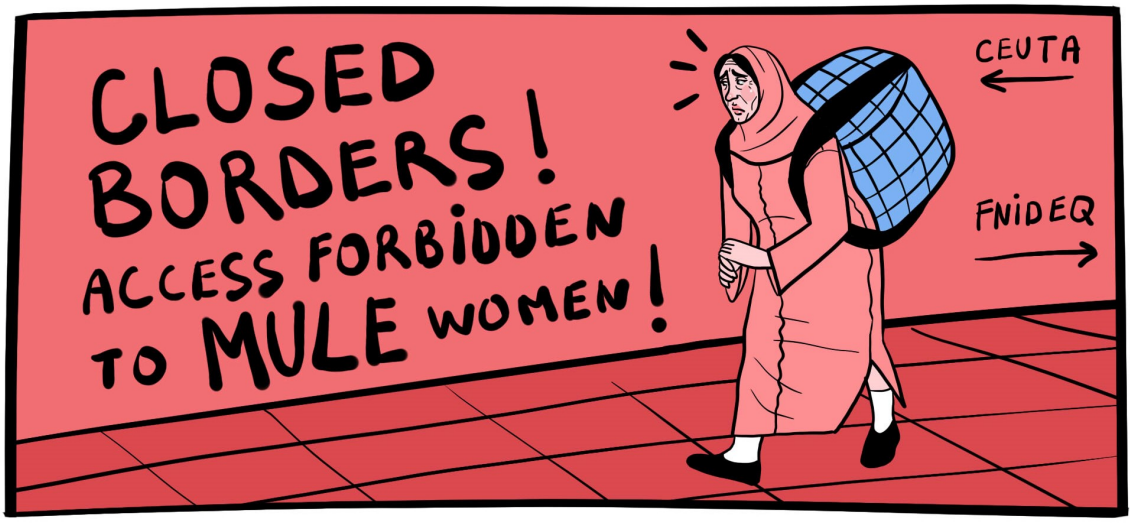
CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Winds of change riding the arab comic

Arab Comic Exhibit

Pedro Rojo, Álvaro Pons, Zainab Fasiki, Andeel, Sonia Ben Salem, Lena Merhej



Although during the 19th century publications that already included graphic narratives from the comic strip that were developing in the West, such as the Egyptian *Rawdat al-Madaris* [1], it was not until the middle of the 20th century that there was a greater spread of the 9th art in the Arab world, focused on the Maghreb and Mashreq areas [2]. The comic developed in these times is fundamentally for children, with great success led by publications such as *Sindbad or Samir*, but still far from an approximation to adult comics that would arrive in the 80s with works like *Carnaval and Freud*, by George Khoury (JAD). A still tentative appearance of the adult comic that was to have a parallel reflection with the growing importance of political graphic humour [3], but that would not be fully recognised until 2007 (except for the comic showing prison experiences by the Moroccan Abdelaziz Muride *On affame bien les rats* and *Le coiffeur* at the beginning of the 21st century) with the appearance of the choral magazine Samandal in Lebanon. The appearance of the collection that creates this pioneering magazine is a reflection of an era, of a very young generation growing up in the age of the internet, but also of the disbelief of the ideals of pan-Arabism and the confrontations that the Cold War had fuelled in the Arab world. They are a generation that grew up in countries emerging from bloody civil wars, such as Lebanon or Algeria, or extremely controlling dictatorships like Syria under Hafez el Assad

or Morocco under Hassan II [4]. Disillusionment with their own political reality does not prevent these young artists from being closely linked to their social reality. A reality that passes through distinctly urban environments, linked to the chaotic growth of cities such as Cairo, Casablanca or Beirut where a large part of the stories of its protagonists takes place [5]. Graphic novels such as *Le guide Casablancaies* by Mohamed Amine Bellaoui (known as *Rebel Spirit*), which portrays the humour and stark pop style of a whole range of characters that live in the poorest districts of the economic capital of Morocco, or the Algerian *Fatma N'parapli* by Mahmoud Benameur, with a script by Soumia and Safia Ouarezki, are a reflection of the magical space and their network of relationships and contradictions that is the life of the Kasbah of Algiers, a timeless story carefully drawn so that it could be located in Algeria at the beginning of the last century or today.



Arabization, Sonia Ben Salem

But if a city has a leading role in current Arab comics, that is Beirut, and not only because it is the beginning of the new wave of Arab comic creators, but also as it is a framework for works such as the intimate Barrak Rima trilogy (*Beyrouth*, *Beyrouth Bye -bye* and *Beyroth Rewind*), or the vision of the endless nightlife of the Lebanese capital of Tracy Chahwan in *Beirut Bloody Beirut*. But as expected, the war that is already an indivisible part of this city is reflected in several works, such as the journal of the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 in Mazen Kerbaj's work *Beirut Won't Cry*.

But if there is one author who has brought the Lebanese capital closer to the European reader, it was Zeina Abirached. Her work may seem like a continuation of the famous work by Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (Norma Ed., 2002), but a first analysis can quickly discard this argument. It is obvious that the Lebanese author takes advantage of Iranian teachings, but her approach soon reaches its own defined personality. Her tetralogy where the memory of Lebanon is the protagonist, *Beyrouth-Catharsis; 38, rue Youssef Semaani* and translated into English *The game of the swallows* (Sinsentido, 2008) and *I remember* (Sinsentido, 2009) represent a full account of experiences that act like real memory, in

fragments of it formed by small details [6]. The account of the most traumatic moments of the war that ravaged the country until the early 1990s is there, but through a cascade of mixed feelings: fear, terror, the most horrible impressions are combined with smells, colours and shapes that define the reality of a reconstructed memory. The aesthetic component, fundamental as in Satrapi's work in its connection with the roots of his culture, also provides an interesting variation by establishing through composition, symbolism or diagrammatics, that necessary natural contradiction of the images of memory. Repeated images, such as deep recorded impressions but which hide tiny differences, sometimes simple gestures, which are fundamental to the story. With *El piano oriental* (Salamandra Graphic, 2015) Abirached builds connecting bridges between his native Lebanon and the Arab world in general, and France where he resides. A reality that is also present in other Arab authors who write from exile, such as *Las amapolas de Irak* (Astiberri, 2016), by Briggite Findakly and Lewis Trondheim, or who were actually born in the West and add their Arab family culture as is the case of the Spaniard, Nadia Hafiz, author of the minimalist but impressive *The Good Father* (Sapristi Editorial, 2020). This type of works, where Riad Satouf's personal vision of Libya and Syria in *The Arab of the Future* (Salamandra Graphic, 2015), defines an autobiographical genre of its own that can be defined as "autoethnographic", where the language of the comic becomes a key element for the architecture of that reflective gaze, which is fundamental as the textual and visual levels run in parallel to develop a deep relationship with the reader.



The Newcomer, Lena Merhej

It is no coincidence that the number of authors named in this article is numerous, since the presence of women is very important in the world of Arab comics, both in the artistic part and in the management and direction of collectives in the world of Arab comics [7]. Lena Merhej (*Yogur con mermelada. O cómo mi madre se hizo libanesa* Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo, 2018) in *Samandal* or Noha Habaieb in *Lab619* are two examples of this, or the Egyptian collection Mazg, directed entirely by women and led by Sara Elmasry. A presence that is also thematic: for example, the Egyptian magazine Sakmangiya, dedicated its two issues exclusively to feminist demands, while the *Qahira series* by Deena Mohamed shows a superheroine who walks the streets of Cairo doing justice against chauvinist

aggressions and situations of injustice that Egyptian women suffer every day. Even eminently masculine groups such as the Egyptian Toktok made an attempt to approach gender issues in its seventh issue, although, admittedly, with little success. But, without a doubt, the Moroccan, Zainab Fasiki, is the best known figure in the world of Arab comics for her fight against patriarchy. Her drawings and stories are frontal attacks against the corset in which the most conservative Moroccan society wants to enclose the bodies of women. Her book *Hshouma*, conceived during a stay at El Matadero in Madrid, seeks to move extremism and religion away from the debate on the physical and female body. She talks about single women, about abortion, about contraception… Topics that she admits that she would have liked to read when she was fifteen years old. Although the title of the book means "taboo" in Dariya (Moroccan dialect), the book is written in French because when she started writing it in Moroccan she realized that the words referring to these subjects had a pejorative meaning. But beyond the nudes that have attracted the attention of half the world, Fasiki vindicates figures such as Kahina, Amazon queen, whom she considers the first feminist in history, or trades historically performed by women such as *hennayat*, henna tattoo artists.

The red lines and social taboos that Arab artists have to work with are fickle and often surprising. The very presentations of Fasiki's book by Morocco would first of all seem something unthinkable but they are taking place with less scandal than some conservative pressure groups. Neither was the special issue of the magazine Samandal on sex banned, nor were Joseph Khai's homosexual-themed drawings censored, nor was the Egyptian artist Migo prevented from winning the Mahmoud Kahil prize with a dream story of sex with explicit nudity. However, it was a female nude that was used as an excuse in the times of the former Egyptian dictator, Hosni Mubarak, to censor and withdraw from circulation the graphic novel *Metro* (2007), by Magdi al Shafai. Whether that was the reason or to prevent a comic that was highly critical of the corruption of the system from circulating freely in book stores, the truth is that we are facing the first example of censorship in the world of current Arab comics, which was to be repeated in 2015 in Lebanon with a humorous story by Lena Merhej who was denounced for offending religious (Catholic) feelings. Many Arab comic artists believe that they have greater freedom because it is a minority art, which sometimes escapes censorship out of sheer ignorance, but others simply see it as marginal and therefore not considered a threat to the established system.



Double Glazing, Andeel

The energy and the margin of freedom that the Arab revolutions meant for all forms of cultural and artistic expression obviously includes the world of the cartoon. The excess of enthusiasm of some analyses relying on works such as *18 yaum*, by Hanan Alkarargy, whose style is very close to manga and that allows him to tell the story of the 18 days that the Egyptian revolution lasted until the fall of Mubarak, has considerably increased the link of Arab illustrators to these revolutions: in fact, it is not difficult to see that the weight of these themes in current works, including the publications of those years by magazines such as Toktok (whose first issue came out at the very same time as the outbreak of the Tahrir revolution) is a mere coincidence in time. In general, the revolution does not appear as a recurring theme in successive issues of TokTok, nor is not found in Lab619 in Tunisia or Skefkef in Morocco. The concerns of these groups and their freedom and imagination transcend the current situation to delve into much more personal issues which are much more interesting to read, by making us understand the reasons and the feeling that led so many young people to go out into the streets without having to tell the story itself. More committed are online initiatives such as Comics4Syria, launched in the middle of the civil war by mostly anonymous authors who sought to denounce a constant situation of human rights violation but at the same time educational stories were planned that have been used to maintain a minimum of school work among the millions of Syrian refugee children in different refugee camps scattered throughout the region.

However, the undoubted emergence of Arab comics is still relegated to their geographic area. Despite the fact that the Middle East has become a recurring theme in European comics, mainly through French ones, most of the works that deal with these topics have been produced in Europe. The comic produced in the Arab world is still completely unknown to the publishing world, beyond initiatives such as those of the publisher Alifbata, who published the works of Lena Merhej, Mahmoud Benameur, Barrack Rima or Abdelaziz Mouride in France. In other European countries, the publication of comics of Arab origin is considered anecdotal. Fortunately, initiatives are taking place that try to make it known on

the European continent: in Germany, the *Erlangen Comic Salon* in 2014 dedicated an exhibition to Arab comics; the Al-Fanar Foundation organizes the travelling exhibition in Spain *Pens and Cartoons: Arab comics in motion* which began its journey in 2016, while the most important European event, the Festival de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême dedicated a space to them in its 2018 edition with the exhibition *Nouvelle génération, la bande dessinée arabe aujourd'hui*. In 2019, the prestigious Valencian Institute of Modern Art included in its exhibition on the Algerian artist, Zineb Sedira, a large space dedicated to her comics.

Initiatives that are still isolated, but which are marking a decisive step on the path towards promoting and disseminating Arab comics.



Mule Woman, Zainab Fasiki

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Pedro Rojo

Pedro Rojo has a degree in Arabic Philology and Islam from the UAM and he is president of the Al Fanar Foundation for Arab Knowledge. He has lived in Egypt, Syria, Morocco and Jordan. He is curator of comic book exhibitions Cálamos y Viñetas. Cómic árabe en movimiento, Siria a través del cómic and Sendas del cómic español (in Arabic). He authored several articles on Arabic comics and coordinates projects such as "Babili's Home, trilingual comic and App for Iraq" (2012-2014), "Kif-kif, comics for inclusion" (2016-), Stop-Islamophobia (2018-2020), CoCo (2020-2022), Observatory of Islamophobia in the Media (2017-) and "Twenty thousand leagues on the Intercultural Sea" (2016). He contributes to various media and has published books and articles on the Arab world.



Álvaro Pons

Álvaro Pons és Doctor en Física i professor de la Universitat de València. Ha realitzat una àmplia tasca de divulgació del còmic des de mitjans com *El País*, *Cartelera Turia* o *Levante*, així com des del seu weblog *La Cárcel de Papel*. Ha rebut nombrosos premis per la seva tasca de divulgació (Saló del Còmic de Barcelona, UNicómic, SPLASH). Ha comissariat diverses mostres sobre còmic en espais com el Festival de Angoulême, Octubre Centre de Cultura Contemporània, IVAM, Saló del còmic de Barcelona, Biblioteca Valenciana, La Nau Centre Cultural o Museo de Prehistoria. És director de l'Aula de Còmic del Vicerectorat de Cultura de la Universitat de València i director de la Càtedra d'Estudis del Còmic Fundació SM-Universitat de València.



Zainab Fasiki

Zainab Fasiki is a comics artist, mechanical engineer and activist for women's rights. She was interested in drawing and robotics from the age of 5. She obtained the Diploma of Superior Technician in Mechanics in 2014, ranked first in this field in her country. She continued at the National Higher School of Electricity and Mechanics of Casablanca, from which she graduated as a State Engineer in Mechanics in 2017. She began to draw comics at 16 years old thanks to her graphic tablet and her computer. Because of the sexist discrimination that reigns in the field of mechanics, but also harassment in the street, Fasiki finds in drawing her way out: she draws herself naked and shares it with Internet users to prove to everyone that she will live as she wishes. After collaborating on several artistic projects, she decided to devote herself to her career as an artist. She created the Women Power collective which encourages Moroccan women artists via workshops. She also created her project and book Hshouma, which aims to break taboos in Morocco and especially to change the way of seeing nudity and women. In 2018, on November 29, Fasiki was honored by Amnesty International on the International Day of Women Human Rights Defenders in Rabat, Morocco.



Andeel

Andeel is a cartoonist who was born in Kafr al-Sheikh in 1986. His uncle told him that his paternal grandfather was a filmmaker who made a feature film called *Horses*, which he took to the Berlin Film Festival. Due to racism it was overlooked for the big prize though it clearly deserved it, and on the boat back to Egypt he threw the only copy of the film overboard and retired from cinema. Knowledge of this outrage compelled Andeel to move to Cairo and become a professional cartoonist at a very early age, as well as making short films (such as *Who Knows?*, a psychedelic film noir set in the wild west), writing TV scripts, designing newspapers, co-founding “Tok Tok” comics magazine and launching projects such as “Radhio Kafril Sheikh el Habeeba” and "Big Brother".



Sonia Ben Salem

Sonia Ben Salem is a Franco-Tunisian illustrator and designer born in Tunisia in 1986. After obtaining her diploma in Graphic Design, she immediately joined the Tunis-based illustration studio Glibett, which allowed her to evolve in the art of illustrations and quickly find her place. She likes to convey her link with heritage through artistic projects, drawing typically Tunisian scenes with humour.



Lena Merhej

Lena Merhej is a visual storyteller and an expert in graphic narration, born from a German mother and a Lebanese father. After studying design, she became illustrator of children's books and comics and was part of the founding group of the Samandal collective, internationally recognized as a reference group in the publication of comics in Lebanon. In 2015, she defended her thesis on the narration of the war in Lebanese comics at Jacobs University in Bremen. She taught at several universities in Beirut. Her animated *Drawing the War* (2002) won the New York Festival Jury Prize (2002). In addition, in 2009 her comic book *Kamen Sine* received the Award for Best Comic at the FIBDA (International Comic Strip Festival of Algiers); in this contest, she was also awarded for her book *Mrabba w Labban* (2011). In 2019, her work *Salam* was named best comic Mahmoud Kahil.