“Visit Palestine”: A Brief Study of Palestine Posters

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This article describes the Palestine posters in the Palestine Poster Project Archives, and then briefly discusses the history and genres of Palestine posters. It concludes by examining the trajectory of one particular poster – “Visit Palestine” from 1936 – and its iconography and rebirth sixty years later.¹

The Palestine Poster Project Archives

The Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA) collects and archives posters, handbills, other paper ephemera, and more recently since 2005, also digital image files. Because of the decision to look comprehensively at the land and people of Palestine, the archives includes not only Palestinian posters, but also international posters, as well as Zionist and Israeli posters, all of which serve to tell the history of the land and people of Palestine.² The PPPA’s digital collection (online at palestineposterproject.org) numbers ten thousand, with more than four thousand paper posters in the physical archives. While private in its hard copy form, it is publicly available on the internet, adhering to open access standards that allow people around the world to access, download, and use the images, as well as submit their own works or collections. The PPPA also encourages submissions, translation help, informational input, and other crowd-sourcing techniques to build, annotate, and translate the archives for public use. Collaboration and exchange with artists, graphic designers, NGOs, and individuals globally has allowed the archives to expand its paper collection as well as its collection of contemporary digital works.³ A unique user contribution section encourages people to send in photographs of posters in situ (hanging on walls), which now numbers over 680 images.⁴
An increasing number of new Palestine posters are “born digitally” and then printed and distributed locally, often in very small quantities, or they may only ever appear as a digital file on the Internet. This combination of localization and globalization represents a sea change in the way political poster art is produced and disseminated. Traditionally, political posters were printed in a single location and then distributed as hard copies. The global reach of the Internet combined with the rising costs of mass production is shifting production away from large centralized printing operations to a system controlled more by small end-users in multiple and global locations. It also allows for interesting reworkings and remixes of images and iconography from earlier posters, reincarnated in digital and print forms, as will be detailed in the third part of this essay.

The collections in the PPPA overlap with and complement Palestine poster collections elsewhere. Other large collections and archives include the rich and detailed work in the American University of Beirut’s Jafet Library; the International Institute of Social History (an institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences); the Ethnographic and Art Museum at Birzeit University; the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, based in Los Angeles, California; and the Museum of Design, Zurich. Private collections such as those of Ezzeddine Qalaq from the 1960s and 1970s, George Michel Al Ama, and Saleh Abdel Jawad’s intifada poster collection are unique and valuable holdings that have also been exhibited in public.

Several publications have examined Palestinian posters as an artistic genre as well as their significance within the cultural and political milieus of their production. Artist Shafiq Radwan’s 1992 Arabic monograph on Palestinian posters focuses on the artistic traditions from which posters emerged. More recently, graphic designer Zeina Maasri’s outstanding study of political posters of the Lebanese Civil War includes many posters related to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian cause. Rasha Salti’s work curating and explicating Ezzeddine Qalaq’s Palestine poster collection analyzes and places this preeminent collection within the political and historic events and emerging organizations of the PLO in the 1960s and 1970s.

None of the institutional sites currently hosting Palestine posters, however, features digitally designed posters. Decades of collecting posters exclusively as works-on-paper
has left many curators and archivists struggling to define terms that reflect the new realities presented by digitization and to figure out where “born digitally” works fit in the scheme of museum management and library science. Yet since the advent of the twenty-first century, most Palestine posters are “born digitally.” In the PPPA, they are presented on an equal footing with works-on-paper. Digital-only posters are identified as such; however, there is no disparity between the Website’s presentation of a poster that had been printed on paper and one that originated as a digital file. This makes sense because any digital file can be printed.

Palestine Posters

In the Palestine Poster Project Archives, the label “poster” functions as a rough catchall for all manner of printed products, most obviously those made with the intent to be hung on the wall, including most obviously posters, but also handbills, announcements, and other ephemera. The earliest surviving posters made for Palestine come from the late nineteenth century. These were produced by two different communities, one encouraging Christian tourism to the Holy Land and the other promoting Zionism. With the introduction of printing presses in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, printed paper announcements emerged alongside the rise of locally produced newspapers and books for the local community. Handbills and informational posters were pasted on the walls of Palestinian cities throughout the twentieth century. Unfortunately, we have little evidence of these, either material or photographic, for all of the reasons associated with the collection of ephemera more generally, including its temporary purpose and medium and the difficulty in preserving it. Some still-extant Palestinian posters from the British Mandate period advertised musical programs and another denounced the heavy-handed policies of the British High Commissioner.

The heyday of poster art was the mid- to late twentieth century when globally posters served a wide variety of political, cultural, and ideological causes. Marking occasions, supporting or dissenting from political decisions, commemorating events or deaths, and encouraging consumers to purchase products or attend events were some of the many subjects to which posters were dedicated. From the 1920s onward, political liberation movements, communist and socialist governments, and popular struggles against authoritarian rulers all chose posters as a means to promulgate their ideologies and messages, because they could be produced cheaply and quickly and plastered anonymously in public places. The Spanish Civil War, revolutionary China, and the rise of independence movements and anti-colonial struggles from the 1930s through the 1980s, including such places as Cuba, South Africa, and Nicaragua, all inspired the production of massive amounts of posters. While posters are notable for their vibrant graphics and connections to the artistic world, they also constitute a historical source akin to newspapers or textbooks that we can study to understand language, mobilization strategies, messaging, and visual symbolism.

Palestinian artists and graphic designers from the late Ottoman era through the early
British Mandate period experienced a transformation in ideas, mediums, and subjects. Kamal Boullata shows how the art scene developing in Palestine was transforming from one of “religious iconography to secular painting.” Boullata posits that “Through the new pictorial language, whose system, principles and view of the world were unique propagations of creative expression in Western culture, the earliest Arab artists experimenting with painting were each contributing to his or her interpretation of modernity and definition of national identity as their very language reflected their own encounter with the West.” Daoud Zalatimo, Zulfa al-Sa’di, Nicola Saig (Sayigh), Jamal Badran, and Tawfiq Jawhariyyeh all had studios and influenced and trained the next generations. But the 1948 war and the creation of Israel decimated this artistic community. In particular, the Palestinian cities – including Jaffa, Haifa, and Jerusalem – where political organizing, cultural centers, businesses, and educational establishments had cultivated and depended on the artistic and graphic design communities were largely emptied of their Palestinian residents.

Rebuilding these traditions and communities came slowly post-1948, as artists remade their lives and careers in Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, and Amman, as well as in the West Bank, Gaza, and inside Israel. The most significant development in Palestinian poster production occurred in the 1960s with the rise of liberation movements. Artists such as Ismail Shamout and Tamam al-Akhal in Beirut, Suleiman Mansour in the West Bank, Naji al-Ali in Beirut and Kuwait, and many others developed a visual vocabulary to express Palestinian identifications, struggles, and nationalism. The popular appeal of these artists’ work was rooted in their use of traditional imagery associated with Palestinian handicrafts, calligraphy, folklore, music, and poetry, which they combined with the symbols of Palestinian resistance. In most contexts, fine art stays largely in the realm of the elite, but in the late 1960s and 1970s, many in the new generation of Palestinian (and other) artists joined the emerging Palestinian liberation movements.

Artists flocked to these movements, as Rasha Salti describes, because they were broadly liberating and empowering. Palestinians and other revolutionaries placed themselves in opposition to both colonial powers as well as reactionary Arab regimes. “Thus the Palestinian revolution was perceived and experienced as a profoundly transformative project that sought to restore justice, dignity, equality and sovereignty...
Visit Palestine“: A Brief Study of Palestine Posters

in the Arab world.18 Salti chronicles how, because of the nature of the project:

the PLO would attract a nebula of dissident, gifted and innovative artists and intellectuals to Beirut. Artists and poets contributed to the production of posters. ... In their turn, artists discovered the institutional realm as well as the resources to innovate and experiment. ... The array of experimentation, diversity and creativity of Palestinian posters is bewildering. It has remained unprecedented in the Arab world, and remarkable on a worldwide scale.19

Through their artwork, these artists participated in building and defining Palestinian culture, revolutionary struggle, and artistic taste. That artists’ work could be so widely disseminated and celebrated indicates the participation of all sectors of society, including artists, in the Palestinian liberation movements.20

Using techniques and methods gained in their fine arts training, they created a new visual representation of Palestine in oil, watercolor, and gesso. Transferred to posters and graphics for the liberation movements, reproductions of artists’ work were seen on building walls, in offices, and in refugee camps every day. The popularized usage of these fine art works was facilitated by accessible reproduction technology, their incorporation into posters which were placed on walls for all to see, free distribution, and the absence of

Ghassan Kanafani at a Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine press conference. Unknown date and source.

Poster by Emile Menhem, c. 1981. The Arabic is an excerpt of a poem by Mahmud Darwish, which reads, “because the storm promised me wine and new toasts and rainbows / I will go on serenading happiness.” The Storm (al-‘Asifa) was also the name of an armed wing of Fatah.
copyrights. Beirut and the PLO provided graphic canvases for Palestinian artists such as Ismail Shamhout, Hosni Radwan, Kamal Boullata, Shafiq Radwan, and Jumana al-Husseini, as well as artists from elsewhere, including Burhan Karkutli, Natheer al-Naba‘a, and Youssef Abdelke (Syria); Emile Menhem (Lebanon); Helmi Eltouni (Egypt); and Marc Rudin (Switzerland), among others.21

Palestine posters now likely number in the tens of thousands, held in collections all over the world. But they are still being produced (if now mostly digitally) more profusely than ever, put into artists’ digital portfolios, and circulated globally on Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Flickr, among other sites. Their digital form allows almost anyone with an Internet connection to print them out, paste them on walls, hang them in homes and offices, and carry them in demonstrations, updating Bourdieu’s idea of cultural diffusion for the digital age, reflecting the movement and adaptation of symbols across time and space.22 Palestinians have developed a variety of well-known symbols and metaphors that serve as a shorthand to indicate various hallmarks of Palestine and the Palestinian struggle. The following section traces the life and afterlife of one such poster and its iconography.

“Visit Palestine”

One poster in the PPPA in particular – “Visit Palestine” from 1936 – allows us to examine in detail the development of the Palestine poster genre and how posters reflect the history of Palestine-Israel and the visual language that memorializes the events, symbols, and images of Palestine. The “Visit Palestine” poster was made in 1936 for the Tourist Development Association of Palestine by Franz Krausz, an Austrian Jewish immigrant to Palestine in the 1930s who fled Germany before the Holocaust.23 Krausz designed graphics for commercial advertising and posters for Zionist organizations in Palestine, and also in Israel after 1948. Two versions of “Visit Palestine” were produced, one in blue and orange tints, and another in black and orange tints.

The “Visit Palestine” poster disappeared into archives until it was revived in 1995 by David Tartakover, an Israeli artist and one well known for his artistic opposition to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.24 Tartakover obtained Krausz’s permission to reprint the poster and describes his decision as a gesture of hope in the post-Oslo environment. Immediately following Tartakover’s fine-art reprinting run of one thousand, the poster also appeared as a slightly smaller paper poster that was sold in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and could be seen hanging in Palestinian Authority offices, Palestinian homes, and book and tourist shops.25 Tartakover described the diffusion of the poster as natural: “I think everyone can use it the way that he wants,” he said. “You can’t control something you put out there. You can’t give people instructions how to use it.”26 Palestinian artist and designer Amer Shomali, who would rework this poster in 2009 (see below), interprets the embrace of the poster as follows: “The Palestinians, in effect, are taking advantage of the ironies embodied in the provenance of ‘Visit Palestine’ to thumb their noses at the Israeli government that for decades claimed there had never been such
In other words, Palestinians who read the fine print on the poster might know that the Tourist Development Association and Franz Krausz had produced a Zionist poster proclaiming “Visit Palestine” to promote Jewish immigration to create Palestine as a homeland for Jews (seeing the native indigenous population as Arabs and not as Palestinians). But instead, for the most part Palestinians and those in solidarity with their struggle see the “Visit Palestine” poster message as one proclaiming that Palestine and Palestinians exist, in contrast to countless Israeli denials of either or both. And most people are taken by the simplicity and beauty of the image and the message and do not read the fine print or interpret the poster as it was intended.

Krausz’s design and the aesthetically appealing imagery of the “Visit Palestine” poster – the view from the Mount of Olives looking west toward the Old City framed on one side by a mature tree – does much to explain its popularity. The ambiguity stems from Krausz choice to make the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine built in the seventh century, and the area around it on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount the most detailed and recognizable part of the poster. Following the reprinting, many Palestinians and others have assumed or asserted that this poster could not have been made by a Zionist or Israeli both because it features the word “Palestine” and the detailed image of the Dome of the Rock. But both assumptions would be wrong. Not only does the PPPA host 114 Zionist pre-Israeli state posters that use the word “Palestine,” but also a good deal of material produced by Israelis, particularly for touristic consumption including many views of the Wailing Wall, shows the Dome of the Rock. However, the image on the poster along with the “Visit Palestine” message facilitates Palestinians seeing the subject of the poster as fundamentally Palestinian, and thus selling it and reproducing it without question as to its origin. Another “Visit Palestine” poster that Krausz designed, featuring the city of Tiberius, the Sea of Galilee, and the snow-capped Jabal al-Shaykh/Mt. Hermon in the distance,
has not been revived, reprinted, or remixed, perhaps either because the location is more ambiguous or because it was not reprinted in the 1990s by Tartakover.29

After Tartakovar and Krausz reprinted the “Visit Palestine” poster in 1995, and its subsequent embrace by both Israelis and Palestinians, it became referential material for a myriad of other posters and artworks. In 2005, the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design in Israel commemorated Israeli independence day with an exhibition of 57 posters by 57 artists.30 One poster by David Portal riffs on the Krausz “Visit Palestine” poster. Placing “Israel 57” at the top, he breaks up the word “visit” to read “is it” Palestine, and adds next to it a line from the Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovs (d. 1943), “they say there is a land, where is the land . . . .” Portal mixes the Zionist, pre-state past of the “Visit Palestine” poster with the current anniversary of the emergence of the Israeli state from that Zionist past, which, his text suggests, did not take place in a vacuum.31

Taking this idea of Israel and Palestine, two artists living in Vienna, Austria – Osama Zatar and Tal Adler – used the “Visit Palestine” image to announce the declaration of OneState (“previously known as Israel/Palestine”) in June 2009 along with their self-appointment as its “ambassadors.” The opening of OneState’s first “embassy” in a Vienna art studio was streamed online. They declared that in this OneState “everyone lives together with equality, benefiting from cultural diversity and respect.”32 The poster serves their message well, playing on the ambiguity of the Zionist origins and message of the “Visit Palestine” poster, and the poster’s embrace by Palestinians.

Another remix of the “Visit Palestine”
poster by Amer Shomali in 2009, places the Israeli separation wall in front of the viewer. The wall, built in the 1990s and 2000s runs through the West Bank, effectively absorbing Israeli settlements into Israel and limiting access of West Bank Palestinians to Jerusalem except through a number of restrictive checkpoints. Shomali writes, “After the failure of the peace process it was the time for a third print declaring the failure of the previous two prints.” On the poster image itself he credits Krausz and writes, “I agree that adding the wall is vandalism and a rude intervention. ~ The Designer.” It is up to the viewer to decide whether Shomali means the wall in the image or the actual separation wall, or both.

This remix of “Visit Palestine” suggests an imagined landscape. First, the viewer must know the original poster because the identifying markers of Jerusalem are blocked by the wall. (Shomali has created a number of other versions in which identifying markers of the city are just visible over the wall, including the Dome of the Rock.) Second, the wall is reproduced as it is experienced and seen, including with the graffiti that adorns it. But in reality, the wall does not exist on this exact location, but rather it is on the other side of the Mount of Olives, behind the viewer. Thus, its placement here symbolizes the Israeli restrictions on Palestinians entering Jerusalem. As such it comments on and captures the historic transformation of Palestinians’ relationship to the city over the decades.

The ubiquity of the reprinted Krausz poster among Palestinians meant that it also entered other graphic realms. The advertising for the 6th al-Kamandjati Baroque Music Festival in Ramallah in 2010 used the image, unaltered, except for the addition of the festival information, as did advertising for the Palestine Film Festival in Australia, held in 2012. “Visit Palestine” was also picked up and reworked into the art of those working in solidarity with Palestine or with Palestinian artists or to address human rights abuses or house demolitions. The advertising for an exhibit titled “Visit Palestine – The Streets of Ain el-Helweh” at the Danish Arts Foundation was a reworking of the “Visit Palestine” poster, featuring the tree on the left side, but Jerusalem is replaced by an abandoned car, presumably in the ‘Ayn al-Hilwa refugee camp in Lebanon. The goal of the exhibit is to explore “an urban landscape embodying 64 years of exile,” and the graphic suggests that the Palestine that the poster exhorts its viewer to visit is now found in the camp. Jerusalem is no longer pictured, and “Visit Palestine” and has been reframed to be where Palestinians live.

**Conclusion**

So well known is “Visit Palestine” as a poster that it appeared on U.S. television in an episode of Larry David’s HBO comedy *Curb Your Enthusiasm* from 2011. In the episode, David and his friend meet at a Palestinian chicken restaurant and humorously talk about how they feel hated because of the politics expressed in the poster. As they scan the Palestine posters on the walls of the restaurant, David declares that it is the perfect place for Jews to go to cheat on their wives because there are no Jews there. The five seconds of the poster in the show are employed to serve as a marker of Palestine and the struggle for Palestine. Only those who know the poster’s long life and history would know, in fact,
that it had been made by a Zionist Jew, the very people David thinks are absent from the restaurant, and not by or for its fictional Palestinian owners and patrons.

The origins of “Visit Palestine,” the simplistic interpretations of it, and the complex remixes of it over the last twenty years reveal the continuously changing ways that individuals and communities create and seize on images, the importance of remembering and forgetting in that process, and the role played by visual representations and communications. If David Tartakover had not reprinted this poster in 1995, would it have ever reappeared to have another life in a myriad of other ways? What else remains to be rediscovered? The wealth of an archive like the Palestine Poster Project Archives is not only in the collection itself. It is made greater by its openness to the digital world of artists, the submission process, and the open-source nature that allows users to download and re-craft the posters as they see fit.

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Dan Walsh is the founder and curator of the Palestine Poster Project Archives. A graduate of Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (2012), he began his study of Palestine posters while a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco in the mid-1970s. He is currently working on a project to have a major subset of the PPPA – 1,600 Palestine posters – inscribed in UNESCO’s Memory of the World program.

Endnotes
1 This paper is based on the intellectual and field work that Dan Walsh has put into compiling and annotating this archives over the last forty years and which he outlines in greater detail in his MA thesis, available online at www.palestineposterproject.org/sites/aod/files/thesis_daniel_j_walsh-1_0.pdf. This paper builds on his thesis and our many conversations to analyze the visual vocabulary and iconography of Palestine posters. Assistance in researching and writing this article was provided by Emma Murphy.
2 While the inclusion of Israeli and Zionist posters upsets some Palestinians and the fact that the name of the archives is the Palestine Poster Project upsets Israelis, the archives is predicated on the idea that the poster history of the geographic space of historic Palestine should be represented. Thus, the archives include 1) Any poster with the word “Palestine” in it, in any language, from any source or time period; 2) Any poster created or published by any artist or agency claiming Palestinian nationality or Palestinian participation; 3) Any poster published in the geographical territory of historic Palestine, at any point in history, including contemporary Israel; 4) Any poster published by any source which relates directly to the social, cultural, political, military or economic history of Palestine; and/or 5) Any poster related to Zionism or anti-Zionism in any language, from any source, published after August 31, 1897. http://www.palestineposterproject.org/content/about-the-palestine-poster-project-archives-0
3 These collaborations allow the PPPA to digitally hold a number of collections, such as the work of two artists from Gaza, Ahmed and Mohamed Abu Nasser, who recreate film posters (www.palestineposterproject.org/artist/ahmed-abu-nasser-tarzan); the posters produced and hung in from Yarmuk Camp in Damascus from 2008–2011 (www.palestineposterproject.org/source/sent-in-by-ayman-qasem); all twenty-five entries to the poster contest for the Yabous Jerusalem Music Festival of 2010 “Rhythms from around the world” (www.palestineposterproject.


Salti, “Of Dreamers.”


For more on posters as a genre, see: John Barnicoat, A Concise History of Posters (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Steven Seidman, Posters, Propaganda, and Persuasion in Election Campaigns around the World and through History (New York: P. Lang, 2008).

The Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum toured Palestine around 1945, for example: www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/in-the-cities-of-palestine. See also a graphic from the 1936–1939 Revolt about the brutality of the British reshaping Palestinians’ memory of the Turks: www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/jemal-pasha-to-sir-wauchope.


See, for example: Stefan Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); and Russ Davidson and David Craven, Latin American Posters: Public Aesthetics and Mass Politics (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006).

Kamal Boullata, Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present (London: Saqi, 2009), 42.

Boullata, Palestinian Art, 41–42.

Boullata, Palestinian Art, 96–103.

Both Salti and Boullata describe this history in detail.


All of these artists have special collections in the PPPA and can be looked up by their names.

These linkages allow for a discussion not only of how the icons themselves are transferred from one culture, country, or time to another but also how the ideas they represent are transferred as well. Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

Online at www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/visit-palestine-original. Other posters designed by Franz Krausz (b. 1905, Austria, d. 1998, Israel) are available at www.palestineposterproject.org/artist/franz-krausz.
Sixty of Tartakover poster works are available online at www.palestineposterproject.org/artist/david-tartakover.


Updike, “Visit Palestine.”


These posters are available online at www.palestineposterproject.org/special-collection/zionist-published-posters-with-specific-palestine-captions. It should be noted that Zionist efforts to promote Jewish immigration to Eretz Israel used the then-common and known political term Palestine, with the goal of making it a Jewish homeland. They rarely used the word Palestinians to describe the majority of the population and called them instead “Arabs,” in the language of the British Mandate and of Arab nationalism, as would have many of those who today call themselves Palestinians.


Previous years’ exhibits can be seen online at www.palestineposterproject.org/publisher/shenkar-college-of-engineering-and-design-israel.

A rough Hebrew translation of the remaining text says, “Come on, extending a hand of Peace; And good neighborliness to all the neighboring states; And their peoples and calling on them for cooperation; And help with the Arab nations, Independent in their lands; The state of Israel is ready to contribute a portion.” David Portal, entry in “57 x 57” exhibit, Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, 2005, online at www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/57-x-57-portal


Shomali, “Post (Visit Palestine) / The Guillotine.”

See the art version online at www.amershomali.info/post-visit-palestine/.


See, for example: Meera Sethi’s artwork of the wall and an excavator demolishing houses, online at www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/visit-palestine-zaraffeh; and a tribute to Banksy’s paintings on the wall, online at www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/visit-palestine-banksy-tribute.


Curb Your Enthusiasm, “Palestinian Chicken,” season 8, episode 3, HBO, 2011, accessed 2 March 2015, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co_BhTxgWys. The episode also features Larry David picking up one of the women in the restaurant, playing with the idea of Arab and Jew as both enemies and lovers.