The History of Omani Women in the Fine Arts

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The History of Omani Women in the Fine Arts Movement

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The History of Omani Women in the Fine Arts Movement

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Abstract: Omani women have not been too far behind in the fine arts movement that first began in the mid 1970s in Oman. Women’s participation in fine arts was marginal and limited only to Muscat the capital. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, a number of prodigies appeared and became role models for the fine art movement in Oman. The first female participation at a fine art exhibition was at an exhibition held in October 1989. Since that time women’s participations were obvious. The Omani Fine Art Society (OFAS) was established in 1993 and the presence of the female fine artists further intensified. The creation of this society encouraged women to practice fine arts. Today, the number of women registered at the OFAS outweighs the number of men, which makes the Omani women artists an appropriate case to be investigated. Therefore, this research focused on the history of the fine arts movement in Oman in general and the history of Omani women artists in particular, with reference to famous women and their artworks. The result of this study shows that the Omani women involved themselves in modern and contemporary arts, using different artistic styles, as well as implementing installations, photographs and video arts by using mysterious stories, spiritualism, cultural traditions and motifs that define their identity and experiences through their artworks.

Keywords: Fine Arts Movement in Oman, Omani Women Artists

INTRODUCTION

The women in Oman\(^1\) are similar to Middle Eastern women and have often been described by Westerners as silent shadows or as helpless victims of oppressive habits and traditions who are unable to manage their own life, and this situation was fact before Sultan Qaboos took power on July 23, 1970. However, recently Omani women have had special attention and support from the Omani government.

It was not long before the Sultan paid particular attention to improving the economic and social status of women (UNICEF, 1996). The government pays special attention to female education and women are considered a valuable resource in the development of the country (Curtiss, 1999). His Majesty encouraged women to play their role in the country’s social and economic development alongside their male counterparts. So while the size of women’s contribution became larger, the situation of Omani women has been thoroughly transformed during the last 40 years. His Majesty repeatedly called upon women to lend their full support to the continuing development of Oman and to play their social, cultural, economic and political role in different aspects, including the fine arts discipline.

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\(^1\) Oman is a country located in the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula in an area of approximately 309,500 square kilometres. It has 1,700 kilometres of coastline from the Strait of Hormuz in the north to Yemen in the south, and overlooks three seas—the Arabian Gulf (Persian Gulf), the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It borders Saudi Arabia in the west, United Arab Emirates in the northwest and Yemen in the southwest. It is the second largest country in the Arabian Peninsula, lying between latitudes 16 40’ and 26 20’ North and longitudes 51 50’ East.
The new regime initiated a new stage of development, and social and economic growth. One of the Sultan’s first reforms was to set in motion the foundation of modern government structures. His Majesty launched major development programmes and upgrading the educational system was one of the main reforms of the government structures for both males and females.

However, teaching art was given a low priority in the Omani education system before Sultan Qaboos took power in 1970 (Al-Yahyai, 1998). That was because Oman was without healthcare, roads and schools, other than the very basic Koranic schools based on the recitation of the Koran; educational and health facilities in a country plagued with illness, illiteracy and poverty were upgraded. So, the main concern in the initial education system in 1970 was to teach the basic skills of writing and reading.

After setting up the basic requirements of the education system, fine arts education gained special attention from the rationalized government, represented by the construction of a lot of schools, institutes, colleges and clubs in which the youth find a good climate to develop their talents. Moreover, fine arts have received wide attention through the opening of special art associations supported by the government in terms of facilities and equipment.

Regarding the fine arts movement, artists in Oman used their cultural heritage as resources for their artworks. The greatness of Omani cultural heritage can be found in the heritage of the sea, Omani environments, the Omani habits and traditions, the Omani traditional crafts, and Omani architecture, including old houses, castles and forts, like other Arab countries which have a long history and civilization which reflects richness in various aspects including the arts and crafts. As a result, the artistic heritages are been used by Omani and non-Omani artists in different disciplines of fine arts. Therefore, the researcher in this study attempts to focus on the women’s role in building the fine arts movement in Oman; she is one of these women who got full support and one of the female artists who obtained absolute care from the government.

The Significance of the Study

The topic of this study, Omani women artists, is a significant topic and needs to address the history of the Omani fine arts movement as this issue has been neglected in terms of literature reviews in Oman. Therefore, it will fill a gap in current knowledge regarding art history in this country. Moreover, this study is the first English and Arabic study in Oman which has attempted to review the history of the Omani art movement generally and women’s art movement specifically.

The Aims and Questions of the Study

The aims of the current study are to highlight the fine arts progress in Oman in general and focus on Omani women artists in particular, with reference to prominent women and their artworks. The following research questions were chosen to construct the study:

- What is the situation of the fine arts movement in Oman generally?
- What are the factors playing main roles in making Oman fine arts a modern and contemporary movement?
- What is the situation of the women’s participations in the fine arts movement in Oman?

Method of Study

Based on the nature of the study, the researcher used the historical-based research method to record the history development of the Omani art movement as well as to understand the conditions and factors of this movement after the country’s revolution. In order to identify the situation of the women’s participations in the fine arts movement in Oman, content analyses on some Omani artworks were used.
The History of the Omani Fine Arts Movement

The beginning of the art and crafts movement in Oman goes back thousands of years and has its own roots, although the modern art movement is regarded as a new movement. Some Stone Age cave drawings were discovered in 1975 in the Oman region. These drawings were found on the wall and they express human life at that time. Images such as human figures, animals and some tools and equipment were found in this cave at that time. In Salalah, south of Oman, some interesting graphics and writings were found in some caves and the date of these images goes back to the period of pre-Islam (Al-Yahyai & Al-Amri, 2006).

As mentioned in the book by Al-Yahyai and Al-Amri (2006), the Omani art movement does not have a long art history compared with other movements, especially in the Arab Gulf countries as well as in Arab countries in general. Furthermore, the authors also indicated that there were no references or written documents to recount the history of the Omani art movement at that time, except a number of news articles which were published to cover some events in the early years. Also, there were no art historians or art critics who could write the art history and make it easy for someone who wishes to get information and knowledge about such art movements in this region.

Since the Omani artists started practising art in the mid 1970s during the country’s revolution, they showed a special concern for natural objects, and then they involved themselves in the process of expressing their heritage motives in visual art forms such as paintings and drawings. The history of the Omani art movement was summarized by White (2010) as she clarified that ‘Many artists use the landscape, wildlife, people and still life studies to produce pieces’. The landscape and cultural heritage of Oman is diverse and awe-inspiring for both artists and photographers. Some produce literal representations whilst others choose a more abstract approach (White, 2010).

As a result, the development of artists’ styles started with observational drawing for still-life and Omani landscapes. A great number of today’s artists are influenced by these themes in different ways. Some of them are affected by the elements of the sea and its environment. Many others are affected by architectural forms and styles they found from the Omani castles, old houses and mosques. Some artists are inspired by the landscapes and attempt to paint without following the traditional grammar. These paintings took different directions, including impressionism, cubism and abstractionism. New forms of art such as installations, video arts and conceptual art also appeared later in the beginning of 21st century.

Returning back to the early practice of fine arts in Oman, we found that most Omani artists at the beginning gained their artistic skills through self-endeavour and sample art tools and equipments available at that time, as there were no community-art studios or associations promoting artists other than governmental schools at that time. It was necessary to find a new mechanism for exploring the youth and artists’ aspiration. This meant that those people who were responsible for developing the fine arts movement had to find new ways to explore and promote the aspirations of the youth and artists. This was before the establishment of the Youth Art Studio in 1980. The Youth Art Studio was established and attached to the Directorate General of Cultural and Youth Sports activities and is today under the direction of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. It was designed to be a common place for all Omani youth artists, in which they found their needs and supported their scientific thoughts and abilities.

This establishment is regarded as the starting point for the Omani fine art movement, and since that time this discipline gained special attention from the rationalized Omani government, represented by the construction of a lot of schools, institutions, colleges and clubs in which the youth found a good environment to develop their artistic talents. Since that time the fine arts have received a lot of attention and support from the government.

The Omani government also paid attention to the academic side by establishing the Art Education Department at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1991. ‘It’s main purpose is to pre-
pare art teachers for work in secondary schools and consequently the numbers of Omani Art teachers has increased, gradually replacing foreign nationals under the government’s plan called ‘Omanization’ (Al-Amri, 2010).

Moreover, in 1993 the government took one step further in promoting art by establishing the Omani Society of Fine Arts (OSFA). The main aim for this establishment was to develop the ability of Omani artists by providing them with the opportunities to achieve and build up their artistic skills and interests in fine arts. Furthermore, the OSFA promises to activate Omani movement and progress it, and present the real skills of the artists and photographers through periodic exhibitions, artistry meetings and art performances. These are held during the year, helping to raise the artists’ morale and the value of their works and rights received, developing their skills, helping them to face challenges and difficulties and solve them, and encouraging and supporting youngsters and hobbyists and thereby helping them to achieve in their hobbies (SIS Group, 2004).

In order to give Omani artists the opportunity to make their own progress the OSFA participates continuously in various international Binallies and Trinalise, exhibitions and events, in compliance with the directive, which keeps the Omani fine arts movement alive today. Furthermore, specific art workshops inside and outside Oman are organized by the OSFA in order to raise the quality of young artists.

Factors Supporting the Omani Fine Arts Movement

In this section, the researcher attempts to summarize the factors that play the main roles in making the Oman fine arts a modern and contemporary movement. These factors can be summarized in the following points:

- The existence of some Arabian and foreign artists who brought in expertise in different fields as well as art appreciators, and they were focused on producing drawings and paintings. This created some connection between those with expertise and the beginner artists which helped them to benefit from practising art.
- The role of art teachers in general schools and their invitations to practise different art disciplines and hold school art exhibitions.
- Holding annual art exhibitions, and their contributions in attracting audiences and artists to participate in such events which pushed forward the Oman fine art movement.
- Travel abroad by some people with an interest in literature and arts to have the opportunity to see some art movements in other parts of the world.
- The existence of some art institutions such as the Youth Art Studio (1980), the Cultural Club (1989), the Fine Art Group at Sultan Qaboos University (1986), the Art Education Department at SQU (1991) and the Omani Society of Fine Art (1993).
- Foreign participations by Omani artists in international art events, giving them the opportunity to see the art experiences of others, and this was reflected in the quality of Omani artists’ productions as well as in the art movement in general.
- International participations and art symposiums and their contributions in making artists-based who had been educated and trained under famous leader artists. This interaction of young artists and their effective participation within art workshops is organized by the Omani Society of Fine Art (OSFA) or the Youth Art Studio and all contribute in a direct way to creating a new generation of young Omani artists.
- The interaction between Omani artists and foreign artists who live in Oman was one of the most important factors in activating the Oman fine arts movement and ensuring the continuity of Omani artists in joint art exhibitions at national and international levels.
- Returning Master’s and PhD degree holders in Fine Arts and Art Education to the country. This factor played a role in creating a new generation who have a responsibility for devel-
oping the art movement in terms of knowledge and quality in making and appreciating artwork, as well as developing the art criticism movement in Oman.

Omani Women in the Fine Arts Movement

Male and female artists in Oman are treated equally in terms of opportunities and financial support. The Omani government gives the women artists the same rights as the male artists to exhibit their artworks inside and outside the country with free materials and tools for practising their talents and participating in the annual exhibitions held by the OSFA or other organisations such as the Youth Art Studio and Cultural Club. This full support makes women’s participations in the fine art movement more obvious and active. In this part, the researcher will attempt to present women’s contributions to the fine arts movement, through reviewing some examples of Omani artists and their work.

As mentioned earlier, the phenomenon of women participating in the fine arts movement in Oman was clear from the mid 1970s. The numbers increased during the 1980s, and in the 1990s, some of them became role models for the fine arts movement in Oman. The existence of the OSFA in 1993 encouraged women to practise the fine arts discipline. Another positive step which was seen keen to encourage Omani women to participate in the Omani art movement was organizing annual exhibitions for resident women only, both Omani and non Omani artists. These exhibitions have been dedicated solely for women in fine arts and have been successfully run since 1997 up until today. These exclusive exhibitions account for the increasing number of women registered at the OSFA.

The experience of the Omani fine artists can be described as positive and full of achievements; so much so that many Omani fine artists have successfully competed for prestigious awards inside and outside the country. The constant endeavours and hard work of some artists helps us in identifying the real prodigies who have a strong influence in the Omani fine arts movement. The list of famous female artists includes: Rabha Mahmoud, Nadra Mahmoud, Maryam Al Zadjali, Zakia Al-Barwani, Fakhriah Al Yahyai, Budoor Al Riyami, Mona Al-Baiti, Hafiza Al Tamimi, Nadia Juma Al Balushi and Iftikhar Al Badawiyah.

This part of the study will only review some examples of the famous women artists who play a main role in the fine arts movement in Oman, as shown below.

**Rabha Mahmoud** is one of the few artists who have had a big impact on the art movement in Oman in general and on women in particular since the mid 1970s. Through her continuous investigation on a single subject, which is women as a theme for her artworks, the viewer is able to recognize her artistic style from many other artists. She had a clear direction, using similar methods of work within the same subject. In following her paintings we can see there are compositions of women characterized by forms and colours, both in the foreground or in the rear of her paintings. The women figures in relation to places are the fundamental objects in her work; although the viewer could feel a sense of the crowded composition and the similarity of figures and colours, they could also see details of each person as a case of semi-abstraction (see Figures 1, 2 & 3).
Nadira Mahmoud is another prominent artist in the art movement in Oman. She is one of the most important artists in the country and has built an international reputation for her direct expression in forms of abstract art which can be easily understood by the European audiences. As declared by the Director of Molhiem Museum, Al Ror Region, Germany, Nadra’s works would be understood and accepted by the European audiences, because her works have a universal and human dimension [...] An objective eye can easily pick up and understand the meaning of these paintings and appreciate their value. Recently she stopped using different colours except white, as if she is in an argument with all the colours or bored of a world filled with different colours, looking for an ideal world of her own. The change from using diverse colours to one single white colour and its tones in her last group of paintings, which is white, came from discovering the truth that when light is passed through glass it creates seven colours, and when assembled, it gives the colour white, and most of her current paintings are based on this theory.

The use of white in her paintings is a process of abstraction from the abstraction itself. Someone could say that the colour expression of human feelings is more abstract when it becomes white. It means that artistic expression is not just a response to a situation or emotion, or even a realistic accident, but it is a symbolic language that extends beyond the experience. It is a symbolic and combined language, which becomes entangled in emotions, perception and the skill of execution all at once. This symbolic language has been a rare experience, resulting from using different colours which inspired the artist from the beginning of her experience. She transfers the use of colours into a single colour to create links and balance between mental awareness and the inner sense of her art expression, as shown below in some examples of her artworks (Figures 4, 5 & 6).

![Figure 4: Mixed Media](image-url)
Maryam Al Zadjali is an artist who began her practice in the 1980s; she is also one of the female artists who followed the arts movement in Oman early on. She is inspired by Omani traditional motifs and takes them into consideration as artistic symbols to express ideas and to form images in an attractive contemporary painting. Whoever follows Maryam’s artwork will find that her method of work moves quietly between different artistic styles as her work is characterized by a soft style and blurred colours. In her painting expressions, there is always a kind of violence in the movements of shapes. Her abstracts are based on the philosophy of Islamic Art in using geometric shapes such as circles and arches. In her paintings, people can find scenes of courage and power in the movement of lines that contribute to the formation of harmonized colours, achieving an aesthetic rhythm in the process of reconciling the lines. Maryam uses rich and varied colours, and yet she is keen to find the unity of colour in each painting.

She has also worked to revive the heritage in contemporary and modern art styles, emphasizing the values of Omani heritage in new visual forms to draw attention to the traditional elements that have almost disappeared from the Omani environment. Her recent work is based on the assembly and direct transfer of single heritage motives into modern art, so that the viewer can recognize shapes and styles through this process. Through visual composition, she was able to find an artistic unit for her work (see Figures 7, 8 & 9).
When talking about artists in Oman, we cannot ignore the experience of Zakia Al-Barwani, one of the former artists who practised fine arts in Oman from the early time. Ever since she joined the Youth Art Studio, she participated in most art exhibitions in and out the country, relying on her realistic and expressive style inspired by the Omani environment, including the elements that attract her, whether it was through nature or even human figures, especially Omani women with their colourful traditional clothes which were the focus of her paintings.
In her earliest paintings, she adopted a brutal direction by using sharp and explicit colours and picking themes where she could find an opportunity to use fresh colours. Her current works are based on using collage as she entirely relies on scraps of paper for creating artistic scenes based on the aesthetic relationships of those clips and merged colours that reflect her realistic and expressive style. Women figures were also found as a focal point in most of her paintings and the use of colour structures complete the basic form of the integration with the background in harmony with all elements of the painting (as in Figures 10 & 11).

![Figure 10: Oil on Canvas](image1)

![Figure 11: Oil on Canvas](image2)

**Fakhriya Al Yahyai** finished her PhD in Fine Arts in the UK in 2004. She started as a student at the Art Education Department at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman in 1991, and joined the OSFA in 1993. Currently she is the Assistant Professor for Drawing and Painting in the Art Education Department (SQU) in Oman. The academic study had an impact in changing her vision and practice of art. Thus, her artworks need sensitive eyes to see them. She links her art to philosophy, and philosophy in her work takes visual and experimental approaches. For example, in her experience at the exhibition “Shadow and Light”, the artist relied on the implementation of the fine art elements to find the interaction between shade and light, and investigated the abstract and non-visible elements (as in Figures 12, 13 and 14).
Figure 12: Mixed Media

Figure 13: Mixed Media
She also looks for colour relations that result from observation, taking advantage of the camera’s techniques by taking quick snapshots, as she showed in her exhibition “Compositions of Colour” and her direct intervention in creating integrated configurations based on colour relations. The artist has presented a journey of abstract colour relationships, to create balanced and complete compositions in terms of pure aesthetic values, to find visual elements which are based there, but that need to be realized (see Figures 15, 16 & 17).

Figure 14: Mixed Media

Figure 15: Mixed Media
Fakhriya also tries to showcase the Eastern identity by adopting the philosophy of Islamic culture through the traditional costume, the veil, as she emphasized her Islamic identity during the recent issue of banning the hijab, as shown in Figures 18, 19 and 20.
Budoor Al Riyami is another female artist who graduated from SQU, Oman (Art Education Department). Al Riyami started work in painting and sculpture as a realism artist but currently she prefers video installations to other medium. We could describe her artworks as she is one of those artists who look more then say visually or do as much as they look and find themselves in speech by actions with audiences through her artworks. Her approach to art seeks to stir the viewers’ sensibilities with her works, as she said: “The viewers should be allowed some space so that they can interpret art in their own ways. As an artist I can give them some clues on any particular issue. But, they should decide how to react” (Ershad, 2008).
Her work “Loaf of seduction” (Figures 21 and 22), which was exhibited in 2005 in Oman, goes beyond the local place to include the world that she would like to address. As noted, her artworks began to enjoy a wide range of freedom and expressed shapes and materials devised for herself, which is a result of the art productions of contemporary daily life.

Al Riyami is one of the very few artists who employs technologies to support her artworks. She also preferred to use video art to create her work entitled “The Peak of Burning” (see Figures 23 & 24). The video shows the back of a man projected on the screen made of white T-shirts. As soon as the clip begins, Arabic words in different dimensions appear on the man’s back. After a while a hand with a piece of cloth emerges and covers the words with blood. The clip ends with the back of the man all bloody, with a mournful sound effect. The artist explained her thoughts regarding this film when she said: “I have tried to feature the ongoing crisis in a chaotic world. War is going on in many parts of the world, not for any noble cause but for political and business interests. Humanity, peace and rationality are under constant threat” (Ershad, 2008).
In her recent artworks she attempted to create a relationship with her cross-faded images. Al Riyami explained that by saying “Old tales have no beginnings, for they are transferred from one person’s memory to another’s, new details and steps towards untraversed places. They are often illusive images, hidden treasures that are waiting to be discovered” (see Figures 25 & 26).
Mona Al-Baiti is an abstract expressionist born in Kuwait, working mainly as a painter and a photographer. She is one of a few seeking to study art as a profession. She studied Fine Arts at the University of Fine Arts Of Brest, France, and she took her Master’s Degree at the University Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, France. She is currently taking her Doctorate Degree in Fine Arts at Paris I University, Panthéon-Sorbonne, France. In 2008, she founded the organization AL.BAITI ART, as a linking point between artists from all over the world.

AL-Baiti’s artworks pose questions about various concepts of the human, social and psychological aspects, looking at the impact of the environment and cultural heritage on the individual human. The themes and ideas of her creations and artwork are inspired by the contradictions, both visible and invisible. Mona’s way of seeing the world is different, where the surfaces deal with tenderness, always forms and shapes wrapped around each other (see Figures 27 & 28).

Al-Baiti worked on the concept of the *burqa* \(^2\) of the Bedouin in Oman and raised it in her M.A. (Sorbonne). She worked from the concept of visible and invisible forms in contemporary art and she used the *burqa* as a symbol of Omani heritage to express her art (see Figure 29).

\(^2\) “Burqa” is the name given to one of many forms of face veils and the only term used in Oman which refers to all forms of face veiling.
Conclusion

The researcher believes that she has provided comprehensive information about the art history and women’s participations in the fine art movement in Oman. Although the history of Omani women in fine arts movement has had a short time, they involved themselves in modern and contemporary arts, experimenting and using different approaches in their artworks. This in fact confirms the real passion of Omani women to represent themselves in arts and their endeavours in the role of arts in building communities.

Finally, it is clear that Omani fine artists are open to the world and constantly developing through various interactions and experience. In a nutshell, one can proudly say that the Omani fine artists, especially women, have made much headway in the fine arts movement.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Fakhriya Al-Yahyai: Fakhriya Al-Yahyai is an assistant professor of drawing and painting at Sultan Qaboos University, with Ph.D in Fine Art-UK-2004, and a MA. in Art and Design Education-UK-1998. Fakhriya Al-Yahyai is a member of the International Museum of Women, San Francisco, USA, member of the Omani Society for Fine Arts, Oman, and a member of the Youth Art Studio, Oman. Fakhriya Al-Yahyai made several solo and joint art exhibitions nationally and internationally. She has published articles including: “The Artistic and Aesthetics Values of the Islamic Manuscripts in the Arabian and Persian schools”, “Professional Standards in the Contemporary Art Education”, “The Omani Heritage motives as an approach to teach the course of Modern Painting for the Students in Art Education Department at Sultan Qaboos University”, and “The Impact of The Appreciations standards of post-Modernism in the Art Production of Students in the Art Education Department in the Sultan Qaboos University in the course of Project in Contemporary and Modern Art”.

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