

MUNIF'S INTEREST IN MODERN ART

FRIENDSHIP, SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND THE ART OF THE BOOK

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Remembered as Arab novelist *par excellence*, 'Abd al-Rahman Munif is not usually known for his interest in modern art. However, it was much more than a pastime. Modern art occupied an important place in Munif's life. Whoever visited him in his apartment in the residential neighbourhood of al-Mizza in Damascus can attest to this. His apartment is crowded not only with books but also with paintings by various Arab artists. Most of the paintings were given to him by the artists. Munif lived with the paintings as if they were real beings, changing their places frequently in order to look at them anew, keeping them from turning into mere *objects d'art* or part of the furnishing.¹

Munif's interest in modern art dates back to the time he spent as a student in Baghdad in the early 1950s. The years preceding the 1958 revolution in Iraq were marked by heightened political as well as cultural activity. Munif then was more interested in politics. He was an active member of the Ba'th party. He left the party in 1963, when it came to power.² But Baghdad's cultural life was to have a lasting impact on him. As regards modern art, Baghdad was a centre of avant-garde movements. In this context one has to remember the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (*Jama'at Baghdad lil-fann al-hadith*) which was founded in 1952 by young Iraqi artists who later came to be celebrated as the country's foremost artists, namely Jawad Salim (1919-1961) and Shakir Hasan Al Said (1925-2004), in addition to the Palestinian intellectual and writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-1994).³ As stated in its manifestoes, the group aimed at producing art of international significance and local character at the same time.⁴

Since the 1950s, Munif not only spent much time in the museums and galleries of the many cities he lived in, especially when living in Paris in the 1980s, he followed the development of modern art in the Arab world closely. He engaged in close friendships and fervent dialogues with many artists. Although not a professional art critic, he wrote numerous essays on art and artists in the Arab world, among them Fatih al-Mudarris (1922-1999), Marwan Qassab Bashi (b. 1934), Nadhir Nab'a (b. 1938), Na'im Isma'il (1930-1979), Ardash Kakafiyān (1940-1999), Jabr 'Alwan (b. 1948), 'Ali Talib (b. 1944), Jawad Salim (1921-1961) and Mahmud Mukhtar (1891-1934). He was planning to publish these essays in book form, but he died before he was able to do so.⁵ Munif did not only write about art and artists, he also tried his own hand at drawing, as the special edition of his *Sirat madina* (Story of a City), discussed later, shows. Asked about his interest in art, he responded:

“First, I like fine art and thus it is natural to share this appreciation with the public. Second, there are precedents of authors and poets who “read” and wrote about the works of artists. This

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writing, even if it is not academic, is a parallel reading of a work of art that may shed light on aspects and discover aspects in it that the skilled critic does not see. Third, there is a rupture between the arts, especially in the Arab world, where each art grows separately from the others, a condition that weakens art in general, at a time when the novel could build bridges between these arts.”⁶

One of the “precedents of authors and poets who “read” and wrote about the works of artists” was Jabra. He came to be one of Munif’s closest friends and served him as a model – not only in his capacity as distinguished writer and intellectual but also as an author interested in modern art.⁷ Like Jabra, Munif considered the novel a bridge between the arts. Together they wrote *Alam bila khabara’it* (A World without Maps, Beirut 1982). This co-authored novel raises many questions, not only in regard to authorship. It can be considered “a novel on the art of novel writing,” as Muhsin Jasim al-Musawi suggests,⁸ and, furthermore, a novel critically reflecting the role of the artist in contemporary Arab society.

Most of the artists Munif wrote about were his friends and like him outstanding figures in the field of cultural production, be it in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo or any other city. Not only did he write about the works of artists, they in turn produced drawings and paintings that figure as illustrations on his book covers. At a time when the Arabic book market is flooded by cheap and rapid publications, Munif’s books stand out. It is difficult to say whether he first wrote about an artist or whether the artist first produced the illustration. Rather, the give and take between writer and artist is to be understood as a gradual process of symbolic exchange between friends and outstanding figures in the field of cultural production.

This article focuses on the artists Dia Azzawi and Marwan Qassab-Bashi and their contributions to Munif’s books. Just like Munif’s writing on the works of artists, their drawings and paintings offer “a parallel reading” – of a literary text that “may shed light on aspects and discover aspects that the skilled critic does not see.” Methodologically, the article draws inspiration from Laurie Edson’s approach of reading relationally across the fields of literature and art. Such an approach challenges our ways of seeing and reading by calling into question the boundaries usually drawn between the verbal and the visual.⁹

AZZAWI

The Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi (b. 1939) was part of the so-called sixties generation in Baghdad and deeply influenced by The Baghdad Group for Modern Art. In 1969, he together with other young Iraqi artists founded The New Vision. The group called for a free and creative rapport with Iraq’s cultural heritage, allowing room for individual approaches.¹⁰ Having studied archaeology and art in Baghdad and headed the Iraqi Antiquities Department, Azzawi is known internationally for combining contemporary artistic practices with characteristics drawn from the Arabic-Islamic heritage and beyond it the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia. He has lived in London since 1976.¹¹

Apart from being a painter, Azzawi has a profound interest in graphic design, having worked in book illustration and produced many *livres d’artiste* (artist’s books) since the early 1960s. The art of illustrating books has a long and very elaborate tradition in Arabic culture.¹² The *livre d’artiste*, however, originated in Europe. It emerged as a significant art form in early 20th century France as a reaction to the mass-produced book.¹³ It used to be published in a limited edition, usually not exceeding three hundred copies, and issued unbound (*en feuilles*) in a box or case. Each illustration in the *livre d’artiste* was an original. However, its definition has aroused much scrutiny since the 1960s when new forms of *livres d’artiste* started to proliferate worldwide in the general context of socio-political activism.¹⁴ The *livre d’artiste* has become a powerful means of expression for Arab artists.¹⁵ As Azzawi

points out, it establishes a link with the Arabic-Islamic heritage in which book-making was valued highly and is part of contemporary artistic practices worldwide, at the same time. It liberates art from being a painting, a decorative object hung on a wall to give evidence of its owner's refined taste. Issued in the form of a book, it emphasizes the narrative capacity of images and calls for a visual reading.¹⁶ Azzawi's *livres d'artiste* are manifold. They range from signed limited editions to offset multiples and one-of-a-kind volumes. All of them are on Arabic literature – on classical Arabic literature, like the *Mu'allaqat* or *Alf layla wa-layla*, as well as on modern Arabic literature written by such acclaimed authors as al-Jawahiri, Adunis, Yusuf al-Khal or 'Abd al-Rahman Munif.

Munif never wrote about Azzawi. However, Azzawi not only produced numerous book illustrations for Munif's *Mudun al-milb* (Cities of Salt), he turned the novel into a valuable *livre d'artiste*. He was fascinated by its minute description of life in the desert and the transformation of the desert triggered by the discovery of petroleum.¹⁷ *Mudun al-milb* has been described as “the grand oil novel of the lands of the Gulf.”¹⁸ A visual reading of the novel through the lens of Azzawi's book illustrations and *livre d'artiste*, however, shows that there is more to the novel than the theme of petroleum.

AZZAWI'S BOOK ILLUSTRATIONS

Azzawi's illustrations figure on the book cover as well as inside the book of *Mudun al-milb*'s second edition (vol. 1 and 2), published in Beirut in 1986. They visualize some of the characters described in the novel. The book cover shows Mut'ib al-Hadhdhal (fig. 1) who is a central character in the novel's first volume *al-Tib* (The Wilderness). In the novel, he is introduced as a descendant of Jazi al-Hadhdhal who is remembered by the desert community of Wadi al-'Uyun for his resistance to the Ottomans at the end of the 19th century. After “the butchery of Wadi al-Uyun”¹⁹ caused by the discovery of petroleum in the region about forty years later, Mut'ib al-Hadhdhal himself becomes a legendary figure in the community's collective memory, revered for his resistance to the Americans and their local allies. Azzawi depicts him in bright colours, his face leaning forward sternly, standing out against a sand-coloured background. His depiction corresponds to the way he is described in the novel, when suddenly appearing before his son Fawwaz and other members of the community.



“At that very moment, as a brilliant flash of lightning rent the sky, creating fear upon fear, Miteb al-Hathal appeared. He seemed enormously tall and rather white skinned. He had his staff in his right hand and pointed it at them from the other side of the wadi. His physical form was so clearly discernible and so extremely powerful that he appeared to be closer than the opposite bank – as if he were directly over the water.”²⁰

Azzawi's black and white drawings included as illustrations inside the book focus on some of the novel's other characters (fig. 2-6). Each drawing is provided a page of its own. However, the incorporation of Arabic letters into the drawings establishes a graphical likeness to the text. The introduction of Arabic letters into modern art is a prominent feature in the Arab world. It is closely linked to an artistic reorientation, as promoted by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, that set in with the *nakba* of 1948 and distanced itself from the powerful model of Western art, seeking inspiration instead from the Arabic-Islamic heritage, here from calligraphy.²¹



In figures 2 and 3, the letters are clearly legible as the names of two characters described in *Mudun al-milb*: Umm Ghazwan and Ibn al-Rashid. However, the latter's name is cut in two – whereas “Ibn al-Ra” is written horizontally, the last part of the name “shid” continues vertically – just like Ibn al-Rashid himself is torn apart between his Arab origins and his alliance with the Americans. In figure 4, the letters on the right side of the drawing are clearly legible as “Harran al-‘arab” (Arab Harran), as the Arab



quarters in the port city of Harran are called as opposed to the American quarters.²² But the letters in the upper left corner of the drawing do not form any coherent word at all. In figure 5, the letters in the upper part of the drawing, just below the site of a camp, are only reminiscent of Arabic letters. Like the novel's characters, they are engrossed in a process of transformation. It is a forceful and violent process, as the dismembered body in the drawing's foreground bluntly shows. The miserable state some of the characters are in is in sharp contrast to the proud figure of Mut'ib al-Hadhdhal, shown in figure 6.



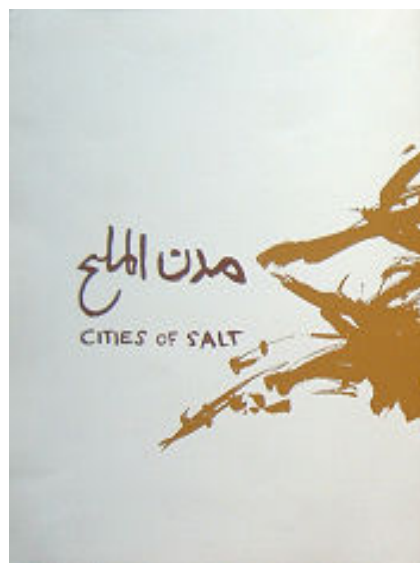
Just as the illustrations draw on the Arabic visual heritage, namely the tradition of Arabic calligraphy, the novel borrows narrative techniques and idioms from the Arabic literary heritage. It incorporates numerous quotations from classical Arabic literature, ranging from Imru' al-Qays to al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutayba. Allusions to the *Qur'an* as well as to popular salvation narratives, like *Sirat 'Antara bin Shadad*, *Zabir Baybars* and *Bani Hilal*, further enhance the novel's bond with the Arabic literary heritage. Similar to the traditional Arabic story-teller (*al-bakawati*), the narrative voice holds on to the oral transmission of events. The use of colloquial Arabic and numerous Arabic proverbs in the dialogues lends the

narrative an overall authentic character.²³ *Mudun al-milb* has been considered “a break-through in Arabic narrative art.”²⁴ Its English translation, however, has aroused less favourable reviews. The American novelist John Updike, for instance, accuses its author of being “insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel.”²⁵ “Munif may be among the most misunderstood and underrated Arab writers in terms of his formal experimentation,” says Stefan G. Meyer, whereas he is “trying to fashion a novel that is uniquely ‘Arab’ in its view of history as well as in its narrative style.”²⁶ A visual reading of *Mudun al-milb* through the lens of Azzawi's book illustrations, however, brings this aspect to the fore.



AZZAWI'S LIVRE D'ARTISTE

al-'Azawwi's *livre d'artiste* on *Mudun al-Milb* was issued in a limited edition of fifty examples only in London in 1994. Issued in a box, it consists of a bound copy of selected abstracts of the novel's five volumes printed in Arabic and English with black and white illustrations and a folder with six coloured prints, signed and numbered (fig. 7). The prints highlight an important aspect of the novel that was mentioned briefly, when referring to Azzawi's portrayal of Mut'ib al-Hadhdhal



that shows on the book cover of the second edition: colour. Like the novel, the bound copy of the *livre d'artiste* starts with the lines:

“Wadi al-Uyoun: an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert, as if it had burst from within the ground or fallen from the sky.”²⁷

Colour is ascribed a prominent place in the novel from the very beginning. As Kamal Boullata points out, the Arabic language contains “an abundance of words that describe the visual world” – especially as regards the different shades of colour.^{xxviii} In *Mudun al-milh*, Munif deliberately draws on this legacy. Azzawi’s use of colour in the prints brings to the fore the different shades of colour described in the novel. The majority of prints focus on the colours of the desert, different



shades of ochre and brown, interspersed with black lines and writing. Here, the Arabic letters are clearly legible. One print includes the phrase: “Shame on you all” that Muhammad al-Mudawwar cries out, when he finds Umm al-Khush dead (fig. 8). It highlights the sheer desperation as it takes hold of some of the characters, while the Americans and their local allies of royalties and subordinates go ahead with their business. A couple of prints capture the colourful life, as it existed in



Wadi al-Uyoun before the discovery of petroleum in its rich vegetation and abundant water: green, blue, yellow and red. One of them incorporates the novel’s description of Wadi al-Uyoun as “an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert” (fig. 9).

A central theme in so-called *jabili* (pre-Islamic) literature, the desert has become a prominent theme in a number of Arabic novels in the latter part of the 20th century by authors, such as Hani al-Rahib, Ibrahim al-Kuni and al-Tayyib Salih.^{xxix} Munif’s minute perception of the desert, however, is rare. Similar to the village of al-Tiba in his novel *al-Nibayat* (Endings), the desert oasis of Wadi al-Uyoun in *Mudun al-milh* is more than a geographical place. It is described as “a salvation from death”, “a miracle” and “an earthly paradise.”^{xxx} Its description shares many characteristics with the *Qur’an’s* imagery of paradise.^{xxxi} Its unspoiled, heavenly character of former days contrasts its harsh reality after the discovery of petroleum, as seen through the eyes of Mut’ib al-Hadhdhal’s son Fawwaz, on his return to Wadi al-Uyoun.

“When they reached Wadi al-Uyoun, it seemed to Fawaz a place he had never seen before. There was no trace of the wadi he had left behind; none of the old things remained. Even the fresh breezes that used to blow at this time of the year had become hot and searing in daytime, and a bitter cold penetrated his bones late at

night. The men who had gathered there, he did not know from where, in their tents and wooden houses, were a bizarre mixture of humanity; they bore no resemblance to anything a man would recognize”^{xxxii}

Just as the place has changed, so have its inhabitants who have turned into “a bizarre mixture of humanity” with “no resemblance to anything a man would recognize.” The transformation of Wadi al-‘Uyun and the surrounding desert, triggered by the discovery of petroleum, goes hand in hand with profound changes in society. Similar to Azzawi’s book illustrations discussed above, the illustrations in the bound copy of his *livre d’artiste* focus on some of the novel’s characters. They capture their agonies and longings in the face of profound social change. It is as if they were trying to find answers to the distressing question raised in the novel:

“How is it possible for people and places to change so entirely that they lose any connection with what they used to be? Can a man adapt to new things and new places without losing a part of himself?”^{xxxiii}

Reading across the fields of literature and visual art challenges the powerful frames and narratives through which we are accustomed to look at the world. Reading *Mudun al-milb* through the lens of Azzawi’s book illustrations and *livre d’artiste* encourages us to look beyond the novel’s value as a sociological study of an otherwise unwritten history – “the grand oil novel of the lands of the Gulf”. It sheds light on the novel’s local colour, the experimental zeal with which it presents its view of history from within a narrative that remains connected to the Arabic literary heritage while it is part of contemporary literary practices worldwide, at the same time. Only through its local character, argues Munif, can the Arabic novel attain international significance.

“The more our novel is local, the more it becomes world-class. In other words, the closer it comes to sincerity in portraying the local atmosphere and the deeper it goes into people’s life, even if they are only a small group, the more it approaches being world-class.”^{xxxiv}

Munif’s concern with the Arabic novel’s local character has much in common with the Baghdad Group for Modern Art’s call to produce art of local identity yet international significance, as it reverberates in Azzawi’s book illustrations and *livre d’artiste*.

MARWAN

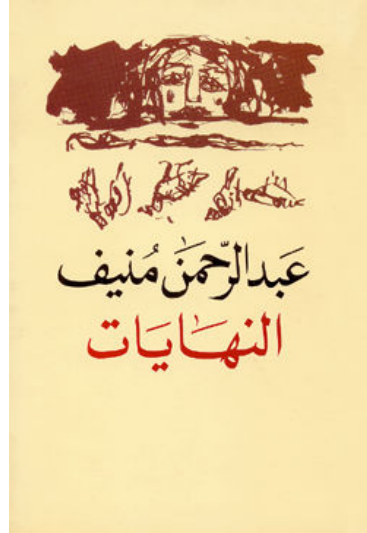
The Syrian artist Marwan Qassab-Bashi (b. 1934) left his native city Damascus in 1957 to study art abroad. He arrived at the College of Visual Arts (today: University of Fine Arts) in Berlin, Germany, where he was later to be appointed professor. He has become part of the Berlin art scene and internationally acknowledged. He is the artist Munif wrote about most extensively, devoting an entire book on him, *Marwan Qassab-Basha: Riblat al-hayat wal-fann* (Marwan Qassab Bashi: Journey of Life and Art, Berlin 1996).

Munif’s and Marwan’s life trajectories intersected briefly in the mid 1950s, when they socialized among the same group of young intellectuals in favour of socio-political change in Damascus. When Marwan left for Berlin and Munif for Belgrade, they lost sight of each other, until Munif was invited to a reading in Berlin in 1992 and visited Marwan in his atelier. This time, the contact was to last and became one of close friendship. Keeping in touch through a correspondence, they exchanged their ideas about literature and art and the world, at large. Whereas Munif’s letters, with all the warmth and generosity of genuine friendship, retain the

character of a correspondence, Marwan's letters are written in the form of a private journal, including stream-of-consciousness passages, drawings and small aquarelles. In the light of their correspondence, it was likely that Munif and Marwan would engage in joint projects.

MARWAN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATIONS

Since the mid-1990s, Marwan has contributed significantly to Munif's books. His paintings and drawings are displayed as illustrations on the book covers and, in some cases, also inside the books. Most of the paintings and drawings were especially produced to accompany Munif's books, preceded by several sketches.^{xxxv} The new edition of *al-Nihayat* (Endings), published in Beirut in 1999, is a good example. Printed on a yellowish paper, the book cover shows a drawing of the novel's protagonist 'Assaf and his prey of partridges, his face hovering above the desert. It is reproduced in a brown colour above the lettering of the novel's author and title in black and red (fig. 10). The illustrations inside the book are in black and white. They visualize 'Assaf accompanied by his dog, hunting for partridges, when he was found dead in the desert and on his deathbed. A detail of Munif's portrait, painted by Marwan in 1996 while on a visit to Damascus, is shown with a listing of his major publications on the book cover's inner back side (fig. 11). While Munif can clearly be discerned, the portrait shares some similarities with the many paintings simply entitled "Head" that have become characteristic of Marwan's work. These give the impression of purely abstract paintings at first sight. The facial traits are in a continual process of composition and decomposition, as they take shape upon closer examination. As "facial landscapes," they show a preference for earthen colours: red, brown and yellow – the same colours that are used in *al-Nihayat's* book cover. They are reminiscent of the colours of the landscape that Munif evokes in his novels and that Marwan left behind, when he embarked on a new life in Berlin.

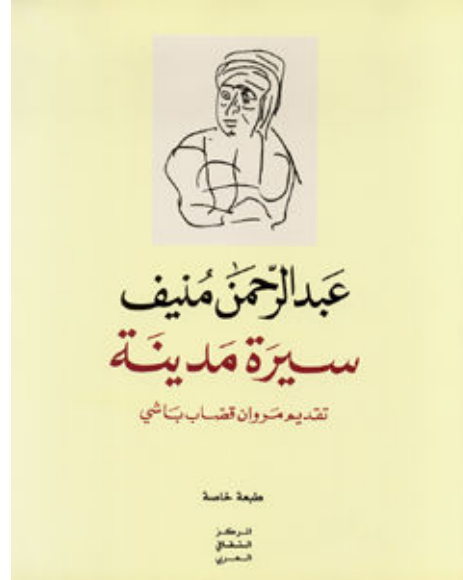


Marwan does not usually work in book illustration. As he says, he did not work together with Munif for commercial reasons but for symbolic ones, having in mind their close friendship and his genuine admiration for Munif's novels.^{xxxvi} Marwan has been living and working outside the Arab world since the late 1950s and has only resumed close ties and more of a physical presence in the region recently.^{xxxvii} In 2005, his work was finally presented to a large public in his homeland in an exhibition held in one of the major historical venues in Damascus, the Khan As'ad Basha.^{xxxviii} Although Munif was no longer there to share this important moment with his friend, his portrait – in addition to portraits of his wife and children and a selection of Marwan's letters – figured prominently in the exhibition. For Marwan, his friendship with Munif has been closely associated with a sense of a homecoming. In the form of book illustrations his paintings and drawings have left the confines of museums, art galleries and private collections and have been introduced to a broad reading public in the Arab world. In choosing to work with Munif – one of the most

renowned Arab novelists whose books are being published in the 10th and 15th editions – Marwan might have been drawn to select “the most monumental of all scales open to literate art, and not the slightest; the form that may travel furthest, touch widest, and that could just possibly even last the longest, if we continue to read.”^{xxxix}

MUNIF'S DRAWINGS

Apart from contributing to Munif's books with illustration of his own, Marwan prepared a special edition of Munif's *Sirat madina* (Story of a City), first published in 1994, which came out in Beirut in 2001 (fig. 12). As Marwan's preface “Indama yarsumu al-katib” (When the Writer Draws) indicates, the special edition shows Munif in a new light. He is not only the author of such acclaimed novels as *Sharq al-mutawassit* or *Mudun al-milh*, he is also an artist engaging in different art forms: writing and drawing. The special edition includes about fifty drawings by Munif. However, it would be misleading to consider Munif doubly talented. The book is the result of the friendship and symbolic exchange between two artists of different artistic fields, one a novelist and the other a painter.



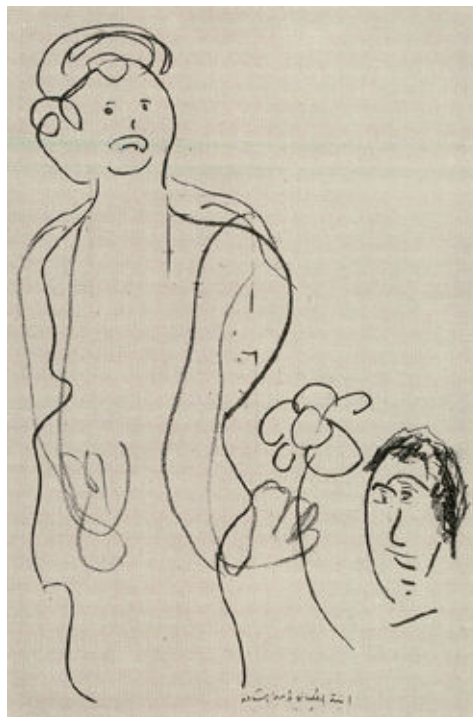
In the preface, Marwan tells about the circumstances in which the special edition came into existence. It was by accident that he came across Munif's drawings during a visit to Damascus in 1995. In his study, in bookshelves next to his desk, Munif used to keep a number of sketchbooks, small books with plain white paper. When working on a book, he from time to time reached out for them and started drawing, interrupting the lengthy process of writing with drawings executed in a matter of seconds. Munif considered his drawings no more than a pastime.^{xl} When Marwan put forward the idea of a special edition, he first objected. But after discussing the issue more thoroughly, he agreed. The special edition was neither to be a *livre d'artiste* nor a *livre de luxe*, a lavish edition for the collector, but a book that the general public could afford and would, at the same time, take pleasure in reading.^{xli}

Sirat madina is usually read as an autobiography. Recent autobiographical narratives in Arabic literature “have broken with the traditional rural model inaugurated by Taha Husayn, and have made the city the key site for formative experience,” writes Yves Gonzalez-Quijano.^{xlii} “The city practically becomes a character in its own right”, he adds, referring to *Sirat madina*.^{xliii} As the book's title indicates – *sirat madina* (story of a city) – it even becomes the principal character, the protagonist. Munif places his story into the broader context of the city's story. *Sirat madina* is informed by sociological concerns.^{xliv} At the same time, it borrows some of its techniques from the novel, as Munif says in the foreword. It thus engages in a melange between fiction and non-fiction, as is typical for autobiographical narratives in modern Arabic literature.^{xlv} As Munif says, *Sirat madina* is not a “historiography” of Amman. But read through the eyes of a person who lived in Amman at the time – referred to throughout the narrative in the third person singular as the child – “it might contribute to an additional vision.”^{xlvi}

The city takes on its traits through the people who live in it. Some are relatives and acquaintances of the child, others people figuring prominently in Amman's public life at the time.^{xlvii} The narrative sets out in the aftermath of World War I and ends with the *nakba* of 1948. The reader follows the child upon discovering the city throughout his school years, until he becomes a young man, leaving the city for Baghdad. Through his eyes, he sees Amman turning from a remote town on Jabal Amman to an ever expanding city. Giving voice to seemingly marginal events and people swallowed up “by the ocean of life, which does not give many the chance to stop to catch their breath”,^{xlviii} *Sirat madina* may be part of “Amman's forgotten history”.^{xlix} As such it partakes in “writing the history of those who do not have a history” – a task Munif ascribed to the novel.¹



One of the drawings included in the special edition looks like a first preparation for the book. It has the form of a genealogical tree (fig. 13). But most of the drawings visualize characters described in the text (fig. 14-16). All drawings are in black ink. They were produced in one hasty continuous line, as memory recalls characters and scenes spontaneously, outlining them roughly in a matter of seconds. As such they are in stark contrast to the text and its careful description of life in Amman. In the foreword Munif mentions the difficulties one faces in writing about the city of one's past, turning it into words that are but “the pale shadows of life”.

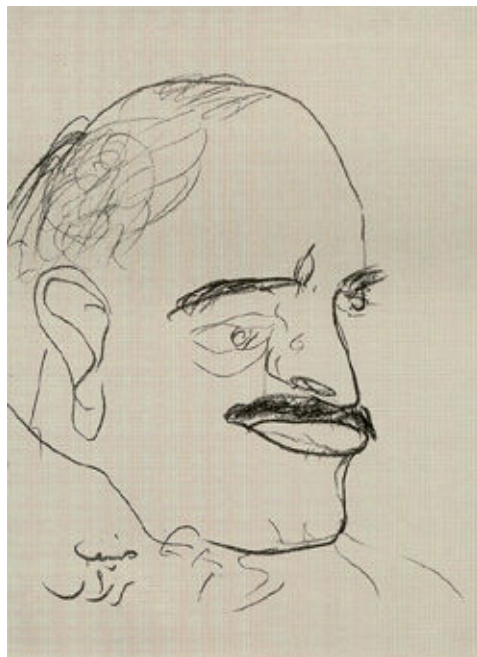


“Man's narrative about the city that, to a certain extent, means something special to him does not seem possible. It is very difficult and sometimes intractable because the question which arises is: what can be said and what is left out? (...)



Writing about the city of the past, that one loves, transforms this city into words. The same words, however brilliant, slippery, significant, or cunning, rarely go beyond being the pale shadows of life. Or, in the best of cases, a touch from outside, or only an approach, while knowing that life itself was richer, more intense, and full of details that are difficult to bring back once again.”ⁱⁱ

Having these difficulties in mind, the question arises whether the drawings have enabled Munif not only to visualize certain characters and places but also to capture some of the “details that are difficult to bring back once again” with words alone. Several bring before the reader’s eye the fleeting character of popular everyday life in Amman. Just like in a comic strip, the visual and the verbal here interact within the drawing. As the captions tell us, we see ‘Abd al-Ra’uf and Umm Ahmad chatting in the street, their neighbour Umm Khalil watching them.



Art history has long been dominated by the idea that temporal succession is the domain of literature and spatial extension that of painting, as was maintained by Lessing in his *Laokoon* (Berlin 1766). But the capacity of visual images to tell a story has increasingly gained attention.^{liii} A narrative along visual images different from that of a verbal text is presumed to be more erratic, uncontrolled, affective, immediate and hence closer to the unconscious.^{liiii} The drawings in the special edition of Munif’s *Sirat madina* constitute a narrative in its own right, a starting point for memories and stories to unfold that have been suppressed in the text by the troublesome question of “what can be said and what is left out?” Not to be dismissed as the doodles of a great writer, Munif’s sketch-like drawings capture the people and places of Amman as memory recalls them spontaneously.

CONCLUSION

Azzawi’s book illustrations as well as his *livre d’artiste*, Marwan’s book illustrations and Munif’s own drawings show that visual images do have the capacity to tell a story and to offer a parallel – visual – reading of a literary text that may shed light on otherwise ignored aspects. al-Azzawi’s and Munif’s illustrations clearly bring to the fore the local character of Munif’s novels, his quest to give voice to the neglected part of history from within a narrative that not only follows Western models but remains linked to the Arabic-Islamic literary heritage. It is this very quest that Arab artists, like Azzawi and to some extent also Marwan, have pursued in their works.

Azzawi and Munif have contributed significantly to Munif’s books. Both share a common fascination for Munif’s novels through which they have kept in touch – al-Azzawi from his exile in London and Marwan from his exile in Berlin – with their respective homelands, Iraq and Syria. However, due to the close friendship, the give and take between writer and artist is more obvious with Munif and Marwan. The special edition of *Sirat madina* was born out of this give and take. Transgressing literary genres, *Sirat madina* can be described as an autobiography, a novel and an additional vision to historiography at the same time. The special edition, furthermore, is a fine example of an illustrated book in which the text and the drawings represent two different narratives, a verbal and a visual narrative; or, as Marwan suggests, two different ways of leaving traces.

“In our many conversations ‘Abd al-Rahman repeated more than once the necessity to leave our traces and to “scratch” what we

can as a duty to bear witness of our generation to the future. If we succeed it is not bad, if not we have done our duty. I liked his expression “scratching” for what it contains of will, challenge, and direct sign of the intellectual’s trace on the issues of his time. I understand “scratching” as two lines: the line of the word and the line of the drawing by the writer.”^{liv}

Leaving traces – “scratching” – here is closely linked to bearing witness, to the intellectual’s engagement with his time and concern for the future. It is the necessity of leaving traces, of “scratching,” we can conclude, that has motivated Munif not only to write but also to be interested in modern art and to try his own hand at drawing.

IMAGES

(All images are published with the courtesy of Dia Azzawi, Marwan and Munif’s family)

- Fig. 1 Azzawi, book cover of ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Mudun al-milb. al-Tib* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya, 1984, 2nd ed.).
- Fig. 2-6 Azzawi, book illustrations to *ibid.*
- Fig. 7 Azzawi, *livre d’artsite* of ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif’s *Mudun al-milb*, 1994
- Fig. 8-9 al-Azzawi, prints of the *livre d’artsite*.
- Fig. 10 Marwan, book cover of ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Nihayat* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya, 1999, 10th ed.)
- Fig. 11 Marwan, portrait of ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif reproduced in *ibid.*
- Fig. 12 ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, book cover of *Sirat madina* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-thaqafi al-‘arabi, 2001, special edition).
- Fig. 13-16 ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, book illustrations to *ibid*

ENDNOTES

This article is based on my D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford 2005. An earlier version was given as a lecture organized by the Anis K. Makdisi Program in Literature at the American University of Beirut in memory of ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, 27.01.2005.

¹ Munif in an interview with the author, Damascus 27.08.2003.

² On the early years of the Ba’th, see especially Hanna Batatu, (1978). *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba’thists and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Hazim Jawad, one of the political leaders of the Ba’th in Iraq at the time, gives a personal account of Munif’s political involvement in the early years of the Ba’th in “Fi dhikra arba’in ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif” in: al-Quds (London), 06.03.2004. See also Maher Jarrar, ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif wal-Iraq. *Sira wa-dhikrayat* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-thaqafi al-‘arabi, 2005), p. 21-32.

³ See Ulrike al-Khamis, “An Historical Overview 1900s -1990s,” in Maysaloun Faraj (ed.), *Strokes of Genius. Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), p. 21-46.

⁴ See Shakir Hasan Al-Said, *al-Bayanat al-fanniyya fi al-Iraq* (Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1973), p. 25-29.

⁵ He wanted to devote one book to modern art in Syria and another to modern art in the Arab world, at large. He had more artists in mind, like Rafi al-Nasiri (b. 1940), ‘Asim al-Basha (b. 1948), Suha Shuman (b. 1944), ‘Adli Rizqallah (b. 1940) and Adam Henein (b. 1929) but he died before he was able to put his ideas onto paper. I thank Su’ad al-Qawadiri for this information.

⁶ Iskandar Habash, “Unpublished Munif Interview – Oil, Political Islam, and Dictatorship,” in: *Al-Jadid*, 45 (2004) www.aljadid.com.

⁷ Jabra was not only a founding member of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, he also participated in many of the group’s exhibitions with paintings of his own. Moreover, he was a distinguished art

critic. He published several books on modern art in Iraq, notably *Jawad Salim wa-nash' al-huriyya* (Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1974).

⁸ Muhsin Jasim al-Musawi, *al-Riwaya al-'arabiyya - al-nash'a wal-tabannul* (Beirut: Dar al-adab, 1988), p. 282.

⁹ Laurie Edson, *Reading Relationally Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Art* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹⁰ See Al Said, *al-Bayanat al-fanniyya fi al-'Iraq*, p. 31-35.

¹¹ See Institut du monde arabe, *Dia Azzawi* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 2001).

¹² See Marie-Geneviève Guesdon and Annie Vernay-Nouri (eds.), *L'art du livre arabe. Du manuscrit au livre d'artiste* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 2002).

¹³ See W.J. Strachan, *The Artist and the Book in France. The 20th Century Livre d'Artiste* (London: Peter Owen, 1969).

¹⁴ See Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert, *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists' Books* (New York: Granary, 1999) p. 8.

¹⁵ See Guesdon and Vernay-Nouri (eds.), *L'art du livre arabe*, p. 177-199.

¹⁶ Azzawi in an interview with the author, London 28.11.2003. To render the Arabic-Islamic heritage of book-making more visible, Azzawi engaged in an ambitious project: a facsimile of the 1237 manuscript of the Maqamat of al-Hariri, copied and illustrated by the thirteenth century Baghdadi calligrapher cum miniature painter al-Wasiti. The facsimile was published with an introduction by Oleg Grabar by TouchArt in London in 2004. Moreover, he has built a large collection of contemporary *livres d'artiste* from Iraq.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 125.

¹⁹ 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Tih* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 9th ed. 1999), p. 124. Translated by Peter Theroux as *Cities of Salt* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 106.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 174. English translation, p. 152.

²¹ See Sharbel Dagher, *al-Hurufiyya al-'arabiyya: al-Fann wal-huriyya* (Beirut: Shirkat al-matbu'at, 1990) and Sylvia Naef, *L'art de l'écriture arabe: Passé et présent* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1992).

²² Arab and American Harran can be described in Frantz Fanon's words as "the settler's town" and "the town belonging to the colonised people, or at least the native town, the negro village, the medina, the reservation (...) a town of niggers and dirty arabs". Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* translated by Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 29-30.

²³ See Eric Gautier, *Individu et société dans la littérature romanesque du Moyen-Orient: L'Arabie Saoudite à travers Mudun al-milh (Les villes de sel) de 'Abd ar-Rahman Munif* (Unpublished Doctorat de l'Université de Provence, 1993), p. 237-267.

²⁴ Issa J. Boullata, "Social Change in Munif's Cities of Salt," *Edebiyat. The Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures*, 8, no. 2, (1998), p. 191. See also Nedal al-Mousa, "Experimentation with Narrative Techniques and Modes of Writing in 'Abd al-Rahman Munif's Mudun al-milh: al-tih," *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures*, 4, no. 2, (2001), p. 145-156; Yumna al-'Id, *al-Rawi wal-mawqi' wal-shakl. Babih fi al-sard al-rima'i* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-abhath al-'arabiyya, 1986), p. 123-176.

²⁵ John Updike, "Satan's Work and Silted Cisterns," *The New Yorker* (Oct. 17, 1988), p. 117-118.

²⁶ Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel. Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 76, 72.

²⁷ 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Tih*, p. 9. English translation, p. 1.

xxviii Kamal Boullata, "Visual Thinking and the Arab Semantic Memory," *Tradition, Modernity and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature. Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, eds. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill, 2000) p. 296-302.

xxix See Salah Salih, *al-Riwaya al-'arabiyya wal-sabra'* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1996); Richard van Leeuwen, "Cars in the Desert: Ibrahim al-Kuni, 'Abd al-Rahman Munif and André Citoën," *Oriente Moderno*, 16, no. 2-3, (1997), p. 59-72.

xxx 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Tih*, p. 9-10. English translation, p. 2.

xxxi Notably in *sura* 15, 45-46 and in *sura* 55, 46-50. See Eric Gautier, *Individu et société*, p. 36.

xxxii 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Tih*, p. 157. English translation, p. 135.

xxxiii Ibid., p. 156. English translation, p. 134.

xxxiv Nizar 'Abidin, "Hiwar ma'a 'Abd al-Rahman Munif," *al-Ma'rifa*, no. 204, (1979), p. 199.

xxxv Marwan in an interview with the author, Berlin 03.06.2004.

xxxvi Ibid.

xxxvii In the 1990s, he held solo exhibitions in Damascus, Amman and Cairo. Moreover, he made a bequest of a collection of etchings and watercolours to the children of Palestine that was displayed at Birzeit University and the Khalil al-Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah in 1998. Since 1999, he has supervised the annual Summer Academy at the Darat al-funun in Amman, Jordan, which brings together art students from different Arab countries.

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- xxxviii See Mouna Atassi, *Marwan. Dimashq-Birlin-Dimashq/Marwan. Damascus-Berlin-Damascus* (Damascus: Atassi Gallery/Goethe Institute, 2005).
- xxxix Carol Hogben, "Introduction," to *From Manet to Hockney. Modern Artists' Illustrated Books*, eds. Carol Hogben and Rowan Watson, (London: Victoria&Albert Museum, 1985), p. 36.
- xl Munif in an interview with the author, Damascus 20.03.2002.
- xli Marwan in an interview with the author, Berlin 03.06.2004.
- xlii Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, "The Territory of Autobiography: Mahmud Darwish's Memory for Forgetfulness," *Writing the Self. Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, eds. Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor, Stefan Leder (London: Saqi Books, 1998), p. 317.
- xliii Ibid.
- xliv See Tetz Rooke, *'In my Childhood'. A Study of Arabic Autobiography* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1997), p. 197.
- xlv As Dwight R. Reynolds writes, it is this mélange between fiction and non-fiction that sets autobiographical narratives in modern Arabic literature apart from the Arabic literary tradition, aligning them instead with the novel, as it emerged in Western literatures. Dwight R. Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 10
- xlvi 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Sirat madina* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-thaqafi al-'arabi, 2001), p. 31.
- xlvii The latter include Shaykh Taqy al-Din al-Nabhani (1909-1977) who was the founder of the Islamic Liberation Party and Munif al-Razzaz (1919-1984) who was a well-known intellectual and an early member of the Ba'th Party.
- xlviii 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Sirat madina*, p. 37. English translation by Samira Kawar: *Story of a City. A Childhood in Amman* (London: Quartet, 1996), p. 5.
- xlix Ibid., 141. English translation, p. 170.
- l 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Katib wal-manfa. Humum wa-afaq al-rivaya al-'arabiyya* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 1992), p. 43.
- li 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Sirat madina*, p. 31-32.
- lii See, for instance, Alexander Sturgis, *Telling Time* (London: National Gallery, 2000); Hilmar Frank and Tanja Frank, "Zur Erzählforschung in der Kunstwissenschaft," in *Die erzählerische Dimension. Eine Gemeinsamkeit der Künste*, ed. Eberhardt Lämmert, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), p. 37-40.
- liii See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999), p. 410.
- liv Marwan Qassab Bashi, Preface to 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Sirat madina*, p. 27.