Dear Friend, I write to you from a lonely corner in this bar, with imagination playing upon my mind. Imagination sums up everything in man. It is the spirit of our existence. And art is only a slender trace. I read today the words of [Leonardo] da Vinci, which an art critic relayed: l’art est une chose mentale. This is the most powerful definition of art. Do we have anything more welcoming or far-reaching in our souls? Or more irruptive and creative than the imagination?

SIDQI ISMAIL, DAMASCUS, SYRIA, OCTOBER 5, 1947

SITTING AT A CAFÉ TABLE in a bar off Marjeh Square in Damascus, Sidqi Ismail, a twenty-three-year-old writer, composed a letter to a friend in the city of Homs (fig. 0.1). As a leader in the cultural arm of the Arab Resurrection Party, or Ba’th Party (Hizb al-Ba’th al-‘Arabi), Sidqi had become interested in the liberating potential of modern painting. His letter, excerpted here as an epigraph, proposes an idea of the imagination as a procreative force underlying all art. Accordingly, it goes on to discuss the achievements of such painters as Auguste Renoir, Camille Corot, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, and Maurice Utrillo (that last artist a modish favorite of the international art magazines that circulated into Syria) in terms of their perceptible intimacy with upsprings of this force. Sidqi was keenly aware that he was writing just one year after Syria’s formal independence from France, and his analysis of the successes of his favorite European artists betrays relatively little concern for the presumptive tasks of modernist scholarship in a historicist mode, such as charting influence, naming styles, or projecting a single
arc toward formalist autonomy. Instead, he narrates artists’ efforts to achieve the “lib-
eration of art in painting” (tahrir al-fann fi al-taswir). By this, he means breaking with
the conventions of illusionism in favor of an art that sustains the fullness of experi-
ence, sense perception, and shifting modes of life.

Having characterized painting as a stage for irruptive forces (al-infi’aq) rather than
as a planar object or a window onto space, Sidqi orients his analysis to fluctuating pos-
sibilities within terms. Cézanne receives praise for his ability to “give us heat in the
whiteness of snow”; Gauguin for rendering both flowers and bodies in burning red
pigments; Picasso for flowing lines and color arrangements that perform a dazzling
“dance.” By this reckoning, to characterize art as a “mental thing” is to accord it the
task of tapping into lasting truths beneath mere surface appearances. As Sidqi writes
in the letter, Picasso, too, was to be admired for the metaphysical quality of his paint-
ing. Sidqi and his older brother, Adham Ismail, a painter, had spent an entire afternoon
studying one of Picasso’s wartime portraits of a seated woman with a cat. They were
aware from reading the international press that conservative art critics in London
were denouncing the Spanish artist for making ugly paintings. In their view, however,
the work established a portal into the register of free imaginative play that precedes
and sustains all art.

I have opened with Sidqi’s reading of the modernist archive in part because he
expresses interest in marking the limits of any one person’s control of artistic ends.
The sentiment may be recognized as appropriate not only for a moment of Syrian transition to ex-colonial sovereignty, but also a moment of deep moral suspicion in the aftermath of a world war fought using deathly instruments with recognizable origins in the mass killing tactics of the colonial state. As scholars of the interwar years have observed, the motif of autogenesis had been a persistent myth in European political thought and its interpretation of modernity, always supposing that man can produce himself ex nihilo, and that forms and social formats in the world are means to bring himself forth. But crucially, no one in Sidqi’s cohort of activists understood man’s actions to unfold in the world in such a way. The views Sidqi shared with friends, and published in the Ba’th Party newspaper, employ a vitalist idiom informed by philosophies identifying a universal life force or élan vital as the source of the world’s animation, thereby embracing “life” in excess of mechanistic explanation. In this, he and others in the party were informed by the teachings of philosopher Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899–1968), who, in turn, drew on Henri Bergson for insight into the necessary conditions for a free Arab community. Their vitalist view not only positioned the ontology of art in a register of expansive, transhuman sense, but also modeled it “from below” as opposed to from above (the latter being tied to a notion of an anthropomorphic God). That Sidqi makes mention of Leonardo da Vinci’s insight that “art is a mental thing” suggests that he admired an early Bergson essay containing praise for Leonardo for looking behind a face to find “the movement the eye does not see,” and then going further still to arrive at “something even more secret, the original intention.” As Bergson put it, the artist worked from a virtual center located behind the canvas, from where he produced insight into the “generating axis” of his subject.

As this book will explore, philosophies of life forces appealed broadly to the generation of upwardly mobile Syrians who had begun their university studies during the independence struggle. For many, the formal transfer of power had brought not an ecstatic experience of liberation so much as a new awareness of the hegemony of comprador nationalist leaders over Independence-era policies. Questioning the arid forms of parliamentary representation by which these old guard leaders, known as the National Bloc, maintained power, the new generation spoke about summoning a condition of perpetual perturbation (qalaq) to ensure their responsiveness to life forces, immanent energies, and natural affinities. Further, vitalist ideas blended readily with their wide readings in Romantic national theory and the theories of imagination proposed by classical Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037 CE), not to mention more nascent critiques of runaway privatization and capitalist economies. In this context, to celebrate imagination as an untamed and generative source is to dismiss the narrowness of the business interests that underpinned the Syrian state, and which thwarted popular aspirations to sweeping solidarity across state borders. Similarly, as I track in the chapters that follow, artists’ attempts to make work in relation to a substrate of life forces could put them out of step with both the “state,” defined as a set of institutions holding a monopoly on violence and charged with
distributing services, and the “regime” in power at any given moment, defined by particular leaders and administrations.\textsuperscript{17}

This same milieu of imaginative questioning gave rise to artistic attempts to bring vitalist concepts of images, based on struggle to come into appearance, to bear on the formal characteristics of paintings.\textsuperscript{18} We can, for instance, consider the wonderfully strange concept-sketches produced by Adham, who was working as an artist and art teacher.\textsuperscript{19} In one gouache painting on paper, which he made in about 1949 or 1950, Adham explores ways to maintain the value of openness and expansion beyond all singular human entities. The sketch depicts a female dancer performing a version of a floating jeté by means of an assembly of contour lines that twist and extend in inky black space (fig. 0.2). In terms of its ostensible subject, it plays on the conventional nude, which was then such a privileged signifier of academic arts training that Adham’s lessons in colonial schools had included sculpting a copy of the Venus de Milo.\textsuperscript{20} But in terms of its approach to making a picture, the drawing rejects these classical arts of touchable surfaces in favor of ephemeral traces of fertile energy. Adham uses the smoothness of the gouache medium to explore values of filled and unfilled space, coloring only the areas outside the unfilled lines of the dance. In turn,
so as to bring a different mode of life into his traces, Adham adds a pulse of red at the point of the nipple, signifying both touch and heat. Having thus conceptualized “woman” without recourse to the appearance of any particular sitter, the drawing delivers an image of feminine oscillations between forms and communion with durational truths.

*Beautiful Agitation* tells a history of modern painting in Syria over the period 1900 to 1965 that aims to take seriously artists’ professions of commitment to reservoirs of life forces as a philosophical and political frame for their practice. Discerning an important strand of anti-mechanistic, anti-academic creative practice in Syrian modern art, this book examines work by artists who produced polysemic, layered, inchoate paintings, and did so out of stated interest in cultivating aesthetic alliances with meaning beyond that established by the colonial-era nation-state. The totality of modern Syrian art practice shows many artists taking up painting as a means to cultivate viewers’ awareness of the collective character of life, and for different reasons. Some made socialist realist images at moments of heightened pan-Arab feeling or turned to abstract painting to pursue social progress from a zero point, as was done in Damascus in the late 1960s. In this book, however, I focus on practices that posited a reservoir of life existing “behind,” “beneath,” or even “around” the painted object, thereby exploring the significance of this formulation of a relationship between art and the interconnected world, and highlighting its importance for the formation of modern painting in Syria and the Middle East. These kinds of assessments, as we shall see, often emerged from activist communities that embraced models of popular politics, such as the ideological parties formed in the region in the 1940s. As such, they are significant elements of the history of modern Syrian politics. Equally, I contend, they can be recognized as a kind of political assessment, for to allude to a vitalist reservoir beneath the visible world is to propose a framework for how people might be expected to live and create together, including recognizing their own participation in constructing a social world defined by its interdependence.

The period of my inquiry runs nearly seven decades. Adham Ismail (1922–1963), whose sketch I just discussed, is the central figure of chapter 3. The book opens at an earlier moment, with the twilight of Ottoman Empire rule in Syria amid the world historical events of revolutionary movements and wars, and it ends in about 1965, a date I recognize as a pivotal point in Syrian cultural politics in the wake of the Ba’th Party’s coup d’etat on March 8, 1963, when its military wing took power. The new regime credited its party structure with preserving the forms and procedures of democratic deliberation (as opposed to implementing autocratic rule). However, it also took steps to choke Syria’s journalistic sphere, requiring newspapers to apply a “nationalist method of socialist construction” to reporting. In 1965, the Syrian Ministry of Culture—an entity established during a period of Syrian union with Egypt, from 1958 to 1961—went
so far as to announce a requirement that works in the annual exhibitions accord with the parameters of “national art” (al-fann al-qawmi), whether by drawing inspiration from the struggle and heroes of the nation or expressing a personal style based on Arab art and its philosophy. Although artists protested and the policy was reversed the following year, the threat lingered. Time and again, government officials lay claim to painting as the property and reflection of the nation-state, passing other policies of definition and delimitation.

Beautiful Agitation examines how, over the decades that preceded the regime change of the mid-1960s, which saw a top-down tightening of the relationship between state institutions and national expressions, painting could seem to possess more radical purpose—including acting as an irritant against orders of conventional meaning, whether producing bodies that evaded instantiation in pigment, or, as we will see, finding ways to make the pigmented ground of the image seem to move and shift in status. One of the important shared characteristics of such conceptions of painting as an irritant is the understanding of paintings as a relationship between two parts: a “reservoir” and a “surface.” That is, an underlying reservoir of animated energy, and a surface layer at which appearances in line, color, rhythm, and tone become discernible. The two parts are conceived neither as opposing points nor as positions in a dialectical movement. Instead, they maintain a chiasmic relationship of reciprocal crossings. In the realm of political action, the idea that an animating reservoir existed in chiasmic relationship to a people, such that the one instantiates the other, held clear appeal. Editorials and speeches produced by nationalist parties not only identify latent powers in reservoirs of national feeling but also forecast their activation. These looked to inspired figures (whether artists or politicians) to stir the cache of energy, rippling its connections in ways that others could feel. Equally, artists who were sympathetic to these models might seek to find analogues in artistic action. A painter could aim to manifest movements in paints and inks, producing surface effects meant to prompt recognition, and, in turn, further action.

Over the chapters that follow, I discuss a number of instances in which beholders of paintings describe this kind of recognition, including expressing hope for its catalytic extension into the constitution of other political communities. Yet my primary goal is not to demonstrate that such catalysis actually took place or to make a programmatic claim that descriptions of integrated aesthetic effects can enact change in institutions of power. Rather, I am interested in treating the power of the claim historically, as it brought art into a relationship to politics that extended rather than limited both. Importantly, Syrian artists’ sense of movement between surface and depth helped to guard their painting against such clichéd modernist notions as flatness and self-referentiality. The history of modern painting in Syria offers occasion to consider modernist painting on criteria other than its object properties. If the mere adoption of oil paint and canvas is not the threshold, then what is? If modern painting is not about irreducibility and competence, then what is its arc of development? As we
will see, painters in Syria were challenged to think about the embodiment of images in media as a contingent and often ambiguous process. Further, because the “users” of painting—a group that included artists, critics, students, publishers, politicians, bureaucrats, and others—thought about painting as a meeting point between kinds of perception, they continued to recognize modern painting’s imbrication in wider systems of coexistence as the central feature of its importance.

My title phrase, Beautiful Agitation, identifies a primary means by which the reservoir—its actions and movements—became perceptible in artworks. At its most embodied, a “beautiful agitation” will be a somatic experience such as a flush of heat, quickening of blood, being overcome, or moving out of joint. These are effects that Arab modernists, many with allegiances to Symbolist literary and artistic movements, cited as rejuvenating (rather than destabilizing) as early as the turn of the century. They made for awareness of a body’s dependence on collective energies at large. Just as important, as a rejection of naturalistic techniques in favor of interior states, beautiful agitation may be understood to occur prior to ideology, thereby making states of excitation available to aesthetic programs of all political stripes. For these reasons, “agitation” provides an important dynamic to many varieties of populist nationalisms that recruited participants by addressing sensoria directly, bypassing such formal political apparatuses as Parliament and elections. Italian Futurism fits this model, too, even its 1930s turns to fascism.

This last point proves decisive for the historical formation of modern arts in Syria because, as I uncover in this book, youth-oriented political movements acted as serious art world institutions and helped to bring early twentieth-century discourses of Symbolist feeling into the sphere of aestheticized politics. Initially incubated within the French institutions of culture, education, and policing of the interwar years, Syria’s parties grew to oppose the same institutions’ abuses of power, placing ideological pressure on the older systems of patronage. Pressuring groups took many guises: Islamic populists, Communists, labor leaders, and paramilitary youth groups, among others. They organized grassroots campaigns to petition for better public services, and, later, as the hardships of World War II hit the region, called strikes over the dearth of essential foodstuffs. After the ouster of the French in 1946, campaigns came above ground as not only the Ba’th Party but also the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), to which artist Fateh al-Moudarres had early intellectual ties, and the Arab Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Historians have shown how these parties extended their influence in schools, social clubs, and cultural events. Classrooms in the government network of schools that offered a local version of a French baccalauréat degree—known in Syria as “Tajhiz” schools, after the Arabic word meaning preparatory—became noisy with political argument. Students identified ideological allies with the call-out, Shū dinak?, meaning “What’s your religion?”, but operating as a request for declaration of affiliation: Communist, Ba’thist, or Syrian Nationalist.
Syrian poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber), who joined the SSNP in 1943 as a high school student, has explained that the party seemed to offer a path to emancipation from traditional family structures.37 It demanded its own familial loyalty, making its members into a collective that replaced religious, ethnic, and other identity designations. Similarly, the Ba‘th, during its initial phase of semiunderground operation, organized around such organic metaphors as “cells” and corporate “bodies.”38 Crucially, as I will detail, these same parties and party formations produced newly attentive audiences for art, performing important institutionalizing work in the art world.39 Given this history, the term “agitation” becomes especially apt because it can slide between a notion of personal agitation, as in something getting under one’s skin, and of collective agitation for a cause, such as disturbances staged in protest against a policy, or anti-authoritarian acts. By insisting on self-organizing as a means to organic collectivity, parties such as the Ba‘th and the SSNP agitated the artificial interventions of a top-down state. What I hope Beautiful Agitation can show, then, is that an artist’s act of claiming identification with other kinds of communal reservoirs could also constitute opposition to sitting regimes or politicians. In so doing, artists challenged, undermined, or overwrote the lexicon of national meanings.

I do not wish to suggest that every radical act of imagination by Syrian artists and critics lay claim to an identical conception of a reservoir. Indeed, the precise terms artists used to designate ideas about a depth register of moving, mutable energies—what I am describing as a reservoir—necessarily shifted with changes in historical conditions, and a global history of modernism will feature many kinds of vitalisms.40 My intention is to consider art-making as a discursive and social endeavor. As such, I am interested in the recurrence of reservoir ideas because their recurrence accords with the undecided nature of much artistic practice in this period, allowing me to track artists’ involvement in developing relationships, institutions, and formations, rather than, say, attribute fixed characteristics to Syrian modern art.41

**CHAPTER PLAN**

My first chapter, titled “Arab Romantics: Kahlil Gibran and the Awakening Storm,” follows the career of Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), a Romantic-Symbolist artist and writer who resided in the Syrian diaspora in North America, as he developed an approach to painting meant to catch and manifest spirit in the natural world. Gibran is best known for penning the international best seller *The Prophet* (1923), which secured him a place as a leading writer in the Arab diasporic community in the Americas known as the writers of the *mahjar* (lit. “place of emigration,” the term describes a condition of being “away” from the homeland of the Arab East but not severed from it).42 Yet as I examine in the chapter, Gibran also painted prolifically, and circulated his images widely as illustrations in his books. Trained as an artist in Boston in the late Victorian modernist milieu of photographer Fred Holland Day, he forged his aesthetic attitudes amid thinkers interested in spiritualism and transcendental theory who aligned themselves with
“Eastern” sensibilities as a critique of urban overdevelopment. The subtitle of the chapter, “The Awakening Storm,” comes from the words of fellow mahjar activist Amin al-Rihani, who in 1909 called on Arab people to rouse a storm of agitated spirits as the means to launch a revolution against orthodoxies of religion and politics. I demonstrate how Gibran’s techniques for painting in watercolor and ink not only evoke the ineffable presence of life “within” things but also find articulation in a modern image environment of photographic reproduction. Since his death from illness at the age of forty-eight, Gibran has become seen as a Lebanese artist who helped update the iconographic repertoire of a primarily Christian national canon. At the time of his passing, however, contemporaries recognized him as a radical Syrian thinker with a pantheist commitment to spiritual unities that exceeded any and all organized religions.43

The term “reservoir” features prominently in the accolades Gibran received from the American spiritualist community at the height of his fame. His 1923 novel The Prophet carries an endorsement from Claude Bragdon, a New York architect and theorist, attributing the book’s power to its drawing “from some great reservoir of spiritual life, else it could not have been so universal and so potent.”44 Gibran recognized the endorsement as a helpful one for introducing his work to American audiences; earlier in his career, he employed in a similar manner an apocryphal endorsement from Auguste Rodin likening him to William Blake.45 But equally he was interested in making a reservoir of “spiritual life” the source of political sustenance for Arab Syrian communities in the not-yet-capitalized East. Like many other Arabic-speaking intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire, Gibran had tried to foster a sense of unity as a defense against Turkish neglect and persecution.46 Its basis, he supposed, was the intimate ties to the realm of souls and spirits that could still be found in the East by dint of the delayed incursions of industrialization and mechanized reason. Gibran continued to air these views even after the Ottoman collapse. His writings feature stories of prophets who stir the reservoir to bring it to an awakened state, and who abandoned the (false) artistry of work in stone and paint so as to make direct address to the human complex of hearts, souls, and minds.47

Chapter 2 turns to the kinds of thinking about images that emerged over twenty years of French colonial rule in Syria. Between 1920 and 1946, France governed Syria under a League of Nations–endorsed “mandate” that tasked it with developing the citizenry toward statehood, a putatively benign mission that colonial agents pursued via new cultural institutes and schools. The chapter takes as its protagonist not an artist but rather a cohort of young intellectuals who moved between Damascus and Paris to train in social sciences and ethnography, and sought ways to systematize their understanding of culture.48 Their cohort, which includes Kazem Daghestani (1898–1985) and Jamil Saliba (1902–1976), co-editors of the short-lived but influential journal al-Thaqāfa (Culture), published from 1933 to 1934, and al-Arsuzi, the philosopher and political activist who taught a generation of Ba’th Party recruits about Bergson, employed its training to uncover structures of cultural coherence as bulwark for
Syrian life after colonialism. Navigating multiple institutions at once, a new generation of scholars developed critical readings of images, heritage objects, and traditions of metaphysical thought—both secular and religious—that registered presence beyond the reach of positivist modern science.\(^49\)

The group’s discussions of creativity at the crossroads of East and West made mention not only of reservoirs but of agitated ones that necessarily bubbled up, bursting the frames of their illusory status quo. For instance, Saliba, a scholar of anthropology, comparative philosophy, and law, called on fellow Syrians to sustain “movement in anxiety” in opposition to “stagnant” comfort derived from rote forms of modernity.\(^50\) Saliba asked readers to recognize how acts of creation cannot take place de novo and, in fact, make use of past traces stored in a communal storehouse (\textit{hawd al-jamāʿat al-mushtarak}). As he mapped the sequence, the image emerges first from multipart powers of imagination, followed by the rearrangement of material in the world to accord with the image. In advancing these models, Saliba was drawing not only on Bergsonist thinking but also the metaphysics of Ibn Sina, on whom he had written a thesis at the Sorbonne.\(^51\) Saliba understood the storehouse as free and ungoverned on account of its mobile potentiality and yet always engaged in productivity, such that each new flash of inspiration emerging from its depths might have material consequence. For a thinker in Syria who bore witness to the waves of colonization and resistance that defined the twentieth century, this notion of the image accorded new power to artists. Anyone who allowed himself to act upon his flashes of inspiration could become an agent who, without ever rivaling God in terms of pure creation, might bring meaningful changes to his world.

Chapters 3 and 4 each center on individual artists again, hewing for the most part to a biographical ordering of my narrative so as to highlight shifts in possibility occurring during the rapid political reversals of the Independence period. Chapter 3 focuses on Adham Ismail, an artist recognized for producing paintings out of the upsurges of Arab spirit—either through “unending” contour tracings, bright “touches” of flashing color, or a rhythmic structure borrowed from poetry or dance (all his terms, as we will see). Both Adham and his brother Sidqi came to Damascus in 1938 as internal refugees from the region of Alexandretta, following its highly contested transfer from Syria to Turkey. They had volunteered for numerous campaigns to advocate for retaining a connection to Arab Syria, and the bitter experience gave a particular charge to later Baʿth discourses of enduring Arab life and thought and its capacities for restitution. I examine how Adham attempted to link his strategies of composition to their activism, including by making conceptual reworkings of Arab heritage such as the Orientalist notion of an arabesque.\(^52\) The chapter draws on an archive of correspondence, sketches, and political memoirs that relay experiences of displacement alongside details about political retrenchment, allowing insight into the quietly radical aspects of Adham’s efforts to forge aesthetic unities in the name of a deferred Arab nation.
As Sidqi and Adham reflected on creativity in the aftermath of World War II, they linked a Bergsonist idea of upsurges of élan vital to political commitments to an idea of an animating and procreative Arab nation. Adham identified the Arab East—al-mashriq, the Arabic toponym for the regions of the eastern Mediterranean—as the catchment of originary genius from which his paintings would draw life. His vocabulary, in turn, tended toward such terms as al-yanbūʿ, meaning a fountain-like origin. As a way to describe a creative source, “fountain” carries both geological resonance as a kind of underground stream and a literary association with the Symbolist poetry of Charles Baudelaire, whose imagery of fountains that “sob” and “pulse,” and permeable bodies that leak blood in support of other life, had long circulated in modern Arab letters. Importantly, the Ismails’ thematization of Arab nationalism as a flowing source had little to do with nationalization in the sense of claiming specific resources for the use of particular identity groups or with racialist appeals to genetic makeup. As the art historian Iftikhar Dadi has observed, the art writing of the postcolonial period activated an Arab nation that has no simple, fixed, and stable locus. It is a modern discursive creation, situated in multiple and overlapping modalities. Further, it may figure as a quilting point between registers of secular and religious identification. To Adham, this Arabism’s appeal lay in this kind of flexibility. His family was ‘Alawite Muslim, a syncretic branch of Twelver Shi‘ism known for its esoteric character, yet they understood their connection to the Arab people as a code to achieving self-realization within a whole.

In many ways, Adham’s career serves as an emblem of the recuperative thrust of this book. He had been aligned with the Ba‘th Party over its first two decades of activism prior to the March 8, 1963, coup, when it was an underground opposition group. And, once the reinvented party began to publish art writing about favored artists in the 1970s, he was elevated to the status of a national hero who had always made work devoted to nationalism. Yet Adham died suddenly of a heart attack on Christmas day, 1963, less than a year into the period of Ba‘th rule. As a result, the liminality of his practice has been partially preserved, including its meaningful points of difference from later definitions of nationalism and national interest.

Finally, chapter 4 examines the early career of painter Fateh al-Moudarres (1922–1999), from the 1940s until the mid-1960s, with particular emphasis on his engagement with the psychological dynamics of creative manifestation. Growing up in the northern city of Aleppo, al-Moudarres belonged to an avant-garde circle interested in Surrealism and psychoanalytic theory and developed a view of a collective, reservoir-like unconscious structured by dark histories of suppressed urges. Later, in 1956, having received a government fellowship, he headed to Rome and studied contemporary postwar efforts to level Western pictorial traditions by incorporating detritus and accretive pigments into the painting surface. By the time he returned to Syria in the early 1960s, seeking to launch his career as a leading modernist, he gave interviews in which he spoke of a storehouse-like reservoir (al-makhzūn) holding an accumulated volume of the community’s energies. This formulation allowed him to redirect and