

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Printed in Jerusalem

Meaning, Form, and Vision

Review by Tarteel Muammar and Hasan Safadi

Abstract

In July 2020, while Palestinians were enduring lockdown and isolation to counter the COVID-19 pandemic, and health protocols hampered cultural institutions, the Palestinian Museum launched an online version of the exhibition “Printed in Jerusalem: Mustamloun,” (*Tubi’a fi al-Quds: mustamlun judud*),¹ originally scheduled to open in spring 2020. Reviewers Tarteel Muammar and Hasan Safadi take the readers on a tour of the exhibition, which was curated by Baha Jubeh and Abdel-Rahman Shabane, and share their observations within their critical and analytical framework, on the relationship of “printing” to the social, political, and economic conditions in Jerusalem, linking it to censorship, and the status of the city of Jerusalem. They attempt to raise questions about the vast trove of materials, which include historical prints and two hundred printing clichés, and knowledge presented, to stimulate debate and to invite further research into this subject from various perspectives.

Keywords

Printing; New Mustamloun; Jerusalem; Palestinian Museum; *al-Karmil* newspaper; Yusuf Nasr; Sixth Communiqué; censorship; political and cultural publications; Haifa.

On 27 July 2021, as Palestinians were suffering from long months of lockdown and isolation, and as cultural institutions were hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic health protocols,

the Palestinian Museum launched an online version of the exhibition *Printed in Jerusalem: Mustamloun* (*Tubi'a fi al-Quds: mustamlun judud*), which had originally been scheduled to open to the public in spring 2020. It took considerable determination on the part of the Palestinian Museum to inaugurate this exhibition during an extended period of restricted gatherings. The exhibition, which encompasses a vast trove of materials and rich history, was organized by two new curators, Baha Jubeh, and second-time guest curator Abdel-Rahman Shabane. From the museum's online description, the exhibition:

explores the relation between Jerusalemites and publications printed in their city – be their content political, educational, commercial, cultural or touristic – by probing the profession of the mustamly.



Figure 1. The welcoming sign of the exhibition “Printed in Jerusalem: Mustamloun,” (*Tubi'a fi al-Quds: mustamlun judoud*). Courtesy of The Palestinian Museum, 2020.

The creators of the *Printed in Jerusalem (Second Iteration)* exhibition have tackled the concept of the “new mustamloun.” This was the basis for the exhibit’s exploration of new ways to conceptualize archival materials, as well as to produce artworks that simulate the original materials. The materials were donated by Jerusalem’s Lawrence Press to Dar Al-Tifel, and the exhibition was initially launched at Jerusalem’s Palestinian Heritage Museum at Dar Al-Tifl in 2018.

The concept and properties of mustamloun have changed over the different historical periods. It took us some time to research the meaning of mustamloun. The curators define the word as follows:

A mustamly (plural: mustamloun) was tasked with dictating manuscripts to copyists and acted as an intermediary between author and the reading public. Historically, the transmission of content was merely one aspect of the role of the mustamly, the other being that of censorship. They were able to ban and omit, and to promote that which fell in line with their beliefs and intellectual inclinations. The profession of the mustamly is an ancient one that disappeared like others before it as modernisation replaced human voices with machinery's hum and grind.²

Shaykh Ahmad Shakir defines the term mustamly as “a person who asks for dictation from the shaykh” (taken from the Arabic verb yumly; “to dictate”), hence the mustamly receives the narration of the shaykh and transmits/dictates the content to the students. When it was challenging for them to be heard by all attendees, the shaykh would have one or more persons assigned with the task of transmitting their talk to the rest of the audience. As such, the mustamly would reach a high status through reporting and informing the public about the contents of the shaykh's speech.³

As noted throughout the museum's publications and interviews, the exhibition seemingly brings into being and explores “the new mustamly,” particularly in the recent history of Jerusalem. However, the question that arises is: what does that concept really mean, and how does it relate to modern printing? What is the relation of modern printing with the acts of dictation (“Istimla”)? Also, who is a mustamly today? What are his roles, and what tools does he use? And why does the exhibit restrict the role of the new mustamly to the act of censorship within the context of a complete monitoring and behavior control system?

Entering the Exhibition

The exhibition presents rich and diverse archived works without confining itself to a single narrative or chronological order. That can be noticed when one sees the great array of newspapers, such as *al-Fajr*, and *Filastin*, as well as various magazines and printing clichés (whether letters, logos, stamps, and the like) in addition to a collection of educational books by Khalil al-Sakakini and others. The works are divided into groups, and the groups into sections that are not visibly marked for the visitors. This style of presentation generally attracts the visitor's attention but makes it difficult to coherently grasp how the knowledge products are interlinked, until one watches the interviews related to these sections within the Palestinian Museum's electronic platforms.

The transitions between sections and materials revealed some time gaps in the research process, which may have been due to deficiencies in the archives, artworks, and exhibition publications. This made it challenging to interact with the exhibition's objective of understanding Jerusalem life in all of its aspects through the lens of printing presses, since it did not transmit a sense of the historical and social context of the city. One may call into question the purpose of this exhibition and its preoccupations, as

seen in how it deals with the archive's available materials, and its primary focus on printing and printed materials. In this way, we find ourselves moving from the "Sixth communiqué" to *al-Fajr* newspaper's archives, the impact of Jordanian censorship, and on to the clichéd advertisements of famous industries (as well as touristic clichés, schoolbooks, and so on) in Jerusalem. This happens without establishing an inductive historical analysis in conjunction with the intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and political transformations in the region.



Figure 2. A sample of the collection of educational books by Khalil al-Sakakini. Courtesy of The Palestinian Museum, 2020.

Importantly, there is no mention or reference to the ownership of printing presses or who has the right to own them. For example, Ottoman sultan Bayezid II prohibited all forms of printing by his Muslim subjects in order to enhance his monopoly over Arab-Islamic production in the region, while he gave other religious groups the right to establish their own printing presses within the empire, on the condition that they not use the Arabic letters. This freed Jews and Christians to establish their own printing presses and delayed the printing process for Muslims.

There is also no reference to the craft of printing and to those who mastered it nor to the related crafts of carpentry, blacksmithing, painting, and Arabic calligraphy. This leads us to wonder whether the exhibited printing clichés (metal/wooden plates that bear ink) were locally produced or were imported from abroad. It also makes us reflect on the production or import of pigments and colors (which can impart

information on the relationship of Jerusalem and its cultural and social history with the rest of the world). Although the exhibition specified that it examined the formation of social, economic and political relations in the city, the presentation raised a number of significant questions that went unanswered.⁴

Jerusalem in the Exhibition

The city of Jerusalem played a prominent role in the printing sector, not only in historic Palestine but also in the whole of the Levant. The first printing press in Palestine was established in Jerusalem in 1830 by Jewish resident Nesim Beyk.⁵ With Jerusalem a global religious center, printing in the city was concentrated on Christian and Jewish religious books. Printing activities eventually extended from religious to commercial, cultural, and political publications, all of which had a great impact on public life. The exhibition did zoom in on the period of Jordanian rule in Jerusalem – with materials depicting Jordanian censorship of local newspapers – as well as Israeli military rule over Jerusalem – highlighting the restrictions and prohibitions pertaining to printing and publishing.

Jerusalem's actual role in the field of printing was only partially presented in "Printed in Jerusalem: Mustamloun." The exhibition displayed a certain historical phase of printing but did not delve into how the profession was developed. It also did not explore the broader historical and geographic contexts, which could have tied Jerusalem (as a central city and religious pilgrimage site) to other Arab and Palestinian cities, as well as shown the relation between these cities and their inhabitants in terms of culture and the social, political, and economic life at the time. Adding those layers could have helped us understand the great role that publications, such as Najib Nassar's *al-Karmil* newspaper in Haifa, had in shaping the political and cultural awareness of Palestinians in the north, not to mention the many achievements in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo that were made in partnership with and inspiration from Jerusalem.

This second iteration of the "mustamloun" exhibition generally lacked specification of the political and social life of the mustamly in Jerusalem, and did not examine sensitive political dimensions of this profession. For example, what was the selection criteria of the mustamloun, and who was the party who hired them? By whom were they apprenticed to become the "eyes and tongues" of the regime that gave them a political and social status, such as during the sensitive political period of the city's Ottoman era. Were they not appointed by the ruling authorities at the time?

The Political Dimension and the Sixth Communiqué

The exhibition did not present a full picture of the reciprocal relationship between printing and the political situation in Jerusalem. The city, after all, had undergone successive oppressive regimes that prohibited all liberationist and nationalist printing activities. Although the exhibition did include the Jerusalemite *al-Fajr* newspaper in

several of its sections, it made no mention of what happened to its founder Yusuf Nasr, who was assassinated in 1974 in mysterious circumstances because of his political views and his role in political life. His body has never been found.

On the other hand, an art installation work titled *The Sixth Communiqué* was prominent in the exhibition, and pointed to the status of Jerusalem and its printing presses during the first intifada. This installation demonstrated

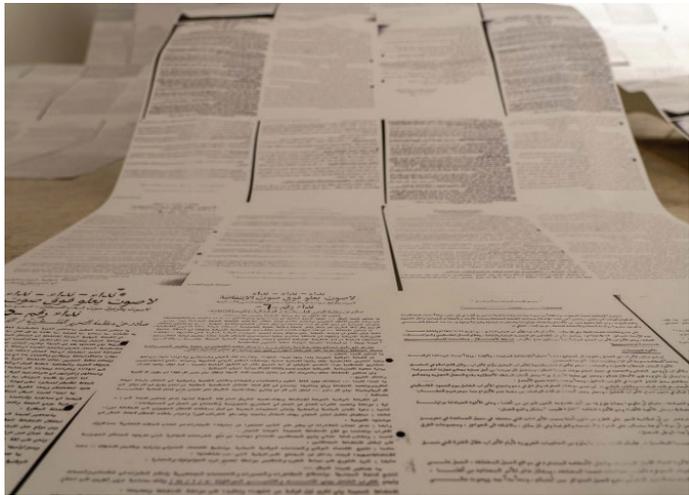


Figure 3. “The Sixth Communiqué” art installation at the exhibition. Courtesy of The Palestinian Museum, 2020.

the printed materials at the time, as well as reflected on the hunt and searches, arrests, and assassinations of those who printed revolutionary materials. The premise was that the “Sixth Communiqué was printed in Jerusalem,”⁶ but the information provided was not sufficient to ascertain whether the first intifada communiqués were, in fact, printed there. The linkage between this installation work and the exhibition was a distraction for visitors that reinforced the act of merely (and perhaps passively) “watching.”

With all of this in mind, we must not neglect to note the tremendous efforts made to develop this exhibition, including the transfer of all these works from Jerusalem to Ramallah and the related risks – especially in light of the harsh political and security situation – for the purpose of presenting them to the largest possible number of people, in hope that this knowledge may contribute to further advancement.

Conclusion

This exhibition enables us to view printing as a transition point in modern history that constitutes an important change in societal culture and the formation of modern identity. Printing has contributed to the acceleration and spread of knowledge on the global level, as demonstrated by various historical stages of printing in Jerusalem in the exhibit. The exhibition also contributes to our understanding of the role of printing in the previous eras in relation to the news, when an entire day was needed to update events through daily newspapers, and its opportunity as a space for discussions, debates, and deliberations.

The most important epistemological contribution of the “New Mustamloun”

exhibition, in the case of links to censorship, is that the “algorithms” of today’s modern technology and its accompanying tools for monitoring and targeting knowledge distribution can be seen as a form of mustamloun. We can see how these new mustamloun (algorithms) direct us on what to watch, hear, and read. The technological revolution transformed printing and printing presses to a digital world where a tremendous amount of (diverse and sometimes contradictory) data can be produced. Through speedy updates, overwhelming amounts of information shapes the greater part of our consciousness and awareness of current issues. Hence, the visible act of censorship is unnecessary; it has expanded its reaches to that of epistemological authority.

It would be fascinating to take this contemporary conceptualization into a third iteration of the exhibition, based on today’s reality through the mirror of the past. This could allow a broad and critical eye to give the exhibition a new, vibrant, and dynamic dimension.

Tarteel Muammar, from Bethlehem, has a BA in journalism and political science from Birzeit University. She is currently assistant coordinator of the “Visual Arts: A Flourishing Field” project at A.M. Qattan Foundation.

Jerusalemite Hasan Safadi holds a BA in journalism and political science from Birzeit University, and was previously with al-Safir newspaper and the Institute for Palestine Studies. He is currently a media officer at A.M. Qattan Foundation.

Endnotes

- 1 The Arabic title differs slightly from the English, see online at www.palmuseum.org/printed-in-jerusalem (accessed 1 March 2021).
- 2 Printed in Jerusalem – The New Mustamloun – Exhibition catalogue, 4.
- 3 Shaykh Ahmad Shakir’s explanation in *Sharh al-fiyat al-Suyuti fi ilm al-Hadith*, (Cork, IR: Sifatu Safwa), 127–28.
- 4 Printed in Jerusalem – The New Mustamloun – Exhibition catalogue, 27.
- 5 Mohammed Basil Suleiman, “Early Printing Presses in Palestine: A Historical Note,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 36 (Winter 2009): 79–91, online at www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/JQ_36_Early_Printing_0.pdf (accessed 1 March 2021).
- 6 Interview with Baha Jubeh (1:45): online at youtu.be/-EFXMuCSsZo (accessed 1 March 2021).