Abstract
At the fifty-ninth edition of the Venice Biennale Arte (2022), Palestinian art production is showcased at the exhibition “From Palestine with Art,” curated by the Palestine Museum US and included as a parallel event to the Biennale. The exhibition, featuring Palestinian artists across generations and locations, draws on traditional Palestinian national imageries and discourse to shape a collective tale about the beauty of the land, both real and imagined. The dozens of works on display show the continuity of tropes that inform the formation and evolution of Palestinian national identity. At the same time, they also convey the diversity that characterizes the international dimension of a people with a long diasporic history. As the exhibition pursues interpretations and ideas of Palestinian beauty, its goal is to unveil what emerges artistically through and despite the hardships and suffering imposed by Israeli occupation. This Palestinian contribution to the Venice Biennale is a stage for wider recognition of the vibrant Palestinian artistic production globally.

Keywords
Palestine; art; national identity; beauty; land; diaspora


The goal of the exhibition From Palestine with Art, included as a parallel event at the fifty-ninth edition of the Venice Biennale Arte 2022, is to represent the beauty of the land and its people, while avoiding the reiteration
of narratives and images focusing on violence and pain. The nineteen Palestinian artists showcased in the exhibition successfully depicted a collective image of what they considered as the most beautiful and meaningful characteristics of Palestinian culture, nature and identity, ranging from paintings of rural landscapes to traditional embroidery and portraits of celebrated Palestinian intellectuals.

*From Palestine with Art* was born as an idea of the Palestine Museum US (Woodbridge, CT), brought by curator Nancy Nesvet to Faysal Saleh, the museum founder, that Palestinian art needed to be adequately represented at the world-famous display in Venice. The exhibition ultimately found a home in the elegant premises of Palazzo Mora, on the popular Strada Nuova, hosted by the European Cultural Centre, and can be accessed freely by all visitors until 27 November 2022. The artists involved in the project were handpicked by the curator among those who were already collaborating with the Palestine Museum US. Nesvet was able to build from that a collective endeavor representing different branches of the Palestinian national community, with contributors from different generations and geographical locations, producing thirty original works exclusively for this exhibition.

The works are arranged in a single, high-ceilinged room adorned with traditional Venetian tiles. Facing the entrance, a wide painting depicting a rural landscape of lush flora and rolling hills welcomes the visitors. *In Pursuit of Utopia* by Nabil Anani is the expression of the author’s frustration with the present political situation and, at the same time, the image of an alternative Palestinian reality where the absence of the Israeli military occupation allows the land and its dependents to thrive. Anani’s painting seems to set the tone for the other works featured in the exhibition by conveying some of the most important tropes and imageries shaping Palestinian national identity. Palestinian celebration of attachment to the land, longing for it, and appreciation of its bucolic beauty overwhelms the viewer, and in opposition to the violations perpetrated by the occupiers. Many of the works draw inspiration from, or directly render, traditional elements that make up modern Palestinian national and political identity. The painting is surrounded by installations that explicitly refer to such elements, such as the olive tree whose branches are hung with keys donated by Palestinians who fled their homes during the 1948 Nakba but kept their keys as a symbol of their resolve to Return.

*All that Remains* by Ibrahim al-Azza is an intriguing reinterpretation of potent symbols of Palestinian identity that draw not only from the “Palestinian collective memory” but also from images of its present. Two black and white kufiyas wrapped around pages written by Palestinians from all over the world hang from the ceiling, tied to barbed wire, remind the visitor of the clearest physical (and metaphorical) manifestation of Israel’s infrastructure of occupation. Through the fabric of the kufiyas, it is possible to glimpse the hand-written script on the paper sheets written by different Palestinians of their own recollection of Palestine – and in their preferred language, a reference to the polyglot of a diasporic people. Similarly, Samar Hussaini reimagines the motives and colors of the traditional Palestinian *thawb* in her *Ahlan – With Open Arms*. Realized on canvas framing the entrance door, Hussaini’s work
includes various media to redesign the embroidery patterns traditionally indicating the regional origins of the dress’s owner.

Collective and personal memories, as well as identities, are also at the center of works that explore Palestinian heritage in a less explicit form. *Woman in All Her Moods* by sculptor Sana Farah Bishara is a two-piece bronze statue that communicates the artist’s struggle in solidifying her own identity. As a Palestinian woman and mother, born in Nazareth and thus having Israeli citizenship, the artist must deal with external pressures while delineating her own self. Her sculpture can be arranged in different poses, symbolizing both a fragmented identity and its frailty due to its conflicting dimensions.

Not far from Bishara’s works, the painting by Mohammed al-Haj, *Immigration*, has the power to connect the Palestinian collective experience to that of all national diasporas. Al-Haj’s work is centered around the idea of displacement and powerfully conveyed by the faceless silhouettes that wander in a desert-like yellow space. The condition deriving from forceful displacement – whether by war, economic decline, or natural disasters – binds Palestinians and other people in the region and beyond who share the burden of being migrants.

As a historian, I could not help but reflect on the sources that informed an exhibition in which personal and collective memories occupy such a central place. Many of the featured works are based on the artists’ exposure to oral history of not only historical events and the accompanying traumas, but also of the traditions that came to build Palestinian cultural heritage. Oral transmission played a key role in maintaining a sense of belonging and in the reformulation of a national community among Palestinians scattered throughout Arab countries following the Nakba. While often dismissed by traditional historiography, the thousands of oral accounts of what happened in 1948 began to be validated by new archival discoveries in the 1980s and are now gaining increased recognition. The works featured in *From Palestine with Art* contribute to the international acknowledgment of a rich oral heritage; they provide an opportunity for the general public to encounter Palestine’s most traditional aspects and contemporary reinterpretations, while highlighting the founding role of collective and personal stories transmitted across generations.

One installation in particular represents the importance that Palestinians attach to the preservation of their historical background, namely Salman Abu Sitta’s *Map of Palestine 1877*. Placed on the floor, the map allows visitors to “walk” over Ottoman Palestine and engage with place names that no longer exist, particularly the hundreds of villages that were destroyed during the Nakba. The map, which is part of Abu Sitta’s lifelong project of rebuilding Palestinian historical atlases, is a testimony to Palestinian efforts at historical preservation, ultimately the essential pillar in the construction of a shared national identity.

While the exhibit is extremely successful in highlighting the beauty and significance of Palestinian national, cultural, and natural heritage, such a focus may also be seen as one of its limits. Some works are distanced from traditional imageries and themes but tend to be interpreted within the context set by other installations. The visitor
may leave wondering how Palestinian artists active today engage and interact with current discourses and techniques, how they ultimately fit in, in their international fields of action. The importance of constantly reaffirming Palestinian heritage and identity cannot be understated, as it is still threatened daily by Israel’s settler-colonial endeavor. Nonetheless, conveying the contemporary and global dimension of Palestinian cultural production is arguably as important. This would help to represent an artistic scene that remains vibrant and prolific, in spite of the asymmetric power relations that all Palestinian, from all generations and places still face.

*From Palestine with Art* is a remarkable new step in the growth of Palestinian presence at the Venice Biennale. The greatest success of this exhibition is introducing a wider public to an incredibly rich artistic and cultural production while also asserting the existence and importance of the Palestinians’ own historical narration”. The curators contributed to the foundation for a persistent Palestinian national presence in Venice and paved the way for future representations of Palestinian artistic production at such a paramount international venue.

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**Endnotes**