

The Lebanese Artist Gebran Tarazi and The Casablanca Art School:

Intersecting Paths and a Shared Vision

الفنان اللبناني جبران طرزي ومدرسة الدار البيضاء - تقاطع المسار واتحاد الرؤية

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“Circling the square, squaring the circle, cubing the sphere and spherizing the cube, then circling the cube and squaring the sphere, along with other transmutations that lend geometric outcomes a sense of ambiguity in visual perception that echoes the sense of bewilderment in Sufi philosophy- a state suspended between doubt and certainty where both become intertwined...” (Asaad Arabi)

Summary

This article examines the artistic and intellectual journey of Gebran Tarazi (1944-2010), exploring the cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic foundations of his creative oeuvre. At the heart of his artistic vision lies geometry, particularly the geometric abstraction of the square, which he regarded as an essential symbolic and spiritual principle situated between consciousness and instinct. **The study addresses** a critical gap in art historical literature by revealing how Tarazi's bicultural upbringing produced a geometric language that dissolves tension between traditional Arab-Islamic and modernist arts. Through repetition, transformation, and rigorous artistic discipline, Tarazi developed a unique

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بوجمعة أشفري شاعر وكاتب وناقد فني مغربي في مجال جماليات الفنون البصرية، وهو عضو اتحاد كتاب المغرب، وجمعية نقاد الفن، ومدير نشر مجلتي «أصدقاء ديونيزوس» و«آرت شيف». شغل إدارة محترف الجماليات بكلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية بنمسيك بالدار البيضاء. كما ترأس تحرير جريدة «الوطن الآن» على مدى 24 سنة.

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رنا الصيفي مترجمة لبنانية كندية متعدّدة اللغات، محرّرة، روائية، وكاتبة إعلانات ومقالات. لها أكثر من 26 سنة من الخبرة في مجالها.

visual language inspired by Islamic ornamentation, Arab architecture and the shared cultural heritage of the Maghreb and the Mashreq. **This study's main objective is** to decode the square as a mediator between consciousness and instinct **through a qualitative, comparative methodology** integrating a close reading of Tarazi's artistic and philosophical manifesto, a formal visual examination and a **comparative analysis** of the Casablanca School's parallel decolonial discourse and analogous efforts anchored in a return to heritage and roots as a form of resistance to Western artistic domination. His artistic stance closely paralleled that of the Casablanca school, whose members sought to

reclaim indigenous visual identity in the aftermath of French colonialism. Tarazi's philosophical manifesto, *The Need for the Orient*, articulated his belief in preserving the Orient's cultural specificity while engaging with Western modernism. Balancing heritage and innovation, craftsmanship and experimentation, he created unique artworks in which geometric forms were elevated beyond mere designed motifs and instead became an expression of a collective Arab identity; forms that invite contemplation and hold a symbolic visual intensity. His artistic legacy, recognized internationally, continues to have an important place in the history of modern Arab art.

لغة بددت التوتر بين الفن العربي الإسلامي التقليدي والفن الحديث. فمن خلال التكرار والتحول والانضباط الفني الصارم، طوّر لغة بصرية استلهمها من الزخرفة الإسلامية والعمارة العربية والتراث الثقافي المشترك بين المغرب العربي والمشرق. تهدف هذه الدراسة بالتالي إلى تفسير لغز المربع في أعمال طرزي الإبداعية بصفته وسيطاً يربط الوعي بالغريزة، وذلك من خلال منهجية نوعية مقارنة تجمع بين القراءة المتأنية لبیان طرزي الفني الفلسفي، ومعاينة فنه التشكيلي، وتحليل خطابه الفني تحليلاً

تتناول هذه المقالة المسيرة الفنية والفكرية للفنان اللبناني جبران طرزي (1944-2010)، وتسبر الأسس الثقافية والفلسفية والجمالية التي ارتكز عليها نتاجه الفني الإبداعي. تكمن الهندسة، وتحديدًا التجريد الهندسي القائم على المربع، في صلب رؤيته الفنية. فقد سبغ طرزي على المربع طابعاً رمزياً وروحانيّاً يقع ما بين الوعي والغريزة. تتناول هذه الدراسة فجوة أساسية في الأدبيات الفنية التاريخية وتسدها بإظهار أثر نشأة جبران طرزي ببعديها المغربي والمشرقي على اللغة الهندسية التي صاغها،

على الحفاظ على خصوصية الثقافة الشرقية من دون صدّ الحداثة الغربية. وفي إرثائه توازناً بين التراث والتجديد، والحرفية والتجريب، أتى بأعمال فريدة ارتقت فيها الأشكال الهندسية لثجاوز منظور الزخرفة إلى التعبير عن الهوية العربية الجماعية، ولتحتّ على التأمل وتختزل كثافة بصرية طافحة بالرمزية. وما يزال إرث جبران طرزي الفني اليوم يحتلّ مكانة بارزة في تاريخ الفن العربي الحديث على الساحة العالمية.

Keywords

Gebran Tarazi, Casablanca school, geometric forms, square, Maghreb, Mashreq, Levant, visual consciousness, modernism, contemporaneity,

عربي إسلامي، تراث، هوية، إنتماء، صوفي، خصوصية ثقافية، فنون مغربية تقليدية، زخرفة، قائم نائم، الحاجة إلى الشرق.

Biography

The Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi (1944-2010) was born in Damascus into a family steeped in tradition, a lineage that had practiced Levantine crafts for over 160 years. Renowned for its Arabesque forms and embossed botanical motifs- its artistic signature- this family of artisanal craftsmen adorned grand palaces of the Levant and masterfully crafted oriental brass artifacts inlaid with silver, which

مقارناً مع الخطاب اللااستعماري الموازي الذي جاءت به مدرسة الدار البيضاء وجهودها المماثلة لجهوده في دعوتها إلى الاستلهاًم من التراث والعودة إلى الجذور كشكل من أشكال المقاومة ضدّ هيمنة الفن الغربي. طابقت مواقفه من الفن مواقف مدرسة الدار البيضاء التي سعى أفرادها إلى استعادة الهوية البصرية المغربية الأصلية في أعقاب الاستعمار الفرنسي. في بيانه الفلسفي «الحاجة إلى الشرق»، أكد طرزي

originality, authenticity, Arab-Islamic art, Sufi, heritage, identity, belonging cultural specificity, Moroccan traditional arts, ornamentation, Qayem-Nayem, The Need for the Orient.

جبران طرزي، مدرسة الدار البيضاء، أشكال هندسية، مربع، المغرب، المشرق، وعي بصري، حداثة، معاصرة، أصالة، فن

found their way to Damascus, Beirut, Alexandria and Jerusalem. Tarazi spent a brief period of his childhood in Morocco, up until the late 1950s. There, he deeply absorbed Moroccan arts and visual crafts that refined his artistic command. From a young age, he was passionate about reading, holding a particular affinity for French literature. Following his family's return to Beirut in 1959, he kept pace with Arab artistic artisanship as he pursued his secondary

studies in Literature and Humanities/ Philosophy and later his university studies, earning a law degree.

His novel "The Olive Press" was published in Paris in 1996. His creative works earned prestigious placement in local and international museums: A comprehensive collection was acquired by Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar in 2015. His lifelong creative journey has been documented in two illustrated books focused on his artistic career. The first, *Geometric Variations*, published in 2007 by Dar Al-Funun Al-Jamila, Lebanon, features Tarazi's philosophical and artistic manifesto *The Need for the Orient*. The second, *The Twelve Seasons*, was published in France in 2017 by Zaman Book.

His paintings were exhibited in Paris in 2016 alongside the international artist Victor Vasarely, in recognition of Tarazi's contribution to modern Arab art and his Lebanese authenticity. In 2024, Tarazi's creative experience was formally incorporated into the graduate curriculum at the Lebanese University, honoring his monumental creative and artistic role.

In the Beginning was the Consciousness

It is consciousness that lies in those adjacent, compact, interlocking geometric forms, arranged vertically

and horizontally. They suggest familiarity and estrangement at once; tuning their rhythm through negative spaces and leading to a state of being rather than mere meaning, much as passionate love does. Unsurprisingly, Gebran Tarazi was infatuated with all that is visual. He discerned a light within forms that caused him, unconsciously, to lose himself in the celestial realm of art. Within him grew a primal relationship with the macrocosm, with the Maghreb (Arab West) and the Mashreq (Levant)- a testament to the fact that whatever is imprinted upon vision in childhood remains and endures.

Study's Problem Statement

This study addresses the problem of lacking systematic analytical examination on how Tarazi's bicultural upbringing shaped his geometric language that resolved the tension between traditional Arab-Islamic art and modernism.

As a child, he stood acutely attentive to everything he perceived. The Maghreb, particularly Rabat, the capital of Morocco, was for him a land of antiquity. "Sometimes, a country or a city unveils layers of history where the ancient remains there- and strangely enough- alive still.¹" In one of his interviews, Tarazi spoke

of his visual consciousness: "I spent my childhood in Morocco, a country renowned for its aesthetic sensibility in oriental ornamentation. In these oriental arts, I found a bold use of color, and a significant emphasis on geometric drawing; and that is the very essence of Arab-Islamic art."

Objectives of the Study

This study's primary objective is to analyze Tarazi's perspective of the square as a mediator between consciousness and instinct and its symbolism in his oeuvre. **Another objective** is to situate Tarazi's artistic discourse within broader art movements of the Maghreb and the Mashreq.

Hypothesis of the Study

The study posits that the square for Tarazi was a geometric constant of traditional roots holding cognitive, emotional and spiritual dimensions that bridged Eastern, and particularly Levantine, authenticity with modernist expression and was a form of resistance to artistic alienation. **The hypothesis is tested** through tracing the recurrence of geometric forms in Tarazi's works and their evolution over time. Through his masterful practice of making geometric forms, both in craftsmanship and art, Gebran Tarazi- the craftsman and the artist- came to

possess form: first through replication, then through repetition, and finally through an attentive listening to its spirit. In the beginning he was akin to, as per a Sufi saying, "Whoever hears the invocation, bears the secret; and whoever bears the secret, finds a path in every station." Such attunement to the spirit of form is achieved only through rigorous discipline and struggle. It is a path open only to those who have relinquished all that does not belong to art and beauty.

Previous Studies

A review of **previous studies** reveals that the Casablanca School has been documented by thinkers and art critics like Khatibi and Shaba'a as an art movement reclaiming Moroccan visual heritage in the post-colonial period, while Tarazi's parallel discourse has not been comparatively examined to link his theoretical manifesto *The Need for the Orient* and the philosophical dimensions underlying his artistic concepts to wider Arab modernist movements.

Intersecting Paths and a Shared Vision

The visual artist Gebran Tarazi was unwavering in his defense of Arab identity, both in the Maghreb and the Mashreq. His commitment did not

come from a retreat into the past or an attachment to traditionalism. Rather, it was a determination directed toward preserving the cultural and intellectual specificity and context that sets the Orient apart from the European West. A close examination of his artwork will readily corroborate Tarazi's choice to which he remained firmly committed. Indeed, anyone who "studies the artist's life and oeuvre will recognize his belief in the necessity of breaking with the archaic repetitive form of art, while retaining his Arab belonging, far from complacency, compromise, and the commercialization of art..."²

In this light, a comparison may be drawn between the artist Gebran Tarazi and the Casablanca School (the Group of 65) in their stance toward artistic practice.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative methodology based on formal visual analysis of Tarazi's works- quadrangular compositions in particular; close readings of his manifesto, his two books, interviews with him, critical essays and archival catalogues of his exhibitions. **It also offers a comparative analysis** between Tarazi's discourse and that of Casablanca schools' artists and thinkers.

Both Gebran Tarazi and the Casablanca School acted in response to the fragmentation of the general artistic entity during the French colonial and post-independence periods. Although this comparison reveals intersecting paths, Gebran Tarazi and the Casablanca School shared a common vision. The main concern of the Group of 65 (Casablanca School) was to reclaim Morocco's visual identity and heritage. The discourse and writings of some of the group's artists and intellectuals present clear denouncement of this fragmentation. In his article "For a New Discourse on the City", the visual artist Mohammed Shaba'a writes: "Today, we suffer from a fragmentation of our very entity through the fragmentation imposed upon us by colonialism in order to exploit Morocco as a market for its commodities, by undermining the national local industry, depriving it of any development and relegating it to the past."³

The Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi set forth a similar discourse about visual arts of the Levant. He asked: "Is it possible to achieve a modern Arab art?" His answer was: "Most Arab artists are influenced by the West, either because they are ashamed of the past, or because they are basically ignorant of it. Geometric art has

become a label used by craftsmen to market their goods to tourists...⁴” His vision, fueled by resisting all forms of artistic alienation, informed his artwork and philosophical manifesto *The Need for the Orient* in which Tarazi advances the propositions and ideas of building a modern and contemporary art that springs from artistic and historical originality rather than from the blind imitation of Western modernism. Prior to his contemporary period, Tarazi immersed himself in the traditional Moroccan and Levantine arts. Throughout his life, he was fond of the visual world. His gaze stood in utter wonder before the splendor of Moroccan and Levantine architecture and the ornamentation of walls and facades. In the words of the Moroccan writer and thinker Abdelkebir Khatibi, Tarazi returned to what had been forgotten and awakened what lay dormant within “the natural and historical roots that define the essence of the human being.”

Forms of Consciousness and Instinct

“The loved one who knocks at our door, arrives bearing grace and the silence of a life kept private. He draws near and wraps us in his presence. Sometimes gently, sometimes forcefully. He wants us to bear witness to his life, seeking support or help; or

perhaps he merely feigns not needing anything at all from us. He gives us time. And yet, what is it that we truly share with those we love? It is time that brings our loved one back to us just as it carries him away. There are moments when he withdraws from us and even from our hearts. Yet, he always returns, sometimes in the image of a ghost yet remains so close that we find ourselves drifting back into the time he once bestowed on us, held in intimacy, through every joy and every sorrow.⁵”

Such is the state of the square that haunts the artist Gebran Tarazi. The square is still, yet mobile, rooted yet nomadic, inhabiting the space between consciousness and instinct. In an article titled “Mediterranean Plastic Vocabulary in Islamic Art⁶”, the artist and art critic Assaad Arabi cites a quote by psychologist John Dewey, who observed that “the concept of the square constitutes a fundamental element within the recesses of humanity’s collective unconsciousness.” The square is a geometric form, yet initially before becoming geometry, it exists as “a part of human knowledge that lies between consciousness and instinct.⁷”

Gebran Tarazi was captivated by the square. For him, it was not merely a geometric shape, it was a spirit that dwelled within him. His childhood

bears witness to this infatuation: The square- and nothing else- became his Alpha and Omega. To him, the square was geometric and symbolic at once. Tarazi admits a lifelong passion about quadrangular forms, since childhood, hence their persistent recurrence in most of his works. Even when forms and volumes intertwined in his compositions, the square prevailed.

“I began,” Tarazi says in one of his interviews, “with a fundamental concept present in Islamic art: the idea of arranging the square in a vertical-horizontal pattern (Qayem-Nayem). I developed it into 36 perspectives of the square.” The intertwined forms in Tarazi’s works suggest an interconnectedness as though existed in the first state of nature prior to the second nature (art). This sense of intertwining appears at the opening of his novel *The Olive Press*: “We were born one day amidst greenery. Come, let us spill our speech to the rhythm of the sesame. Our beautiful white city dissolves into the sea. Come, let us head toward the deserts. There, the earth is red, perhaps an ochre-red...” The same intertwining is expressed by the poet and art critic Samir Al Sayegh who observed that: “This is a language: geometric forms undergo transfiguration; dialogue transforms into words; and

the mathematical order governing their paths transmutes into facts and truths. Then comes the eye to read and perceive and comes the heart to savor and judge.”

The Cultural Inclination

At first glance, upon contemplation, the works of Gebran Tarazi reveal an artist whose artistic conceptualization comes from the deep roots of the Maghrebi and Levantine culture. In his creations, he achieves balance between originality and innovation, favoring neither one over the other. **The findings of this study confirm** that Tarazi’s compositions manifest a visual philosophy that parallels Casablanca School’s project. His position resonates with the propositions of numerous Arab thinkers who addressed this issue of heritage and contemporaneity: to deeply immerse oneself and belong to the culture and art of the Self while remaining open- without excess- to the culture and the art of the Other. His rebellion through the 1960s and 1970s and his rejection of his family’s profession and trade, drove him toward literary and artistic modernism. He also found home in the Leftist thought that influenced him, yet he never pledged political allegiance to it in a strict sense. This enabled him

to cultivate cultural and intellectual relationships with prominent figures such as the communist playwright Jalal Khoury, the writer and lawyer Ossama Al Aref, the poet and art critic Samir Al Sayegh, and the writer and novelist Elias El Khoury.

Conclusion

The study ultimately concludes that Tarazi established a unique, non-ideological project that grounds modern Arab art in a disciplined return to origins as a form of resistance to Western artistic hegemony.

Endnotes

- 1 Michel Serres, *It Was Better Before!* under chapter *Wandering in Graveyards*, translated by Al-Mo'ti Kabbal, Mawaqef magazine, issue no. 55, p. 51.
- 2 Khudhair Al-Zaidi, *Gebran Tarazi: The Biography of Levantine Artistic Creativity*, Al-Adib Press, Amman, Jordan, First Edition, 2024, p. 22.
- 3 Mohammed Shaba'a, *The Visual Consciousness in Morocco*, The Union of Moroccan Writers' publications, 2001, p. 33
- 4 Gebran Tarazi, *From Artisanry to Decorative Art*, an interview with Ahmad Bazzoun, the Lebanese As-Safir Newspaper, 06 May 1993.
- 5 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Politics and Forgiveness*, translated by Ezzeddine Al-Katani, National Center for Translation-National Project for Translation's publications, Cairo, Egypt, 1998, p. 18.
- 6 Assaad Arabi, *Mediterranean Plastic Vocabulary in Islamic Art*, Mawaqef magazine, issue no. 64, p. 120.
- 7 See previous source, p. 132.

References & Sources

- 1- Michel Serres, *It Was Better Before!* under chapter *Wandering in Graveyards*, translated by Al-Mo'ti Kabbal, Mawaqef magazine, issue no. 55.
- 2- Khudhair Al-Zaidi, *Gebran Tarazi: The Biography of Levantine Artistic Creativity*, Al-Adib Press, Amman, Jordan, First Edition, 2024.
- 3- Mohammed Shaba'a, *The Visual Consciousness in Morocco*, The Union of Moroccan Writers' publications, 2001,
- 4- Gebran Tarazi, *From Artisanry to Decorative Art*, an interview with Ahmad Bazzoun, the Lebanese As-Safir Newspaper, 06 May 1993.
- 5- Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Politics and Forgiveness*, translated by Ezzeddine Al-Katani, National Center for Translation- National Project for Translation's publications, Cairo, Egypt, 1998.
- 6- Assaad Arabi, *Mediterranean Plastic Vocabulary in Islamic Art*, Mawaqef magazine, issue no. 64.
- 7- See previous source.