

### Exhibition of Palestinian Posters

The poster announcement of the Exhibition of Palestinian Posters, which took place in Beirut Arab University in 1979. The maps of Palestine appear above the word "Palestine" in five languages.

1979

Beirut, Lebanon

Source: The Palestinian People's Artistic Heritage Exhibition, 1979, Cairo

Author(s): PLO

## The Palestinian Poster

### Popularizing National Landmarks and Symbols



The golden age for the Palestinian poster dates to the period between the early 1960s until 1982, with the re-emergence of Palestinian identity after it slipped into invisibility after the Nakba, the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and the international, anti-imperialist solidarity mobilizing in support of the Palestinian “revolution.” Though pivotal and unique, this period incarnates one stage in the history of Palestinian graphic arts that is marked with forking paths since the period of the Mandate when posters were used as both an advertising medium and a political instrument, and until the post-Oslo era with the return of posters as advertisements and their marginalization as conveyors of political messages.

The study of posters differs from other sub-fields in art history because posters are at the intersection of an artistic practice and a skill in the advertising industries. A poster is a medium reproduced in serial editions using off-set, lithography, and serigraphy. As such, its monetized value can never reach that of an art work. However, a poster can be as much a masterful accomplishment as any work of art, and because of its serial nature, its modes of dissemination make it sometimes more impactful and more subversive. In the realms of militant and politically radicalized artistic practice, posters hold a special place because artists regard them as an instance of creative expression geared toward popular mobilization. In the conventions of poster design, the visual composition and graphic elements of a poster should speak to a decipherable collective imaginary, use widely known symbols, stylization and strong contrasts.

During the British Mandate, posters were mostly produced for advertising and marketing. However, on the occasion of the Second Arab Fair that took place in Jerusalem in summer 1934, a series of posters and postage stamps representing iconic

landmarks of Jerusalem (notably the al-Aqsa Mosque) were issued with the purpose of incarnating Arab support for the Palestinian national struggle. During the Great Palestinian Rebellion of 1936, a second series was produced with a focus on landmarks; one stamp featured a map of Palestine. The third series was issued in 1938, and the etchings of landmarks were captioned with the slogan “Palestine for the Arabs.” (Decades later, the PLO printed a set of stamps from that period. The graphic renderings of landmarks continued in different styles and iterations, they were in some cases quite close to the first versions minted on the postage stamps.)

The Nakba produced such a radical rupture that it is almost impossible to unearth a graphic aesthetic repository and presume a transmission of know-how over generations. In 1955, the Beirut office of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) began to print posters in silk screen, designed by Palestinian artist Jamil Shammout, to disseminate instructions for public health and other social welfare matters among the refugees. His brother, Ismail Shammout (1930–2006), started to design posters, and shortly thereafter he headed the Artistic Culture Section at the PLO’s Department of Information and National Guidance (later known as Department of Information and Culture) in 1965. Shammout designed the first set of posters ever issued, a total of four, with the caption “We All Are the Sons of Palestine.” The posters communicated the simple message that the PLO was the representative of the Palestinian people and that it was a political body emerging from the masses. The same designs were reprinted in 1967 with the caption, “We All Are with the Resistance.”

The most prolific period of poster production started in the mid-1960s. By the time the PLO moved its headquarters to Beirut, it attracted a nebula of dissident, gifted, and innovative artists and intellectuals. While some artists donated labor, others were remunerated and some were employed in the organization and management of events. They produced and promoted films, photographs, reportages, pamphlets, and posters; the latter were the most effective, lightweight and low-cost means of visual and iconographic communication. Posters were commissioned by the Department of Information and Culture, the Office of Unified Information, the General Union of Palestinian Artists, the Palestine Film Unit, and the political factions DFLP and PFLP. The General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), established in 1955, also used posters to mobilize constituencies in its chapters around the world.

An impressive roster of Arab artists and poets contributed to the production of posters: from Egypt, Mohieddine Ellabbad (1940–2010), Hilmi al-Tuni (b. 1934) and Adli Rizkallah (1939–2010); from Iraq, Dia Azzawi (b. 1939) and Kadhim Haidar (1932–85); from Morocco, Mohamed Melehi (b. 1936) and Mohamed Chebâa (1935–2013); and from Syria, Nazir Nabaa (1938–2016). A short list of the many Palestinian artists who produced posters would have to include Samir Salameh (1944–2018), Jumana El Husseinii (1932–2018), Mona Saudi (b. 1945), and Kamal Boullata (1942–2019). Artists

had free rein to experiment artistically with a new visual vocabulary and to forge a political iconography that galvanized the masses. There were no aesthetic directives; the PLO cadres commissioning posters were neither didactic or dogmatic. There were obvious PLO red lines, widely shared by the artists themselves: religious symbols would be respected and anti-Semitic language or iconography would not be tolerated.

The movement's leadership was actively invested in nurturing international anti-imperialist solidarity. By the late 1960s, the Palestinian national liberation movement mobilized a transnational creative imaginary. Ezzeddine Kalak, PLO representative in France (1972–78), connected with artists based in France who produced posters for the Palestinian struggle. He was assassinated in 1978 in Paris, and to honor him, the PLO reproduced selections from his poster collection in a book. Abdallah Hijazi, PLO representative in Poland in the 1980s, launched an annual competition inviting Polish artists to make posters representing the Palestinian struggle. One of the most well-known "Palestinian" posters, featuring a post letter envelope printed with the word "Palestine" and stamped with "Return to Sender. No Such Address," was made in 1979 by Jacek Kowalski, a Polish graphic artist. Fathi Abdulhamid, PLO representative in Japan in the 1980s, invited Japanese graphic artists to design posters.

The posters produced during the 1970s and early 1980s (when the PLO was headquartered in Beirut) took as their subject matter the slogans and objectives of the Palestinian Revolution. The posters showed refugees, men and women, who rise as freedom fighters from the squalor of tents, learning to read and write and acquiring guerrilla warfare skills. They depicted Palestinians farmers, workers, teachers, and poets, all custodians of a rich and diverse culture. Posters were also a means to counter the traumatic dispersal of Palestinians: homes were lost, but the iconic record of having had a home was represented; the land was no longer in sight, but the artistic imagining of the homeland kept the bond of affiliation alive. Posters were used to popularize national landmarks (such as the Dome of the Rock and the Church of Nativity), and national symbols such as the olive tree, the key of return, and the patterns of embroidery in folk dress. Some posters were visual translations of verse from poems, such as the Palestinian wedding, borrowed from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, that refers to the martyrdom of the *fida'i* (the freedom fighter), when his body merges with the land.

The representation of the *fida'i* was indeed a prominent theme. Predominantly male, his face rarely discernible, usually clad in a kaffiyeh (checkered scarf), he was anyone and everyone, but was invariably upright, a human being who had taken charge of his destiny and was willing to sacrifice his life to liberate the homeland. Another prominent theme is the commemoration of national heroes who fell in battles or were assassinated, beginning with Izzeddin al-Qassam and including prominent PLO cadres, such as PLO political and military figure Kamal Adwan and PLO representative in France Mahmoud

al-Hamshari. Posters were also used to create a national calendar of celebrations, or temporal “sites of memory” and to commemorate massacres, battles, and uprisings, such as the Deir Yasin and the Tantura massacres, the battle of al-Karama, the Day of the Land, and the Nakba.

Posters designed by artists were often reproduced as postcards or book covers, and paintings were also reproduced in posters. Dar al-Fata al-Arabi, a publishing house, was particularly keen on promoting innovation and creativity. Established in 1974 in Beirut, funded by the PLO, and led by Mohieddine Ellabbad, it revolutionized children’s literature and pedagogy. Well-known Arab novelists authored short stories that reflected the social and political reality of the Arab world, while artists were invited to illustrate the books. The publishing house produced posters with the entire pages of the books in slightly smaller format, or large-sized “mural” posters centered on a current theme.

The third chapter in the history of Palestinian poster production, perhaps the most difficult to pin down, begins in 1983, when the PLO was forced to leave Beirut for Tunis, and spans until the signing of the Oslo Agreement. The departure happened in extreme conditions of escape for survival. In Tunis, the priorities were revised and several cultural activities were no longer possible. Moreover, none of the artists who had responsibility for organizing events and commissioning posters and exhibitions moved to Tunisia. In 1987, the first intifada erupted in the West Bank and Gaza, impassioning diaspora Palestinian artists to reinforce representations of the popular movement. Polish artists were invited to spend some time in Tunis and commissioned to produce posters. In the West Bank, poster production was strictly forbidden, but militants produced leaflets and other print materials to circulate in secret.

The fourth and final chapter of Palestine poster production begins with the Oslo Agreement and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank and Gaza. With the advent of satellite television, the role of posters changed radically. The advertising poster for marketing and branding products, events, and services prevails widely over the political and militant poster. The latter is designed and produced independently by artists to commemorate martyrs and protest Israeli aggression (such as the separation wall or the settlements) or policies of the Palestinian National Authority (such as continuation of the peace talks). Graffiti and mural art have become so popular in recent years that they have supplanted some of the confrontational and transgressive role of poster art, as in the case of the separation wall which stands today for one of the longest and largest concrete “surface” covered with graffiti and tag art.

As pivotal field of production of representation and iconography, specifically in the 1960s and 1970s, the collection and transmission of posters have yet to mobilize the attention of archivists and scholars. Poster collections are housed in several university libraries (notably Birzeit University and the American University of Beirut), research centers (Institute for Palestine Studies), and private collections (Dan Walsh's web-archive collection). The classification and indexing of Palestinian posters raise interesting questions about authorship, national identity, and cultural heritage, because this legacy transgresses the strict Palestinian authorship and is also a repository of what Palestine represented to Arab as well as to international artists. In addition, it would be erroneous to couple the history of the Palestinian poster with that of the Zionist poster and to adopt a reductionist view of the complex, intertwining histories contained within the Palestinian poster. Palestinian and Israeli creative representations may intersect in other fields (cinema, literature, etc.), but poster art is precisely where it does not. The Palestinian poster presents indeed a rare and fecund opportunity to revisit histories of graphic arts worldwide.

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