

Letter from the Editor

Many of us are now entrenched in the daily effort to bring order to the chaos of personal, professional, and political environments. We are acquiring new skills in order to navigate teaching in a virtual landscape; managing households with multiple dependents and responsibilities; and either struggling within volatile circumstances in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, the U.S. and beyond, or bearing active witness to those struggles in our teaching and daily conversations. I thought of this during the second session of my classes this past week when we talked about the importance of analytical distance and the ability to “pause” to contemplate the categories and frameworks we adopt in research projects and discussions. It is perhaps now more difficult than ever to achieve this practice and carve out the mental space necessary to build innovative and interrogative frameworks for reporting on and analyzing the dynamics that bring us all together as scholars and actors within the field of Middle East studies. But it is also all the more imperative to do so, as news cycles push relentlessly past events such as the explosions in Beirut so as to take on the next alarming domestic or global event. Thus, even as we navigate the chaos of our own personal spaces, as members of MESA our responsibility is to retain the ability to pause and to hold before us the ongoing consequences of these events for the people whose lives remain wrenchingly precarious.

One result of our overburdened lives is delay: delayed work on articles, conference papers, books, and research as we evaluate priorities and face the onslaught of daily news, events, and responsibilities. And, of course, the delayed release of this issue of the *Review of Middle East Studies*. Yet it is my hope that we might acknowledge that even as collaborative work during a moment when the “global” now entails added difficulties via COVID-19, it is all the more pressing to embrace collaboration as a practice. As I mentioned in the IMES advertisement for this *RoMES* issue, COVID-19 magnifies glaring disparities of wealth and privilege that MESA members have dedicated their lives to researching. These disparities are of course always visible, often uncomfortably so, from within academic institutions and professional organizations that attend to the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism. COVID-19 and the wave of racial justice protests within the U.S. has, for the moment at least, made

these disparities “mainstream.” Yet, the “mainstreaming” of conversations around systemic inequality and racism can contain its own forms of erasure, a mechanism we are all too familiar with in our own research on marginalized lives. It is often harder to teach and write about issues related, say, to Palestinians, Kurds, Armenians, Yazidis or to the categories of Shi’i, Sunni, and Alevi when the the *New York Times*, *Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other multimedia platforms release their own barrage of opinion pieces and analysis.

This issue of the *Review* addresses concerns about how best to build a collaborative vision of a topic without reinforcing mechanisms of erasure from a rather unique vantage point: the meaning of artistic practice in the late nineteenth and twentieth century Middle East. The issue provides an extended conversation centered around MoMA’s publication of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (2018, distributed by Duke University Press), compiled and edited by Anneka Lenssen (UC Berkeley), Sarah Rogers (Middlebury College), and Nada Shabout (University of North Texas, Denton). The translations, contextual background essays, and meticulous effort to showcase artists, institutions, and artistic movements from a region typically marginalized from pedagogical and curatorial practice transforms this compilation into an intervention and a record in itself of the vital intersection between art, politics, and commemoration from the 1880s to the 1980s.

Commissioned by Guy Burak (New York University and Executive Board Member) and myself, contributors to this issue address both the limits and the potential of this monumental text. Positioned from within artistic ventures in Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, or from more trans-regional dynamics, our contributors provide observations on: what is the meaning of “modern”; the meaningfulness of the “Arab world” as a conceptual category; the pedagogical and methodological implications of a “primary documents” approach; and, perhaps most profoundly, the discursive impact of material culture on major political transitions. The issue also purposefully includes the voices of artists and artistic activists within the ongoing borderland crisis unfolding in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq and thereby demonstrates the importance of a “primary record” of devastation through the lens of art and performance.

The *Review*’s Special Focus on art as a dynamic intervention foregrounds three elements of the questions that opened this Letter: how do we insert formerly marginalized topics into a field of study (modern art and artistic movements in the MENA region) without reinforcing mechanisms of erasure; what categories of analysis should we adopt; and how do we avoid

objectification when we design new objects or objectives of analysis? Each contributor reflects in varying ways on these intricate questions, and Lensen, Rogers, and Shabout themselves reflect on the inspiration for their project, the challenges they faced when selectively compiling the book's contents and respond to how the contributors to this Special Focus showcase ongoing methodological and theoretical conundrums. Our "Curator's Corner" and "Pedagogical Perspectives" columns, as usual, align with the theme as Lynn Gumpert (Director, Grey Art Gallery, New York University) and Dina Ramadan (Bard College) explore what it means to curate exhibitions and teach artistic modernism in the MENA region. And our "Middle East Studies in Action" section includes a selection of undergraduate posters on art and material culture from the 2019 annual meeting of MESA. We also introduce a new section titled "Career Retrospectives" with an inaugural contribution by Carter D. Findley. Findley looks back to how the field of Middle East studies shifted over the course of his time as a scholar and professor and models our goals for this section: to provide a space for interrogative contemplation of the always fluid nature of the fields, topics, and categories of analysis that collectively make up our labor as MESA members.

Even as we celebrate an effort to foreground art and material culture and explore together our ongoing obligation to interrogate the frameworks and categories we deploy in our research and in our daily lives, *RoMES* also serves as another form of "pause": a space to commemorate the loss of key figures in our field. In this issue we remember Eleazar Birnbaum (1929–2019), John Masson Smith (1930–2019), and Derek Hopwood (1933–2020). Yet it is also our great sorrow to acknowledge the loss of our former *RoMES* Editor, Richard C. Martin. Our January issue will contain remembrances of his career and profound impact on the *Review*, but here I wanted to honor his patient and compassionate mentorship as I assumed my current role. Without his lovely combination of steadfast seriousness and wit along with his fervent dedication to the importance of the *Review*, I might not have agreed to come aboard this venture! So thank you, Rich, for passing your spirit and commitment on—may it continue to suffuse the pages of the *Review* in the years to come.

As *RoMES* works to continuously highlight the range and diversity of Middle East studies, I want to thank again the dedicated labor of our Associate Board Members. It is their regional and field expertise that transforms the *Review* into a vibrant space for interrogation and critique. As we range across disciplines, geographies, and chronologies, we collectively remain committed to mapping a world shaped by interconnected policies and lifeways, one that

may contribute to the spread of a pandemic and reinforce systemic inequality but also one that might open up new methods for collaboration and interrogation amidst crisis.

Interested in reading the latest from RoMES? Follow us on Twitter at [@RevoMES](#). Any questions or inquiries concerning content or potential submissions should be sent via email to Editor Heather Ferguson and Managing Editor Lauren Broidy at romes@cmc.edu. ✂

Heather Ferguson
Claremont McKenna College