

## **The Politicisation of the Work of Art During Times of Political Unrest: Three Layers of Meaning Production**

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### **Author bio**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to show how, during times of political unrest, a work of art can become a site of contestation and negotiation. When this occurs, meaning is produced, reproduced, interpreted, encoded, and aligned with contemporary systems of representation. The work of art is the most potent example of objectified entanglement in that it occupies a physical or virtual space where the convergence of perspectives is visible and externalised. This article is inspired by a highly publicised incident of purported censorship that took place shortly after the latest war on Gaza began on October 7, 2023. *Al Moulatham* (2012), an anonymous portrait by Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki, was removed from an auction of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art, sparking debates about censorship and the political nature of the work of art. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, this article looks beyond the ontologically inscribed political nature of the work of art to consider instead how sociohistorical

processes of collective meaning production entangled *Al Moulatham* inadvertently in a political moment for which it was not originally intended.

**Keywords:** Media, art, Palestine, Gaza, painting, aesthetics, politics, censorship, politicisation, publics, counter publics, digital media, conflict, artistic censorship, Lebanon, Lebanese art

## **Introduction**

On October 30, 2023, Christie's, an international auction house, removed *Al Moulatham* (الملثم, 2012), a painting by Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki, from an auction of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art scheduled for November 9, 2023. While much could be written condemning the censorship of art, this article is interested in what occurred *after* Christie's decision. Changing access to a work of art alters the nature of a painting's reception— in this case, from an elite in-person audience to a widespread digital one – and its political and cultural significance. By removing the painting from their auction, Christie's opened it up to dynamic discussions about creative censorship, the role of art in geopolitical conversations, and the potential for the work of art to serve as a site for collective negotiations of understanding and interpretation.

Debates over whether works of art can be political have primarily focused on the potential impact of the work of art on those who receive it (spectator, audience, publics, counter-publics). Less attention has been devoted to what these agents can do to a work of art to change its political and historical significance. This article considers the work of art as the site of collective meaning production. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, it looks at how we politicise works of art through our associations with what is depicted and how that intervention coincides with what Rancière calls the “regime of identification” in which we act. The process is one of speaking about, defining, negotiating, and debating the meaning of a work of art.

It is a process of politicisation that occurs at the level of media coverage, visual symbolism, and assessment of the work of art as an object of both sentimental and monetary value. These three layers highlight the power of visual symbolism and media coverage to determine tangible outcomes. The first step is to examine coverage by news outlets and social media users following the removal of the painting. The second step is to consider the visual content of the painting and its role in the decision to remove it from the auction. The third step is to look at the painting as an object whose value changed significantly after Christie's pulled it from their annual program.

### **Context and Background: The War on Gaza and Censorship of the Arts**

On October 7, 2023, the military wing of Hamas, a Palestinian Islamist movement, led an attack on a variety of targets in southern Israel, including a music festival and *kibbutzim*. The attackers killed some 1,200 Israeli citizens, injured hundreds more, and seized 251 Israeli hostages. The subsequent retaliatory assault on the Gaza Strip by the Israeli military has been one of the most brutal in modern history. For the last 12 months, Israel has perpetuated a bloody campaign resulting in the deaths of over 40,000 Palestinians, injuring and traumatising thousands more, and devastating the physical infrastructure of Gaza.<sup>1</sup> The Israeli assault, which the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and other international bodies have argued likely constitutes genocide, has incited millions to protest globally, in the streets and online. For many, this has been a watershed year in which modern-day mythologies about the relationship between the United States and Israel and the purported mission of American foreign policy to spread modern 'democratic' values continue to be undermined by the scale and costs of the Israeli campaign. This has been fuelled in no small part by citizen journalists and grassroots advocacy on social media.

Artists from many backgrounds have long expressed solidarity with the Palestinian cause. However, those who support Palestine, Palestinian culture, Palestinian resistance, or any related topics through their art or in public declarations have been subject to controversy, debate, censorship, and intimidation. The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) recently

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, "Gaza Death Toll: How Many Palestinians Has Israel's Campaign Killed?," August 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gaza-death-toll-how-many-palestinians-has-israels-campaign-killed-2024-07-25/>.

launched its Art Censorship Index. This database tracks and maps instances of censorship where “the reason for the withdrawal was related to the perceived political content of the work, the personal politics of the artist, the national or cultural associations tied up in the content of the work or the general tense political atmosphere related to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

According to their data, “censorship incidents have risen dramatically, threatening the creative freedom of artists.”<sup>3</sup> On November 23, 2023, The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva put out a statement which expressed “alarm at the worldwide wave of attacks, reprisals, criminalization and sanctions against those who publicly express solidarity with the victims of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine.” The statement went on to say that “artists, academics, journalists, activists, and athletes have faced particularly harsh consequences and reprisals from states and private actors because of their prominent roles and visibility.”<sup>4</sup>

In many cases, these actors have been censored due to direct expressions of support for Palestine or associations with Palestinian solidarity movements. Two examples of note: Lisson Gallery in London postponed an exhibition by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei after he tweeted about the war on Gaza, and the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany cancelled an exhibition on Afrofuturism by Haitian-American curator Anais Duplan after he described Israel’s military

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<sup>2</sup> National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), “Art Censorship Index: Post-October 7th,” October 7, 2023, <https://ncac.org/art-censorship-index-post-october-7th#:~:text=Artworks%20and%20artists%20touching%20upon>.

According to the NCAC website: “We have intentionally limited our data collection to cases in which institutions expressly canceled, withdrew, abandoned, or restricted a program or work after plans to present it had been communicated, and where the reason for the withdrawal was related to the perceived political content of the work, the personal politics of the artist, the national or cultural associations tied up in the content of the work or the general tense political atmosphere related to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.”

<sup>3</sup> NCAC, “Art Censorship Index.”

<sup>4</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Speaking Out on Gaza / Israel Must Be Allowed: UN Experts,” November 23, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/speaking-out-gaza-israel-must-be-allowed-un-experts>.

campaign in Gaza as “a genocide” on Instagram.<sup>5</sup> In other cases, censorship has occurred due a perceived connection to Palestinian culture. Indiana University, for example, abruptly cancelled a highly anticipated retrospective of the work of esteemed painter Samia Halaby a few months after the start of the war.<sup>6</sup> The removal of *Al Moulatham* from the Christie’s auction complicates the question of censorship of Palestinian art even further. Baalbaki is Lebanese, and the painting is a tribute to a moment in Lebanese, not Palestinian, history. This reveals a form of censorship that equates any perceived depictions of Palestinian culture and heritage with, as the NCAC states, “perceived political content.”

### **The Incident: Removing *Al Moulatham* from Public Auction**

Before the attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki was expected to have three paintings for sale in Christie’s Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art auction on November 9, 2023. On October 30, 2023, two of the paintings were removed from the auction, *Al Moulatham* (الملثم, 2012 – Figure 1) and *Anonymous* (c. 2011-2018 – Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> *Al Moulatham* is an anonymous portrait of a man whose face is obscured by a red and white checked *keffiyeh* wrapped closely around his head and shoulders. The portrait is set against a vibrant blue background patterned with brightly coloured flowers. Only the man’s heavy-lidded eyes, thick black eyebrows, and forehead are visible between the folds of the *keffiyeh*. It is one in a series of similar paintings by Baalbaki inspired by young men who fought in the Lebanese

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Greenberger, “Ai Weiwei Says Censorship in the West Is ‘Sometimes Even Worse’ than in Mao’s China,” *ARTnews*, February 5, 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ai-weiwei-censorship-west-china-israel-hamas-war-gaza-1234695044/>.

Rhea Nayyar, “German Museum Cancels Afrofuturism Show over Curator’s Pro-Palestine Posts,” *Hyperallergic*, November 15, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/856774/german-museum-cancels-afrofuturism-show-over-curators-pro-palestine-posts/#:~:text=The%20Museum%20Folkwang%20has%20therefore>.

<sup>6</sup> Erik Schreiber, “Indiana University Art Museum Cancels Career Retrospective of Palestinian Artist Samia Halaby,” *World Socialist Web Site*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2024/01/15/avyq-j15.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Rhea Nayyar, “Christie’s Pulls Paintings by Lebanese Artist after ‘Complaints,’” *Hyperallergic*, November 10, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/854986/christies-pulls-paintings-by-lebanese-artist-after-complaints/#:~:text=Christie's%20withdrew%20two%20portrait%20paintings,about%20the%20works'%20subject%20matter>.

Civil Wars in the 1970s and their experiences of “repeated displacement, violence, and strife.”<sup>8</sup> *Anonymous* depicts a man wearing a black balaclava, a gas mask, and a red cloth around his forehead painted with the Arabic word *thaeroun* (ثائرون, roughly translated as ‘rebels’).<sup>9</sup> A third untitled painting by Baalbaki depicting a burning flag from his *No Flag* series remained in the auction and sold for around \$24,646.<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity, this article will focus on *Al Moulatham*.

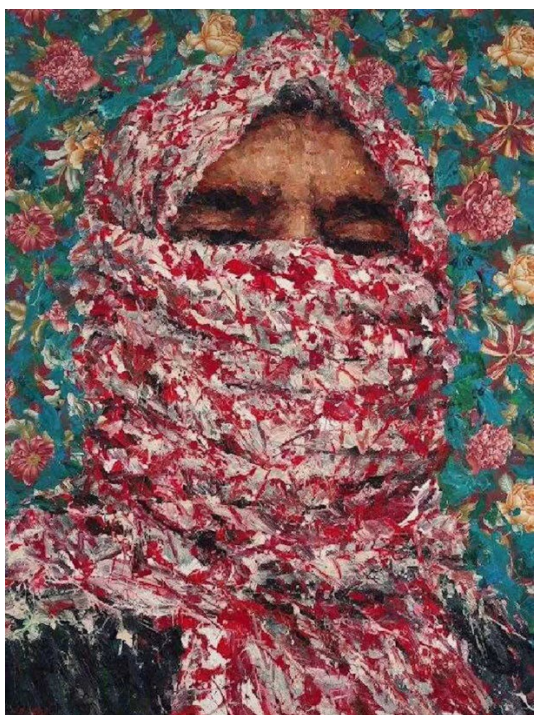


Figure 1



Figure 2

The details surrounding the painting’s removal remain obscure. According to the consignor of *Al Moulatham*, the request to remove the painting came from someone “highly placed” at Christie’s New York offices after they received numerous complaints about the painting’s inclusion in the auction.<sup>11</sup> The consignor was not provided with any further details regarding the complaints. Christie’s told *The National* that all decisions must remain confidential

<sup>8</sup> Nayyar, “Christie’s Pulls Paintings.”

<sup>9</sup> The estimated worth of *Anonymous* is between \$15,000 and \$22,000.

<sup>10</sup> Nayyar, “Christie’s Pulls Paintings.”

<sup>11</sup> Nayyar, “Christie’s Pulls Paintings.”

between their team and the consignor.<sup>12</sup> According to the consignor, the removal clause in the consignment contract only accounted for “potential for withdrawal on the grounds of fraud or misattributed ownership, money laundering, or criminal activity” – none of which were applicable in the case of *Al Moulatham*.<sup>13</sup> Notably, Christie’s was prepared to facilitate a *private* sale of the work for the consignor, who decided to keep the painting instead for “sentimental purposes.”<sup>14</sup> In 2022, Christie’s sold another painting by Baalbaki, from the same series, also entitled *Al Moulatham* (2010). This work depicts the exact same subject matter and sold for around \$300,000 (£201,600), more than double its estimated value.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Theory: The Political Nature of the Work of Art**

*Al Moulatham* became entangled in an active process of collective meaning-making, which resulted in its repositioning in an alternate political narrative. The painting was subsumed into a political movement it was not originally intended to be a part of. It became a key symbol for Palestinian resistance despite having been painted by a Lebanese artist to depict an episode in Lebanese political history. Yet, it has become one of the most widely cited examples of artistic censorship connected to the war since October 7<sup>th</sup>. To understand how this occurred, we must first consider the capacity of the work of art to ‘be political.’

According to Jacques Rancière, every work of art has an objective ‘political being,’ regardless of the motivations behind its creation or its potential reception. He philosophically brackets off this ‘political being’ from the ‘political experience’ of the work of art. Rancière concedes that a work of art may cause political conversion or inspiration, but not in a deliberate, calculated sense. For Rancière, the work of art is defined by the “regime of identification” in which it belongs, i.e. how society conceives of artistic production and expression in relation to other aspects of social life during a given time.<sup>16</sup> The work of art cannot be politically

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<sup>12</sup> Razmig Bedirian, “Ayman Baalbaki Paintings Withdrawn from Christie’s Auction after Complaints,” *The National*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/2023/11/04/ayman-baalbaki-paintings-withdrawn-christies/>.

<sup>13</sup> Nayyar, “Christie’s Pulls Paintings.”

<sup>14</sup> Nayyar, “Christie’s Pulls Paintings.”

<sup>15</sup> “Ayman Baalbaki (Lebanese, B. 1975), *al Moulatham* | Christie’s,” *Christie’s*, 2020, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6395650>.

<sup>16</sup> Rodolfo Wenger, “The Regimes of Identification of Art and the Political Reconfiguration of Aesthetics,” November 2020, 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i22.386>.

“committed” and autonomously drive political action. If the work of art coincides with any construction or performance of politics, it is “something that the art in question does not control.”<sup>17</sup>

Within the scope of Rancière’s theory, the work of art passively aligns with political movements. I argue that we should look beyond this framework and consider what Gabriel Rockhill refers to as the “sociohistorical struggles over the political dimension of artwork.”<sup>18</sup> While the work of art itself may not control the politics ascribed to it, it is also not bound to a “fixed political valence” that can be determined by finite ontological deduction, nor does it simply ‘coincide’ with a given political movement.<sup>19</sup> In other words, there is an active process of inscribing a work of art with meaning that occurs at the level of reception, be it one viewer or several million online. Therefore, there must be a dynamic and context-specific process taking place at the level of the reception of the work of art wherein meaning is attributed to it. From Rockhill’s point of view, “works of art are sites of contestation and negotiation in which meaning is dynamically produced and reproduced,” wherein the process of meaning-making is active but remains external to the work of art.<sup>20</sup>

### **Three Levels of Meaning Production**

In line with the theoretical framework outlined above, the following section will examine how *Al Moulatham* was repositioned as a politically significant painting in a specific geopolitical context. This process aligned it with the contemporary ‘regime of identification’ and what is considered visually ‘political.’ In this case, again, three layers of meaning production can be identified: the first on the part of the media, where often contrasting narratives are constructed and disseminated; the second is in the visual symbolism and interpretation of the artwork itself; and the third in the assessment of the work of art as an object of value. These three layers of

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 58.

<sup>18</sup> Gabriel Rockhill, “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art,” in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Philip Watts (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 206.

<sup>19</sup> Rockhill, “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art,” 206.

<sup>20</sup> Rockhill, “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art,” 208.



meaning are intertwined, revealing how visual symbolism and the media narratives woven around a work of art play a role in determining its value and historical significance.

### **I. The Range of Media Coverage**

Rancière has written that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”<sup>21</sup> The fuel that maintains this revolving dynamism of politics are ‘traditional’ (e.g., newspapers, television, radio) and ‘new’ (e.g., social media platforms, messaging applications) forms of media. Ralph Schroeder argues that the media serves as a kind of “transmission belt” for the interests of political elites by media elites. However, the media must also be responsive to the “agendas of the public.”<sup>22</sup> He believes that the “measure of political change is the responsiveness of the political apparatus to citizens.”<sup>23</sup> When these agendas are not responded to, counter-publics form to challenge the status quo. In the case of *Al Moulatham*, the media coverage of the painting’s removal reveals incongruencies between the interests of the political elite and those of counter-publics.

The removal of the two paintings from the auction catalogue was covered by several news outlets, including *Artnet News*, *The National*, *Hyperallergic*, *Reuters*, *Asia Pacific*, *ArtsHelp*, and *L’Orient du Jour (L’Orient Today)*. From the United Kingdom to Lebanon, these outlets hold to different and often competing, narratives and perspectives dependent upon geographical, political, and cultural factors. A ‘media agenda’ depends on geographical, cultural, and social factors and the positionality of the journalists and editors involved. The headlines concerning the removal of Baalbaki’s paintings ranged from politically neutral to critical. *The National* ran a relatively impartial headline: “Ayman Baalbaki Paintings Withdrawn from Christie’s Auction After Complaints.” Yet, it referred to the two painted subjects as “revolutionary figures” in the subtitle.<sup>24</sup> *Hyperallergic* emphasised the questionable nature of the complaints by including quotation marks in their headline: “Christie’s Pulls Paintings by Lebanese Artist After

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<sup>21</sup> Rancière, “The Politics of Aesthetics,” 8.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Schroeder, “Media Systems, Digital Media and Politics,” in *Social Theory After the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization* (London: UCL Press, 2018), 28–29.

<sup>23</sup> Schroeder, “Media Systems, Digital Media and Politics,” 29.

<sup>24</sup> The full subtitle: “Two paintings, which depict revolutionary figures, removed days before London sale.” Bedirian, “Ayman Baalbaki Paintings Withdrawn.”

‘Complaints’.” *Reuters* presented readers with an alternate point of view when it focused on the artist’s reaction: “Lebanese Painter Says Christie's Withdrawal of His Works from Auction is 'Discrimination'.”

The content of the articles provided a spectrum of reactions that ranged from presenting evidence to decrying the removal as censorship and a political act tied to the war on Gaza. While reporters for *Artnet News*, *Hyperallergic*, and *The National* quoted the artist and consignor’s opinions about the painting’s removal and its political significance, reporter Zeina Zalzal, writing in *L’Orient du Jour*, offered her perspective, calling the removal of the two paintings “collateral damage” of the war on Gaza. She asked whether the censorship of the two paintings indicates the start of a “time of increasing fragmentation, where even artistic expression, losing its freedom, faces confinement within narrower boundaries.”<sup>25</sup> In an article for *ArtsHelp*, journalist Rasha Hamade wrote, “Ba’albaki’s work does not only call for change and revolution, but it also sends encouraging messages of hope through the strong symbolism of the keffiyeh.”<sup>26</sup>

Users took up the painting on social media to express solidarity and resistance. User @emnemroue posted the painting on Instagram on the day of the Christie’s auction with this caption (Figure 4):

Our resistance is a testament to the desire to live, not to harm. / Ayman Baalbaki's powerful portrayal of a figure donning a kufiyeh, symbolizing resistance, reflects our journey as Arabs navigating various forms of resistance—be it social, political, religious or geopolitical. Resistance, an art woven into our identity. Our resistance is fuelled by the belief in what we deserve—life, dreams, and a voice. /Al Moulatham / signed in Arabic; dated '12' / acrylic and printed fabric on canvas / 200 x 150cm / Executed in 2012 / [#ArabResistance #aymanbaalbaki #almulatham](#)”

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<sup>25</sup> Zeina Zalzal, “Collateral Damage of Gaza War: Ayman Baalbaki’s Artwork Withdrawn from Christie’s Auction,” *L’Orient Today*, November 3, 2023, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1356620/collateral-damage-of-gaza-war-ayman-baalbakis-artwork-withdrawn-from-christies-auction.html#:~:text=TIMES%20OF%20CRISIS-,Collateral%20damage%20of%20Gaza%20war%3A%20Ayman%20Baalbaki's%20artwork%20withdrawn%20from,industry%20professionals%20in%20the%20region.>

<sup>26</sup>Rasha Hamade, “Silencing the Canvas: Censorship and the Struggle for Palestinian Liberation in the Art of Ayman Ba’albaki,” *ArtsHelp*, December 2023, <https://www.artshelp.com/censorship-and-the-struggle-for-palestinian-liberation-ayman-baalbaki/>.



Figure 3

Another user on Instagram (@mathqaf) posted the painting in February 2024 (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Most comments are empowering, featuring short phrases like “Powerful” and “Stunning” as well as #freepalestine and watermelon emojis, popular ways to indicate Palestinian solidarity online. Only one comment at the bottom of the list expresses disdain for the painting. It reads: “too evil to reveal any face,” indicating the user’s perception of the figure depicted as malevolent<sup>27</sup> - a voice of dissent amongst an otherwise united online ‘public.

At the level of media coverage, *Al Moulatham* was politicised through an active, external process. It was aligned with political movements through the meaning ascribed to it by those who create and disseminate media. This is a process which Matthew Lampert, responding to Rancière, refers to as “reception and political appropriation.” Through this process, the work of art can gain or lose political significance if appropriated by a group of “disincorporated spectators” who find that they have the same “aesthetic awareness of their own equality” and

<sup>27</sup> Mathqaf مَثَقَف (@mathqaf), “Artwork details: Ayman Baalbaki (Lebanese, b. 1975), ‘Al Moulatham’ (2012), acrylic and painted fabric on canvas. @ayman\_baalbaki,” Instagram, February 9, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3IQOMyo4Cf/>.

exchange shared experiences over the meaning of the same work of art.<sup>28</sup> This group then begins to form tentative communities of political subjects that challenge the established distribution of the sensible through their shared understanding of the work of art as politically motivating or inspiring. This is the “political *terrain* or *site* of political organization and struggle” where art is made to participate in politics and the potential reconfigurations of the sensible are tested.<sup>29</sup> In this case, *Al Moulatham* became a symbol of Palestinian resistance despite its original association with Lebanese history. The following section will elucidate one reason *why* this came to pass.



Figures 4.1 and 4.2

## II. The Symbolism of the Keffiyeh

An examination of the visual symbolism in *Al Moulatham* further elucidates why it was removed from the auction and subsequently involved in broader discussions about political resistance. According to Bart Vandenabeele, “for successful (artistic) communication to work, it is not a necessary requirement that words, images, sounds, and concepts have exact meanings shared by all participants involved in the communicative interaction.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, variances in interpretation can result in new narratives about a painting’s political significance.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Lampert, “Beyond the Politics of Reception: Jacques Rancière and the Politics of Art,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 50, no. 2 (March 21, 2016): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-016-9369-1>.

<sup>29</sup> Lampert, “Beyond the Politics of Reception,” 192.

<sup>30</sup> Bart Vandenabeele, “‘New’ Media, Art, and Intercultural Communication,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 38, no. 4 (2004): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3527371>.

Two features of the painting deserve particular consideration: the *keffiyeh* wrapped around the head and shoulders of the individual depicted and the flowers decorating the backdrop. While the flowers might indicate reverence or ceremonial commemoration, it is the visual significance of the *keffiyeh* that requires unpacking. The name ‘*keffiyeh*’ is likely derived historically from the Kufa region of Iraq, meaning “from the city of Kufa.” Christian, Muslim, Druze, and secular Arabs all wear the *keffiyeh* and have attached a variety of meanings to it over time. It has long protected Bedouins from the heat and sand of the desert. In Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and Iraq, it’s called a *shemagh*; in Iran, it’s a *yazdi*; and in Egypt, it’s a *rezza*.<sup>31</sup> According to Bartlett: “It was headwear that marked men as city dwellers, villagers, or Bedouin, and indicated their religious affiliation and socio-economic position...the keffiyeh was a marker of low status, distinguishing the *fellah*—peasant—from the *effendi*— the educated middle-class men of the town, who wore the maroon-coloured tarbush or fez.”<sup>32</sup> The patterns of the *keffiyeh* are rooted in historic Palestine, representing the leaves of ancient olive trees, the nets used to fish in the Mediterranean Sea, and the robust trade routes that ran across the land.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 5

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Donica, “Chapter 9 Head Coverings, Arab Identity, and New Materialism,” in *All Things Arabia: Arabian Identity and Material Culture*, ed. Ileana Baird and Hülya Yağcıoğlu (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004435926\\_011](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004435926_011).

<sup>32</sup> Djurdja Bartlett, *Fashion and Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 126.

<sup>33</sup> Niloufar Haidari, “From Yasser Arafat to Madonna: How the Palestinian Keffiyeh Became a Global Symbol,” *The Guardian*, December 11, 2023, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/11/keffiyeh-scarf-fashion-history-palestine>.



Since the 1930s, the *keffiyeh* has been closely associated with Palestinian nationalism and solidarity with the Palestinian people. Yasser Arafat played a role in linking the *keffiyeh* with the concept of national independence in the 1960s.<sup>34</sup> The *keffiyeh* has been both a symbol of Arab pride and self-determination but has also been used to vilify Arabs and their social and political movements.<sup>35</sup> Representations of the *keffiyeh* in popular culture and art are most often caught between allegations from pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli factions. Political symbols like the Palestinian flag and the *keffiyeh* are prohibited under Israeli occupation, so Palestinian artists often use the *keffiyeh* in their work as a form of political resistance.<sup>36</sup> Today, in protests around the world, the *keffiyeh* now symbolises such broad meanings as anti-colonisation, anti-globalisation, anti-militarism, anti-imperialism, protest against investments, and disillusionment with ‘democratic’ Western values and institutions.



Figure 6

Figure 7

Christopher Phillips explains how Arab identity is “constructed, reproduced and disseminated...every day in a largely routine and everyday manner.”<sup>37</sup> Head coverings are one of the most important of these everyday indicators of identity and have been “used in more pointed ways by Arabs and non-Arabs alike to indicate an Arab identity on other levels.”<sup>38</sup> In the case of representations of Palestine and Palestinian people, we can see the process of validation/invalidation occur through the co-option of head coverings like the *keffiyeh* that have

<sup>34</sup> Haidari, “From Yasser Arafat to Madonna.”

<sup>35</sup> Donica, “Chapter 9 Head Coverings, Arab Identity, and New Materialism,” 165.

<sup>36</sup> Olga González, “Culture and Politics in the Visual Arts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” *Macalester International* 23, no. 1 (2009): 218, <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol23/iss1/16>.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Phillips, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World* (London, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 1–2.

<sup>38</sup> Donica, “Chapter 9 Head Coverings, Arab Identity, and New Materialism,” 164.

come to represent, for some, ‘resistance’ and, for others, ‘terrorism’. Such garments are used as visual building blocks to construct representative regimes that turn human beings into “products of political struggle” and any symbols that might represent them as political forms.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, the *keffiyeh* becomes immediately and widely associated with Palestinian resistance, even if, as is the case with *Al Moulatham*, that was not its original signification. When depicted in a work of art, the presence of the *keffiyeh* can create new associations, transforming a painting into what Rockhill refers to as a “recognizable formula of politicized art” within a particular regime of identification.<sup>40</sup> As a work of art becomes increasingly politicised, it can be more easily co-opted by either side of a political debate - as a symbol of terrorism, nationalism, or resistance to oppression, depending on who controls the narrative.

### **III. The Work of Art as an Object of Value**

Increased media attention and the shift in the painting’s significance to a symbol of political resistance altered the tangible value of *Al Moulatham*. While *Al Moulatham* was valuable before Christie’s pulled the painting from their auction, it is far more precious now that it has received significant media attention and become an internationally recognised political symbol.<sup>41</sup> The same is true of the painting’s sentimental value as well. It is unlikely that the consignor will part with a painting that has developed such a symbolic status during a time of global unrest. According to anthropologist Alfred Gells, “Artists do not (usually) make art objects for no reason, they make them in order that they should be seen by the public, and/or acquired by a patron. Just as any art object indexes its origins in the activity of an artist, it also indexes its reception by a public, the public it was primarily made ‘for’.”<sup>42</sup> It follows that changing the audience for which the art object was initially intended can change how the painting is received and interpreted.

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<sup>39</sup> Todd May, “Rancière in South Carolina,” in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Philip Watts and Gabriel Rockhill (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 105–19.

<sup>40</sup> Rockhill, “The Politics of Aesthetics: Political History and the Hermeneutics of Art,” 206.

<sup>41</sup> The estimated worth of *Al Moulatham* is between \$98,000 and \$150,000, but Baalbaki’s paintings tend to sell for much more than their expected value at auctions. Bedirian, “Ayman Baalbaki Paintings Withdrawn,” 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24.

This also depends on the nature of the auction house and its role in the art market. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the public meaning of a work of art “originates in the process of circulation and consumption dominated by the objective relations between the institutions and agents implicated in the process.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, the position of an institution impacts how its actions are received and understood. Christie's actions are widely publicised as a highly influential international auction house. Removing the painting from their auction was uniquely impactful in politicising *Al Moulatham*. The act of removal – what many observers saw as an act of censorship – most likely increased the painting's visibility and estimated selling price. If the consignor ever agrees to sell, they will have a painting whose value has certainly been appreciated. If a less prestigious institution had censored the painting, the reactions to the decision and the impact on the painting would have been less obvious.

### **Conclusion**

The three approaches identified in this article are inextricably linked. The media generates a wide range of narratives about global issues, such as the war on Gaza. These narratives either align with the views of stakeholders in commercial institutions like Christie's or not. The reasons for Christie's decision are still unclear, but their removal of *Al Moulatham* was likely motivated by private complaints and intended to address the concerns of an elite constituency. The media stepped in to expose their actions and, in some cases, accuse them outright of censorship. However, this might never have occurred had the painting not featured such a politically charged symbol as a *keffiyeh*. Despite being a likely catalyst for the removal of the painting, the visual symbolism of the *keffiyeh* also facilitated a greater connection between the work of art and those who stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Thus, Christie's decision underscores the power of the visual symbolism of the *keffiyeh* and its resonance with counter-publics that support the Palestinian people. The media coverage and the salience of the visual symbolism within the painting altered the commercial and historical value of the painting.

Who, then, can validate the political meaning of a work of art? Does the artist have the final say? As the case of *Al Moulatham* makes clear, the artist can also contribute to a repositioning of their work. In an interview with *Reuters*, Baalbaki referred to removing the

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<sup>43</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1984), 9.



paintings as “censorship of an image, of culture.”<sup>44</sup> He draws parallels between the decision to remove the paintings and the concept of “degenerate art”, an idea the Nazis used to justify the destruction of works of art that had purported Jewish or Communist traits. “When we start to mess with freedom of expression in art, in novels, in anything that has cultural significance, it snowballs fast...people feel it's their image that's been withdrawn,” the artist said.<sup>45</sup> By arguing that the painting was censored for political reasons, Baalbaki validates the re-interpretation of the painting in the context of Palestinian resistance and solidarity, naturalising *Al Moulatham* as political in the contemporary context.

The new political significance ascribed to *Al Moulatham* is significant in that it is both lasting and mutable. On the one hand, Christie’s fateful decision will ensure that the new political meaning attributed to the painting will become part of the painting’s history like a layer of geological sediment. *Al Moulatham* was not created by a Palestinian artist or directly inspired by pro-Palestinian sentiments. Yet, the painting was encoded within it the same negotiation between “images that can and cannot be represented and/or stay in circulation” that is typically attributed to Palestinian art.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it has become a politically salient symbol that resonates with both pro-Palestinian actors, as a symbol of resistance, and defenders of Israel, who would likely interpret Christie’s actions as a gesture of support and solidarity in the wake of the events of October 7th. On the other hand, this analysis also reveals how easily a painting may be repositioned within a new political narrative, indicating the likelihood that new layers of meaning may be added in the future.

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### **Figure 1**

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**Figure 3**

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**Figure 4.1**

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