where Zuhur has been academically associated. The introduction to the collection reveals the artistic talent of the individual contributors; Edward Said is an accomplished pianist, Sherifa Zuhur herself is a musician, and other contributors, Zuhur informs us, play music, paint or direct plays. The very first pages thereby imbue the volume with a flavor of personal taste and talent, which is usually hidden in academic writing. This makes the book more humane than usual, as well as somewhat problematic.

Perhaps the strongest example of the problematic is the inclusion of Edward W. Said's short personal piece "Farewell to Tahia" (pp. 228-232). Although materials included in edited volumes and collected from many different sources tend to vary in size and quality, Said's reminiscences about that famous dancer and actress, followed later by musician Selim Sednaoui's description of a musical *diwan* in Weimar, Germany (pp. 358-362), both seem to belong in a respectable newspaper or magazine rather than in the same book that also includes Zuhur's profound analysis of the personality and personae of

film actor and singer Farid el-Atrash. The same unevenness also is found in the plates and illustrations. Some of these are indeed excellent, notably the color plates between pp. 362-363 that are most helpful for readers of the chapter on the visual arts. Yet others are technically poor (e.g. figure 7 on p. 102, also shown on the back cover), although the value of their inclusion as a visual aid to the written text is obvious - they provide a glimpse of actual artistic performance and offer a taste of the excitement experienced by an audience watching a play or listening to a concert.

The volume is subdivided into five sections, each of which deals with a specific field of art - Theaters of Enchantment (9 articles), Dance and Spectacle (3 articles), Music and *Maqam* [melodic mode on which an Arab musical composition may be based] (7 articles) and Visual Images (3 articles). The editor provides the readers with a number of helpful aids, including a glossary of Arabic terms and literary figures, a rich bibliography in Arabic, English, Persian and Hebrew (unfortunately with no English translation of non-English titles) and an index of terms and persons.

Relevance to the different topics is usefully marked in the bibliography as A (art), M (music), etc. Although this marking is useful and the editor's introduction demonstrates a number of cultural, artistic and political links between the articles, abstracts for each of the chapters would have been very helpful. Most readers of such a rich volume would like to have direct access to the topics within their own field of interest.

The twenty-two articles cover a wide geopolitical scope. Ten articles deal with Egyptian cultural phenomena, institutions and personalities, while four describe the history and activities of local theaters in four different countries (Morocco, Syria, Palestine and the US). Two articles are devoted to Lebanese music, two others treat Yemenite dance and music while two more focus on Iraqi music. Sednaoui's above-mentioned report of a peace-oriented Israeli-Palestinian musical encounter and an overall review of modern painting in the Mashriq, including Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Palestine (but not Israel, where a few prominent Arab artists have made themselves a name), Jordan, Gaza Strip, Lebanon and the Arab Peninsula round out the geographic scope. Last but not least, I found the article, 'Race, Sexuality and Arabs in American Entertainment 1850-1990' by Lori Anne Salem (pp. 211-227), to be highly illuminating. It describes an encounter between East (the Arab world) and West

(white American audiences) where Arabs were either presented as repulsive males included in circus freak shows or as sexually attractive females performing oriental dances. This Orientalistic view was further reinforced by the identification of the Arab with black Americans. Salem's article, then, not only skillfully describes a specific example of blatant racism but also

demonstrates how some Americans have failed to understand and respect Arab nature and culture.

The great span of writers, countries and topics, including lists of songs and recordings of the Arab world, offers readers a fresh and interesting view along with highly valuable information. This view and its ensuing insights are provided both by Western-educated Arabs proud of their artistic heritage and by their Western colleagues who share and admire both theory and practice of the various arts described in the book.

In a sad and tense world full of prejudice towards the other in general and towards Arabs in particular, this loving and knowledgeable volume is a major contribution towards further research as well as a better understanding and appreciation of contemporary Arab arts that strives to combine their long historical heritage with Western influence. Sherifa Zuhur, an Arab woman, artist and scholar who has studied, lived and lectured in both East and West, including a year at Ben-Gurion University, offers us a broad and generous glimpse at her field of interest and greatest love. It is to her credit that *Colors of Enchantment* is courageously free of both the Orientalistic condescension and Arab apologetics often typical of similar volumes.