

الأصالة التعبيرية ورموز الهوية الثقافية

في أعمال الفنان نبيل وهبه

اعداد

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الأصالة التعبيرية ورموز الهوية الثقافية في أعمال الفنان نبيل وهبه

الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل مفهوم الأصالة التعبيرية ورموز الهوية الثقافية في تجربة الفنان المصري نبيل وهبه، أحد أبرز التشكيليين الذين ربطوا الممارسة الفنية بالواقع القومي العربي. ينطلق البحث من فرضية أن الأصالة لا تتحقق إلا من خلال التفاعل الصادق بين الذات الفردية والبيئة الجمعية، حيث تتحول التجربة الشخصية إلى خطاب بصري جماعي يعبر عن الذاكرة والوجدان العربي.

تستند الدراسة إلى منهج تحليلي نوعي يجمع بين التحليل الشكلي والرمزي والسياقي لعدد من أعمال وهبه المحورية مثل صبرا وشاتيل (1983)، الفيتو (1987)، ومرثية حتشبسوت (1997). تكشف النتائج أن وهبه قد طور لغة تشكيلية رمزية تجمع بين التجريد التعبيري واستخدام الخامات غير التقليدية كالشاش الطبي الذي اتخذ دلالات بين تضميد الجراح وكفن الشهداء، مما أضفى على أعماله عمقاً إنسانياً وسياسياً.

تؤكد الدراسة أن الأصالة التعبيرية في فن وهبه لا تقوم على استلها الميراث بوصفه ماضياً منغلِقاً، بل كعملية تفاعل حي بين الذاكرة والواقع، وبين الإبداع الفردي والانتماء الجمعي. ومن خلال هذا التداخل، نجح الفنان في صياغة رؤية بصرية تمزج بين الصدق التعبيري ورموز الهوية الثقافية، مقدّماً نموذجاً للفن العربي المعاصر الذي يوظف الجماليات كأداة للمقاومة الثقافية وحفظ الذاكرة الجماعية.

كلمات مفتاحية :

الأصالة التعبيرية، رموز الهوية الثقافية، الفنان نبيل وهبه

Expressive authenticity and symbols of cultural Identity in Nabil Wahba's Artwork

Abstract:

This research examines the concept of expressive authenticity and the symbols of cultural identity in the artistic practice of the Egyptian painter Nabil Wahba, one of the most influential modern artists whose works are deeply rooted in the Arab national context. The study is based on the premise that authenticity emerges through a sincere interaction between the individual self and the collective environment, transforming personal experience into a shared visual narrative that reflects Arab collective memory.

Adopting a qualitative analytical approach—combining formal, symbolic, and contextual analysis—the research focuses on Wahba's key works such as *Sabra and Shatila* (1983), *The Veto* (1987), and *Elegy for Hatshepsut* (1997). Findings reveal that Wahba developed a symbolic and expressive visual language through abstraction and the use of unconventional materials, such as gauze, which carries dual meanings of healing wounds and shrouding martyrs. This material and conceptual synthesis conveys both collective grief and resistance.

The study concludes that Wahba's expressive authenticity is not a nostalgic return to heritage but a dynamic dialogue between memory and reality, individual creativity and collective belonging. Through this fusion, Wahba's art exemplifies the role of authentic expression in articulating Arab identity, positioning artistic creation as both an aesthetic act and a form of cultural resistance that preserves historical and emotional continuity.

Keywords: Expressive authenticity, symbols of cultural identity , Nabil Wahba

Research Background

The concept of authenticity in art has been a central concern in both aesthetics and cultural studies, particularly in the context of globalization and shifting cultural identities. Authenticity, as many philosophers and critics argue, is not merely about originality but about the sincere articulation of the self in relation to its cultural and historical environment. Within the Arab world, contemporary art has often been a site of negotiating identity, memory, and resistance against colonialism, oppression, and sociopolitical upheaval.

The Egyptian artist Nabil Wahba stands out as a key figure who embodied this negotiation in his visual practice. Through expressive abstraction, symbolic materials, and culturally embedded motifs, Wahba produced works that documented and critically reflected on events such as the Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982) and the Luxor terrorist attack (1997). His works can thus be read as visual archives of collective trauma and artistic assertions of Arab identity.

This research seeks to explore Wahba's oeuvre as a case study of how expressive authenticity and cultural symbolism intertwine to construct an aesthetics of resistance and identity affirmation.

Research Problem

While Nabil Wahba's contributions have been acknowledged within Egyptian and Arab art circles, there remains a lack of focused scholarly research that critically analyzes his works through the lens of expressive authenticity and cultural identity symbols. This gap prevents a deeper understanding of how his works negotiate the balance between personal expression, collective memory, and cultural symbolism.

Research Questions

1. How does Wahba's work demonstrate expressive authenticity, and in what ways does this differ from mere stylistic originality?
2. What symbolic elements and cultural motifs does Wahba employ, and how do these resonate with Arab collective memory?
3. How do specific works like Sabra and Shatila (1983) and Elegy for Hatshepsut (1997) transform personal response into collective cultural discourse?
4. How does Wahba's practice contribute to the broader discourse of art and identity in the postcolonial Arab context?

Research Hypothesis

1. Wahba's expressive authenticity derives from the sincere transformation of collective tragedies into personal visual expression.
2. His use of symbolic materials such as gauze and motifs such as crucifixion and martyrdom serve as a visual language of cultural identity rooted in Arab traditions of mourning and resistance.
3. Wahba's works demonstrate that authenticity in Arab art is inherently relational: it emerges from the dialogue between the individual artist and the collective experience of the community.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how expressive authenticity is articulated in Wahba's artistic practice through materials, techniques, and abstraction.
2. To identify the symbols of cultural identity (martyrdom, crucifixion, sacrifice, resistance) embedded in Wahba's works.
3. To situate Wahba's art within the broader Arab sociopolitical and cultural context of the late 20th century.
4. To contribute to theoretical debates on the relationship between authenticity, identity, and contemporary art in the Arab world.

Significance of the Study:

- Provides the first systematic academic analysis of Nabil Wahba's work through the lens of authenticity and cultural identity.
- Contributes to broader debates on Arab visual culture, postcolonial identity, and art's role in representing collective trauma.
- Highlights the value of art as a form of cultural resistance and historical memory.

Research Methodology:

Research Design: Qualitative, interpretive, and analytical study.

Data Collection:

Archival research: exhibition catalogues, critical reviews, and interviews.

Visual analysis of selected artworks (Sabra and Shatila, Elegy for Hatshepsut, The Veto).

Analytical Framework:

Formal analysis (composition, color, texture, medium).

Semiotic analysis (symbols and cultural meanings).

Contextual analysis (historical and sociopolitical events)

Scope and Limitations:

- Focus on selected works from the 1980s–1990s (especially Sabra and Shatila, Elegy for Hatshepsut, and The Veto).
- The study does not attempt a full monograph on Wahba but a focused thematic analysis.
- Limitations include availability of archival materials and restricted access to private collections.

Introduction

Authenticity is one of the most pressing intellectual issues of the modern era, closely linked to the preservation of national and cultural identities and the discourse of cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism, in particular, became a central debate in American intellectual life as scholars grappled with the challenge of fostering harmony within a society of diverse cultural origins. Parallel to the notion of pluralism emerged the idea of cultural interaction.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the rise of a unipolar world order seeking to consolidate global dominance, the call for internal cohesion grew stronger. With this shift, and under the rhetoric of dissolving cultural borders, the idea of pluralism declined, while the “melting pot” metaphor—signifying the fusion of cultures into a single global identity—gained prominence.

At the core of pluralism, however, stood the concept of authenticity, a value that must be preserved and nurtured to safeguard cultural uniqueness. Among its advocates was the liberal philosopher Charles Taylor, who developed the idea of the “politics of recognition,” which emphasizes the need for each cultural identity to acknowledge others as a reaffirmation of its own. (Taylor, 1992) defined authenticity as the belief that “there is a certain way of being human that is my way, and I am called upon to live my life in this manner.” For him, being true to oneself is inseparable from being true to one’s origins. He sought a reconciliation between liberalism’s principle of equal recognition and the particularity of cultural identity.

In contrast, (Adorno, 1973), in his critical work *The Jargon of Authenticity*, argued that the concept of authenticity itself is

problematic, since the “self” is both self-constructed and shaped by social forces.

Thus, authenticity has emerged as a crucial modern concept, essential for intellectual, cultural, and political discourse. It is intertwined with national identity and cultural heritage, standing in opposition to the homogenizing pressures of globalization. This research, therefore, aims to examine the meaning of authenticity, especially in relation to artistic creativity, while tracing its development in Egyptian intellectual and artistic movements.

Theoretical Framework:

The Meaning of Authenticity

Philosophical and artistic encyclopedias have devoted significant attention to the term “authenticity,” recognizing its central role in contemporary thought. It plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity, as it balances modern intellectual development with historical and traditional roots.

Philosophical dictionaries generally present two main meanings:

1. Authenticity as Truthfulness

- Authenticity may refer to genuineness or originality, such as a manuscript written by the author’s own hand. However, deriving from an original source does not always imply factual accuracy.
- In metaphysics, authenticity signifies the correspondence between appearance and reality. In ethics, it represents honesty and sincerity.
- In history, authenticity relates to determining whether documents and narratives are genuine or falsified.
- (Heidegger, 1962) emphasized that authenticity arises from thoughts and emotions that genuinely originate from the self. In contrast, a person whose thinking merely reflects public opinion is not authentic.

2. Authenticity as Originality

- This meaning highlights creativity and novelty—the production of something new and distinctive. Authenticity here is opposed to banality, imitation, or triviality.

- Pascal noted that “the more refined one’s thought, the fewer authentic individuals one finds” (as cited in (Cassirer, 1951)).
- (Lalande, 1926) identified three senses of authenticity: (a) derivation from an original source, (b) being the prototype for imitation, and (c) uniqueness and non-repetitiveness.

Beyond these definitions, authenticity acquires further meaning depending on context:

- In metaphysics: correspondence between essence and existence.
- In ethics: sincerity and integrity.
- In history: reliance on primary sources, though without guaranteeing factual accuracy.

Thus, authenticity is not merely a nostalgic return to tradition but a framework for uncovering collective identity by examining the interrelations between past, present, and future.

Authenticity and Creativity

Authenticity takes on renewed significance in discussions of artistic creativity, where originality has long been regarded as a key criterion for evaluating artistic works.

- (Royce, 1899) studied originality in innovation, introducing methods for stimulating creative thinking. Later, Guilford’s creativity tests measured authenticity as the ability to generate a wide range of unusual and remote associations.
- (Maltzman, 1960) developed training programs for originality, focusing on mental strategies that foster diversity and novelty of responses.
- Osborn (1957), in *Applied Imagination*, identified originality as one of the essential components of creativity, emphasizing novelty in responses.

Hence, authenticity and innovation are intrinsically linked. Authenticity in creativity reflects both the innovator’s unique originality and the distinctiveness of the work itself. Psychologists widely agree that originality is marked by novelty, freshness, and departure from convention.

Some scholars also define authenticity as the ability to invent and innovate in artistic, literary, or technical fields. It signifies both uniqueness and continuity with the past. For artists, heritage is not a static legacy but a living source that enriches their work. By engaging

with tradition, they uncover new aesthetic values rooted in authenticity and sincerity of expression.

Authenticity as an Artistic Criterion

Authenticity is grounded in the principle of respecting differences between individuals and, moreover, valuing such differences as qualities of intrinsic worth. It constitutes a defining attribute of the artist, as it is essential to the creative process. This attribute is expressed through the generation of novel and unconventional ideas. As some researchers have noted, when the artist employs unfamiliar forms of expression or unconventional media, the result is likely to evoke surprise and capture the viewer's attention.

Authenticity is, however, a complex and expansive concept, particularly within the realm of artistic expression. One definition considers authenticity to be the distinguishing feature that separates art from craft, functioning as the measure of artistic value. Yet this value is difficult to define, as it overlaps with qualities such as uniqueness, originality, novelty, and rarity—terms that themselves do not sufficiently clarify the meaning of authenticity.

Another definition describes authenticity as a distinctive characteristic of expression, marking it as neither derivative nor imitative and allowing its origins to be easily identified. Authenticity, in this sense, is rooted in elements of personality, shaped partly by heredity and partly by environment.

Several scholars in aesthetics have investigated the problem of authenticity in art. Poullain argued that an authentic artwork is a new creation that interrupts the historical continuum, appearing as a unique phenomenon beyond explanation or comparison. In his view, the authentic is that which bears no resemblance whatsoever to anything previously known or experienced. An authentic work confronts us as an unprecedented event that compels admiration and wonder, eliciting the aesthetic response of admiration.

Such a work is not merely new but discloses itself as a revelation, as though the artist were unveiling a hidden truth for the first time. Authenticity in this sense not only transforms the artwork but also transforms the viewer, who encounters the piece as if entering a new world unfamiliar to them.

According to R. Bayer, the artist's experience of authenticity is inseparable from a sense of solitude. Authenticity, he suggests, weighs

heavily on the artist, like a burden borne by a giant encumbered by his own wings. An artwork is deemed authentic only within the context of its reception—whether by a public, a society, or an artistic milieu. Authenticity, therefore, does not imply isolation or estrangement; rather, it signifies the capacity to provide a model, articulate an ideal, or inspire admiration .

Some scholars further suggest that the authentic artist is one who modifies, develops, or synthesizes elements within their cultural heritage, uniting previously disparate components and imbuing them with new functions that respond to the aesthetic needs of the present—or even of future generations. The authentic artist, then, is one whose creativity arrives at the appropriate historical moment: not prematurely, nor belatedly. Distinction alone is insufficient; it must be validated by subsequent generations as a legitimate contribution .

Often, the artist is unaware of the specific aspects of their own authenticity. Indeed, many complete their works without a sense of satisfaction, while posterity may overlook the works they most prized and instead elevate details or pieces the artist considered trivial.

In this respect, authenticity is indispensable to the true artist. An artwork devoid of authenticity introduces nothing new; it lacks vitality and, therefore, ceases to be art in the fullest sense. For this reason, authenticity is among the foremost criteria by which critics evaluate artistic production. A work bearing the artist's authentic imprint reflects their individuality—visible in line, composition, color, subject matter, and overall expressive style. Artistic authenticity thus reveals the intellectual temperament and sensory qualities of the artist.

Consequently, every authentic artwork bears the unique signature of the artist's personality, whether expressed in a classical or contemporary mode. This individuality is conveyed through both the underlying idea and the method of execution. It follows that an artist cannot wholly depart from their innate nature, for unconscious impulses dictate both the subject matter and the expressive style. The authentic artist therefore possesses a distinctive creative character that governs their artistic achievements.

Producing authentic art requires extensive reflection and the investment of both intellectual and sensory energies, often over prolonged periods of contemplation. Some theorists contend that the pursuit of authenticity in art spans multiple levels, much like creativity

itself. Accordingly, judgments of authenticity must always be relative rather than absolute.

Absolute authenticity is exceedingly rare, since every artist is immersed in and shaped by their cultural environment, absorbing accumulated knowledge and influences. Thus, originality cannot be completely disentangled from the inherited cultural matrix in which an artist works.

Authenticity and Context

Authenticity in art must also be understood in relation to the intellectual, cultural, and artistic conditions of its time. For example, the Impressionist painters—Monet, Pissarro, Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Renoir—were united by their adherence to Impressionist principles, yet each infused the movement with a deeply personal style. Van Gogh's rapid brushstrokes, for instance, transformed Impressionist technique into a unique form of expression that no artist before him had achieved. His work demonstrates how authenticity combines fidelity to a shared cultural framework with an intensely personal vision.

Authenticity is therefore rooted in the degree to which an artist manifests their personal perspective. It deepens when individuality is evident and diminishes when absent, resulting in mere imitation. As Mohsen Atiya notes, authenticity is rarely absolute but relative. When judging art by the criterion of authenticity, the question is not whether a work possesses authenticity in a definitive sense, but to what degree it does so. (عطية، 1995)

Van Gogh, for instance, reinterpreted Millet's paintings, investing them with his distinctive color and vitality. Similarly, Picasso drew inspiration from African sculpture, yet transformed these influences into original, integrated visions that reshaped modern art. In all cases, the authentic artist remains responsive to the stimuli of their cultural, social, political, and artistic environment. (عطية، 1996)

Even when artists deny external influence, their memories remain saturated with prior images and experiences that unconsciously shape their creative process. Authentic creativity, therefore, cannot be understood as *ex nihilo* creation but must be seen as a dialogue with both tradition and context.

Aesthetic Representations of Cultural Identity

One of the key aspects of authenticity in artistic expression lies in the artist's engagement with the society in which they live. The artist's

work is inevitably shaped by the multiple facets of their environment—its culture, traditions, beliefs, events, and transformations. Authenticity is thus found in the truthful expression of the artist's identity, which is itself a product of social life with all its changes and challenges. Although the artwork is fundamentally the product of an individual, "the artist adds little of value unless their roots are deeply embedded in the life of society" (Hauser, 1999).

Throughout history, society has played a decisive role in shaping artistic creation. What moves the artist is inseparable from the collective life of the community, with its values, struggles, and aspirations. As a result, the artwork becomes a synthesis of personal originality and the cultural imprint of society, serving as the final embodiment of both individual style and collective identity (H. H. Arnason, 2013)

Philosophers have long discussed the relationship between art and social change. For example, the French philosopher Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) identified three fundamental determinants of artistic creativity: *race*, *milieu*, and *moment*. By *race* he meant inherited dispositions that influence customs and artistic tendencies; *milieu* referred to geographical, economic, and cultural conditions; while *moment* encompassed the historical and political context. These three factors together shape the artist as an individual within society (Taine, 1871/1985). Similarly, the Russian philosopher Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) emphasized that art and literature must remain closely connected to social reality. He argued that the artist's mission is to promote humanity and elevate the social life of peoples (Tolstoy, 1899/1996)

From this perspective, authentic engagement with themes drawn from social life enables the artist to express individuality while also reflecting the new processes at work within society. Such art reveals the artist's capacity to highlight the human dimensions of their contemporary reality and to expose new truths. (Tolstoy, 1899/1996) further suggested that the value of art increases with its dissemination among people of diverse classes and cultures, and that its authenticity and quality can be judged by the breadth of its audience and the depth of its emotional resonance.

Although art is often regarded as a free and autonomous activity, the social perspective insists that the professional artist has a responsibility to contribute positively to the life of society. In this

sense, art is not merely a reflection of social reality but also an active force that can reinforce, challenge, or transform social and political orientations.

In Egypt, modern art emerged in the early twentieth century amid profound national and social transformations. Egyptian artists sought authenticity by faithfully expressing their lived reality in all its political, social, and economic dimensions. For example, Mahmoud Said, one of the pioneers of Egyptian modern art, depicted the daily life of Alexandria's working class through a distinctive style described by some critics as "mysterious realism." His figures appear monumental, sculptural, and almost metallic, yet simultaneously rooted in the social context of Egypt .

With the approach of World War II, Egyptian art witnessed a growing rebellion against academic traditions, alongside the influence of socialist thought in politics and culture. This period encouraged the search for original artistic forms that reflected the nation's social and political transformations. Artists began forming collectives that united around shared positions in art and ideology. Among the most significant was the *Modern Art Group (Jama'at al-Fann al-Hadith)*, which sought authenticity through the sincere expression of social reality and contemporary events. From this movement emerged artists who explored Egyptian identity by engaging directly with social life and national struggles.

Hamed Owais, for instance, depicted the lived realities of post-revolutionary Egypt following the 1952 Revolution. His realist style conveyed the collective spirit and achievements of the revolution while maintaining a strong communicative connection with the masses. Similarly, Gazbia Sirry began her career by portraying social themes, particularly after joining the Modern Art Group. Her early works vividly represented the hardships of Egypt's working classes through a decorative style inspired by Islamic arabesque motifs, giving her art a distinctly Eastern character while remaining rooted in authentic social expression (Winegar, 2006).

Among sculptors, Gamal El-Sagini symbolized Egypt's collective struggles through allegorical works addressing themes such as freedom, war and peace, labor, and perseverance. Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, meanwhile, transitioned from folk-inspired subjects to symbolic explorations of contemporary Egyptian reality, as seen in works like

The Popular Chorus (pre-revolution) and *The Charter* and *The High Dam* (post-revolution) .

After the July Revolution , Egyptian artists increasingly engaged with the public through socially accessible art. Large-scale exhibitions—such as *Art and Labor*, *Art and the High Dam*, *Art and the Charter*, and *The Revolution in Ten Years*—reflected collective participation in national events.

Broader Arab events also shaped Egyptian cultural and artistic production. The Palestinian cause deeply impacted Egyptian artists. For example, Nabil Wahba responded to the massacres of Sabra and Shatila through an expressive symbolic style that communicated profound emotion with economy of color and form .

These examples demonstrate how the concept of authenticity in Egyptian modern art was inseparable from social and national realities. By expressing the pulse of society, Egyptian artists not only reflected their environment but also shaped it, thereby reaffirming the mutual influence between art and life.

The Expression of National Events in Modern Egyptian Art

Several Egyptian artists sought to address national events through what has been described as *critical realism*. This approach is grounded in the critique of social reality and the attempt to document issues and problems that preoccupied the national conscience. A defining characteristic of critical realism in the modern era is its capacity to “depict the humanity of peoples across the world, to emphasize their closeness, and to confront obscurantism, racism, and destructive forces that divide humanity. It is premised on the idea that art can play an active role in transforming the world, establishing peace, and fostering the limitless development of people” (Wahba, 2001)

Within the Egyptian context, critical realism became a significant framework for engaging with urgent national and regional concerns. Among the most notable examples is the work of Nabil Wahba, who drew upon critical realism to represent key Arab and international events. His paintings addressed pressing national struggles, including the Palestinian cause and broader conflicts affecting the Arab world. Wahba’s work demonstrates how Egyptian modern artists employed authenticity not only as a cultural or stylistic marker, but as a vehicle for engaging with the lived political realities of their time (Mamdouh, 2017; Winegar, 2006).

Authentic expression of cultural identity in Nabil Wahba's Paintings:

The artist Nabil Wahba is regarded as one of the Egyptian painters who consistently expressed social reality and national as well as political events in Egypt and across the Arab world. From the outset of his career, Wahba engaged directly with nationalist themes while simultaneously exploring modern artistic styles and techniques. His canvases often incorporated rough impasto textures and the addition of unconventional materials to the painted surface, reflecting his commitment to both technical innovation and authentic expression. The core of Wahba's artistic practice lay in conveying a forceful and honest representation of issues central to Egyptian and Arab society at the time.

Wahba's artistic path began with the *Group of Five Artists*, which became active shortly after the 1952 Revolution. The group emphasized the expression of social and national realities, particularly values emerging from the Revolution such as equality, justice, freedom, and the consolidation of national identity. Their works also drew inspiration from material achievements of the period, including industrialization, construction projects, bridges, petroleum towers, electrical infrastructure, and, most prominently, national projects such as the Aswan High Dam and the steel and aluminum complexes. Within this context, Wahba immersed himself in Egypt's post-revolutionary aspirations, producing paintings that captured the pulse of popular hopes for a better future. Works such as *The Dam Builder*, *Abu Zaabal Factory*, *The Earth*, and *(The Sad Time -Figure 1)* (the latter referencing the 1967 defeat) then *(The Crossing1973- Figure 2)* exemplify this first stage of his career, characterized by an expressive yet symbolic engagement with Egypt's lived realities.



Figure 1- Nabil Wahba , The Sad Time
oil on wood ,1967



Figure 2- Nabil Wahba, The
Crossing, Oil on wood, (1973)

In the 1980s, Wahba entered a second and particularly prolific phase, during which his art increasingly addressed urgent Arab causes. Deeply shaken by the Israeli invasions of southern Lebanon and the massacres at Sabra and Shatila in 1982, Wahba produced a series of paintings that mourned the victims while invoking values of sacrifice, martyrdom, and resistance. His artistic response employed abstraction and symbolism, often using gauze (shash) affixed to the canvas surface. This material carried layered meanings: as a bandage, it symbolized attempts to heal wounds, while simultaneously evoking the white shrouds of the martyrs, thereby reinforcing the tragic solemnity of the events. In 1983, Wahba held a solo exhibition titled *Sabra and Shatila*, which included works such as *The Crucifixion*, *The Veto*, *The Martyrs*, and *The Arab Fragmentation*, all of which conveyed the political and emotional resonance of the tragedy through an expressionist-symbolic mode .

By the 1990s, Wahba entered a third stage in his career, focusing on themes linked to Egyptian society and environment. Notable works include *Elegy for Hatshepsut*, which responded to the 1997 Luxor massacre at the Hatshepsut Temple, where extremist militants killed foreign tourists. Wahba's painting combined Pharaonic hieroglyphic motifs with abstracted human forms to convey both collective mourning and cultural resilience.

In this later period, he favored pastel hues, chalky textures, and calm chromatic harmonies, creating dreamlike atmospheres that contrasted with the tragic content of earlier works. His formal use of impasto, palette-knife application, and painterly brushstrokes remained central, but his color palette softened to communicate serenity and contemplation rather than grief.

Case study: Analysis of authentic expression in Nabil Wahba's Art



Figure 3- Nabil Wahba , Sabra and Shatila , Acrylics – gauze on canvas,
Museum of Egyptian Modern Art ,1983 .

<http://www.fineart.gov.eg/arb/CV/Works.asp?IDS=1901>

Sabra and Shatila (1983)

Among Wahba's most significant works is *Sabra and Shatila* (Figure 3), part of the series responding to the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in 1982. The composition features horizontally extended white forms, evoking shrouded corpses, juxtaposed with dark blue and black masses representing death and despair. Vertical forms intersect the composition, depicting suspended martyrs whose crucifixion-like postures symbolize the brutality of the Israeli occupation. Wahba's integration of gauze into the painting underscores the dual symbolism of bandages and burial shrouds, amplifying the emotional intensity of the work. The overall effect is one of mourning, reinforced by the predominance of cold, somber tones—blues, blacks, and muted reds—that conjure both nocturnal darkness and bloodshed.

This painting encapsulates Wahba's conception of authenticity rooted in sincere engagement with Arab realities and in articulating collective traumas through symbolic and experimental techniques. His works thus demonstrate how Egyptian modern art intertwined aesthetic innovation with political consciousness, bridging individual expression and national identity .

Artistic Analysis: "Sabra and Shatila" (1983)

1. Medium

- **Materials and Technique:** Oil paints combined with gauze on canvas.
- **Visual Approach:** The use of gauze adds both a tactile and symbolic layer, reinforcing the tension between materiality and metaphor.

2. Contextual Background

- **Core Subject:** The Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982), during which hundreds of Palestinian refugees were killed in southern Lebanon.
- **Emotional and Political Impact:** The tragedy profoundly affected Arab consciousness and found direct resonance in Wahba's art, where the massacre became both an aesthetic and human testimony.
- **Philosophical Foundation:** Wahba viewed art as an authentic expression of the lived experience of the Arab community, translating pain, oppression, and sacrifice into visual language.

3. Symbols and Meanings

- **Gauze:** Functions as a symbol of both bandaging wounds and funerary shrouds, embodying martyrdom.
- **Horizontal forms:** Represent martyrs lying lifeless, wrapped in shrouds.
- **Vertical forms:** Symbolize the hanged or tortured victims, reflecting brutality.
- **Dark colors:** Dominated by blues, blacks, and reddish browns to reflect grief, contrasted with limited red tones that signify spilled blood.

4. Visual Structure

- **Compositional Logic:** Built on the tension between horizontal and vertical elements, suggesting victims both laid down and suspended.
- **Color Harmony:** A dominance of somber hues (blue, black) evokes night and mourning.
- **Techniques:** Heavy impasto applied with a knife, creating rough textures, with visible brushstrokes enhancing dramatic contrasts of light and shadow.

- **Atmosphere:** A strong funerary quality dominates, immersing the viewer in collective grief.

5. Aspects of Authenticity

- **Expressive Authenticity:** Wahba's direct emotional involvement transforms the painting into a visual cry against injustice.
- **Symbolic Authenticity:** The physical presence of gauze bridges the world of the living (healing wounds) and the dead (shrouding martyrs).
- **Conceptual Authenticity:** The work serves as both historical document and aesthetic resistance, affirming the role of art in preserving memory and identity.

6. Analytical Conclusion

"*Sabra and Shatila*" transcends formal aesthetics to become a visual testimony of collective memory. Wahba weaves together expressive, symbolic, and conceptual layers to achieve authenticity: not by reproducing traditional forms, but through sincere engagement with Arab tragedies. The painting thus affirms that the essence of authenticity in modern Arab art lies in truthful expression of lived reality and historical pain.



Figure 4- Nabil Wahba, Vito, Acrylics on Canvas, 1987 , artist's private collection. A picture from the artist's catalog.

The veto (1987)- Figure (4)

The painting *The Veto* (1987) belongs to a series of works exhibited by Egyptian artist Nabil Wahba, which addressed the Palestinian struggle and broader Arab sociopolitical issues. This specific work reflects a critical theme of that period: the U.S. protection of Israeli

aggression through the use of the veto power in the United Nations, which systematically obstructed international efforts to condemn Israeli military actions. Wahba transforms this political critique into a symbolic and emotionally charged visual statement .

The upper half of the composition is dominated by the American flag, but instead of the conventional white stars against a blue field, the artist replaces them with violent blue strokes that explode outward like bullets or missiles. These abstract trajectories descend toward the lower section of the canvas, where three human figures appear crushed under the symbolic weight of the flag. Their bent and submissive postures evoke helplessness and despair, representing the Arab peoples subjected to the coercive power of American political dominance through the veto system .

At the bottom of the painting, a coffin is positioned, symbolizing the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the Arab cause. Thus, the painting functions as a **symbolic allegory** of oppression, sacrifice, and resilience: the flag becomes both a weapon and a stone-like mass, pressing down upon the figures beneath it. The blue section of the flag, rendered in dark tonal gradations, carries a further metaphorical dimension: it appears as a night sky from which decisions of destruction emanate, striking the weakened and wounded figures below.

Formally, Wahba divides the square canvas into two horizontal registers. The upper register contains the red and white stripes of the American flag and the dark blue rectangle, from which radiating blue strokes extend downward. The lower register, by contrast, depicts the three pale human forms engulfed in darkness. Wahba uses the contrast between light (the figures) and dark (the oppressive background) to emphasize vulnerability and fragility. Splashes of red appear in both the flag and the lower section, functioning simultaneously as elements of composition and as symbols of blood and violence.

The work's visual power derives from the rough, expressive brushstrokes, bold contrasts, and simplified color palette. The aggressive texture of the strokes reinforces the imagery of gunfire and bombardment, while the rigid dark outlines around the figures emphasize their collective endurance despite subjugation. Through this aesthetic, Wahba articulates his concept of (authenticity) as the artist's

honest and conscious engagement with the pressing sociopolitical realities of Egypt and the Arab world.

Analysis of Nabil Wahba's "The Veto" (1987) – Figure (4)

1. Medium and Technique

Medium: Acrylics on canvas.

Visual Strategy: Wahba employs a strong division of space into two registers:

Upper register dominated by the reinterpreted American flag, with radiating blue strokes symbolizing missiles or bullets.

Lower register depicting fragile human figures and a coffin, engulfed in darkness.

Color Palette: Dark tonal gradations in blue and black, contrasted with pale human forms and violent streaks of red, symbolizing blood.

2. Contextual Background

Historical Context: Created during a period of heightened Arab-Israeli conflict, the work responds to U.S. political hegemony and its use of the UN veto to protect Israel from accountability.

Cultural Resonance: Represents Arab frustration, helplessness, and mourning during the late 20th century, while also symbolizing resilience through the metaphor of martyrdom.

Exhibition: Part of Wahba's 1987 series focusing on Palestine and the broader Arab struggle.

3. Formal and Symbolic Elements

The Flag: Transformed into an oppressive structure, simultaneously a weapon and a crushing stone.

Blue strokes = missiles/destruction.

Red stripes = bloodshed and violence.

The Figures: Three human forms bent, submissive, and crushed, symbolizing Arab nations under U.S. dominance. Their pale luminosity conveys fragility and innocence.

The Coffin: Direct allusion to martyrdom and sacrifice. Serves as a grounding element linking symbolic oppression to lived Arab suffering.

Spatial Division: Upper half (power/violence) vs. lower half (victims/martyrs).

Duality reinforces imbalance of power.

4. Aspects of Authenticity

Expressive: Wahba's raw use of abstraction (violent strokes, darkened palette) conveys collective Arab despair, helplessness, and

anger. The bowed figures intensify the emotional register, embodying submission under political dominance.

Symbolic: The U.S. flag, coffin, and pale bodies operate as condensed visual metaphors: the flag as weapon, the coffin as martyrdom, and the crushed figures as the Arab nations. The color red functions doubly as compositional balance and as the symbol of blood.

Conceptual: Wahba redefines the painting as a political allegory. The (veto) is not simply a procedural term but becomes a visual metaphor for oppression, silencing, and structural violence. Conceptually, the work interrogates how global politics reduces Arab lives to expendable entities.

5. Critical Reading

Authentic expression :The painting's emotional charge stems from its stark contrasts and distorted forms. Wahba visualizes the crushing weight of international politics on ordinary lives, creating an aesthetic of mourning and anger.

Symbolic authenticity: Through semiotic transformations (flag into weapon, blue into missiles, red into blood), Wahba creates a multilayered symbolic vocabulary.

Conceptual authenticity: The painting transcends its moment, offering a critical commentary on how geopolitical structures manifest in violence against human bodies, especially within Arab societies.

6. Analytical Conclusion

The Veto (1987) exemplifies Nabil Wahba's ability to merge political critique with visual allegory, balancing expressive intensity with symbolic clarity and conceptual depth. The work is not merely a reaction to U.S. vetoes but a profound statement on how global power dynamics inscribe themselves on human suffering. Its authenticity lies in Wahba's capacity to transform a political reality into a deeply personal, emotionally resonant, and universally legible visual language.



Figure 5- Nabil Wahba , Elgy to Hatshepsut , Acrylics and pastel on canvas ,
museum of Egyptian Modern Art , 1997

<http://www.fineart.gov.eg/arb/CV/Works.asp?Ids=1901>

Elegy to Hatshepsut (1997)- Figure (5)

Nabil Wahba's (Elegy to Hatshepsut) embodies authentic expression through its emotionally charged abstraction and symbolic references. The painting channels collective grief over the Luxor massacre of 1997, where innocent lives were taken at one of Egypt's most iconic temples. Rather than documenting the tragedy in literal terms, Wahba conveys it through gestural brushstrokes, raw textures, and a palette of crimson and blue that evoke blood, mourning, and spiritual transcendence. The authenticity lies in the artist's ability to merge personal sorrow with a national trauma, producing a work that resonates beyond individual subjectivity. His expressive approach situates the painting as a lament, but one that transforms pain into cultural resilience.

The work is deeply rooted in Egypt's layered cultural and historical context. By setting his elegy within the symbolic framework of the Temple of Hatshepsut, Wahba recalls not only the tragedy of 1997 but also the grandeur of ancient Egyptian civilization. The juxtaposition of modern violence with hieroglyphic inscriptions and monumental forms creates a dialogue between past and present. This contextual layering emphasizes the **continuity of Egyptian cultural identity**, in which historical memory and contemporary experience

intertwine. In this way, the painting functions as both a memorial to the victims and a reminder of Egypt's enduring cultural heritage, asserting that acts of terror cannot erase thousands of years of civilization.

Formally, *Elegy to Hatshepsut* employs a vertical structure reminiscent of ancient Egyptian stelae and funerary monuments, reinforcing the solemnity of its subject. Abstract human forms appear fragmented, bending under invisible weight, their presence both symbolic and ghostlike. The crimson strokes dominate the composition, cutting through cooler turquoise and blue tones, symbolizing violence and sacrifice against a backdrop of spiritual endurance. Wahba incorporates faint hieroglyphic echoes into the background, not as direct quotations but as abstract traces, suggesting cultural inscriptions that persist despite violence. The tension between geometric order (verticality, hieroglyphic alignment) and painterly chaos (gestural strokes, bleeding colors) embodies the struggle between permanence and rupture, order and devastation. This formal balance mirrors the resilience of Egyptian cultural identity, which withstands cycles of destruction and renewal.

Cultural Identity and Symbols

The painting draws on powerful symbols from Egypt's cultural vocabulary. The hieroglyphic traces act as markers of identity, rooting the composition within a millennia-old visual tradition. The vertical orientation of the work recalls the pathway of the soul in ancient funerary art, echoing the Egyptian conception of the journey toward judgment and eternity. The crimson hues operate as metaphors of both bloodshed and vitality, while the fragmented bodies evoke collective martyrdom. In combining these elements, Wahba transforms a contemporary massacre into an elegiac reflection that affirms Egypt's identity as a civilization of resilience, continuity, and remembrance.

Analysis of the Artwork: "Elegy to Hatshepsut" – Fig (5)

1. Medium

- **Material and Technique:** acrylic colors and pastes with pastels applied on the canvas.
- **Visual Treatment:** The composition blends Pharaonic symbols (hieroglyphic inscriptions) with abstract forms representing the victims of the tragic Hatshepsut Temple massacre in Luxor, creating a visual tension between cultural heritage and contemporary violence.

2. Historical and Social Context

- **Event Reference:** The work is directly inspired by the terrorist attack on the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor in 1997, in which a group of foreign tourists were killed.
- **Impact on the Artist:** This event left a deep mark on Egyptian collective memory, and Wahba responded through a symbolic artistic language that intertwines ancient cultural memory with present-day tragedy.

3. Symbols and Meanings

- **Hieroglyphic Writing:** Serves as a visual bridge to ancient Egyptian civilization, affirming continuity with the past.
- **Abstracted Human Figures:** Represent the victims in stylized, dreamlike forms, stripped of individual features to signify collective loss.
- **Color Palette:** The predominance of soft, subdued colors evokes a calm, melancholic atmosphere, transforming grief into a meditative aesthetic.

4. Critical Reading

- **Expressive authenticity:** Through pastel tones and layered textures, the artist conveys a profound sense of mourning that reflects the collective emotional wound of Egyptian society.
- **Symbolic authenticity:** The juxtaposition of ancient inscriptions with abstract modern tragedy invests the victims with civilizational depth, situating them within the continuum of Egyptian cultural memory.
- **Conceptual authenticity:** By merging ancient symbols with modern trauma, Wahba produces a philosophical reading of destiny and mortality, making the work not merely a documentation of violence, but a reflection on existential continuity.

5. Analytical Conclusion

“Elegy to Hatshepsut” embodies **authenticity on three levels:**

1. **Expressive** – sincere grief expressed through colors and textures.
2. **Symbolic** – the reactivation of Ancient Egyptian imagery as cultural memory.
3. **Conceptual** – linking past and present within a framework of destiny.

Thus, the artwork stands as a fusion of historical memory and contemporary trauma, presenting a visual and conceptual testimony that ties an event of national sorrow to Egypt's eternal cultural identity.

Final Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that authenticity is not merely a nostalgic return to tradition but a dynamic principle that links philosophical thought, artistic creativity, and sociopolitical engagement. Through its dual dimensions—as truthfulness and originality—authenticity emerges as a central criterion in art, allowing individual expression to coexist with collective cultural identity. Within the Egyptian context, the pursuit of authenticity became a defining feature of modern art movements, particularly as artists confronted national struggles, revolutionary aspirations, and the pressures of globalization.

The study identified Nabil Wahba as a key exemplar of critical realism, whose work reflects both a deep engagement with social realities and a commitment to innovative artistic expression. His oeuvre illustrates how authenticity functions as both an aesthetic and ethical framework: it enables art to resist cultural homogenization, to reaffirm heritage, and to serve as a medium for political and national expression. Ultimately, Wahba's art shows that authenticity is indispensable to the representation of cultural identity, as it bridges tradition with innovation, individual creativity with collective memory, and aesthetic form with historical consciousness.

Research Results

- Authenticity in art encompasses truthfulness, originality, and individuality, functioning as both a philosophical and aesthetic category.
- Modern Egyptian art sought authenticity through engagement with cultural identity, rather than imitation of Western models.
- Nabil Wahba's works embody critical realism, uniting expressive symbolism with political and cultural consciousness.
- Wahba's artistic practice demonstrates how authenticity provides a cultural defense against globalization's homogenizing tendencies.
- His use of symbolic materials and experimental techniques (e.g., gauze in the *Sabra and Shatila* series) reinforced authenticity as a truthful engagement with national tragedies.

- Authenticity in Egyptian art is revealed not in isolation but in a dialogue between heritage, context, and innovation.

Research Recommendations

- Encourage further studies on the role of authenticity in Arab and African modern art, beyond the Egyptian context, to situate Wahba's contribution within global discourses.
- Expand comparative research between Egyptian critical realism and parallel international movements to highlight commonalities and divergences.
- Promote documentation and digital archiving of Nabil Wahba's works, especially lesser-known collections, to make them more accessible to scholars.
- Support interdisciplinary research that integrates philosophy, art criticism, and cultural studies in analyzing authenticity as a cross-disciplinary concept.
- Foster educational programs that highlight authenticity in art as a means of cultural preservation and resistance, particularly for younger generations of artists.
- Recommend that cultural institutions and galleries foreground artists like Wahba in exhibitions that explore the relationship between art, identity, and politics.

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