

## TOWARD A MATERIAL MODERNISM

### INTRODUCTION TO S. R. CHOUCAIR'S "HOW THE ARAB UNDERSTOOD VISUAL ART"

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"How the Arab Understood Visual Art" was not meant for publication. It originated as a private letter, an angry rebuke between former colleagues in the field of Arab cultural production and the struggle against colonialism and its intellectual aftermath. But mutual friends of the sender, artist Saloua Raouda Choucair, and the recipient, literary critic Musa Sulaiman, read its contents and were so struck by its "innovative ideas and daring, critical perspectives" that they quickly circulated it among the intellectual elite of Beirut, hometown to both Choucair and Sulaiman.<sup>1</sup> Appearing in several versions in the city's leading cultural journals in the spring of 1951, it metamorphosed into a quasi-manifesto for modernist art. Sixty years later, the letter is consistently cited to support the claim that its author was "the first true abstract modern artist in Lebanon (and perhaps the Arab world)," as a Tate Modern curator says in her essay for

<sup>1</sup> This quote and information come from Albir al-Adib's introduction to an abridged version of Choucair's letter published in his journal, *Al-Adib*, under the title "Hawl Al-Adab al-qisasi 'ind al-'arab" [About Narrative Fiction among the Arabs], *Al-Adib* 10, no. 5 (May 1951): 54–55. The full version, upon which my own translation in this issue of *ARTMargins* is based, appeared as "Kayfa fahima al-'arabi fann al-taswir" [How the Arab Understood Visual Art], *Al-Abhath* 4, no. 2 (June 1951): 195–201.

Choucair's recent retrospective.<sup>2</sup> Yet the document is rarely read nowadays.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, its principal characters and concerns have been transformed through retellings, and the complexities it confronted have faded.<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, Choucair's nuanced discussion of an "Arab perspective" echoes in today's art-criticism circles as "Islamic art," a term not found in her letter. And the question of matter and materialism has been reduced to sound bites about naked bodies, or their absence, in Arab representational repertoires.<sup>5</sup>

It is time that the original letter circulate anew, and that we review the context in which the letter's wider audience snapped it up.<sup>6</sup> The accident of its original publication resulted from the presence in Beirut of a cluster of intellectuals who believed cultural criticism could be a map for decolonization. Prior to Choucair's letter, art and literary criticism in the Lebanese press treated art as an index of civilization that had to be protected from the crass materialism of colonized, "primitive" peoples. In her letter, Choucair boldly confronts such cultural evaluations and re-evaluates them in turn. She recuperates Arab artistry. Most radically, she rethinks materialism and modernity, repositioning art as a guide to one's engagement with matter at its most real substratum of essence, and foregrounding perception as a key to unlocking human potential and ethical responsibility.

The originality and complexity of Choucair's thinking in this document start with its singular title. At the time of her writing, most

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- 2 Ann Coxon, "The Potentiality of the Thing: Saloua Raouda Choucair's Modular Sculpture," in *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, ed. Jessica Morgan (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 119.
  - 3 The most recent example of such cursory reference is Coxon, "Potentiality," 120.
  - 4 Note that Helen Khal, in her influential history *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies, 1987), discusses the letter as if it were written to Charles Malik, around 1946, to define "Islamic art" and declare Choucair's passionate, pious embrace of it. However, Khal did not read Arabic and probably relied on others' memories of it, which by the time of her writing would have been inflected by Lebanon's decade-long civil war.
  - 5 In 1985 Ahmad Farhat quoted Choucair as saying the article dealt with "why the Arab artist did not attend to the naked body as an art topic, or even to the human." See Ahmad Farhat, "Ana al-sibaqa fi akthar min majal fanni" [I Am at the Vanguard of More Than One Art Realm], *Al-Kifah al-'arabi* 12, nos. 166–382 (November 11–17, 1985): 45. Recognizing that journalists sometimes fabricate quotes, I indicate this one nonetheless because it drew contemporary readers' attention to the no-longer-accessible letter.
  - 6 For their insights into how this task could be accomplished, the author thanks Heghnar Watenpugh, Joan Holladay, Amanda Focht, Nada Moumtaz, Laura Metzler, and the ARTMargins editors and peer reviewer.

cultural criticism in the Arabic press conformed to a conventional structure: X art type among Y people looks like Z.<sup>7</sup> Such was the title of the literary study that provoked Choucair's angry epistle: *Narrative Fiction among the Arabs* (1950), by Musa Sulaiman.<sup>8</sup> Generally, such cultural criticism treated aesthetic activity as the universal constant, and ethnic groups as the variable. Choucair's title, "How the Arab Understood Visual Art," signals a different kind of cultural critique and approach, one that shifts the conception of the problem and its components by following the question-formula, "How did Y *understand* X?" The term *how* bespeaks cultural relativism and introduces the politics and ethics behind different ways of understanding; by contrast, *the Arab* calls for strategic essentializing; *visual* connects to the human sense-organ that underwrites the empirical sciences and, in a greater sense, the role of humans in meaning-making; and *art* announces an approach to life and matter that, as the letter's body will suggest, celebrates material abstraction and purification, thereby reframing the cultural/philosophical/spiritual problems of materialism.

#### BACKGROUND TO A LETTER

When Saloua Raouda Choucair read Musa Sulaiman's book, she was an associate of the newly founded Atelier de l'art abstrait (Abstract Art Workshop) in Paris. She had left Beirut two years earlier, in 1948, to pursue formal arts training. Choucair had always sketched, painted, and read art philosophy, but at age 32 she had still not settled down professionally or personally. By her own accounts, she was not interested in professional practice until the mid-1940s, when art helped her think what it meant to be a citizen of a newly liberated country in a world at war (Lebanon became an independent republic in 1943). Upon reaching Paris, Choucair enrolled at the École Nationale des Beaux Arts and took life drawing. After several months, she transferred to Fernand Léger's studio at La Grande Chaumière. When she joined Jean Dewasne and Edgar Pillet in establishing the Atelier de l'art abstrait, she found a community with which she could launch a collective quest. It was a quest for art liberated from the demands of figuration and integrated completely into daily life, as the founders announced in their

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- 7 I base this assertion on my familiarity with the press that circulated through Beirut in Arabic and French between 1890 and 1940.
- 8 Musa Sulaiman, *Al-Adab al-qisasi 'ind al-'arab* [Narrative Fiction among the Arabs] (Juniyah, Lebanon: Dar al-Kitab, 1950).

call for adherents.<sup>9</sup> Choucair organized the Atelier's activities and regularly contributed to *Art d'Aujourd'hui*, the bastion publication of the Francophone postwar avant-garde. She held her first solo show at Colette Allendy's prestigious gallery in March 1951; and when the letter to Sulaiman was published a few months later, she was preparing for the upcoming Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, the annual abstract art show run since 1946 by Jean Arp and Sonia Delaunay, among others.

Apart from the *Art d'Aujourd'hui* review of her solo show, the letter to Sulaiman is the only publication that Choucair preserved from her Paris period. Her pause amidst this flurry of activity to read Sulaiman's book so soon after its publication (in June 1950) reminds us that her work in Paris was fueled by questions that escape historians of continental abstractionism today: questions about postwar political relations, about the connection between materialism and modernism, and about the ethical duties of the socially integrated intellectual. Indeed, a Paris-focused historiography of modernism would trip over the title of Sulaiman's study, *Narrative Fiction among the Arabs*: why did it catch Choucair's eye, let alone her ire? There were personal connections. Just a few years her senior, Sulaiman had taught Arabic at Choucair's high school and was engaged to the poet Thurayya Malhas, a close friend of Choucair's. When he filed his master's degree at the American University of Beirut, Choucair was not only a university librarian but also a fellow student.<sup>10</sup> There were political connections, as well, as both belonged to a broad circle committed to anti-imperialist, Arab nationalist politics.<sup>11</sup>

In a republic newly fashioned out of the succession of two dramatically collapsed empires—the Ottoman and the French—the issue of civilizational merit was urgently tied to the right to rule, to organize, and to teach. Choucair worked with the Arab Cultural Club (ACC), which also had a paramilitary branch that included Constantin Zurayq and Georges Habash as members. The ACC sought to cultivate universal and local cultural values that would guide the formation of a new

9 *Art d'Aujourd'hui* 2, no. 1 (January 1950): last page.

10 See the lists of "Teaching and Administrative Staff" and "Instructors" in the *American University of Beirut–International College Catalogue (1945–6)* (Beirut: American University Press, 1946), 141–42.

11 See the behind-the-scenes account in *Al-Nadi al-thaqafi al-ʿarabi, masira al-khamsin ʿam* [A Fifty-Year Journey: The Arab Cultural Club, 1944–94] (Beirut: The Arab Cultural Club, 1994), 16. I am not certain that Sulaiman also belonged to the ACC, only that he shared some of its concerns.

social order and reconfigure class, gender, and sectarian relations that had been rent asunder by the fall of Ottoman feudalism and the failure of French imperialism. Choucair contributed by organizing an art history and criticism lecture series at the ACC in 1947–48.<sup>12</sup>

Sulaiman's book on Arabic narrative fiction was similarly informed by a belief in the possibility of effecting social progress through cultural production. Assuming that pre-Islamic and medieval Arabic stories reflected the imaginative capacity of their tellers, he undertook an analysis of their components to assess how Arabic literature today should relate to them, and whether it should aspire to other cultural models. In fact, Sulaiman was appalled by what he saw as hyperbolic descriptions, fantastic plots, and unjustified twists in Arab stories, which in turn struck him as mere verbal conglomerations, lacking character development, moralizing plotlines, and authorial personality. Contrasting Abbasid stories with Classical Greek epics, Sulaiman crafted a series of binary oppositions: Greeks dealt with dynamism, which for Sulaiman stood for life, creation, and progress; whereas Arabs dwelt in reactions, knowing neither temporal nor spatial directness. They roamed aimlessly wherever immediate pleasure took them. Pleasure was invariably about material stimulation and satisfaction.<sup>13</sup> He related this to a "materialist" outlook that appreciates things only for their use value. Drawing on a cultural-evolutionist paradigm,<sup>14</sup> Sulaiman posited that the stories' listeners were culturally "juvenile," interested only in "tangible facts and rational proofs," and incapable of sustaining attention to complex, psychological portraits and philosophical meditations.<sup>15</sup> Sulaiman concluded that the perpetuation of such a "unidimensional imagination" in the 20th century no longer made sense: people should grow up, and grown-ups who are oversized children playing with oversized toys can cause vast damage. Arabs live in an unreality, he asserted. They must develop an awareness of reality, especially its material constraints. If not, they will respond only to extreme conditions of material manipulation, such as cannon and rock-

12 Saloua Raouda Choucair, "Al-Nashat al-fanni fi al-nadi al-thaqafi al-'arabi" [The Art Activities of the Arab Cultural Club], *Al-Adib* 7, no. 1 (January 1948): 59–61.

13 Sulaiman, *Al-Adab al-qisasi*, 11.

14 I here refer to a model, adopted by thinkers like Sulaiman, which posits that culture evolves from simple to complex, from infancy to maturity, through ordered and clearly defined stages, on a unilinear path, with contemporary Western culture at the apex of development.

15 Sulaiman, *Al-Adab al-qisasi*, 114–15.

ets, he intoned, and they will continue to suffer spiritual unrest and search for nourishment and entertainment in bigger, louder, and more wasteful material means.<sup>16</sup> By way of remedy, Sulaiman called for a modern narration that could provide realistic representations reflecting on social conditions, offer moral lessons, and enable philosophical inquiry. He encouraged Arabs to develop their modern literature by emulating the Classical Greek epics. This is the recommendation that provoked Choucair's livid response.

#### “HOW” (“UNDERSTOOD”)

The purpose of such comparative art criticism was to contribute to the project of civilizational growth: what path should readers pursue for their own ethnic flourishing? Should they honor particular traits by isolating themselves in cultural distinction, or should they be guided by a paragon of cultural brilliance and seek to assimilate to it? Most critics found the answers in the teleological layout of canonical art history, which moved from Cave Art to the Egyptians, from the Greeks to the Romans, from the Venetian Renaissance to French Classicism, and ended in Impressionism.<sup>17</sup> This history held that the ability to represent living creatures realistically revealed a “love of life” that amounted to the right to possess and control it. Logically, the cultural traits that enabled that ability should be emulated wherever possible. Thus, for the renowned Grecophile artist Qaysar al-Jumayyil, the “curious” half-profile–half-frontal figures in Egyptian art manifested the convergence of a religion devoted to overcoming time with a submissive, unimaginative ethnic character. By corollary, the ability to produce lifelike figures in the round was at once a consequence and confirmation of ancient Greek *joie de vivre*.<sup>18</sup> It followed that if the newly independent Lebanese adopted the Greek lifestyle (whatever that was), they would have their art and prosperity, too.

Choucair was well versed in such cultural criticism. She had herself participated in it with the lecture she gave as part of the 1947–48 ACC art history series, titled “The Art of Picturing among

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>17</sup> This is roughly the trajectory followed by multiple issue of *Al-Mar'a al-jadida* between October 1924 and January 1926, and also in *Al-Makshuf* from May 1936 to May 1938.

<sup>18</sup> Qaysar al-Jumayyil, “Al-Jumud abraz sifa fi al-fann al-masri” [Inertia Is the Most Outstanding Trait of Egyptian Art], *Al-Makshuf* 3, no. 123 (November 24, 1937): 6.

the Greeks.”<sup>19</sup> Yet when she penned her riposte to Sulaiman three years later, she titled it “Kayfa fahima al-‘arabi fann al-taswir” (How the Arab Understood Visual Art). Here the two nouns, *Arab* and *visual art*, are joined not by a preposition but by a verb, *understood*. Thus, Arabs are transformed into cognizant, subjective agents in this title; they are not merely a cultural location. Introducing the topic with the interrogative adverb *how* signaled that Choucair was not interested in the ethnic inflection of a pre-extant art form, but rather in the elaboration of a unique ethic in art. The adverb *how* opens a plurality of possibilities, and the root verb exposed to such potentiality is not merely *to make* but *to understand*. For cultural-evolutionist critics such as Sulaiman and al-Jumayyil, *how* people *made* art was a mechanical issue: it was the formal translation of their ethnically determined way of thinking. Therefore, a simple description of art production in a certain place would reveal what the makers thought about their world. For Choucair, such a description was insufficient because people could perceive apparently similar things in such radically different ways that the object of perception itself was actually transformed. She insisted on individual standards of evaluation for each culture, invoking “personality” or “ethos” as her theoretical model and its “distinguishing features” as the goal of her research. Consequently, she developed a sensitivity to an internal structure or generative system by which cultures produce their concerns and means of address. In reorienting and broadening her approach to cultural diversity, Choucair radically expanded the things that one could say about the world through art.

#### “THE ARAB”

In moving from *ethnos* to *ethos*, Choucair also moves to a singular subject: *the Arab*. Her use of this ethnic qualifier never suggests partial applicability. “The Arab” is at once an individual (who “never cared for visible reality”) and a people (“the most sophisticated”) just a paragraph later. She even homogenizes the population to the point of treating the Qur’an as the religious text for all Arabs.<sup>20</sup> Numerically unmoored—

19 It was published as “Fann al-taswir ‘and al-yunan” [The Art of Picturing among the Greeks], *Al-Adib* 7, no. 2 (February 1948): 9–14.

20 She speaks of “the Arab’s religion” and uses only the Qur’an to address the religious injunctions (“Kayfa fahima,” 197). In this move, Choucair accurately represented the belief of many Christian Arab nationalists (including Constantin Zurayq) in Islam as a unifying cultural force. See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

sometimes singular, sometimes plural—her use of the term also slides upon a slippery verb tense. On page 199, “The Arab [who] *did not* disregard matter” becomes he who “*will always choose* the essence.”<sup>21</sup> In English, a simple equation such as “red is a color” must be written in the present tense in order to be comprehensible, and it thus invokes a temporal frame. Although hearers realize that the sentence refers to an ahistorical state of being, they must frame that state of being as a present condition. In Arabic it is possible to join subjects and traits without any reference to time, and it is in this sense that Choucair develops her descriptions. In fact, she is not so interested in locating actions as complete or ongoing, but rather in identifying the means of their generativity.

I have adhered to the text’s numerical and temporal vacillation, knowing that it makes for tedious reading in the postcolonial library. But this article belongs to the opening of the 1950s, with the rise of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and Pan-Arabism and the struggle for liberation of several Arab nations.<sup>22</sup> Choucair conscientiously alerts her reader to her deliberate act of unification in the second sentence, where she distinguishes between Arabs *tout court* and those “who have studied *and been influenced by*” Orientalist standards.<sup>23</sup> The reference is biographical and intimate. Choucair had recently left Fernand Léger’s studio, and her exit work was a series of gouaches parodying his thinly veiled harem scene, *Le Grand Déjeuner* (1921).<sup>24</sup> She is an Arab who studied with Orientalists but who takes care to reflect on how she relates to his ideas about Arabs. Likewise, her letter’s representational strategies can be said to provoke Arabness rather than naively reflect a given version.

Befitting her theory that the Arab ethos is devoted to extracting the essence in all aspects of life, she purifies the Arab personality of admixtures and corruptions (such as those maddening Orientalists) and extracts the maximum potential difference: “The Arab never took much interest in visible, tangible reality, or the truth that every human

21 Choucair, “Kayfa fahima,” 199, my emphasis.

22 When reading her essay to me in 1997, Choucair paused to observe that the “conclusion that favored Islamic art was adopted on nationalist principles during a time of struggle with Britain and Jews over Palestine” (personal communication, Beirut, November 22, 1997). Her membership in the ACC during this period substantiates the connection, if not its predominance.

23 Choucair, “Kayfa fahima,” 195, additional emphasis.

24 See Kirsten Scheid, “Distinctions That Could Be Drawn: Choucair’s Paris and Beirut,” in *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, 45–51.



sees. Rather, he took his search for beauty to the essence of the subject, extracting it from all the adulterations that had accumulated in art since the time of the [Ancient] Greeks (*zaman al-ighriq*) until the end of the 19th century.”<sup>25</sup> Choucair sets *the Arab* into action in a text that bisects temporality into *zaman*, *‘asr* (period, era), and *tasalsul* (series, sequence). She qualifies the former, a matter of temporal expanse, by relating it to a people’s cultural activities, such as in the opening of her letter, when she invokes *zaman al-ighriq* (the time of the Ancient Greeks). Here “time” is a simple descriptor for co-occurrence. It does not explain the coincidence of events. With *tasalsul*, by contrast, one element sets the possibility for others to occur. Choucair qualifies this notion with *al-tarikhi al-mantiqi* (historical, logical) and *al-fikri* (conceptual). I have translated it as *chronology* or *timeline*, where dating (*ta’rikh*) an event implies theorizing its condition of possibility and its impact. Choucair seeks to distinguish between the situation of sharing temporal existence (concurrence) and the certainty of what must follow from a particular phase or condition (chronology). Chronologies cannot, she declares in her conclusion, account for how this visual language came to be or what can be achieved with its terms. Thus, she separates dynamism (or the potential for informed change) from age (or the exigency of progressive change). Her purified formulation for Arabness severs the tie between time and practice so as to re-politicize it. In this meditation on matter’s promise, the ambiguous merging of the past continuous and the conditional future demarcates a space—the public realm where we share responsibility for our material resources—where art has a serious public role for teaching people the possibilities they have for relating to matter, materiality, and social existence. This is exactly why she posits an essentialist Arab ethos as a critical asset for rethinking modern art.

Clearly the Choucair who in 1948 ran a pedagogical program for Arab nationalists about Western/universal art and who in 1951 intended to found an international art school in Beirut neither believed in a static Arab society, nor advocated hermetically sealing it to Arab sources.<sup>26</sup> Rather, her letter about *the Arab* establishes a way to define and appreciate an Arabic plastic language. By opening her

25 Choucair, “Kayfa fahima,” 195.

26 For Choucair’s pedagogical plans, see the interview with Edvik Jaraysati Shaybub, “Ma’a al-fannana Salwa Rawda” [With the Artist Saloua Raouda], *Sawt al-mar’a* 7, no. 12 (July 1951): 36–37.



Saloua Raouda Choucair. *Chiores*, 1949. Gouache on paper, 25 x 35.5 cm. Image courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation.

title with *how*, Choucair suggests that differences in the ways of seeing make direct access to the self-same object impossible: we may see *how* people see but not *what* they see. Art provokes awareness of ourselves as sighted creatures. Mindfully sighted, we must take responsibility for what we receive visually: it is a matter of neither seeing nor being, but understanding. Asking “how?” in 1951 allowed visual art more agency in the construction of modernity and modern Arabness, which brings us to the next term in her letter’s title.

### “VISUAL”

Choucair states in her letter that Arabs are uninterested in the visible truth but excel in *fann al-taswir* with works that are “more real than common reality.”<sup>27</sup> *Taswir* is one of the essay’s most difficult words to translate. Usually it is translated as *pictorial*, but I have opted for *visual*. Clearly, the works of *taswir* Choucair is referencing are not representational works.<sup>28</sup> The term instead articulates the mysterious type of art whose universality is cast into doubt by Arab “understanding.” Semantically, *taswir* is the process of making a *sura* (pl. *suwar*). People take *suwar* at parties and print them on the pages of society publications.

27 Choucair, “Kayfa fahima,” 199. The phrase is *ashadd waqi‘iyya*, the same phrase she used to describe the cardinal number and the chemical essence.

28 Nonetheless, in an article a few years earlier on modernism, Choucair had used the word to mean *both* realistic and abstract visual art, from ancient Egyptian statuary to *Mona Lisa* to a modernist “picture of a man on which there are no human features to which we are accustomed.” See Saloua Raouda Choucair, “Al-Madrassa al-haditha fi al-taswir” [The Modern School of Picturing], *Sawt al-mar’a* 4, no. 6 (June 1948): 10–11.

A little girl who resembles her mother is her *sura*, as is a piece of paper produced by Xeroxing. This range of usages conveys the word's distance from the *picture* of the Renaissance tradition that Choucair's peers hailed as "descriptive" and (intentionally) "observational."<sup>29</sup> The Arabic *sura* has less to do with content than with production. The root verb, *sawara*, means at its most basic "to shape" or "to mold." The *sura* is the molded thing, and *taswir* is the temporally laden technology of molding. These words keep us in the realm of interaction—between an entity's coming into being and becoming meaningful. Inasmuch as it brings into cognition and communication something that is otherwise not present, we could say a *sura* is a matter of representation, as long as we are willing to set aside the logical, narrative causality that the word conventionally suggests. As Choucair tells Sulaiman, *taswir* and literature are each self-standing art forms, and the former should never be demeaned as a mere stand-in for the latter (as with illustration).

Part of the difficulty in translating Choucair's use of *taswir* is due to her weaving between diametrically opposed meanings. My sense is that Choucair deliberately tapped into *taswir*'s etymological ambiguity to make an argument about Arab connectedness to modernity and materiality. Knowing that *taswir* would make her readers think of the picture-window hanging in their living rooms, she wants to provoke their thinking about it as a moment of visual encounter rather than as an illustration of narrative meaning (or civilizational superiority). By translating *taswir* as *visual*, I do not seek to smooth over the inconsistencies in her usage of the term. Rather, I want to keep the language open to the possibilities inherent in this pivotal moment of her thinking about where art is coming from, and where it might be going.

When she speaks of *suwar* that are more real than common reality, Choucair almost certainly draws on Alhazanian optics and chromatics. Abu 'Ali al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen)<sup>30</sup> provides

29 See, for example, Qaysar al-Jumayyil, "Al-Nubugh wa-l-mal yakhluqan al-fann al-yunani" [Genius and Money Create Greek Art], *Al-Makshuf* 4, no. 137 (February 28, 1938): 8.

30 Choucair does not mention Alhazen by name but refers to "Arab philosophers [who] were Sufis; their knowledge stemmed from experience, not dialectical argumentation" (198), and she reveres the philosopher-scientists' reliance upon mathematics (197). She had already built on Alhazen's theories in an earlier publication about color as an optical effect: see Saloua Raouda Choucair, "Madha yajib 'an ta'arifahu 'an al-lawn" [What You Must Know about Color], *Sawt al-mar'a* 4, no. 7 (July 1948): 12–13; and 4, no. 8 (August 1948): 12.

the perfect rejoinder to Musa Sulaiman.<sup>31</sup> Alhazen was a contemporary of the stories Sulaiman analyzes and introduced empirical experimentation into the study of optics, developing his work as a critique of the Greek scientists whose theory of knowledge and representation lies at the base of Renaissance art. He distinguished between “visibility,” which relates an object to the eye through mere sensation, on the one hand, and “visuality,” which relates eyes to brains and societies, via inference or recognition, on the other.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the Aristotelian model of optics held that viewed objects emitted *eidola* (images), which entered the viewer’s eye, Alhazen’s empirical experiments compelled him to theorize a neutral medium that was produced by neither the object nor the eye but enabled by their connection: light. The ontological premise guiding his study of sight and light is that the latter is subject to “essential ordering structures” that can be experimentally manipulated, mathematically described, and multiply interpreted while still speaking of a singular essence.<sup>33</sup> That essence is what Choucair meant by the “more real,” whereas the culturally learned interpretation is the “common reality.”

In the Aristotelian worldview there is only one proper form (the one emitted by the object) that tells the object’s truth, even substitutes for it. By contrast, in the Alhazenian model, the “true form” (*al-sura al-haqiqiyya*), or “the bundle of properties perceived and unperceived, in any single instance,” is different from the “unified form” (*al-sura al-mutahhida*) the optical nerve transmits from each eye to the brain.<sup>34</sup> For Alhazen the issue at stake between these various types of form is accessibility, not substitutability. For this reason, we can think of vision as “a mode of de-distancing” and of “visual art” as the manipulation of nearness, farness, access, and interpretative conditions. Knowledge coalesces in the interrelationship of forms—specifically, the point where they become convertible to other aspects, where seeing is “geometricized” and perception is “structurally modeled.”<sup>35</sup> This way of knowing the world is intersubjective. It can neither belong to one person nor exist fixedly in one aspect. It is also temporally infused by

31 Choucair, “Kayfa fahima,” 197.

32 Nader El-Bizri, “A Philosophical Perspective on Alhazen’s *Optics*,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005): 189–218.

33 Ibid., 191.

34 Ibid., 192.

35 Ibid., 204.

positing a lapse between the conditions of possibility for sight and the instance of perception. Thus, the sense of time structuring Alhazen's model is not teleological: the array of forms that may result when perception occurs is unranked and undetermined. *Suwar* will always submit to sentient interpretation, which will in turn always be informed by a society's religion, history, politics, ecology, and so on. Hence, Alhazen relocated the meaning of images from themselves to their interpretive conditions. Ultimately the importance of the *sura* lies in what we do with it. In her letter, Choucair patiently if passionately explains to Sulaiman that Arabs do not fear God's wrath for figurative art any more than they worship figuration. They simply spy much greater value in using *suwar* to attain awareness of generative essences, like visual elixirs.

A look at her own art from this period facilitates our understanding of how Choucair tapped into the theory of phenomenalist perception. In a series of pieces that accompanied her association with Fernand Léger's studio, she flattened groups of anatomically simplified figures and landmark sights with strong contours and bright, unmodulated planes of color. *Chores* (1949) exemplifies this whimsical manner. However, she sought in abstraction the key to reality, not simply another look for it. As we know from her biography, after rapidly becoming unsatisfied with Léger's stylizing, she moved to yet another studio, where "more real" came to describe work that staged the interactions of shapes rather than their reduction. In *Experiment with Calligraphy*, the silhouettes of single Arabic letters rotate in multiple versions across the surface, disappearing and reappearing. Quick contrasts of color empty the contours and activate the negative spaces. Though legible, the letters evade verbal meaning. Thus, Choucair extracted the essences of elements by submitting them to conditions that reveal the normally imperceptible range of generativity inherent in their forms.

#### "ART" (AND "MATTER")

The replacement, in the title of Choucair's letter, of the common prepositional axis with a verbal one underscores the plural potentiality of perception. But this was not cultural relativism for its own sake. With her colleagues at the Atelier de l'art abstrait, Choucair renounced hegemonic, totalitarian representation. Critic Léon Degand described it as a group quest to paint a square—the epitome of a mental construction—that exists by dint of its plasticity and not by its reference to an ideal,



Saloua Raouda Choucair: *Experiment with Calligraphy*, 1949. Gouache on paper, 48 × 31 cm.  
Image courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation.

Platonic form.<sup>36</sup> Choucair went a step further, commanding viewers to recognize their responsibility for their particular understanding. This feat is most apparent in how she actually painted a square.

How do squares exist, if not as Platonic ideals? The actual, unmediated sight of a side of a cube is an experience of slantedness and

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36 See Léon Degand, “L’Epouvantail de l’académisme abstrait” [The Bogeyman of Abstract Art], *Art d’Aujourd’hui* 2, no. 4 (April 1951): 32–33.

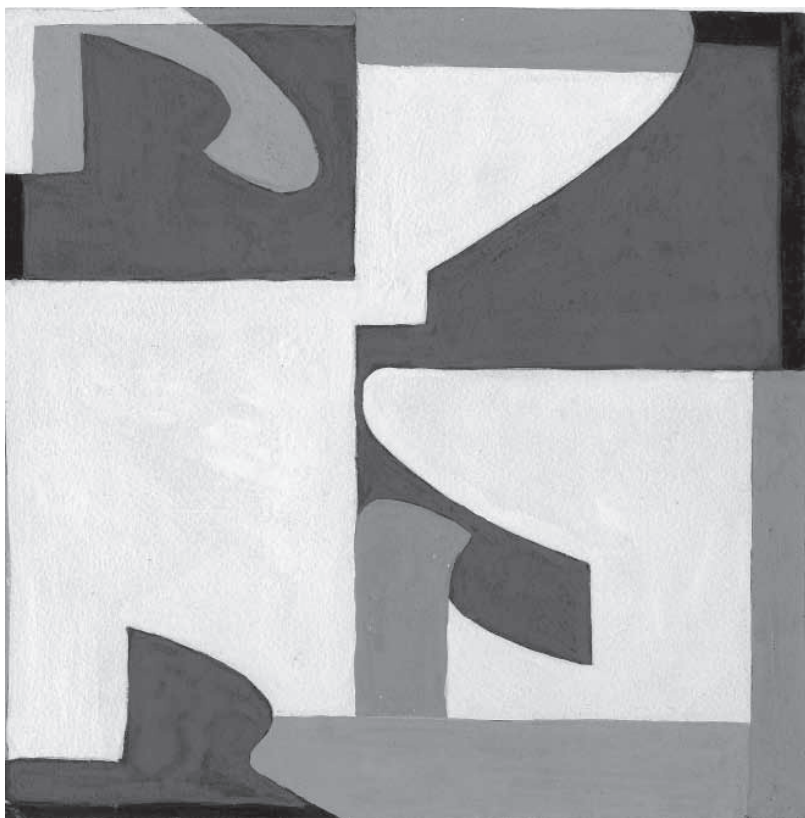
unevenness (*al-sura al-haqiqiyya*), but we learn to collapse those ocular struggles into the square's mathematical status (*al-sura al-mutahhida*). We can "see" this iconic form (the *sura kulliyya*) with our eyes closed. Taking on this dilemma, Choucair's work separates the visible properties of an object from its visual structure. Starting from the plastic element of a square canvas, she replicates the external form by dividing her surface into four equal regions: the mathematical equation that had generated the ideal shape now undoes it. She then manipulates that equation by elongating various elements, flipping and rotating them, and injecting tonal differences. By submitting an iconic form to a range of interpretive conditions, the artist teases out its essence, the features that produce its iconicity. She creates an intervention before the mind's eye can grasp the square's aspects as those of a specific, unified thing. In doing so, she triggers the viewer's sense of perceptual capacity without allowing it to proceed mindlessly. The surrogate closeness afforded by visual art enabled her to interrogate the possibilities of perception that tend to be foreclosed by our culturally learned habits. For Choucair, the de-distancing of vision compelled never-ending explorations of the infinite possibilities for understanding the same object under different conditions, in other media, on other scales. Ultimately, this heightened awareness of the perception process calls into question how we relate to matter (*al-madda*).

Choucair's efforts to extract "the venerable Arab mind" culminate in a disquisition on the role matter has in determining human life. Contemporary cultural criticism in the Arab world typically pitted art against matter and the sickness that it produced: namely, materialism (*al-madiyya*).<sup>37</sup> Scientific progressivism had recently challenged orthodox ideas about divine creation, natural law, and the place of mankind in the cosmos,<sup>38</sup> while colonialism had implicated matter in foreign markets and costly imports, associating it with overextension, deception, dependence, vulnerability, and inferiority. Moreover, much journalism of the period was devoted to techniques for avoiding deceptions

37 See Kirsten Scheid, "Divinely Imprinting Prints: Or, How Pictures Became Influential Persons in Mandate Lebanon," in *Routledge Companion to the Middle Eastern Mandates*, ed. Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

38 For the theological debates about materialism, see Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), and Daniel Stolz, "By Virtue of Your Knowledge: Scientific Materialism and the *Fatwas* of Rashid Rida," *Bulletin of SOAS* 75, no. 2 (2012): 223–47.

Saloua Raouda Choucair. *Module*, 1947–51. Gouache on paper, 22 x 22 cm.  
Image courtesy of Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation.



induced by an object's material value. Childish were they who trusted matter, either unsuspectingly taking anything offered to them or naïvely believing matter would serve all their needs. Demoralization and depression would quickly ensue.<sup>39</sup>

Many intellectuals and social activists of the period believed art should rescue people from corruption by matter.<sup>40</sup> They charged art with representing spiritual values that were not contained within objects or producible by machines, such as honesty and selflessness. They glorified art's immateriality: it overcame material constraints—making the absent present (i.e., landscapes, historical subjects, and portraits). By representing things it was not, art could teach people that

39 Salah 'Abd al-Rahman Al-Asir, "Dhawq al-jamal wa-l-fann" [The Appreciation of Beauty and Art], *Al-Ma'rad* 15, no. 1089: 9.

40 A typical example is 'Arif Abu Shaqra's call on intellectuals to devise an ethical law for dealing with matter and materiality: 'Arif Abu Shaqra, "Fawda al-akhlaq" [The Chaos of Ethics], *Al-Badīa* 1 (September 9–10, 1929): 515.



value lies in how something is used rather than in things themselves. It could enable them to appreciate natural beauty to which they did not have regular, sustained access. It could confront them with goodness and aesthetically activate their sense of joy and will. Building on John Ruskin, Choucair's neighbor and mentor Moustapha Farrouk (Mustafa Farrukh) even held that art was a (secular) religion of beauty that taught people that the world was more than just matter.<sup>41</sup>

However, this approach was based on choosing the "best objects" (in Aristotelian fashion) and picturing them the "best way." Choucair realized that this competition inevitably reinforced a cultural hegemony and, at best, produced a proliferation of questions, as she put it to Sulaiman. By revealing that matter does not predetermine how we interpret it, she rescued materiality for modernity. Choucair's letter presents her reader with a final choice: "Matter *has today become* a road to Heaven-on-Earth, as promised by the Qur'an, or a living Hell *if misused*."<sup>42</sup> Her sentence's strange tense leaves the future open but urgent. Matter *has become*, or it might *if misused*? The answer is in the way of looking, in the role the viewer assumes in the process of *taswir*. The point is not that reality is outside of matter but rather is deeply at its heart. This gives the artist, like the scientist, a central position, and it sets Arabs squarely at the heart of material modernism. The (intellectually) Arab artist—combining faith, science, and knowledge—becomes the seer for a culturally pluralistic modernity. Having opened the space that the mind collapses in perception, Choucair calls on people to be mindful, ethical, and active.

Within months of posting her letter to Beirut, Choucair herself relocated there. Her subsequent writing and work sought to aesthetically spark people's responsibility for their relationship to matter, to public and domestic resources, and to each other. By 1957 her work took a decisive turn to three- and four-dimensional media, incorporating the motion of light, water, and viewers' physical responses. It followed essential units—whether modules, algebraic equations, poetic verses, light waves, or genes—into structures of composition that relate macro- and micro-level processes in systems of open-ended feedback and growth. The search for the essence became the exaltation of infinity.

41 Moustapha Farrouk, "Tali'at al-fannanin al-lubnaniyyin" [The Rise of Lebanese Artists], in *Muhadarat al-nadwa al-lubnaniyya* (Beirut: Al-Nadwa al-lubnaniyya, 1947), 252.

42 Choucair, "Kayfa fahima," 200, my emphasis.