



Palestinian Poster-Art Nomination: UNESCO Memory of the World Programme

By Badar Salem



his revolution is not merely a gun, but also a scalpel of a surgeon, a brush of an artist, a pen of a writer, a plough of a farmer, an axe of a worker."

A 1982 poster quoting Yasser Arafat

The life of a poster, albeit short, might be poetic. Posters hang on walls or street lamps, exhibiting their vivid-bright colours and profound texts. But after a while, they fall down and disappear. One man, however, made it his mission to preserve this art, not letting it fade away from our memories or our hearts.

Palestine, by Carlos Latuff, 2006.



Palestine: A Homeland Denied, by Jacek R. Kowalski, 1979.

It all started as a coincidence. Dan Walsh, an Irish American activist and graphic artist, was working as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco in 1974, when he was encouraged by his Arabic-language tutor to translate some posters around the city. As he walked around Rabat looking for posters to translate, he was stopped by a poster that had an Arabic word he couldn't understand. The word was "Palestine," and by the time he left Morocco two years later, he had around 300 Palestinian posters in hand. And in 1981, he founded his company Liberation Graphics, which focused on importing, exhibiting, and archiving Palestinian posters.

In August this year, Walsh's Palestine Poster Project Archives (PPPA), which includes the world's largest collection of Palestinian posters, has been nominated for the 2014–2015 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation's Memory of the World programme.

The UNESCO programme, which includes more than 300 heritage resources of "outstanding universal value," is an international initiative that aims to safeguard documentary heritage from all over the world against

war, destruction, neglect, and collective amnesia. These documents include the Phoenician alphabet, Britain's thirteenth-century Magna Carta, and an annotated copy of Karl Marx's "Das Kapital," among hundreds of other historically significant documents.

For years, the 67-year-old Walsh has been gathering and digitally archiving thousands of posters created by Palestinian and international artists in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Walsh's nominated collection *Liberation Graphics Collection of Palestine Posters* (www.palestineposterproject.org), which constituted a component of his master's thesis, includes paper and/or digital images of almost 10,000 Palestinian posters by more than 1,900 artists from 72 countries.

For Walsh, these posters represent a significant part of his effort to preserve Palestinian poster art for future generations to study and explore, and that's why he believes that UNESCO's nomination of this genre would lead to a new discussion of the Palestine narrative.

"Owing to UNESCO's nomination of this genre, we have entered a new age of discussion of Palestine's narrative,"

The Liberation Graphics Collection of Palestinian Posters is the largest collection in the world of Palestine posters that relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It includes approximately 10,000 graphic and paper-produced posters that were created by 1,900 international and Palestinian artists from more than 70 countries. Many of the posters featured at the Palestine Poster Project site fall into rare, out-of-print, or limited-edition categories that are no longer available. The nomination of 1,700 rare Palestinian posters for the UNESCO Memory of the World programme represents significant recognition of Palestinian art, culture, and history. The UNESCO review process usually takes around one year to complete.



Visit Palestine (Original), by Franz Krausz, 1936.

he says. “Now, instead of showing these posters only in restaurants or community centres, it will be possible to see them in museums, universities, libraries, and other prestigious locales – inside and outside Palestine.”

He adds, “This nomination represents something metaphysical, if one thinks about the fact that for decades, many or most of these posters were illegal, banned, censored, confiscated... it is a miracle they survived.”

During the first Intifada in 1989, many Palestinian posters, especially those that incorporated the Palestinian nationalist colours and flag, were banned and confiscated by Israel

inside the occupied territories. The reason that Israel tried to repress Palestinian posters and art in general is clear, as Walsh explains: “Palestinian and international poster artists and publishers didn’t use the small space created by a poster to tell a lie: they used it to celebrate a truth,” he says. And in war, truth is the first causality.

Political posters have played an important political role and received a great deal of artistic attention since the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially after the launch of the Palestinian armed struggle against



Glory to the workers and fighters on the first of May, by Zaid Wahba, circa 1969.



Resistance by Abd Almouty Abozaid, 2000.

Israel in 1965. During the 1960s and 1970s, these posters were used as a tool for popular mobilisation inside and outside Palestine. Even more importantly, for many Palestinians, these posters constituted a significant part of their visualisation of their lost homeland.

Palestinian poster art also helped to bring the Palestinian struggle to the world’s attention. Over the years, many internationally celebrated poster artists have created Palestine posters in solidarity with Palestine, including Marc Rudin (Switzerland), Carlos Latuff (Brazil), and Doug Minkler (USA), making the Palestinian resistance movement one of the few political causes to enjoy “a long-running and productive expression of global artistic solidarity.”

“The Palestine poster did not create the Palestinian nationalist narrative, but it did record it and preserve it in a context or a medium that is very

popular in more ways than one,” Walsh notes, “simply because the narrative told in the posters is utterly un-edited, uncompromised, and *authentically* Palestinian.”

With the UNESCO nomination, the Palestinian posters have a great chance of being recognised and celebrated worldwide as a new and original aesthetic art form, and with this recognition, Walsh’s mission might be perfectly accomplished.

“For me, the key objective was to bring the existence of the PPPA to the attention of the Palestinian people... that would be enough for me,” he concludes.

Badar Salem is a Palestinian freelance journalist who works in Ramallah and Dubai.

* <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/homepage/>