


ISLAM AND POPULAR CULTURE

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CHAPTER 9

ISLAM AT THE ART SCHOOL:

RELIGIOUS YOUNG ARTISTS IN EGYPT

JESSICA WINEGAR

PIETY ON CAMPUS

ON A VERY HOT late afternoon in August 2010, fifty or so students at Cairo's College of Fine Arts, a state school, were busily setting up tables in the school's courtyard and covering them with trays of food that many of them had prepared at home. These were members of the largest student club at the college. "Al-Warsha" (or "The Workshop") boasted 1,200 members and had an associated NGO that was committed to pious arts activism—using art to cultivate students' piety and to do good for society and Islam. That night, the core members had organized an *iftar*, a dinner to break the Ramadan fast. After a morning of distributing free food to the poor, they brought more food in the overheated and congested transportation that clogs Cairo's streets in advance of the sunset call to prayer, when the entire city becomes quiet and Muslims break their daily fast together. In very modest Islamic attire, these 18- to 22-year-old artists rushed to get everything in its proper place before the *adhan*, the call to prayer that would soon be recited by a young male art student from the stairs of the arts lecture hall building that overlooked the courtyard. As soon as the *adhan* was over, students distributed dates, the traditional fast-breaking food in Egypt, as well as tamarind juice and soft drinks. The young men then went to the mosque to pray, while most of the women stayed behind to set aside food for the men and to begin eating themselves. When the men returned, the art students sat and ate in mostly gender-segregated groups, chatting and laughing. My partner at the event was a 1986 graduate of the same college, and throughout the evening he expressed surprise at the change in the student body of his alma mater. His memories of his college years, as those of his classmates I know, are filled with faculty challenging dominant values of society, faculty and students making fun of Islamist groups, horsing around in the courtyard, and romantic trysts in back hallways. "There were

seeds" of this religiosity back then, he told me that evening, but pious students did not dominate the art school.

Now, twenty-five years later, the oldest college of arts in the Arab-majority Middle East, founded in 1908, is home to several initiatives, al-Warsha being the most prominent of them, that aim to better link art with Islam and to make art students better Muslims. Another popular student group, called Firsan, regularly hosts events on campus such as lectures by religious authorities that address the relationship between arts and Islam. The group called One Climpse gathers every Friday before prayers and paints one scene together in situ as a way to explore and reaffirm Egyptian and religious identity. They frequently go to an area of the city known as "Islamic Cairo" for its famous medieval Islamic architecture. And finally, one of the most popular professors at the college has gained a significant following for his large art projects that depict scenes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. For many of these religious students and professors, art is key to the process of becoming a better Muslim, for reaffirming Islamic and Egyptian "identity" (*hawiyat*), and to creating a stronger and more "developed" Islamic society. All of these groups are committed to creating art that does not violate what they understand to be the principles of Islam, but also, and more importantly, to creating art that serves Islam and God.

So how did this happen? For the greater part of the last century, this first school of modern art in Egypt was known more for having a liberal, often secular-oriented professoriate and student body, and for teaching art that emphasized national belonging and social struggle more than religious identity (Kane 2013; Winegar 2006). By the new millennium, it had become the seat of ascendant and influential pious art activity. How have definitions of art, and of the proper role of the artist in society, perhaps changed as a result? This chapter explores this new phenomenon by situating it within the history of state and Islamic discourses on the arts and the rise of the Islamic revival in Egypt (see also Van Nieuwkerk, this volume), and within the rise of neoliberalism. This historical and economic contextualization raises the additional question of how much is actually new in this new Islamic art movement.

To address these issues, this chapter takes al-Warsha as a case study to examine how members conceptualize the relationship among art, Islam, and society in their discourse and activities. By taking seriously students who dedicate copious amounts of their time to this group and its endeavors, we can gain an appreciation for how some pious Muslims view art as absolutely critical to their lives and their work as modern and cosmopolitan Egyptians, in large measure as a result of particular historical and economic conditions (not because of some Islamic "essence"). This phenomenon also challenges many

dominant modernist assumptions, circulating in western precincts of the international art scene, that contemporary art is or should be against institutionalized religion or at least critical of it. In such views, art can have spiritual undertones (as in the case of Euro-American high-modernist painters), but art that advocates religious orthodoxy goes against the secularist presumptions of the modern (Asad 2003; Elkins 2004). Furthermore, the young artists at the Cairo College of Fine Arts overturn related modernist notions of the ideal artist as a social malcontent or rebel (Winegar 2006). They also force us to reconsider ideas circulating in the western press (since the Middle East uprisings began in 2011) of young Egyptians as secular revolutionaries.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGION AND NATION IN EGYPTIAN ART EDUCATION

While many artists and professors of earlier cohorts at the College of Fine Arts might be surprised and, in some cases, disturbed, by the rise of public religiosity at their alma mater, a closer look at how the college has dealt with religious issues over the last century shows that discourses on the value of religion in relationship to art, and vice-versa, have always been present at the college, as have religiously inspired artistic practice and debate. The very founding of the College of Fine Arts in 1908 was in part made possible by a fatwa (a non-binding religious opinion) by the main mufti of the Republic at the time, the Islamic reformer Muhammad 'Abduh. The fatwa supported the establishment of a royal college of fine arts in Cairo partly on the basis of his view that art was "one of the best educational methods."¹ Islamic reformers, other prominent intellectuals, and state arts officials at the time argued that the establishment of a modern art school was necessary for the building of the modern nation, including a nation in which Islam was the major religion. They deemed the prohibition against image making in some interpretations of Islamic texts as no longer relevant in modern society, as the danger of idol worship ceased to exist. This engagement with key Islamic texts to form opinions about art specific to time and place has been a central part of Islamic practice across centuries (Flood 2002; Otterbeck, this volume).

Throughout the twentieth century, the number of art schools, museums, galleries, and other arts institutions proliferated in Egypt. Thousands of practicing Muslims and Christians (along with Jews and at least one notable Bahá'í, the famous artist Hussein Bikar) attended or taught at these institutions, with the vast majority viewing no conflict between their religious beliefs and their artistic practice. Some, albeit a minority, explored religious themes in their art—such as images of mosque architecture, popular Sufi symbols and

festivals, and Arabic calligraphy—often through a nationalist framework, as an expression of a key component of Egyptian identity.

Debates peppered this history as well. In 1976, the college administration decided to prohibit live nude models for art classes, causing a ruckus between those who thought the practice was necessary for proper artistic training and those who thought that it was not necessary for students to violate local/religious mores in order to become accomplished artists and modern citizens. At times in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with the rise of the Islamic revival, Muslim students in the sculpture department would wonder if they should put holes in the top of their figurative sculptures so as not to offend what they viewed as God's prohibition against imitating his powers of creation (the holes emphasized the figure as manmade and guard against the figure taking on any human-like spirit). In response, various deans and professors scheduled lectures and workshops, often run by state-trained imams, on the compatibility of art and Islam—even in figurative art—and the necessity of art to the nation, thus reiterating religious views from the early twentieth century.

For the most part during this period, the arts curriculum did not include any explicit discussion of the relationship between contemporary religion and art. Islamic art was taught as a historical subject, alongside ancient Egyptian art, historical Coptic Christian art, and western art history with an emphasis on the classical and neoclassical periods. Students were exposed to works of modern Egyptian art, which were often analyzed through a nationalist frame, as an artist's expression of a specifically "Egyptian" scene or issue. Professors encouraged students to absorb all these historical influences, then mix them with their own personal expression in order to do work that was simultaneously unique and expressive of the nation. The basic emphasis of the training at this school was in classical drawing and painting skills, with a focus on figurative art and realism.

With the rising influence of the Islamic revival in the 1980s and 1990s, art professors began to promote the view that the arts were necessary to fight "backward" or "uncivilized" interpretations of Islam in modern society. Some were not against the revival *per se*, but most were concerned that the increase in public piety might lead to a strictness of interpretation of religion that might hamper the arts. Older professors, especially, became concerned by the appearance of new religious groups on campus. Additionally, most professors and students at the college worried about the emergence, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of Islamist groups who advocated violence against the authoritarian state. The Mubarak government spearheaded, and art professors participated in, an "Enlightenment" (*nahda*) campaign that explicitly used arts and culture to fight what was viewed as religious fundamentalism (Abaza

2002; Winegar 2009). The catalogue for the 1996 Young Artists' Salon, for example, featured an article by Ahmed Rif'at Sulayman, who was a new doctoral student in art education at the time. Sulayman's piece shows that the government intended for visual arts programs to draw youth away from political Islam. Titled "The Role of the Youth in Facing the Waves of Fundamentalism," the article argues that there is a dangerous rise in the popularity of Islamic groups on art college campuses and that they perpetuate erroneous ideas—such that art, particularly figurative art, is forbidden, *haram*. Sulayman draws on the Qur'an and hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) to provide examples of the compatibility between Islam and art and to argue that art institutions have a vital role to play in steering young people away from these groups, in encouraging students to fight these trends through art.

While a fuller history of the place of religion at the College of Fine Arts has yet to be written, it is clear from this cursory discussion that religion and the arts were always intertwined in artistic practice, discourses, and debates, and that art school professors and staff have historically presented the view that art is necessary for a modern nation, that it does not conflict with Islam, and that indeed proper national modern art is necessary to combat misinterpretation of Islam. It is also clear that Islamic visual referents were mostly compartmentalized in a curriculum that emphasized them as primarily historical and only one part of a multipart national canon.

Let us return, then, to the alumnus at the *ifhar*, and his statement that in the 1980s, the "seeds" of religiosity were present at the college. In a photograph of art school students from the mid-1980s (figure 9.1), a few women are wearing the kind of explicitly Islamic dress that was becoming increasingly popular with the rise of the Islamic revival since the 1970s. We can see now that it is not necessarily that religiosity was new at the time, nor were revivalist-modernist notions of Islam in relationship to the arts. What *was* striking was the *visibility* of students' piety, the insistence on particular forms of ethical behavior among unprecedented numbers of students, and the linking of both to artistic practice.

THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL: MORALITY, CHARITY, VISUALITY

This increase in visible piety and insistence on ethical behavior present in the 2000s at the Cairo College of Fine Arts is in large measure part of the rise of the Islamic revival. As Van Nieuwenkerk notes in this volume, there are many reasons for the development of intensified public religious sensibilities throughout the region, and in Egypt in particular, beginning in the 1970s. These included: the devastating defeat of the 1967 war (which many attributed



9.1. Students at the College of Fine Arts, Cairo, early 1980s. Photograph courtesy of Ahmed Ragab Sakr.

to Egyptians' failures to properly worship God); the 1979 Iranian Revolution's success in deposing a western lackey; increased work migration to and from more religiously conservative Gulf societies; increased access to religious texts with the rise in literacy and proliferation of religious spaces and study groups; Sadat's support of Islamic groups in his battle with leftists; and the moral dilemmas created by the western media imports and the increase in interactions between nonrelated men and women, especially in urban areas.

In this volume and elsewhere Van Nieuwkerk (2008a, 2008b) shows how these dilemmas were particularly pronounced in the performing arts, which have generally been morally ambiguous in Egyptian society because people's bodies and potentially immoral acts are represented on stage and screen. In film and television, for example, a wave of female artists left the field in the 1980s after becoming convinced that their craft spread immorality throughout society. But by the late 1990s, as other forms of Islamic discourse emerged that stressed the positive potentials of art for religion, some of these actresses returned. They and others adopted the veil and insisted on roles that did not compromise their piety. Artists and religious figures began intensely promoting "purposeful art" or "clean art" (Alagha, this volume; Tartoussieh 2007; Van Nieuwkerk 2011) in cinema, theater, and music—both in Egypt

and throughout the region. New wildly popular television preachers became key figures in this promotion of art for religion. Young, polished men such as Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud drew on many of the same discourses on art from the Islamic tradition as had mufitis and imams supporting the art college, and others throughout the course of Islamic history to argue that Muslims have an obligation to do and/or appreciate art for Islam and for the nation (Winegar 2014).

And art students and junior professors were listening. These new messages reinforced a century of teaching at the art college that emphasized that there was no contradiction between being an artist and a good Muslim. But they also spoke to something these new students and younger faculty felt lacking in their arts training: an emphasis on and prioritization of Islam in their lives and careers. These messages also spoke to their concerns about rapidly increasing economic impoverishment and social decline and provided a way for them to use both art and Islam to address it.

The expansion of the Islamic revival in Egypt (and worldwide) coincided with the rise of neoliberal economic policy. This policy emphasizes private enterprise and the "free" market—that is, reduction of state regulations, trade protections, subsidies, and investments. Sadat, and especially Mubarak, enacted this policy in full force in response to pressures from international lenders such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The result in Egypt was, to put it simply, the further enrichment of the wealthy and immiseration of the poor.² As around the world, NGOs and charities, many of them religiously oriented, stepped in to fill the resource gap (Ania 2013). For art students, many of whom come from more modest working- or middle-class backgrounds and who attend the state-run College of Fine Arts, this neoliberal economic turn most notably meant a deterioration of their entire schooling system and the neighborhoods in which they lived, as well as economic struggles in their families. It also meant that many had significant familiarity with NGO/charity development discourses, if not actual development projects in their own neighborhoods. For example, many college students knew of, or had volunteered with Al-Risala, a very popular nationwide religious developmentalist charity begun in 2000 by youth from Cairo University, and that became a model for similar organizations.

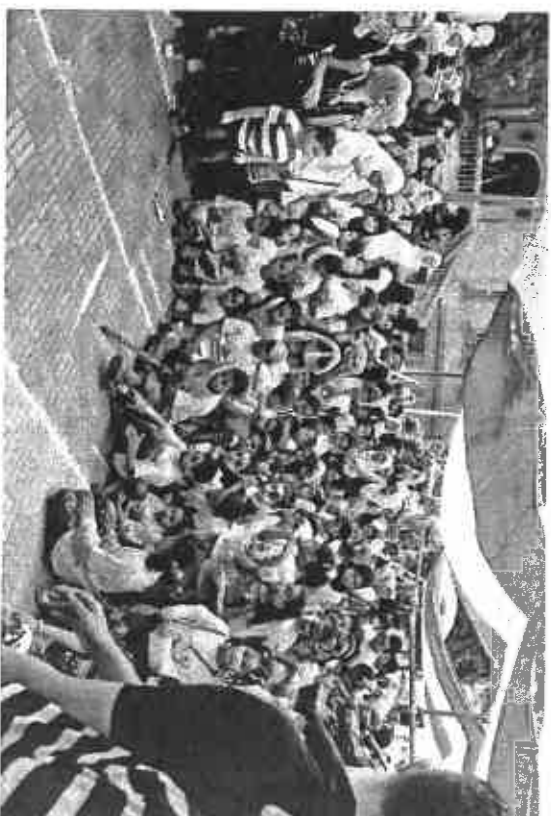
A key component of the Islamic revival has been its visibility, analyzed by surprisingly few scholars. Deeb (2006) provides a rare analysis of how pious Lebanese (in this case Shi'a) try to change the visual aspects of public space to be more in line with Islamic ethics, through various posters and billboards and also Islamic dress. In Egypt, the Islamic revival has had a significant effect on the visual aspects of life in major cities. In comparison to fifty years ago, for

example, one now sees many, many more mosques, religious advertising on signs and billboards, religious stickers and décor on the walls of public buildings or in public transportation, and Islamic dress as the main sign of piety. Art school students and young faculty in the early 2000s, who came of age in lock-step with the visual profusion of the Islamic revival, are especially attuned to the importance of visibility in everyday life. They spend their days creating and assessing visual art, and frequently lament what they see as a decline in “public taste” in the visual aspects of the urban environment in the last ten to twenty years, a period of public disinvestment in public space that in large measure led to its deterioration (Winegar 2006, 2011). With the emphasis on visual symbols of piety in urban Egypt, the simultaneous decline in the visual beauty of the built environment, and the focus on visibility in art school life, it is no surprise that religious art school students in particular would use their training to focus their efforts on linking visibility, Islam, and social development.

AL-WARSHA: A WORKSHOP FOR MAKING WELL-MANNERED MUSLIM CITIZENS

The founder of al-Warsha, Ihab al-Tukhy, is a charismatic assistant professor who was trained as a sculptor at the College of Fine Arts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He attended the same imam lectures as everyone else, learned from his professors how Islam and art were compatible, and how art was necessary for the continued development of the nation. He, like others in the group, also came of age at the height of the proliferation of the Islamic revival, when the majority of Cairenes were cultivating public forms of piety. He joined the growing fan base of the new television preachers who advocated a kind of technologically savvy cosmopolitan Islamic piety and who spoke about the importance of art for building a strong Muslim society and a strong nation. He also started his professional life at the exact time when the aforementioned religiously oriented charities were forming and increasingly providing social services to a population suffering with the withdrawal of state subsidies in healthcare, education, and food with neoliberalism. Growing up in a mixed-income neighborhood in central Cairo (*‘Abdin*), he had witnessed the rapidly growing inequalities and dilapidation of the built environment during the Mubarak years. In an interview, he described this experience as teaching him the strong moral fiber of “simple people” (*al-nas al-basita*) but also their “limited culture” (*thaqafa mahduda*). He became concerned about their behavior, and particularly their forms of expression such as swearing and thugger³.

All of these experiences contributed to his founding of al-Warsha student club in 2000, which he termed an “artistic charity” club (*khayriyya fanniyah*).



9.2. Orphans attending International Orphans Day celebration hosted by al-Warsha at the Cairo College of Fine Arts, 2010. Photograph courtesy of Ehab al-Tukhy.

It started with thirty-one members and quickly grew to be the most popular club at the school. They were dedicated to doing art that did not violate any Islamic principles and to using art to help those less fortunate in Egyptian society. They sponsored religious lectures, held clothing and food drives for the poor, and invited orphans to the college on International Orphan Day every year for traditional puppet theater performances and arts and crafts classes with the explicit intention of “reviving Islamic values” (figures 9.2 and 9.3). As the activities grew, al-Tukhy formed an NGO with the same name and rented a separate space near the campus for planning meetings and computer graphics/animation classes. Since the 2011 protests began, the NGO has rented adjacent spaces in the same building for an art gallery where they host exhibitions of student and faculty work, religious lectures, and artists’ talks. They also opened an arts and crafts workshop where they hold classes and produce crafts for sale at various stores. Al-Warsha (the club and NGO) has a very active Facebook page on which members post announcements of activities as well as quotes from religious texts, and from various religious leaders. As of June 2015, this group had over five thousand members.

One of the key activities of al-Warsha is a program aimed at civilizing orphans through the arts, called “Litarda.” Litarda means “to satisfy Him,” and it appears in two verses of the Qur’an. Al-Warsha members who par-



9.3. Painting activity at International Orphans Day celebration hosted by al-Warsha at the Cairo College of Fine Arts, 2010. Photograph courtesy of Ehab al-Toukhy.

ticipate in Litarda do so explicitly to satisfy God, who enjoined Muslims to care for orphans in multiple verses in the Qur'an. A well-known hadith of the Prophet Muhammad also relates that those who care for orphans will be close to the Prophet in paradise, and another relates that God will count one good deed for each hair on an orphan's head that a Muslim strokes in compassion. Litarda members describe feeling that they are serving God by trying to "correct behaviors" (*ta'dil suluk*) of orphans and increase their knowledge of Islam through art, thereby making orphans better (in their view) members of Egyptian society and better Muslims. Although some members did not appear to have ready answers to my questions about which kinds of behaviors needed correcting among orphans, others specifically mentioned lying, stealing, hitting, and yelling. Art, in their view, was fun and interesting for kids and thus a great means through which to convey religious messages and to make orphans more cultured. And Ramadan was the key time in their ritual calendar to renew their commitment to this project.

The Ramadan fast-breaking *iftar* in the summer of 2010 came in the midst of a flurry of al-Warsha charity activities for the holy month, including distributing bags of food to the needy every morning in the intense summer heat. The group was just starting to plan their last charity acts for Ramadan—a visit to a different orphanage every day of the last ten days. The goal of these

visits was twofold: to maximize their worship in these most special last days of Ramadan, when any evening the heavens could open to human supplication and God's willingness to recognize good acts might be greater; and to find an appropriate orphanage for the second installment of the Litarda program. The program was an eighteen-month curriculum that they developed that consisted of one moral lesson per week or two, as conveyed through a story of one of the prophets (*qisas al-anbiya'*) and accompanying art projects to illustrate the story. During the last ten days of the month and after, the core members of Litarda tried to recruit other Warsha members to the project by trying out one lesson (from the curriculum or related to it) to see if it could be successful with a particular orphanage. Success, it turned out, was judged by the potential that the group saw in having the orphans conform to their model of an Egyptian Muslim citizen, with proper behavior.

The group kicked off the first day with a morning visit to a boys' orphanage in the same mixed-income downtown neighborhood where the leader al-Tukhy had grown up. The group had already done some work in this orphanage before, and members touted it to me as an exceptionally good one with decent children. As we stood outside waiting for everyone to come, one of the women explained that not all the orphans have deceased parents. Many of them have parents who can no longer afford to keep them, she said, and it is very sad that the parents are so desperate that they have to give their kids to an orphanage. Before the group of about ten of us went up the stairs to enter the orphanage, the leader had us go around in a circle and say what our intentions were for the visit, that we needed to think carefully about intentions. Nearly everyone said they were going "for God" or "to follow the Prophet's way." (al-Tukhy answered for me, saying that I was going for "research," which he thankfully noted was a noble goal). Once we had settled on the sofas and chairs in the main living room of the orphanage, the boys, aging around nine or ten, came out in twos and threes to shake our hands. They then sat on the floor or on al-Tukhy's lap. The visit kicked off with al-Warsha members verbally quizzing the kids on their knowledge of Ramadan and whether or not they fast or pray regularly. They responded with "bravos" for all of the correct responses and for all the children who were meeting these basic requirements of Islam. The group also introduced a quiz game with a wide range of religious questions, and a game with a puzzle based on a religious theme. They also asked the students to recite parts of the Qur'an and to sing religious praise hymns.

Throughout all of these activities, several kids kept asking "when are we going to play?" and many were fidgeting or engaging in horseplay. The leader and the Warsha youth told the orphans repeatedly to sit still, to stop hitting, to stop teasing each other, and to listen to the lessons. The orphanage's super-

visitors, mainly lower class women, stayed silent through this whole visit. When I asked one of them about what the “behaviors” were that needed correcting, as the Warsha people had been using that term, she laughed and said she didn’t know. After the group prayed the afternoon prayer together (women and men in separate rooms), the women decided to go back to the headquarters and pack the rest of the Ramadan food bags for the next days’ distribution. As we were descending the staircase, the leader called down to us and excitedly told us to remember how many merits (*hasanat*) we were getting with God as a result of our visit with the orphans that day.

The sense that they were doing important work in society while gaining credit with God buoyed the Litarda members for the rest of the ten days of Ramadan. While many Egyptian college students slept in the mornings due to staying up late at night and the difficulty of making it through the long summer fast, Litarda members met every morning at a different orphanage. They exerted tremendous energy to manage crowds of rambunctious children while giving them morality lessons through activities such as coloring within the lines on pre-printed coloring book sheets and telling stories with puppets and painted storyboards (figure 9.4). They tried to teach them the importance of sitting and listening, of avoiding horseplay, of speaking to each other without teasing or “vulgar” words. They aimed to show their care for orphans, to get themselves and the orphans in God’s graces in these crucial last days of Ramadan, and to test particular groups of orphans for their capacity to be reformed as proper Muslim citizens of Egypt. Repeatedly, members said they needed to “straighten” or “fix” the values and behaviors of orphans.

The Litarda curriculum explicitly emphasized these values. For example, one section focused on the story of Joseph and was intended to teach “acceptance of God’s will” and the importance of “belonging.” The art students had the orphans paint background panels and then act out different parts of the story of Joseph being sold into slavery and then later becoming the second in command in Pharaoh’s Egypt. They encouraged the orphans to paint in the same realistic style that dominates their classical training at the arts college. Through this set painting and acting, Litarda members aimed to show the children that accepting difficult circumstances is all part of God’s will for you and, if trust is put in Him, could result in great things. They also take advantage of the fact that Joseph’s reward takes place in Egypt to show the orphans the importance of “belonging to Egypt,” as one of the organizers put it. Litarda leaders also had the children draw scenes iconic to Egypt to encourage their belonging—scenes that abound in the drawing and painting classes at the fine arts college and in school exhibitions. These included images of Egyptian vil-



9.4. On-site art lessons at a Cairo orphanage given by a team from al-Warsha, August 2010. Photo by author.

lages, streets in Islamic Cairo, and idealized pictures of peasants or people from the popular (*shaʿbi*) classes. The word used for belonging in these visual lessons, *intimaʾ*, also has connotations of loyalty, reflecting dominant notions of moral citizenship in Egypt. Other values that served as object lessons in the curriculum included patience, modesty (i.e., not being arrogant), the importance of concentration, the principles of color mixing, love of God, honesty, leadership skills, and organization. These were taught through various other artistic methods such as origami, clay molding, puppetry, and book art. Litarda members thus integrated many aspects of their training as visual art students into these lessons to get orphans to execute what were, in their opinion, the most visually compelling means and ends of moral education as Egyptians and as Muslims.

In the Litarda program and their other activities, al-Warsha members viewed art as a means of creating national and religious collectivity, and as a way of improving oneself and the collective. For them, being an artist meant accepting God’s bestowal of artistic talent and using it to make oneself a better Muslim, and to help others become better Muslims, as well as Egyptians. The motivation, their intention, for visiting the orphanage that hot Ramadan day

was to honor God by helping orphans do the same. In other words, art was the means, not the goal.

While al-Warsha members and other College of Fine Arts students and new faculty were busy braiding art and religion so intently, many other artists in Egypt were not. Artists exhibiting at the main contemporary art galleries in Cairo, for example, tended to be self-described secularists, or at least not advocates of this trend of purposeful art in the service of Islam. Many of these artists, such as the alumnus cited at the beginning of this chapter, were not even aware of the Warsha group and the other religious activities on campus. Those that were aware sometimes commented to me that these were somehow lesser artists, or not even "real" artists, because of the way they so closely linked art with piety.

A NEW ISLAMIC ART?

Members of al-Warsha are rewriting what it means to be an artist in Egypt and also redefining art more generally. Although their views that there is no conflict between art and Islam, and that art is key to building a modern nation, have been dominant in art education for over a century in Egypt, they insist on foregrounding the ethical dimensions of their work in new ways that emphasize Islam as a much more critical component of artistic practice than has been the case previously. And, judging by their numbers, their views are gaining ground despite the large numbers of artists who do not view art as necessary to religious practice and vice-versa, and despite vocal artists who openly oppose such intertwining of art and piety. For those, art is about personal expression, and/or national identity, and/or criticism of dominant social, political, or religious trends. The new definitions of the artist as a good Muslim activist, and of art as necessary to spread the Islamic message, appear to be gaining ground for reasons related to the history of such ideas in Islamic discourse as well as the history of national art institutions and the political economic situation in the country.

In neoliberal Egypt, the numbers of orphans and the poor grew, the visual environment became increasingly dilapidated, people bemoaned the perceived decline in morality, and charities proliferated in response. Meanwhile, national state institutions, such as the College of Fine Arts, continued to inculcate nationalism and promote moderate Islam as a way to produce a modern citizenry. Thus, fine arts students were, in their own education, given means to emphasize visibility and nationalist values in both profession and piety. In their artistic charitable works, al-Warsha members drew on over a century of positive discourses about the relationship between art, Islam, and society. But they

also gave the project of using art to build the nation and Islam a new twist, galvanizing discourses on the arts and Islam that had recently become popular in the larger cultural sphere. "Belonging" to Egypt remained important, but now being a good Muslim and promoting Islamic values were seen as the most critical part of this nationalist project. For members of al-Warsha, doing charitable works vis-à-vis art was a way of cultivating piety, of using what they viewed as their God-given talents for the purpose of becoming better Muslims and spreading Islamic values. Yet they did not merely seek to use art to build a modern nation, or to advance moderate Islam in particular, or to reconcile art and Islam. Art, for them, was a vehicle through which to become closer to God and to bring others closer to God. In the halls of the Cairo College of Fine Arts, we thus see a new trend in contemporary visual arts—one that has connections to the past but that also contains a novel infusion of purposeful Islamic ethos.

This case has implications for our understanding of the broader trend of purposefully religious art-making across the Middle East. It suggests that participants in this phenomenon may be reworking longstanding religious and nationalist discourses about the arts, in part by linking them together in more concerted and explicit ways. Rather than religion being made subsidiary to the nation, and rather than the focus being mostly on religion's compatibility with art in order to produce the nation, it appears that artists are now engaging with religious texts and contexts much more broadly and substantively, and doing so in order to become both better Muslims as well as proper citizens. The dominant concept emerging is that one needs to be a proper citizen to be a better Muslim, and vice-versa, and that the arts are key to that goal.

This case also suggests that the dominant criteria by which many artists judge other artists, artistic activity, and art works may be shifting. When upwards of five thousand artists (or at least those interested in the arts) value those who are trying to achieve piety through art activities, one wonders if the notion of who is a "good" artist is changing such that to be included in this category one must increasingly engage, explicitly and overtly, in dominant, institutionalized, religious discourses and activities. Furthermore, what is considered necessary and/or acceptable artistic practice now appears to increasingly include charitable work through the arts. And finally, it remains to be seen whether this trend will alter the dominant frameworks by which actual art works are judged and valued, in terms of content, style, media, and message.

Although there are many variables, not the least of which are the ongoing uprisings across the region, we may be witnessing a transformation in prevailing hierarchies of value concerning the arts—and the visual arts especially.

This will particularly be the case in Egypt if and when religiously oriented artists continue to build new institutions and transform others from within. This process is likely to continue, because the religious and artistic values these artists espouse are mainstream, and because most do not participate in any religion-based oppositional politics that would be suppressed by the military regime. Like the uprisings, the global effects of this transformation could be significant for Muslim religious communities and beyond.

NOTES

1. In Rashid Rida, *Ta'ribh al-ustadh al-imam al-shaykh Muhammad Abduh* (Egypt: Matba'at al-Manar, 1931).
2. Walter Armbrust deftly argues how this neoliberal economic policy was a key cause of the Egyptian Revolution (Armbrust 2011).
3. Interview with author, 7 March 2011.

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