

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Exhibiting an Exhibition

Review by Maissoun Sharkawi

Abstract

“Al-Ma‘rad” (The Exhibition), curated by Nadi Abusaada and designer Luzan Munayer, was held 10 August to 30 November 2022 at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center (KSCC) in Ramallah. The double significance of the word *ma‘rid* links this exhibition intimately to its subject: the Arab Trade Fairs of 1933 and 1934. The exhibition highlights the socio-political environment prevailing around the two Arab fairs by displaying objects such as artwork and journal archives, as well as some artefacts from the venue of the fairs – the Palace Hotel in Jerusalem.

Keywords

Local Arab industries; Arab fairs; taxes; British colonization.

Two month-long Arab trade fairs took place in Jerusalem in July 1933 and April 1934. The building that hosted the two exhibitions was the newly built Palace Hotel, located on Ma’mun Allah Street in Jerusalem on awqaf property owned by the Supreme Muslim Council. The first Arab Fair’s main intention was to enhance Arab industrial production at a moment when local producers from Yemen, Hijaz, Greater Syria, Egypt, and the Arab Maghrib were unable to compete with the increasing imports introduced by European capitalist colonial powers. In fact, cheap industrial products from Europe undermined Arab countries’ potential to develop traditional crafts and move toward an industrial phase of production. The idea of an Arab exhibition in Jerusalem was an initiative taken by ‘Isa al-‘Isa, founder

of *Filastin* newspaper, following visits to international fairs in Paris and London that aimed to display the resources of colonial possessions. Al-'Isa's idea became more concrete after he visited the Iraqi Agro-Industrial exhibition in 1932, where he met King Faysal, who strongly supported the concept of a future Arab exhibition taking place in Palestine. Soon after al-'Isa's return, he founded a company with a group of Arab elites from Syria and Palestine to begin planning an Arab Fair for industries from Palestine.

Although the Arab Fair ("al-Ma'rid," as it was known in Arabic) was short-lived (see the article "Fair Competition?" by Semih Gökatalay in this issue, 34–51), it left a cultural and material legacy that is the foundation for an exhibition – likewise titled "al-Ma'rad" – at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah, running from August to November 2022. The objects displayed in the exhibit's four rooms are mainly archival materials collected from several archives such as the Sa'id al-Husayni collection which is located at the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit and mother-of-pearl art works borrowed from the Antonian Charitable Society in Bethlehem. Artworks by artists who exhibited at the two Arab trade fairs were borrowed from the privately owned collections of George al-'Ama and Amjad Ghannam, prominent Palestinian art collectors and archive conservators. Thus, the objects that constitute this exhibition were scattered in various collections that is, in and of itself, indicative of the fate of Arab industries and trade in Palestine.

The first room of "al-Ma'rad" contains collected art works and crafts illustrating the emerging Palestinian art movement of that period: a landscape painting by Tawfiq Jawhariyya, embroidered dresses by Mary and Jamila Salman, and a mother-of-pearl portrait designed by Tawfiq Butrus al-Shami portraying St. Anthony of Padua and the infant Jesus. It is interesting to link the latter to the fate of the mother-of-pearl crafts sector during the 1930s. Indeed, in 1931, *Filastin* reported that mother-of-pearl stakeholders (*al-saddafiyya*) from Bethlehem and Bayt Sahur, the two main areas for this industry, had complained to the high commissioner via Niqula Saba Effendi, the governor (*qa'imaqam*) of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, about taxes that had been re-imposed (that is, removed and imposed once again) on raw shells imported from different places.¹ The report stated that import duties on mother-of-pearl goods,



Figure 1. Demonstrations in Jerusalem, photo from Theodore Surrouf archives, 1936, from Amjad Ghannam Collection. "Al-Ma'rad" (The Exhibition), Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, 2022. Photo from exhibition by author.

which had increased from 12 to 20 percent, had strongly impacted the mother-of-pearl industry and that the wages of workers had fallen by 50 percent when the taxes had been re-imposed, from between ten and fifteen to only seven Palestinian piasters per day.² As a result of the deteriorating economic conditions, many workers from this industry began emigrating from Palestine to the United States.³

The first room of the exhibition also features testimonies from visitors of the two fairs and shows how they opened a space for women artists to display their works: spectators were introduced to artists such as Zulfa al-Sa‘di and Jamila Qunbarji. The choice of exhibiting art and crafts at the 1933 and 1934 fairs is no coincidence, but a response to British officials’ discrimination between the Jewish and Palestinian Arab economic arts and crafts sectors, the latter being viewed by these officials as immature and traditional with artisans lacking basic educational and technical skills. W. A. Stewart, a supervisor of technical education in the British Mandatory government and a founding member of the Jewish Bezalel Art Academy in 1935, praised Bezalel for playing an important role in enhancing Palestine’s crafts industry and compared it favorably to the traditional crafts industry run by Palestinian Arabs, although he also noted the necessity of establishing a textile school to preempt competition from Palestinian Arab industries: “The need for such school is great, and it will have to be established before the Arab Palestinian weaving industry can develop on modern lines suitable for competition, with surrounding countries.”⁴ Noteworthy in this regard, the two catalogs displayed in the second room of “al-Ma‘rad” show that exhibited goods came mainly from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq, with textiles representing more than 50 percent of the products, followed by souvenir goods, and diverse processed food products. The Egyptian pavilion occupied the largest halls of the hotel exhibiting “the reputed” Egyptian textile industry.

This room of “al-Ma‘rad” also contains a historical chronology of the social, political, and economic moment during which the two Arab fairs were inaugurated: between the revolts of 1929 and 1936. Documents in this room offer a bottom-up reflection on the socio-political dynamics and challenges facing Palestinian society between two world wars and two local uprisings, and offering a valuable synthesis of the reality of Palestinian and Arab industries that were struggling to survive under new colonial regimes and to awaken the socio-economic cultural life in spite of the difficult situation. Photos from the archives of Theodore Sarrouf documenting the 1936 revolt are also exhibited in this room, offering evidence of the coverage of the revolt despite strong repression by British forces.

A third room is devoted to historical materials and newspaper archives that documented these two events. The journal archives in particular show that these trade fairs attempted to create Arab economic independence, boycott foreign products imposed by colonial powers, and materialize Arab cooperation that would supply the Arab markets with the necessary goods for its vast clientele – as expressed, for example, by Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza in *al-‘Arab* newspaper.⁵ Craft industries largely disappeared in Arab Palestinian society in the period before 1948 in the absence of institutional structure and investment credit. Not only did these industries

lack capital and technical skills, but they were also unable to secure raw materials needed to boost production to competitive levels. Taxes on raw materials were a major obstacle facing Arab local industries in Palestine under the British Mandate, which adopted a different strategy than that of the Ottoman government concerning monopolies and collecting taxes. Toward the end of the Ottoman period, as the state sought to encourage trade within the empire, tariffs on goods originating from other parts of the empire were reduced from 11 percent to 8 percent, accompanied by a tax of 1 percent on all exports.⁶ These provisions were abolished in 1922, and only goods from Syria were exempted from the new taxes on raw material.⁷



Figure 2. Ceramic tile from the Palace Hotel fountain, designed by David Ohannessian, 1929, “al-Ma‘rad,” Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, 2022.

In the summer of 1925, under increasing pressure from Jewish organizations to aid industrialists, High Commissioner Herbert Samuel submitted a proposal to the Colonial Office whereby raw materials would be allowed duty-free admission against the re-export of finished products. Although the Colonial Office regarded such an action as exceptional, since it contradicted the system in comparable Mandate areas such as in Syria (or in Egypt where laws contain clauses prohibiting monopolies),

Samuel held that the emergent Jewish industries would collapse without it, and added that it would resolve the issue of immigrants' employment. Industries granted this aid would employ immigrants, leading in turn to an increase in consumption in Palestine. Palestine's colonial administration singled out for specialized treatment several factories, all Jewish-owned. These included the Palestine Oil Industry (Shemen) in Haifa, and Delfiner's Silk Factory, the Yehuda Steam Tannery Factory, the Raanan Company (confectioneries), and the Lodzia Textile Company, all in Tel Aviv.⁸ Furthermore, the British government exempted building materials and agricultural implements imported by Jewish investment firms. Meanwhile, wood or paper imported for packaging of oranges for export were not exempt from any import duty, although these materials were not consumed within the country, but were solely destined for export. The British government's decision reflects a colonial context, since most orange farmers and merchants were local Arabs.

The last room of "al-Ma'rad" documents the fate of the elegant Palace Hotel, the venue for the Arab fairs. This choice of placing the history of the building itself in the fourth room of the exhibition offers a particularly vivid demonstration of the main idea behind "al-Ma'rad" and also links to the current Palestinian reality of dispossession, appropriation, and recasting. The hotel was suffering from the competition of the newly built King David Hotel, which opened nearby in 1931. The Palace Hotel closed its doors for good in 1935 and the Supreme Muslim Council then leased it to the British government.⁹ Ironically, it housed the offices of the departments of agriculture and fishery and later, after 1949, the Israeli ministry of industry, trade, and labor. Since 2008, the building has been subject to "restoration" work that has completely emptied the Palace of its architectural and interior components and contents, keeping the facades of the building intact, while reconstructing the building from the inside. The only element that escaped the interior razing were the stairs that will continue holding the four-story building; everything else was scrapped or sold at auction. The fate of the Palace thus parallels the settler colonial project to empty the land of its cultural and civilizational components.

Clearly, Arab and Palestinian industries, including small-scale emerging industries such as textiles, souvenir industries, and agricultural products, could have flourished to a much greater extent under more favorable political and economic conditions. The decline of most small-scale industries in Palestine was due to the heavy taxes imposed by the British, designed to inhibit the development of native industries, thereby substituting products made by the Jewish immigrants for the local traditional industries. Significant capital concentrated in the hands of new Jewish immigrants, including skilled craftsmen who could afford to import modern machinery and apply up-to-date methods, together with their monopolistic and capitalist spirit, undoubtedly defeated emerging small-scale Palestinian industries and brought about increased market dependency on new products of better quality. These new investors had an incentive to produce on a large industrial scale with determined efforts to establish the only factories in the Middle East.¹⁰

"Al-Ma'rad" is in many ways a tribute to the efforts of Arab entrepreneurs, craftsman, and traders to resist British policies that favored Jewish-owned industries

and ventures. The exhibition at the Sakakini Center reconstructs a fragmented part of the Palestinian history of creativity, protected today by private institutions and collectors. Ironically, “al-Ma‘rad” could be the last exhibition shown at the Sakakini Center. As the center struggles to survive a funding shortage, the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Culture is undertaking serious attempts to reclaim the building, which it owns, on the pretext that the ministry needs the building to manage its affairs. If this plan becomes reality, the first non-governmental community center established after the Oslo Accords, a popular center that did much over the years to produce a cumulative experience of cultural work in Palestine, will be closed.

Maissoun Sharkawi is a research associate at the French Institute of the Near East (IFPO) and is an assistant professor at the Palestinian Technical University–Kadoorie in Ramallah.

Endnotes

- 1 “Sina‘at al-sadaf fi Bayt Laham wa al-dariba al-jumrukiyya ‘alayha” [The mother-of-pearl industry in Bethlehem and the customs tax on it], *Filastin*, 11 July 1931, 6.
- 2 Correspondence between H. Dubno and the chairman of the standing committee for commerce and industry in Jerusalem, in “Import Duty on Mother-of-Pearl (1933),” Palestine Government Files box 161/45, Israel State Archives.
- 3 Beginning in 1927, the Palestinian pound (PP) replaced the Egyptian pound (EP) as Palestine currency. The PP was worth 2.5 less than the EP. Following this switch, merchants increased prices by 10 percent, and the British government in turn increased customs duties, which had been the most important resource for its budget. See “Ta‘dil al-rusum al-jumrukiyya: himayat al-sina‘at al-Yahudiyya – al-ta‘widh ‘an ‘ajz al-naqd al-Filastini” [Adjustment of customs duties: protecting Jewish industries – compensating for Palestinian monetary weakness], *Filastin*, 8 November 1927, 1.
- 4 W. A. Stewart, “The Recent Developments of Crafts and Industries in Palestine,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 14, no. 5 (January 1944): 270.
- 5 Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, “al-Ma‘rid al-‘Arabi” [The Arab fair], *al-‘Arab*, 13 April 1933, 3–5.
- 6 Ruth Kark, “The Contribution of the Ottoman Regime to the Development of Jerusalem and Jaffa, 1840–1917,” in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social, and Economic Transformation*, ed. David Kushner (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1986), 18.
- 7 Commission Permanente des Mandats, Procès-verbaux et documents de la cinquième session (Extraordinaire) tenue à Genève du 23 octobre au 6 novembre 1924, 85.
- 8 Barbara J. Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920–1929* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 166–67.
- 9 Nadi Abusaada, “The Forgotten History of Jerusalem’s Palace Hotel,” *Middle East Eye*, 9 August 2022, online at (middleeasteye.net) bit.ly/3ScNcP (accessed 20 October 2022).
- 10 The British Mandate administration assumed its functions in Palestine in July 1920 and one of the first departments to be established was that of Trade and Industry, whose main function was to provide advice and recommendations on economic and industrial affairs. It was also tasked with developing and increasing both Arab local industries and emergent Jewish industries in Palestine.