

# الرمز في الفن الفلسطيني التقليدي والمعاصر

## Symbols in Traditional and Contemporary Palestinian Art

Kamal Zeidan

Symbols have existed in the art of every nation throughout history. In Palestinian art, symbols have played a very essential role. The huge traditional heritage of the Palestinians along with the political situations that they have lived with, and still live with today, are what encouraged the Palestinian artists to use these symbols. These symbols were able to summarize the different situations and conditions in which the Palestinians lived. Each era of their history created its own symbols.

It is clear that the Palestinian artists who lived in the occupied territories preferred to use symbols more than those artists who lived in exile in the other Arab countries. "Works of artists in occupied territories are distinguished by their symbolism and surrealism. It is only natural for those living under occupation. They cannot express their patriotic feelings through the bold use of the realistic or expressionist realistic style. Symbolism and surrealism, as indirect means of expression, offer a handy substitute". (1)

The Palestinian artist benefited from the western styles of art in the way that serves his goal. That goal cannot be separated from the goals of his community." The use by Palestinian artists of "Western" styles, such as realism, expressionism, surrealism, Dadaism and even abstractionism, cannot be viewed as literal or blind imitation. On the contrary, their application of these styles was effected in a special manner such as to render them almost "Palestinianized". (2)

Because the artist is sensitive to the issues of his society, he is the first who recognizes and expresses the interests of his people and land. "Palestinian artists have expressed an awareness to be a voice of the people and community as their primary audience. Palestinian art with its partiality can be described as ideological. This ideology is either veiled (in images such as domesticity and traditional activities), or explicit (in confrontational images such as clenched fists and politically sensitive symbols)". (3)

The symbols which I'll try to talk about in this paper are related to the issues that the Palestinians' life is based on. The heritage and culture are commonly represented by geometrical designs, traditional decorative motives and calligraphy. Liberation, peace, hope and future are represented by the dove, olive branch and broken chains. Martyrdom, suffering, revolution and identity are represented by prison bars, barbed wire, Kafieh, martyr, stone and gun.

---

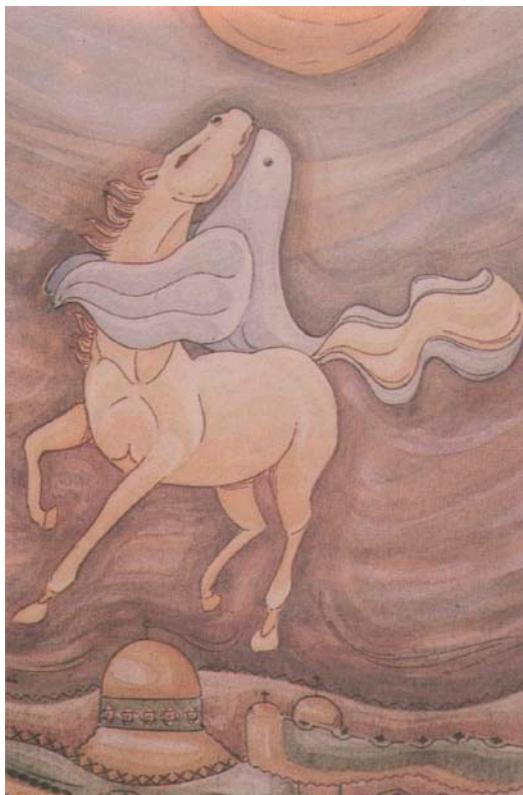
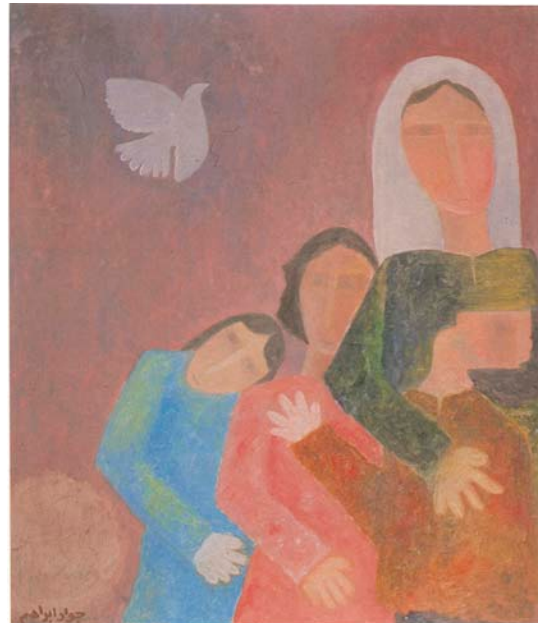
(1) Shammout, Ismael; Art in Palestine, Page 15, 1988.

(2) Shammout, Ismael; Art in Palestine, Page 15, 1988.

### The Dove:

The symbol of the dove has been used in different kinds of arts until it became a universal symbol. The Palestinian artists who suffered and are still suffering from the occupation, torture and arrest, use this symbol to convey the meanings of peace, freedom and future. The dove with its peaceful shape, color, quietness and softness was the best qualified figure to convey this message. The symbol of the Dove is depicted in different ways depending on the artist's technique and the message that the artist wants to transfer to the world. In many art works it is used in combination with other symbols and in different compositions.

We see the dove flying alone in the big space of a painting by Jawad Ibrahim (image 1), while we can see a woman with her kids leaning on her shoulder and maybe dreaming of this lost peace and freedom.



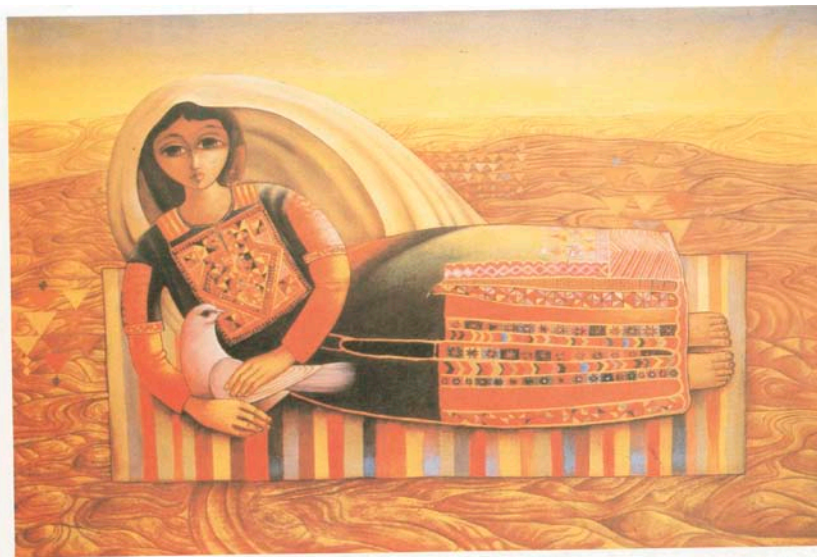
We can see this symbol in a combination with the horse in an incredible movement. This *Embrace* (image 2), between these two symbols in Mahmoud Khalili's painting reminds us of the twinning between peace and revolution, between love and strength.

In a very strong embossed sculpture by Nazek Ammar (image 3), we can feel the goal that the Palestinians want as a result of using the gun and defending their land. That goal is absolutely the freedom that leads to peace. This peace is represented by the dove that appears as a crown at the top of this struggle.



Mohammad Abu Salah was very clear to define the symbol of the dove by naming his painting *Freedom* (image 4). This freedom is represented by a dove escaping through a window, declaring that freedom is coming one day. At the same time the Palestinians will keep struggling to bring this dream to light and live in peace.

In a painting by Ismael Shammout *The Wound* (image 5) we can see the dove at the top of the painting and it comes out of the gun that the fighter holds strongly. In spite of the wounds, sadness and suffering that we see in this painting, it is a very clear message that peace and freedom are what the Palestinians want from fighting.



Suleiman Mansour (image 6), made a connection with the dove and the Palestinian woman. We can see the dove relaxing beside the woman, that woman is raising this dream to be able to deliver generations of peace and freedom.

## The Old Key:

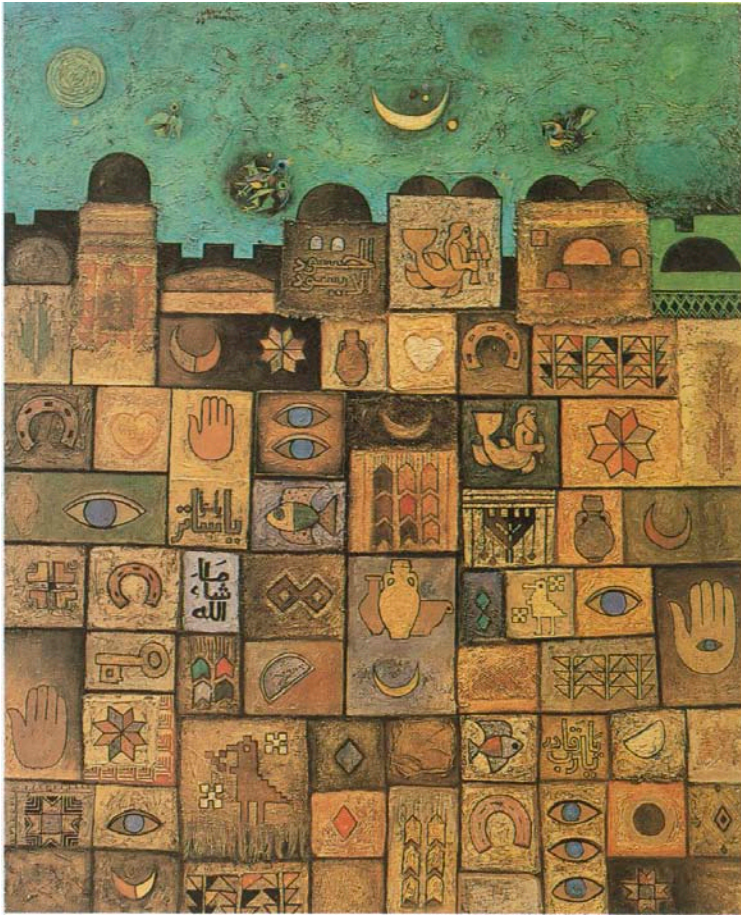
The symbol of the old key started to be connected with the Palestinian memory since 1948 when the Palestinian people were forced to leave their territories and homes and became refugees in the camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. They are still waiting and still dreaming of returning to their home.

The issue of the Palestinian refugees became as important as the issue of the land, the freedom, and peace. We can hear them talking about how important it is to return to their homes and not to accept being in exile away from their land.

We hear them saying: I would prefer to sacrifice my soul before I would dream of sacrificing my key. Although their homes were destroyed and demolished, they still have their keys as a sign of their determination to return home and as proof of their right to live peaceably in their land and those homes. So when they want to remind the world of their issue they just need to raise that old shape of the key. We find this symbol repeated many times in the works of Palestinian artists.



Abdul - Rahman Al – Mozayen used the symbol of the old key to be the key of peace (image 7). The meaning is that the return of the refugees to their home and land is the key and the first step towards peace, which is represented by the dove about to be thrown by a Palestinian woman. The tool that the woman uses is a key, a symbol for the slingshot that was used in the first uprising in 1987. The actual weapon was a piece of u-shaped wood and a stone was used instead of the dove.



Suleiman Mansour in his painting *From Heritage* (image 8) used the old key as one of the elements that are considered to be from the Palestinian heritage. It was used in a combination with many other elements such as the hand, the crescent, the traditional patterns of decorations and traditional buildings.

Mostafa Al – Hallaj reserved a big area for the old key on the right side of this painting (image 9). The other figures are moving in that direction, the direction where the key is, the direction where the refugees and the key of the Palestinian issue are.



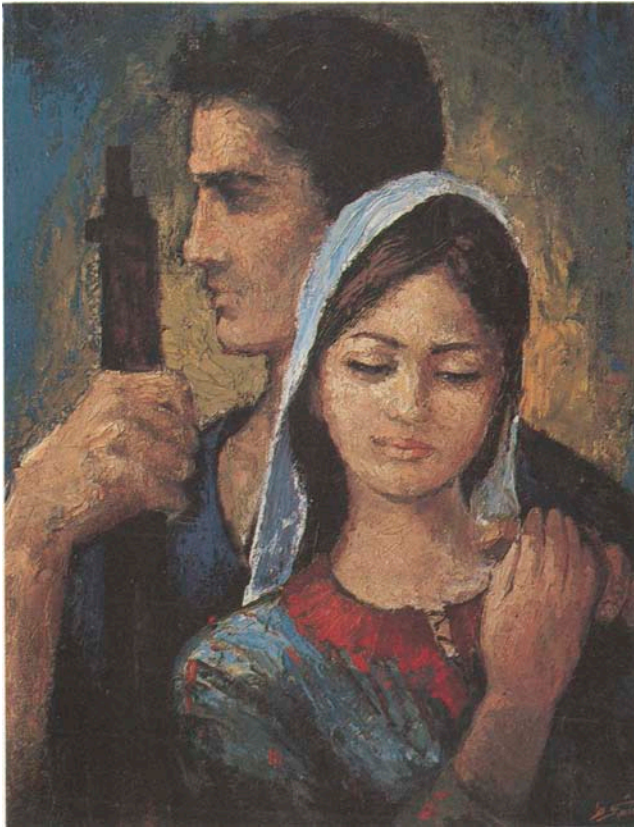


In Tawfiq Abdul – Al's painting *Never Fall Down* (image 10), he indicates that the olive branch in the right hand will never fall down, at the same time the Palestinians will keep holding strongly the old key in the other hand. That key guarantees the refugees' rights in going back to their land. The horse, the strength, and revolution, represent ways to achieve that goal.

### **The Rifle:**

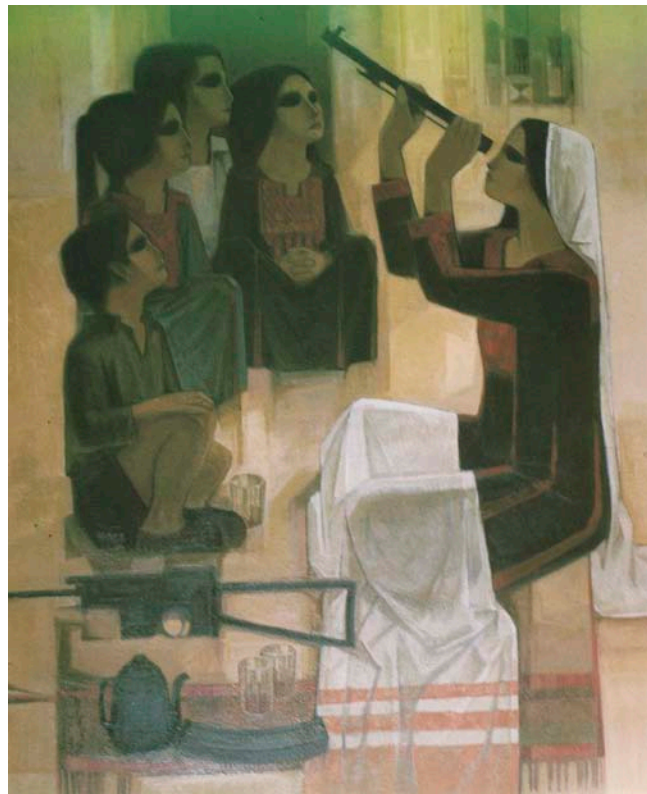
The symbol of the rifle started to be important in the Palestinian life and memory by the beginning of the Palestinian resistance against the occupation. This symbol became a concept of the right of the Palestinians to defend their land and honor. The Palestinian artists used this symbol strongly after the 1960s after the revolution took place to liberate Palestine.

The Palestinian artist was the best to define the meaning of this symbol when he used it with many other figures and elements. The aim of using this rifle not the will to kill or the wish to go to war, but it was the legal right to defend the land and resist the occupation, wishing to live in peace with freedom.



Ismael Shammout was among the first artists to use the symbol of the rifle. In his painting, *Newly Weds on the Borders* (image 11), Shammout made a strong combination between the fighter, the bride, and the rifle. In spite of this warm relation between this couple who recently married, the Palestinian never forgets to keep his other hand on his rifle. If he wants to live with dignity, then he has to keep half of his heart open for his new bride, and the other half for his land, which deserves his sacrifice.

Nasr Abdel – Aziz made from the rifle an essential figure in his painting (image 12), where we can see a Palestinian family with their traditional clothes. The mother is trying to look through the rifle, while her four children are watching her. It is the duty of the wife to prepare the rifle for the absent husband, so he will find it ready when he is ready to struggle.



## The Martyr:

“The martyrs are more generous than all of us” is a famous Palestinian saying. This saying indicates the position that the martyrs take in the Palestinian society, and how much they are respected in the Palestinian mentality. They are the brave who sacrifice their souls defending their homeland and their people in order to secure the Palestinian’s right to live free and in peace.

In Palestinian art we can feel the meaning of sacrifice through the atmosphere in which the artist puts his figures. The symbol of the martyr appears in different shapes. Some times we can feel it from the movement of the other elements in the painting. Sometimes we can feel this concept through the expressions that appear on the human faces. Sometimes we can see the martyr as a silent figure lying in peace. This movement meets the meanings of quietness, leaving, and death depending on the artist’s style and the message.

Faten Toubasi in her painting *The Martyr* (image 13), used a dead young boy on the shoulders to represent the martyr. This atmosphere is full of emotions that we can feel in the movements of the hands that go up towards the sky and the heaven. Toubasi did not forget to wrap the martyr’s body with the Palestinian flag. The important thing that we can feel is the combination between this sad atmosphere and the symbol of the olive branch. The martyr is the one who sacrifices himself for peace for his people and homeland.



In a similar composition, Fathi Ghaben in his painting which is also named *The Martyr* (image 14), used almost the same elements—a dead young boy on the shoulders, the symbol of the olive branch, and very strong upraised hands swearing to keep going in the same way united in liberating the land and bringing freedom and peace to land and people.



Ismael Shammout in his painting *Poppies on the Martyr's Grave* (image 15), uses emotions to express to the viewer the symbol of the martyr. The expressions and the sadness on the faces, especially the boy and the woman putting the poppies on the grave, leave no doubt that we are in front of a great man and message, the martyr and the message of sacrifice.



## The Horse:

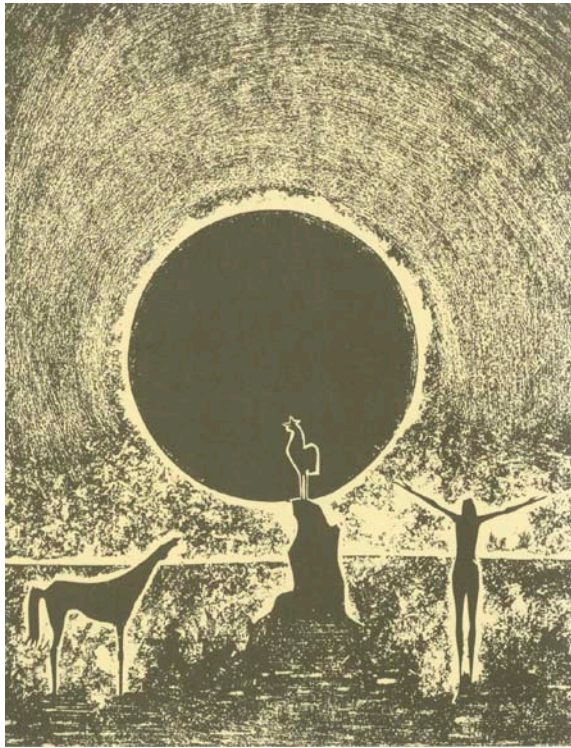
The horse was connected with the Arabic life hundreds of years ago, becoming commonly known as the Arabic horse. The horse played an essential role in ancient Arabic activities—traveling, fighting, and racing. The horse became connected with the concepts of originality, strength, and rebellion. Since these words are exactly the description of the Palestinian life and struggle, the horse became one of the symbols which the Palestinian artist used in his art works to express these qualities.

Issam Bader reserved a big space for the horse to run (image 16). In this painting we can feel the meaning of the strength through the movement of the horse. This horse is able to cross this long distance in the horizon and towards the sun. This whole scene exists on a strong foundation of traditional decorative layers.

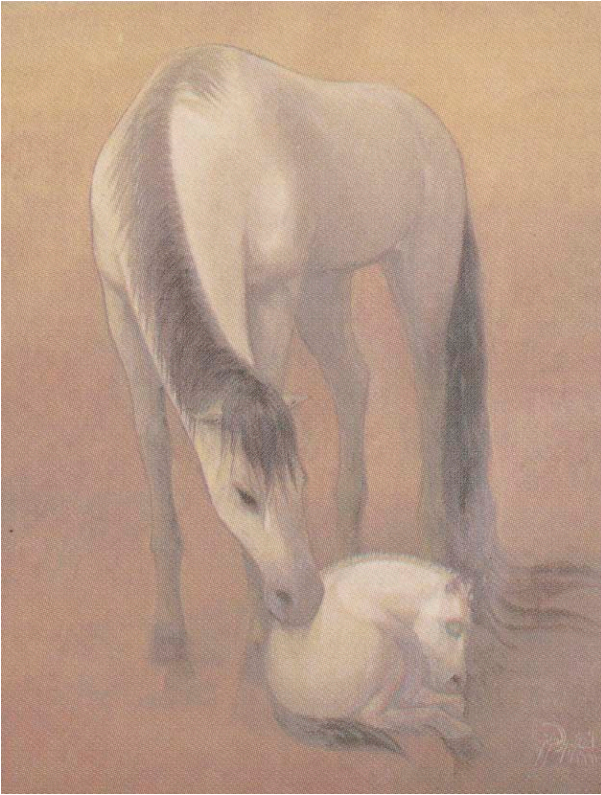


In a unique scene, Mahmoud Sadek uses impressionism in this painting where he documents the relationship between the Arabic fighter with his traditional dress and his horse. This horse is can always be depended on to fight and travel (image 17).

Mostafa Al – Hallaj found in the horse the one who shares the rooster and the human being inviting the dawn, the sun and the freedom (image 18).

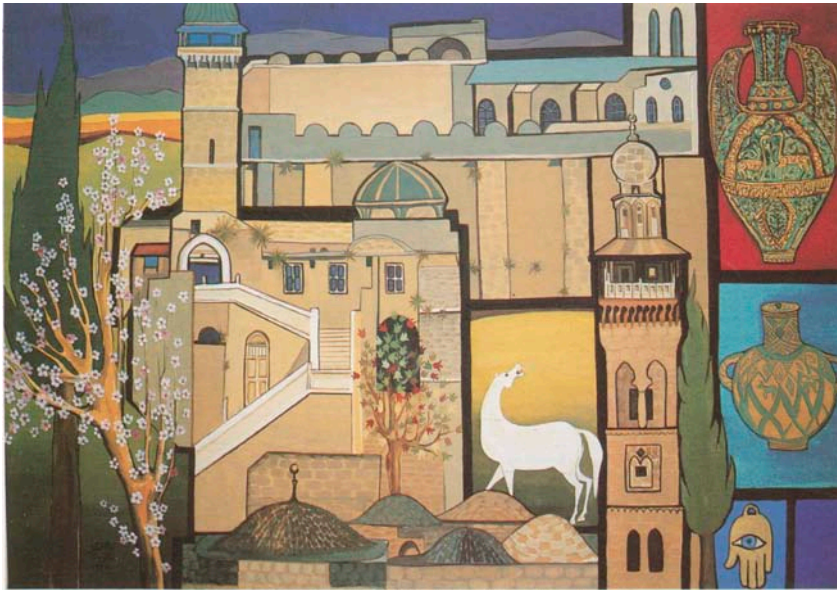


Bashir Al – Sinwar treated the horse as a Palestinian citizen (image 19). He gave him the Palestinian identity when he dressed him the KEFFEYYA. Not only that but he also gave him a lot of emotions towards his holy land represented by The Dome of the Rock. This horse is waiting for freedom Jerusalem and Palestine exactly as the Palestinians do.



Nasr Abdul Aziz in his painting *Birth of foal* (image 20), celebrates this special occasion through this painting which is full of emotions between the mother and the child. The Palestinians become pleased when their horse delivers. This new baby is highly welcomed to share the Palestinian suffering and pleasure and to give hope for future and new generation to come.

Kamel Moughani in his painting *Abu Zeid without his Stallion* (image 21), reminds us how strange and difficult it is for the man to be far away from his stallion.



Tamam Al – Akhal in her painting *Jerusalem* (image 22), decided that the horse is an essential part of Palestine, the holy land and the heritage. The artist gave the horse a special space, a special color and a special movement in the work. The horse is the only soul in this work.

### **The Olive Branch:**

The olive branch is considered to be a universal symbol which represents peace. This symbol took a special position in the Palestinian life and we can feel its importance through Palestinian art. The Palestinian people are the most to know the importance of this symbol and its meaning because they suffered a lot from the occupation. They realized the meaning of living in peace. Many of the Palestinian artists used this symbol, which came in many cases combined with other symbols, to focus on this meaning.



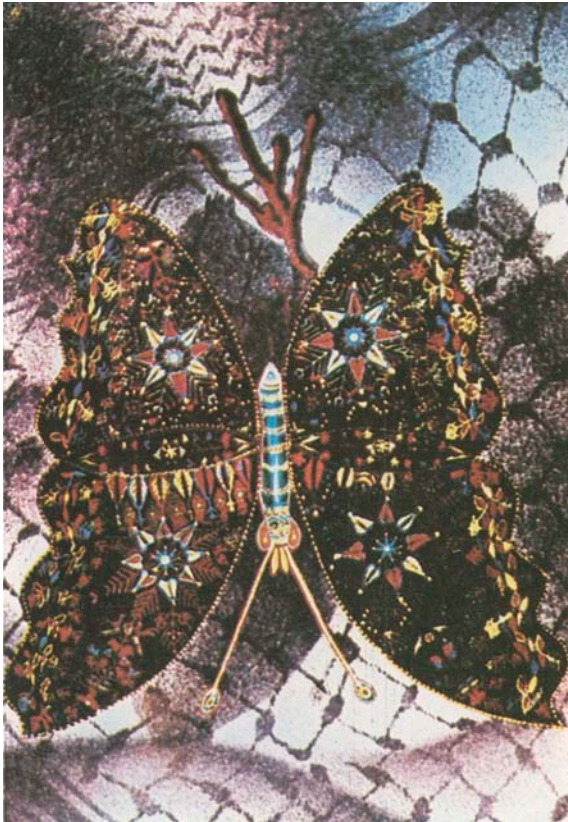
Abdul – Muti Abu Zeid indicates that the Palestinians, men and women, are looking for peace (image 23). The artist gave this mission to the olive branch side by side with the dove to transfer and spread this idea to the world. The olive branch is held strongly to focus on the need of peace for the Palestinians.

Shafik Radwan summarized the purpose behind the Palestinian struggle by using the symbol of the olive branch in front of the fighter (image 24). The purpose of struggling is living in peace which comes as a result of liberty. The bird on the fighter's shoulder indicates the same meaning.



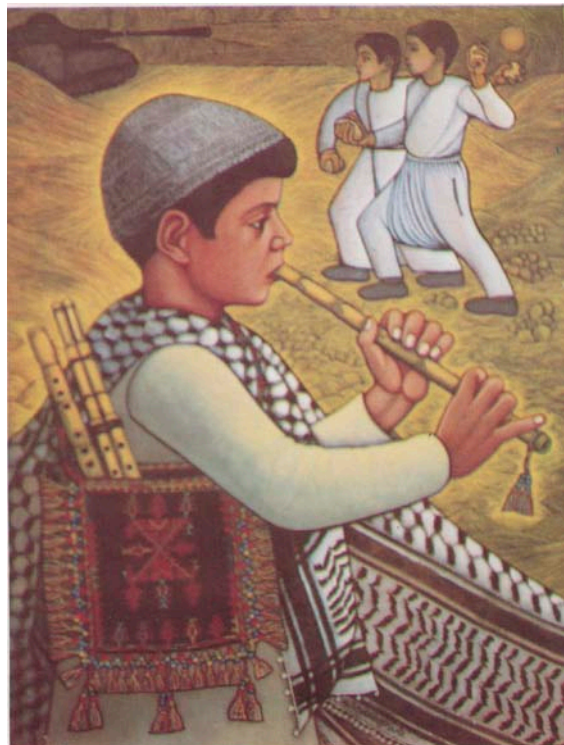
### The KEFEYYA:

The KEFEYYA is an Arabic word that describes a piece of cloth put on the shoulders or around the neck like the scarf. The Palestinian KEFEYYA contains crossed zigzag motifs with white and black. A strong relationship exists between the Palestinians and this symbol which represents identity and love of homeland. It became clear that the one who wears this symbol is a Palestinian or connected with the Palestinian issue. The same thing can be said about the painting that contained this symbol.



Abdul – Aziz Ibrahim made from the KEFEYYA a background for his elements, (image 25). In this painting the KEFEYYA plays the role of the Palestinian land which gives love to all, and honey to the butterfly.

Abdul – Rahman Al – Muzayen made a nice relationship between melody, struggle and identity, between the Palestinian struggle and the Palestinian melody of life (image 26). The symbol of the KEFEYYA gave us a clear idea about the people who are struggling and in the same time trying to live the melody of life.



Burhan Karkutli in his painting *Yes to Palestine* makes it clear that there must be sacrifice for Palestine (image 27). This sacrifice needs strong Palestinians who love their land and keep their hands raised with their rifles close by which is the way to preserve basic rights and to bring dignity to this land and these people. The KEFEYYA the man is wearing tells the viewer that it is the Palestinian land and the Palestinian people.



Mohammad Jadallah in his painting *The Return's Wind* (image 28), gave the wind the Palestinian identity. This wind is coming with good news for the Palestinians that their return to their homes and land is very close.

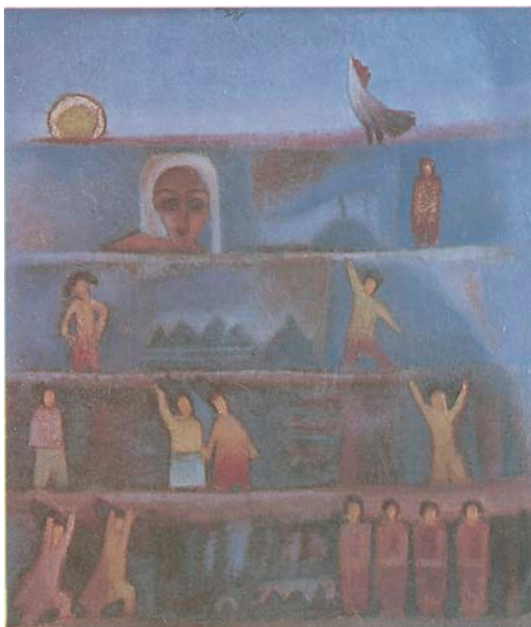
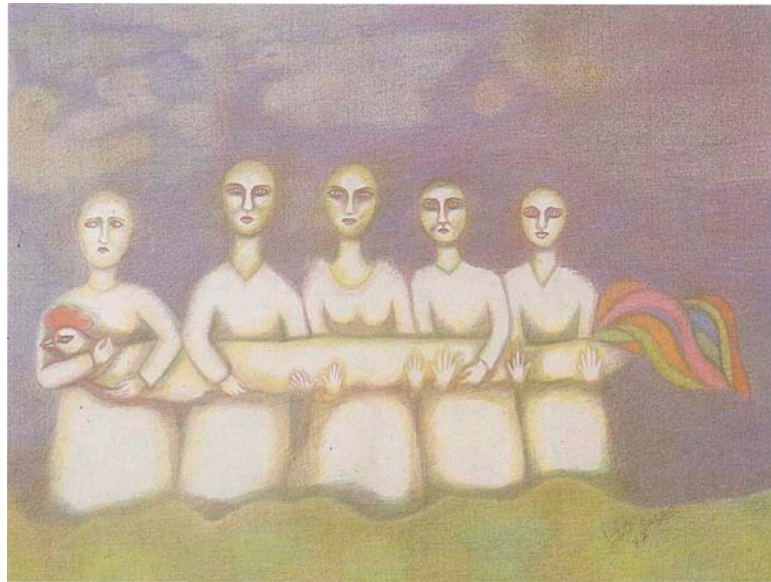


## The Rooster:

The rooster is connected with the meanings of the dawn, future, and promise. All know that the rooster starts crowing early in each morning and before sunrise. This is a clear sign that he invites the sun to spread the light to everyone on this earth. He calls everybody to wake up and start a new day. He promises that there will be another day to live again. That is tomorrow.

In this meaning the symbol of the rooster was used in the Palestinian art, reminding that the dawn and freedom are coming one day.

Saqr Al – Qateel determined that the rooster is the most important dream that people should keep. Five people with different expressions are holding the rooster. He is the one who promises for the future (image 29).

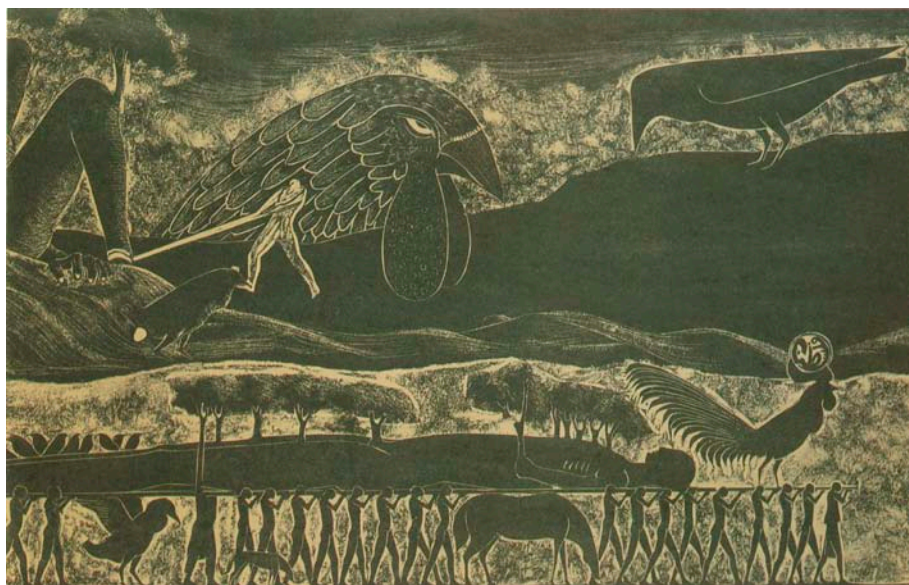


Tayseer Barakat put the rooster and the sun on the highest and the same level (image 30). Barakat gives the mission of inviting the light to the rooster, who is able to promise a happy childhood with better day and future.

Mohammad Abu Salah in his painting *Symphony of Salvation* (image 31), found in the rooster the one who is completely qualified to sing the salvation song while the woman plays her flute. This amazing harmony gives us a strong confidence that the day of salvation is coming.



Mostafa Al – Hallaj made from the rooster the leader he can trust (image 32). He is the leader who understands the goal. He is the leader who carries the name of Palestine at the top of his head.



## The Stone:

The stone gained a place in Palestinian thinking since the beginning of the first uprising in 1987. This uprising was a kind of national revolution against occupation where the stone was the new rifle that the Palestinian used to defend their land and get their freedom. For that reason, that revolution was named *the uprising of stones*.

Since that time, the stone became a symbol of resistance and revolution. Many of the Palestinian artists started using that symbol to refer to these meanings.

Ahmad Al – Nabulsi used this symbol thrown by a woman (image 33). This is to show the role that the Palestinian woman played in this uprising. She was side by side with the man; the son, the brother and the husband.



Aziz Ammura in his watercolor painting *The Stones* (image 34), used the Arabic calligraphy to transfer the message of the stone. This interesting calligraphy with the half-covered face made it clear how much the Palestinian are determined to struggle and get their freedom.

Amin Shammout in his painting *To My Land* (image 35), shows us the strength of the Palestinian hand holding the stones, and face to face with the occupation fire. In this scene, we can see a group of Palestinians raising the Palestinian flag while the soldiers are shooting a boy throwing stones on them.



Naji Al – Ali, the most famous Palestinian cartoonist, found the stone to be the best way to raise the dream of future. These stones with this strong hand are able to replace this darkness and occupation with light and freedom represented by the child and the flower (image 36).



## Jerusalem:

Jerusalem lives in the heart of each Palestinian. Jerusalem is the sacred city that has inspired the creativity of poets, singers, and artists. This city is carved in the minds of Palestinians; it continues to live in their hearts but now is not accessible to them, making it impossible to express their love to it.

Jerusalem has become associated with the Dome of the Rock's unique architectural design and amazing decorations. The Dome is considered to be one of the most beautiful buildings worldwide. It has also become a symbol that most Palestinian artists use in their work. Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock represent Palestine and the land of peace. Palestinians wish to have Jerusalem to be their capital once again and forever thereafter.



Suleiman Mansour sends a strong message as the old man carries Jerusalem on his back where ever he goes for the sake of its liberty. This shows the tenacity of Palestinians as they are ready to sacrifice everything to keep Jerusalem safe free from harm (image 37). Palestinians will never let Jerusalem down.

Suleiman Mansour also in another painting *The Opened Door* (image 38), decided to curve Jerusalem, represented by the Dome of the Rock, on that old wall. Whoever wants for that door to be opened is supposed to open his heart to that sacred city and to reserve enough space for the dove and peace.



## The Woman:

The symbol of the woman is used in the Palestinian art to represent motherhood, fertility, and homeland. She has a very special position in the Palestinian society. She is the one who raises the generations. She is the one who shares the dreams of the man. One time, I asked Kamel Moughani about the woman figure and what it means when used in his paintings. He said, “To me, the woman is the mother and the sister. The woman is the wife and the daughter. She is the friend and the beloved. She is the fertilized land when it gives us all kinds of fruits. She is the future. The Palestinian woman is Palestine, the homeland”. This is the way that Palestinians look at the woman. And now, today, the Palestinian woman still carries the traditional decorations on her dress.

In most of the paintings that depict the woman, her dress is full of traditional motifs. This includes sharing some of the daily works such as harvest and collecting olives with the man.

Kamel Moughani shows us the traditional life that the Palestinian woman lives. She carries the basket in which she can bring some fruit from the field. With her scarf and decorations on her dress she represents the Palestinian identity and originality (image 39).



Nabil Anani connected the Palestinian motifs with the figure of the woman. On this decorative area we can see the role that the Palestinian woman plays in her society. She takes care of the children and keeps in touch with her heritage (image 40).



Abdul Rahman Al – Muzayen found the woman the one who protects the unity between man and woman (image 41). They both share their life and try to work on their field together. The Palestinian woman always carries Jerusalem with her. The Dome of the Rock is attached to her necklace.

Yousef Doweik shows us how man and woman share activities together. A Palestinian woman stands shoulder by shoulder with her husband harvesting and collecting the crops (image 42).



This has been a quick journey in Palestinian symbols of traditional and contemporary art. It is necessary to understand the Palestinian culture and the different situations that the Palestinians have lived in order to understand Palestinian art.

If a symbol is a form or image representing something beyond its obvious meaning, then almost every form used in any Palestinian artwork is a symbol.

## APPENDIX

Introduction.....	1
The Dove .....	2
The Old Key .....	9
The Rifle .....	11
The Martyr .....	13
The Horse .....	16
The Olive Branch.....	20
The KEFEYYA .....	22
The Rooster .....	24
The Stone .....	27
Jerusalem.....	29
The Woman .....	31