Art Diplomacy in the Middle East

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Throughout history, artistic expressions from the Middle East have been deeply shaped by the political and societal transformations occurring in the region. Iran has strategically utilized its diplomatic channels to impact artistic representation through a culture-oriented approach. The most significant artistic trends, such as modern art, contemporary art, and Islamic art, each uniquely portrayed the distinctive characteristics and challenges prevalent in the region. During this specific period, Iran's international diplomatic strategies were fundamentally constructed around Islamic ideological principles, with a strong focus on cultural identity and representation. The primary objectives were to foster regional unity and challenge Western dominance. Simultaneously, both internal and external pressures prompted shifts in diplomatic strategies. Art from the Middle East, shaped by this complex context, increasingly explored themes of cultural identity, contemporary life, and historical traditions. While some artists critically examined the prevailing circumstances, others aimed to reconnect with and celebrate the region's cultural roots. Accordingly, this research employs a descriptive and analytical approach to investigate how art diplomacy might contribute to peace-building in the strategically significant Middle Eastern region.

Introduction

Art from the Middle East has gained remarkable international recognition in the recent past. Following the year 2000, creative expressions from this region have attracted global attention across various artistic domains, including visual arts, film, and musical performances (Moridi, 2018: 20-21). When examining Middle Eastern art as an organic cultural movement originating from the region, we must recognize a significant portion of this movement as postcolonial or socially-engaged art. This artistic approach emphasizes social interaction, where artistic expressions and cultural products are deeply embedded in intricate social dynamics. In Islamic countries, art serves as a powerful tool for exposing and understanding social dimensions, holding a distinct social significance. The development of social art facilitated a transformative period that introduced a surge of artistic expressions, bringing to prominence artists from diverse nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and cultural contexts who had previously been marginalized. William Lawrie, (2008), an expert in Islamic Art at Christie's Auction House, argues that the emergence and development of contemporary Middle Eastern art stems from shared postcolonial experiences. These experiences arose from a new impulse to reconstruct and redefine spiritual, national, cultural, and artistic identity in the region; consequently, this artistic form is fundamentally anchored in and reflective of its historical and social context (Moridi, 2018: 312). It is noteworthy that the artistic expressions from the Middle East have the potential to broaden and enhance the reach of Iranian-Islamic cultural heritage across other nations in the region (Afsarian, 2010: 80).

The primary objective of this study is to examine how artistic diplomacy can contribute to enhancing artistic expression and promoting peace specifically within the Middle Eastern region, with a particular focus on Iran. Through its participation in regional organizations like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Iran has established itself as a platform for showcasing and sharing its distinctive Iranian and Islamic artistic heritage, cultural traditions, and historical civilization (Hamedi, Moridi, and Kamrani, 2023).

Middle Eastern Art

Some argue that art from the Middle East represents a symbolic clash between an enigmatic Eastern culture and a rational Western perspective. On one side, Middle Eastern artists employ mystical and symbolic techniques to generate intricate and multifaceted artistic expressions that blend simplicity with complexity through traditional ritualistic approaches. Conversely, Western art experts and scholars decode these artworks in museum settings and determine their market value through auction evaluations. Consequently, the representation of Middle Eastern art as a form of global and local artistic expression remains inherently contentious and subject to ongoing debate (Hatamirad, 2006: 154).

Cox (2009) characterized Middle Eastern artistic expression as an extension of the art world's colonial legacy, particularly as manifested through Western cultural institutions like museums, galleries, and auction houses. He suggests that the representation of Middle Eastern art mirrors the earlier treatment of Chinese avant-garde art, wherein Western art institutions selectively acquired and promoted contemporary Chinese artworks that aligned with their preconceived Western aesthetic and conceptual frameworks. Artists were compelled to adopt Western artistic approaches and styles to gain traction and marketability in the design industry. However, as time progressed, the art market experienced a significant collapse, which negatively impacted Chinese artists; currently, a similar pattern is emerging in the Middle Eastern art scene (Ansarizadeh, and Marathi, 2016). When examining this artistic domain, Middle Eastern art appears deficient in a unified conceptual interpretation and fails to demonstrate consistent structural and implementation qualities that would qualify it as a distinct artistic style or category. Instead of representing a clearly defined art form, Middle Eastern art essentially functions as a constructed marketplace for artistic products. This marketplace has been strategically cultivated and sustained by prominent art institutions like Christie's auction house, major art museums in Britain and New York, along with select Iranian and Arab art collectors. Nonetheless, the shared cultural foundations (such as Islam and Islamic artistic traditions) and similar societal contexts (as nations from the developing world) among Middle Eastern countries are significant. It is clear that these mutual backgrounds generate distinctive characteristics in both the substance and design of artworks created by Muslim countries in the Middle East, which can be collectively referred to as Middle Eastern art (Mostafavi, 2010: 37).

Examining Middle Eastern art through a discourse analysis lens involves two key components: first, investigating the linguistic characteristics of artistic works through textual examination, and second, exploring the power structures that articulate their perspectives and goals through a specialized linguistic approach (Hamedi, Moridi, and Kamrani, 2021). Consequently, the primary focus of art discourse analysis centers on: investigating the underlying linguistic rules, examining power dynamics, and identifying how different identities are formed in relation to the processes of accepting or rejecting specific artistic practices and methodologies. When discussing the underlying principles that guide how discourse develops and appears, Foucault argues that the fundamental mechanisms of linguistic interaction should not be traced within the discourse's own text. Instead, he suggests these rules can be discovered by examining the institutional contexts and systems that actually generate the specific discourse, such as medical facilities, psychiatric institutions, legal systems, cultural repositories, and similar organizational structures (Zimran, 1999: 27).

The artistic traditions of the East primarily explore the complex political landscape of the Middle Eastern region. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, this geographical area

became a critically important geopolitical focal point, generating significant global media attention due to conflicts centered around petroleum resources, diplomatic tensions between Iran and the United States, ongoing disputes between Arab nations and Israel, and the rise of terrorist organizations associated with Al Qaeda. The rise of Islamic fundamentalist ideologies and their resistance to modern concepts, coupled with the expansion of the middle-class demographic, increasingly highlighted the growing tension between traditional and contemporary worldviews across political, social, and artistic domains (Rahbarnia, and Nouri, 2019). The concept of art's geographical significance is not a novel phenomenon; as an illustration, artwork from Eastern Europe garnered substantial international recognition during the 1990s, following the Berlin Wall's dismantling, the Soviet Union's disintegration, and the conflicts in the Balkan region. Chinese art gained attention after China's economic dominance. African and South American art, although not strategically important today, once had strategic features as colonies (Winch, 2010: 47). After the events of September 11, curiosity about art from politically insecure regions also increased (Mostafavi, 2010: 37). Art from the Middle East, reflecting the distinctive qualities of a region marked by oil wealth and geopolitical uncertainty, occasionally gains prominent media attention, often associated with the controversial 'Axis of Evil' designation (as illustrated in Figure 1, Hana Mania's artwork titled Terrorism).
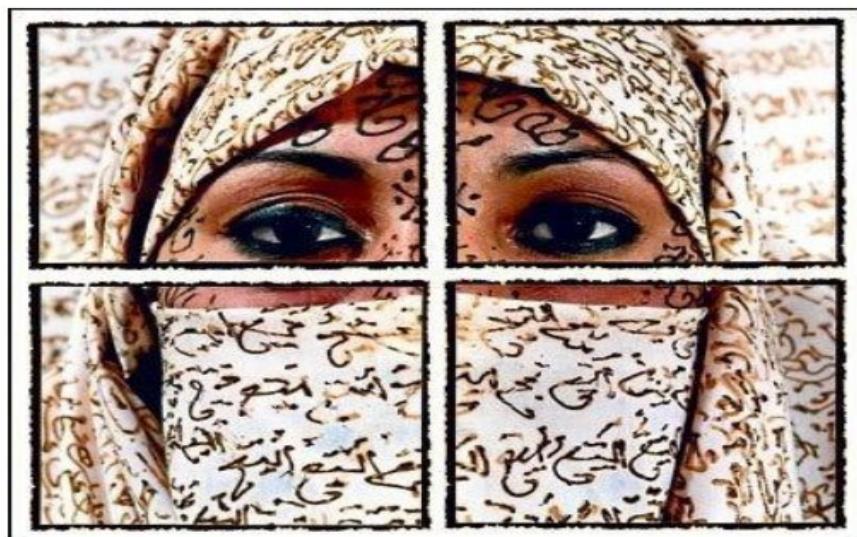

Figure 1. Image of Henna Mania; Terrorism (Source: www.wikiart.org**).**

Painter: Leila Al-Sadi

Explanation: Space, in both its literal and symbolic forms, consistently permeates my artistic work, encompassing both remembered and imagined dimensions. The origin of my photographic work stems from a profound desire to capture and preserve authentic environments, with a particular emphasis on the spaces associated with my early years (Shaygan, 2019). Eventually, I

recognized that advancing as an artist required me to physically revisit my childhood home in Morocco and visually record the world I had geographically departed from, yet remained emotionally connected to. To comprehend my current adult identity, I realized it was essential to reconnect with and examine my younger self. In order to truly grasp the complex intersections of my present life's diverse cultural landscapes, I understood that I needed to journey back to the cultural context of my childhood. This culture, and the space of my childhood within it, was defined for me by certain domestic spaces, spaces that still exist but are slowly decaying. So, I embarked on a project to photograph these physical spaces before they were lost, and in doing so, to see the role they played in shaping the metaphorical space of my childhood (Mojtahedzadeh, 2021).

A distinctive aspect of artistic expression from the Middle East is the contemporary creative output from predominantly Muslim nations. Despite the regions rich historical legacy of Islamic artistic traditions, modern Middle Eastern art cannot be simply categorized as Islamic art in the traditional sense. The primary focus of this artistic genre is to explore and represent the complexities of religious experience in contemporary times. Creative practitioners in this field deconstruct religious life through a blend of mystical and intuitive approaches, while simultaneously incorporating visual elements and decorative motifs drawn from classical Islamic artistic traditions. Consequently, these artistic works, which are frequently traded at prestigious auction venues like Christie's and acquired by cultural institutions and private collectors, offer nuanced political and critical perspectives on the everyday lived experiences of individuals in Muslim societies (Figure 2, work by Aida Al-Khadi, an Iraqi artist).

Figure 2. Artist Aida Al-Khadi; Iraqi artist (Source: Pourjavadi, 2018).

Wijdan al-Majid began adorning Baghdad's concrete surfaces with art approximately nine months ago, motivated by a desire to introduce aesthetic appeal and artistic expression to the

urban landscape, aiming to counteract the city's monotonous and drab appearance. Despite being traditionally experienced in creating art within refined and tranquil gallery settings, he boldly ventured into this new artistic endeavor without hesitation, particularly in a culturally rigid and male-dominated environment that is generally unwelcoming to women (Taheri, Afzal Toosi, and Nozari, 2019).

Among his most significant artworks is a depiction of Mozafar al-Nawab, known as the "poet of revolution," who endured prolonged imprisonment in Iraqi jails for his critical writings about the oppressive Baathist government and who currently remains a deeply respected figure among many Iraqis. Majid has created a minimum of 16 large-scale paintings in and around Baghdad, which include portraits of influential Iraqi cultural figures such as Jawad Salim, considered the pioneer of modern art and a celebrated Iraqi sculptor, and Zaha Hadid, the internationally acclaimed Iraqi-British architect who has since passed away (Naqvi, 2023).

Unity of Expressive styles

The artistic approaches of art from the Middle East adhere to the broader principles of the global art industry and marketplace. The platforms that enable Middle Eastern artistic expression are comprised of a restricted network of exhibition spaces, cultural institutions, art specialists, and professional collection managers who acquire artworks and showcase them on the international stage. Middle Eastern art remains conceptually positioned within a framework where the Western perspective acts as the authoritative interpreter (possessing the ability to evaluate and validate artistic merit), while the Eastern perspective is perceived as a subject of study (containing layers of complexity and unexplored significance). The primary coordinators of this artistic initiative include Christie's auction house, art museums across Europe and the United States, and a diverse collection of regional art galleries. These galleries encompass establishments like Sabz Art Gallery, Majlisi, and Khat Soom located in Dubai, Seyhun, Mah and Hama in Iran, Al Sultan Gallery in Kuwait, Jani Rabiz in Beirut (Lebanon), City House in Cairo (Egypt), Ayyam in Damascus (Syria), Darat Al-Fanun in Jordan, and are complemented by events such as the Sharjah Biennial and the Abu Dhabi Art Fair, along with various art curators from throughout the Middle Eastern region (Lawrie, 2008: 24).

The realm of Middle Eastern art is not automatically a showcase of excellence for all artists, and simply being created by an artist from the Middle East does not inherently qualify a work as Middle Eastern art. To apply this label, certain specific criteria must be met, which are not universally present among all artists (Pappé, 2014). Artists from the Middle East who are associated with postmodern approaches are recognized for their distinctive stylistic and thematic elements in their artistic productions. In other words, the definition of Middle Eastern art includes those who often deal with regional issues with a critical perspective; for example, the issue of

women and the Islamic veil, the confrontation between tradition and modernism, and other themes that reproduce Eastern art in a new and modern image.

As well as the repetition of themes in Middle Eastern art, it is possible to discover a specific inferential structure. In a general classification, the subject matter of Middle Eastern art works includes:

1. Gender-related issues in Muslim societies, including disparities in rights, dress code controversies, and feminist discourse.
2. Tensions arising from the clash between traditional cultural practices and contemporary modernization efforts.
3. The romanticization and perpetuation of stereotypical representations of the East, emphasizing perceived primitive or simplistic cultural characteristics.
4. Ideological tensions between religious principles and political structures.

When considering Iran's prominent position in Middle Eastern artistic expression, we aim to explore and explain the key thematic trends and creative principles that define contemporary Iranian art (Pourjavadi, 2018).

1. Engaging with and reimagining the symbols and preconceived notions of orientalist visual representation. The primary visual archetypes in this artistic tradition depict enigmatic, submissive, and alluring women of eastern origin, either veiled in hijabs or partially unclothed, alongside oriental rulers, peasants, and enslaved individuals within contexts like royal chambers, secluded women's quarters, and traditional bathhouses. These thematic elements are frequently explored in the artistic works of notable contemporary Iranian artists such as Afshan Katabchi, Shirin Neshat, Shadi Ghadirian, and Shirana Shahbazi.

2. Establishing a deliberate and nuanced connection between the iconic symbols of Iran's traditional high culture and the elements of contemporary urban culture, including satirical representations and marginal urban expressions, while simultaneously linking traditional cultural and political symbols with their popular or more vulgar manifestations. Within this approach, Farhad Moshiri creatively pairs the traditional Iranian jug—a symbol with deep historical roots—with every day, colloquial terminology, while Fereydoun Av skillfully relates a concrete symbol like the throne to concepts of heroism, mystical wandering, and urban street wisdom (Entessar, 2009).

3. Depicting historical-cultural contradictions and social and political constraints in contemporary Iranian urban life, focusing on issues of women and youth. In this context, Samira Eskanderfar paints youth in indoor spaces and close-ups, and Dariush Qorehzad depicts young girls on the sidewalk and against the backdrop of Tehran's graffiti walls.

4. Addressing the signs and issues of contemporary Iranian history, especially the issue of the revolution and the events that followed it, such as the works of Nikzad Nojomi, Mitra Tabrizian, Niusha Tavakolian, and Parastu Forouhar.

5. Spirituality and mystical tendencies with a focus on Rumi. Such as the works of Kamran Yousefzadeh and Shirazeh Hoshyari (Akhgar, 2010: 19).

A significant aspect that contributes to the conceptual cohesion in Middle Eastern artistic expression is the seamless integration of contemporary visual arts with traditional Islamic artistic practices. This includes innovative approaches like painting-calligraphy, which represents a distinctive form of visual representation utilizing intricate linework. Considering the profound cultural reverence for written text within Islamic traditions, artworks that successfully blend calligraphic elements with painting are widely regarded as important representations of contemporary Muslim artistic creativity.

In this regard, a critical approach to the concept of modernity and globalization has fostered local, indigenous, and dominated cultures of resistance. The emergence of discourses of local identities in the era of globalization is indicative of a contested world; the art movement is no exception to this rule. The mainstream of art is built on the paradox of global-local art. On the one hand, art is a product of a local, national, and indigenous society, and on the other, it is a product that claims to express human experiences beyond differences by using abstract and conceptual language; this duality is the essence of postmodern art. From one perspective, it should be said that the origin of the principle of the universality of art stems, above all, from the claim of universality of Western art and the demand of the focal countries to present their artistic themes and styles as the ultimate human achievement. It can also be said that it stems from the collaborative efforts of surrounding countries in this path of artistic development (Pourjavadi, 2018: 245). This concept, which merits the designation of the dominance principle, was progressively developed and refined during the nineteenth and twentieth century periods. Within the framework of this principle, artistic expressions from indigenous, Eastern, African, colonial, and developing world cultures were characterized as subordinate elements of modern art, with their visual motifs, design patterns, and abstracted aesthetic forms being strategically borrowed by artists from dominant Western nations to create an innovative artistic language.

In general, Middle Eastern art can be considered a new narrative of the confrontation between tradition and modernity in geopolitics of the cultural sphere of Islamic art. But the most important representative of modern Muslim art is also European art, which is introduced by powerful institutions of the art world (i.e. some museums, galleries and auction houses), does not represent all artistic movements in the Islamic world (Hassanvand, 2022). Rather, it is a specific and selected type of art that is consistent with the discursive positions of the institutions of power in the art world. In other words, this art, through a mechanism of rejection and approval, recognizes

a specific type of contemporary art as Middle Eastern art and allows it to enter museums and the international art market cycle. Therefore, the claim that Middle Eastern art has been able to deconstruct the polar oppositions of center-periphery, global-local, and modern-traditional art and to offer an understanding and interpretation beyond the traditional polarities of East-West, national-transnational, is not very realistic. As an illustration, the artistic creations of Shirin Neshat, who is frequently recognized as a key figure in contemporary Iranian and broader Middle Eastern artistic expression, offer a novel interpretation of how Western visual traditions have traditionally portrayed the Eastern world. In her notable 'Women of Allah' series, she employs calligraphic elements that evoke Islamic ritualistic practices, uses segregated monochromatic imagery of men and women that symbolize Iran's theocratic governance, and incorporates elegiac musical compositions that suggest a primitive cultural ritual—all of which ultimately reinforce and reframe existing Western perceptions of Eastern culture (Mostafavi, 2010: 38).

Conclusion

Across different historical periods, the role of art has fluctuated between being considered peripheral and being viewed as a fundamental aspect of cultural and societal development. To illustrate, during the European Enlightenment era, artistic expression was often overshadowed by philosophical thought, and later in the 19th century, it was similarly eclipsed by scientific pursuits.   However, by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, art began to assume a more prominent position within broader social frameworks. Consequently, as art's significance and influence grew, it started to intersect and interact with diverse domains such as economic systems, political structures, and even athletic endeavors. In European countries, some philosophers like Alain Badiou have thought about the relationship between these two institutions. But in Iran, no one has explained this relationship. The relationship between these two institutions in our culture has its own characteristics, and the model of other cultures cannot be generalized to our society without reflection, because each culture explains this relationship in a different way, and since our thinkers have not been active in this field. In this context, it is inevitable for our youth to turn to other cultures in these matters. Given the current situation and the fact that culture is spreading to other institutions, including the economy, we must quickly restore the status of culture and art, and if we do not do this, we will suffer a deficiency in our cultural identity. Economic growth and enhancement of social well-being. This is because contemporary societies increasingly view 'art' as a catalyst for development. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the circulation and influence of culture and art are continuously expanding. Art markets and creative industries are demonstrating substantial and consistent progress. Concerning art diplomacy in the Middle East, it's important to recognize that art and politics, although having different objectives, fundamentally share a common focus and target audience: human society. Consequently, these two domains must maintain a close and

interconnected relationship. Neither art nor politics can afford to disregard the other completely. When they ignore each other, their respective energies become diverted into mutual confrontation, ultimately causing them to drift away from their core purposes. In fact, one could argue that art and politics are mutually dependent for achieving their respective goals. Both spheres are fundamentally committed—or at least aspire—to creating a more refined and compassionate social environment. Their ultimate aim is to establish a society where individuals can access both spiritual and material resources to enhance their quality of life. Therefore, all political institutions of a society need each other and each is supposed to meet some of the needs and desires of citizens. The absence or weakening of each is considered neglect or lack of attention to some of the needs of humans. As a result, the political institution, which is also responsible for managing and organizing all institutions, must be able to use and interact with other institutions, such as the "artistic institution", in specific ways.

Art and politics are interdependent and mutually influential. The political system and artistic realm should engage in continuous communication and exchange. In a context like Iran's, such a reciprocal relationship is crucial for both institutions to successfully fulfill their objectives and contribute to societal advancement.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all participants of the present study.

Ethical considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and misconduct.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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