

Development of Visual Art in Saudi Arabia: Case study from Saudi context

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Abstract

This research investigates the factors and obstacles affecting the development of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia, along with potential solutions. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, interviews were conducted with 18 visual artists and faculty members from Riyadh and Jeddah. The findings identify key hindering factors, including political issues (colonial legacy, closure of art centers), academic shortcomings (absence of specialized colleges and curricula), and societal-religious challenges (misconceptions about art). Artists face significant obstacles such as the high cost of materials, a lack of societal appreciation, and an absence of museums and galleries. To enhance the field, participants strongly recommended substantial governmental support through legislating supportive policies, establishing arts academies, cultural centers, and providing scholarships, complemented by social and economic initiatives to foster a conducive environment for artists.

Keywords: *Visual Arts, Saudi Arabia, Development, Factors, Obstacles, Recommendations.*

Introduction

History of the Visual Art development in Saudi Arabia and most other Gulf countries began around the mid-twentieth century which causes similar reactions to those against any new invention that comes from the west (Bager 1998).

In Saudi Arabia, just like in other Gulf countries, the artistic and Visual Art movement and development could be measured through in auctions, galleries, museum, and art festivals. In recent times, the Art movement can also be seen in the social media perspective such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, blogs and commentaries by adolescents groups on Art and Artistic criticism (Alsenan, 2014)

An Overview of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia

The meaning of the arts began to be understood during the architectural and handicraft revival in the western region of Saudi Arabia, where the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina are located (al-Senan, 2007a).

Ali (1997) explains that at the start of the 20th century, Arabia was far from any cultural influences apart from Hijaz and its sacred association with Islam because of its geographical isolation. The people in the peninsula satisfied their need for artistic expression through crafts, the most common of which were "weaving, embroidery, silver and gold jewelry making, wood-carving and naïve two-dimensional decorative paintings on boats, walls, and doors of houses and mosques" (p. 120).

Statement Problem

Visual art in Saudi is not considered as an important aspect by both policy makers and society which affect it development in the country. Issue one: There is quite a number of factors affecting visual arts in Saudi which includes lack of proper policy and misconception of relevance. Due to proper policy and misconception on the profession leads to the closure of Saudi Arabia Arts Academy in the 1990s, the abandonment Museum and other modern Art projects (Lacroix, 2011). This action can affect the idea of art in the next generation. Second issue: It was noted that fine artist faces a lot of obstacles in practising their profession in Saudi due to the misconception about the field. One of the major problems

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was the lack of recognition in the community (Al- Zayer, 2015). With these challenges, a number of professionals have left and abandoned the field for another profession. This signifies that the profession is losing quite significantly and that has an impact on the visual arts field. Last issue: There is a need for establishing a cultural center's includes museums and galleries for artists (al-Resayes, 2011). Also, there is a need for establishing arts academies and expand the arts departments (Felimban,2011).Despite these efforts by the government the field as a profession is still not fully recognized due to misconception (al-Resayes, 2018)

The Gap

The literature review indicated there are factors affecting the development of visual art in Saudi Arabian. Yet there was no study conducted to investigate these factors and recommend possible solutions. Adding to that, there are no studies conducted to examine the obstacles that face visual art artists in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the vision 2030 which aim at revolutionizing the country indicated the clear intention towards improving the visual art field specifically.

The Research Questions

1. What are the factors affecting the development of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia?
2. What are the obstacles face by visual art artists in the development of visual art in Saudi Arabia?
3. What are the recommendations that can enhance the visual arts field in Saudi Arabia?

The Research Objectives

1. To identify the factors affecting the development of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia.
2. To investigate the obstacles faced by the artists of the visual arts in the development of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia.
3. To suggest recommendations that can enhance the development of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study involves nine visual artists and nine faculty members of art education departments. The participants were from Riyadh, and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.

Limitations

There is very little research conducted about visual arts in Saudi Arabia. This limitation encourages the researchers in visual arts field to conduct more researches.

Could not generalize the findings about the entire country through because the interviews were from the baggiest two cities in Saudi Arabia (Riyadh and Jeddah). However, other cities may be significant for uncovering similarities and differences regarding the factors and obstacles.

The participants involved in this study were two groups (visual artists and faculty members of art education departments). The faculty members of art education departments were from 4 universities. Also, the participants cannot represent all faculty members of art education departments in all Saudi universities and artists in the country. However, the small number of participants will allow for more focused investigation to reached the saturation.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical significance

Serve as a reference for further research on visual arts development across the globe and Saudi Arabia in particular.

One of the its kind in the context of KSA visual art, particularly using theory applied herein and with qualitative approach.

Contribute towards the development of more comprehensive, better organized visual art programs in the KSA.

The study further enhance the body of knowledge in the field of fine art.

Practical significance

The study have practical significance to policy makers, fine artist, student and the society as it contributes toward the development of visual art in the country.

Methodology

Search method; qualitative method

Research design; phenomenology approach

Research paradigm; interpretivist

Study location; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Sampling: 18 informants are selected from two groups

Sampling Location: Riyadh City, Saudi Arabia

Sampling techniques; purposive.

Criteria; experience, skills, years in service, and willingness to participate in the study.

Method of data collection; data are collected through two main sources, primary source (interview one-on-one) and secondary sources (literature).

Method of data analysis; the data obtained are analyzed through the traditional thematic analysis.

Reliability and validity; the obtained data are verified and the trustworthiness are test in via second (supervisory committee) and third party (professor of fine art).

Ethical consideration; the study observed and respected the principle of research ethics throughout the research process to maintain and respect the human involved

Target Population

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	6	33.4%
	Male	12	66.6%
City	Jeddah	5	27.8%
	Riyadh	13	72.2%
University	King Saudi University	4	22.2%
	King Abdul-Aziz University	5	27.8%
	Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University	4	22.2%
	Princess Norah Bint Abdul Rahman University	5	27.8%
Group	Artists	9	50%
	Faculty Members	9	50%

Empirical data analysis and interviews occurred concurrently based on the theory of analytic induction (Glaser and Strauss, 2006) by adjusting the interview questions after the first few interviews

so that key emerging topics for subsequent interviews based on the experiences from previous interviews could be included. Preliminary analysis of the interviews showed that data saturation was reached after 15 interviews with no new themes emerging in the last three interviews

Findings

Objective One: Factors Affecting the Development of Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia

The following themes and subthemes emerged from the interviews with 18 participants.

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage	Representative Participant Quote
Political Factor	Impact of Colonialism	6 out of 18	33.3%	"...visual arts in the Arabian Peninsula was delayed due to the Ottoman state's control over the region, which prevents it from keeping pace with what is happening in the Western world..." (Participant 12)
	Impact of Islamophobia	4 out of 18	22.2%	*"...after the 11-9, we found it difficult to get invitations to attend exhibitions of some artists in the West especially in the US."* (Participant 7)
	Closure of Museums and Visual Art Centers	8 out of 18	44.4%	"...the government's closure of some Artists exhibitions affected the society's acceptance of the arts... the shutdown causes us frustration." (Participant 7)
Academic Factor	The Absence of Colleges and Departments of Arts	6 out of 18	33.3%	"...the absence of colleges and departments of arts... is the reason of the few artists in our society." (Participant 5)
	Weak Collaboration Between Universities and Artists	7 out of 18	38.8%	"The absence of the artist from the classroom makes there a gap between the curriculum and the field." (Participant 9)
	Inadequate Planning and Development of Curriculum	Information Missing	Information Missing	[Note: A subtheme was listed in the initial summary but no supporting data was provided in the detailed responses.]

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage	Representative Participant Quote
Societal Factor	Misconception About Visual Arts	6 out of 18	33.3%	"...they believe that practicing visual arts is a waste of time and money. Therefore, they do not encourage artists..." (Participant 14)
Religious Factor	Prohibition of Human Imagery and Statues	2 out of 18	11.1%	"...the sheikhs were prohibits drawing images and erecting statues of humans because they have a soul... Therefore, many artists did not showed their artworks to the public." (Participant 11)

Findings

Objective Two: Obstacles Faced by Visual Artists in Saudi Arabia.

The following table details the obstacles identified through interviews with 18 participants.

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage	Representative Participant Quote
Economic Obstacles	High cost of arts materials	5 out of 18	27.7%	"Many artists had difficulties obtaining some materials and some of them could not continue in this field due to the high cost." (Participant 7)
Social Obstacles	Lack of appreciation by the society	7 out of 18	38.8%	"The most painful one is the lack of recognition and appreciation by the society on our efforts... Nobody even cares to notice or appreciate us." (Participant 4)
	The absence of visual arts associations	10 out of 18	55.5%	"The existence of visual arts associations will facilitate communication between artists... and facilitate the organization of exhibitions." (Participant 7)
	The absence of museums and galleries of art	12 out of 18	66.6%	"Many artists do not know how to display or sell their art! We really got tired while we were looking for a solution..." (Participant 7)

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage	Representative Participant Quote
Academic Obstacles	Inadequate planning and development of the visual arts curriculum	8 out of 18	44.4%	"The dearth of literature and books in the field of visual arts was affecting [development]." (Participant 3)
	The absence of visual arts curriculums in the universities	7 out of 18	38.8%	"Now we just studying courses related to art

Recommendations

Objective Three: Proposed Solutions for Developing Visual Arts in Saudi Arabia

The following themes and subthemes for potential solutions emerged from the interviews.

Theme	Sub-themes
Governmental Support	• Establishing cultural centers that include museums and galleries for artists. • Establishing arts academies and expanding the arts departments in universities. • Legislating laws that contribute to enriching the visual arts environment. • Providing scholarships to study arts abroad.
Social Support	• Raising awareness of the importance of visual arts in the media. • Establishing a visual arts association. • Honoring and appreciating artists socially.
Economic Support	• Providing discounts for artists to buy materials and tools. • Marketing and presentation of artists' production.

Findings

Question	Response of the Participant	Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage
What are the recommendations that can enhance the visual arts field in Saudi Arabia?	"Actually, what is needed was the government to provide or re-design its current policy	Governmental support	Legislating laws that contribute to enriching the visual arts	7 out of 18 participants mention this factor.	38.8%

Question	Response of the Participant	Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage
	that recognize the importance of visual art in the country. The policy should be support the visual art in teaching and in practice. If the government can do this then I think visual art in Saudi can be enhanced and if possible can compete with the developed nation arts...believe me” (participant 4).		environment		
What are the recommendations that can enhance the visual arts field in Saudi Arabia?	“As an artist, I see that there are some solutions and recommendations that will help the government to develop visual arts in Saudi Arabia. Establishing cultural centers that include museums and galleries for artists to display their artworks. Through these centers we will be able to display and sell our artworks and introduce	Governmental support	Establishing cultural centers' includes museums and galleries for artists.	14 out of 18 participants mention this factor.	77.7%

Question	Response of the Participant	Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage
	more visual arts.(participant 2).				
What are the recommendations that can enhance the visual arts field in Saudi Arabia?	"I believe that sending students to study abroad will help us as an artists to learn about arts schools and learn many types of arts. Studying abroad will give students who interested in the arts deep experience to develop visual arts in Saudi Arabia (participant 7).	Governmental support	Providing scholarships to study arts abroad	6 out of 18 participants mention this factor.	33.3%
What are the recommendations that can enhance the visual arts field in Saudi Arabia?	"I believe that one of the most important recommendations that we should take into account is establishing art academies as well as expanding art education departments in universities. Many countries have art academies from many years ago that have helped develop the visual arts field in their countries. I hope the government	Governmental support	Establishing arts academies and expand the arts departments.	17 out of 18 participants mention this factor.	94.4%

Question	Response of the Participant	Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Percentage
	and the competent authorities will establish art academies so that we can keep pace with the West in the visual arts.(participant 7).				

Conclusion

- From the above findings and discussion, it was noted that there are several factors hindering the development of visual art in Saudi Arabia. Such a problem is connected with colonialism in the early 19th century. Others include; lack of support by the government, administrative issues such as improper policy on visual art. Thus, some of the factors are similar to those of many developed and developing countries. This is to portray that visual art faces development issues in many countries.
- It was, however, reveal that because of the problem of misconception and lack of support financially, the visual artist faces series of obstacles in teaching and practising their profession, this is linked with administration and society.
- Therefore, in order to enhance visual art in Saudi Arabia, the government needs to pass a new policy which can rehabilitate and recognized the visual art practice and teaching.

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