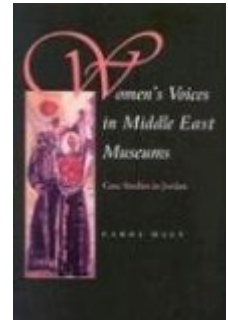




**Carol Malt.** *Women's Voices in Middle Eastern Museums: Case Studies in Jordan.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005. xxxvii + 138 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-3078-4.



**Reviewed by** Nada Shabout

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Carol Malt's study is certainly a welcome and sorely needed addition to the dearth of literature on Middle Eastern cultures. It is a publication that covers three timely topics at once: visual culture and its related issues of cultural patronage and exhibition, the preservation of heritage, and women's role in society, albeit of a certain class and level of education. At this point in time of heightened turbulence in the Middle East, when cultural expression in the age of globalization as well as women's status in particular have been in the forefront of discussion while plans for a "new Middle East" are drawn by the powers of the world, Malt renders the remarkable strength of Jordanian women and their efforts to preserve, document, and promote history and culture. The strength of her study, however, is as its title states: beyond merely *describing* women involved in museums, it presents their voices and their issues as they engage in dialogues.

The book provides a comprehensive study of museums as cultural institutions in Jordan. The choice of Jordan is a particularly relevant and interesting one for a multiplicity of reasons. In the

last two decades, Jordan has been transformed into a vital and lively cultural center in the Arab region. Its expatriate population, a large percentage of which is comprised of Palestinians who resided and worked in the Arab Gulf region or the West, started investing in real estate and other business in Jordan as an alternative space of existence, particularly following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the displacement of resident Palestinians that ensued, and in view of the intensified instability of the Arab/Muslim presence in the West as a consequence of the ideology of the war on terror. The political instability of the region has specifically contributed to Jordan's cultural growth, as the country provided one of the few safe havens in a very chaotic part of the world. While Amman, Jordan's capital, was mostly unsuccessful in its attempt to replace Beirut as the cultural capital of the Middle East in the 1980s, it blossomed in the 1990s in the aftermath of the Iraqi situation. With both Beirut and Baghdad unavailable, and given Cairo's perceived stagnation at the time, Amman offered fertile ground for various cultural activities, but particularly for providing exhibition space. In chapter 2, "Women in

Jordan," Malt examines the effects of the political and economical shifts on the status of women in the workforce within an overview of Jordanian women's organizations.

Through personal interviews Malt provides information that was previously unavailable, inaccessible in English, or presented in a scholarly manner. The book provides an important detailed survey of twelve different cultural institutions in Jordan, discussing their formation, development, and collections, as well as providing biographies of their founders. The appendices provide important practical data about the museums, their missions, and contact information. Appendix B offers statistical details of the specific Jordanian women involved in these institutions, their positions, and their responses to the questionnaire utilized by Malt in her interviews. She ends her study by providing a list of museums and art centers in major cities of the Levant. While most of the information provided is still valid, many changes have occurred since Malt collected her data in the 1990s and the subsequent publication of her book. This is of course an inevitable consequence of contemporary studies and a particular factor in a region of rapid developments and drastic changes. Iraq is a case in point. Malt's list in fact provides a much-needed historical record of Iraq's cultural institutions, many of which were completely destroyed after 2003.

Further, Malt investigates the transformation of the "museum" in its modern sense as a "Western idea" in the Middle East. In the process she refutes the notion that collecting and exhibiting is a Western activity. In the introduction, Malt sketches a brief history of collecting in the Middle East region from the ancient times, highlighting its development from private expressions of power to public and educational institutions. Malt states that "The museum as a public institution appeared in Europe in the eighteenth century" (p. xv). Missing from her discussion, however, is the political context of its emergence, particularly in

relation to Europe's colonial history. Colonialism was in fact a vital factor in the promotion of museums both in the West and the Middle East. It is particularly interesting that Malt notes that the exception among most museums in the Middle East, which were founded by men, is Iraq's National Museum of Baghdad, which served as a precursor to women's museum involvement in the Middle East. This museum, however, was founded by Gertrude Bell, an Englishwoman who was part of the British colonial presence in Iraq, and who thus hardly serves as a good example for Jordanian women. Of added interest is the tragic fate of the Iraqi museum following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the looting that ensued. Looting throughout the colonial age was, as we are often reminded today, the main source of the collections of most Western museums.

Moreover, a direct consequence of museum ideology (and museums are always ideologically constructed) is the colonial indoctrination it transmitted to the national construction of the collective Arab self following the creation of the modern nation-states that became known as the Arab world, including the country of Jordan. On several occasions, Malt raises questions concerning relationships between national identity, colonial heritage, and antiquity in Jordan. She does not, however, question the colonial agenda of promoting ancient heritage or the role of museums of ancient heritage in the self-orientalization of the modern nation.

The particular strength of the book is its mapping out of the formation and development of a national civic consciousness in Jordan as manifested in the development of the twelve museums studied and the prominent role of the specific women in achieving such goal. Malt's examination reaches beyond the construction of museums into the various relevant education programs, as well as the specific class of women's goals, attitudes, aptitudes, and aspirations. Malt justifiably highlights the achievements of two specific wom-

en, Wijdan Ali and Suha Shoman, who are credited with realizing "the challenge of founding a museum, of creating a private institution where none yet existed--and making it work" (p. 43). Ali's vision of the Jordan National Gallery and Shoman's of The Darat al Funun, surpassed the notion of preserving the past as practiced by archeological and heritage museums, to that of art centers that function as links between the past, the present, and the different parts of the world. Their visions included revitalizing old parts of the city and establishing community outreach programs that promote art appreciation, as well as internships, art residencies, and workshops. Their efforts are instrumental in constructing Jordan's contemporary identities and memories.

Malt's work raises a number of important questions that need much probing and paves the ground for further investigations. The anthropological and contextual approach of the book makes it a useful text for Middle Eastern and women's studies.

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