

The House that is a Home

By Emily Lodge

Darat al Funun is not just a gallery to promote a renaissance of Arab visual arts and culture, it is a symbol of the multifaceted nature of Jordan. Perched on a green hillside overlooking the oldest part of Amman, the early 20th century buildings of the Khalid Shoman Foundation made from local stone, stand alongside a Roman temple dedicated to Herakles; in the 6th century, the temple became a Byzantine church to honor St. George, (Al Khader in Arabic) and today provides a majestic backdrop to musical events in summertime. In the seventh century, Muslims also came here to pray and their prayers, alongside with those of their predecessors, are inscribed in stone.

British explorer Major C.R. Conder, who first identified the site in 1881, speculated that it was “sacred as a tomb or cave-dwelling of some saint.” One of the three houses was built by the Circassians of Russia’s northern steppes who came to Jordan in the late 19th century. The main building is in the Venetian style, characteristic of the Mediterranean architecture that was in fashion in Beirut, Haifa, and Jaffa in the 1920s. The place, cut into the steep rock, is reached on what must have once been a goat path not far from the Citadel that the Bible says was the site of where David sent Uriah the Hittite into battle so he could have his widow, Bathsheba, who, later, gave birth to Solomon. It was an area of passage between the great Pharaonic, Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, Ottoman, and Persian empires. Many Jordanians, like the Lebanese Arabs who were Phoenician, can trace their origins to the ancient Canaanites.

Suha Shoman, founder of Darat al Funun, named the Khalid Shoman Foundation after her late husband, formerly president of the Arab Bank. Khalid Shoman’s father, Abdul Hameed Shoman, founded the Arab Bank in 1930 when Jerusalem was part of Palestine. (The Bank’s founder’s grandson, also named Abdul Hameed, is the current Chairman of the Arab Bank.) The site was bought in 1991, and since then has sponsored numerous exhibits in its gallery and played host to scholars who study in its extensive art library. Suha and Khalid believed that the private sector could play a role in nurturing Arab culture, to spread ways of thought to “promote the renaissance of the Arab nation.”

Standing outside mid-way between a Roman head and a modern Iraqi sculpture, Suha Shoman, the founder-chairman of Darat al Funun and the Foundation, asks rhetorically, “What does this imply about our origins? Here there is an unbroken link to our past. The Mediterranean basin was always home to Arab Christians, Jews and Muslims. To use the historical myths surrounding the Judaic Kingdom as a justification for aggression is to distort history. This place is a symbol of tolerance and the continuity of our past. We believe in Abraham and have no hatred for the Jewish tradition. But we are anti-Zionist, those who want to declare that Palestine is the exclusive state of the Jewish people; we Palestinian Arabs want the right of return to our homeland without any impediment.”

On the half-moon terrace with Roman columns overlooking the Byzantine church, one can almost hear the faint tinkling of glasses and polite chatter. Darat was the official British headquarters and officer’s club following World War I. Although included in the British mandate, present day Jordan was separated from the Palestinian lands west of the Jordan River and set up as an Emirate under the Hashemite Emir Abdullah I. Although Jordan would evolve towards complete

sovereignty, it was originally under heavy British influence and Peak “Pasha” followed by Glubb “Pasha” were the British heads of the Arab Legion between 1921 and 1957. In 1956, King Hussein replaced Glubb with mostly Jordanian Bedouin officers. “King Hussein got the British out,” said Suha whose grandfather, a Palestinian from Jerusalem, was part of the Great Arab Revolt with King Faisal in Damascus. King Hussein ordered that her grandfather be interred next to the King’s great grandfather, Sherif Hussein, at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. “The region of the fertile crescent was one nation, Syria, and it was divided by the British and the French,” Suha asserted.

Suha was born in Jerusalem in 1944 and grew up in Egypt from 1948 to 1961, and studied in Beirut and Paris for her doctorate in law. Jordan has become her new home and Darat al Funun, a home to artists. “My work is a tribute to my love for Jordan. I am doing here what I was not able to do in my own homeland. This is a home for Arab artists. Many have come to us in times of great difficulty.” During the first Gulf War, in 1991, artists like Nedim Kufi, currently a resident in Holland, had nowhere to go and the Darat gave them refuge, assisted them and showcased their work. “We supported Arab artists before it was the fashion to do so. We show the art of the Arab world, not of the Islamic world, not of the Middle East for that would exclude North Africa—Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. We bring together all Arab artists regardless of national boundaries and religion.”

In October, 2008, for the 60th anniversary of “An Nakbath,” a term Palestinians use for the forced exodus of three-quarters of a million Palestinians from their land in 1948, the gallery chose Scottish artist Jane Frere’s “Return of the Soul.” First moved by her visits to a concentration camp in Poland to explore the Jewish narrative and the brutal consequences of the Holocaust, she later came to understand “the ethnic cleansing policy” used by Israel “to drive Palestinians into exile through massacre, rape and both violent and psychological warfare.” Thousands of tiny wax figures are suspended in air. “If land is pulled under your feet,” the artist explained, “severing the roots that have maintained you over centuries, your unbound spirit has nowhere to go, [and] remains trapped in limbo.” Each is an individual tale of a people who still suffer from injustice. The final product depicts a calamity. There are 2.2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan of the total population of 6,269,285. Although there has been no reliable census, many believe that those of Palestinian origin outnumber East Bank Jordanians.

The current photography exhibit by Ahlam Shibli shows the life of Arab Al Sbaih, and her village in the Lower Galilee where the grandparents of the Palestinians there remained on their land during the 1948 war when it became part of Israel. In order to be allowed to build a house, the grandchildren had to give up their Palestinian identity, become Israeli, and join the Israeli army. The photographer contrasts life in the Galilee with life in two of Jordan’s Palestinian refugee camps—Baq’a and Irbid. It shows how these communities never moved on but continued to name their shops after places in Palestine: “Cafeteria Palestine,” “Jerusalem Center for Frozen Fish and Market.” “The irony,” Noura Al Khasawneh, Assistant Director, explained, “is that in the camps, you have a home but no houses of your own. In the Galilee you have a house but you don’t have a home. The dilemma is you either have a house or a home but you can never have both.”