



## AL QATT AL ASIRI INDIGENOUS SAUDI WOMEN'S FORM OF ART

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### Abstract

It is the purpose of this research to highlight a form of women's art in southern Saudi Arabia, Al-Qatt Al-Asiri, which is recognised as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. Al-Qatt is an abstract art form created by women in the Asir region to decorate the walls of their homes. As I felt a sense of belonging to this cultural practice, I chose to make a field visit to Rijal Alma to help me clearly understand the current state of this art and document it with photographs. An analytical study of Al-Asiri art was undertaken to understand its concepts, symbols, colours, and social value as discovered by researchers in the domains of art and art history. The small amount of previous work on Al-

Asiri art did contribute to the analysis of this art form, particularly the analysis of its symbols and the attitudes and beliefs of the artists themselves. A review of the literature has led me to a number of recommendations that I hope can be taken into consideration in future research. There is a lack of academic research on this type of art, and the artworks themselves have begun to fade due to environmental conditions; therefore, conducting interviews with the residents of the region would enrich any theoretical approaches to this art form to ensure its continuity and development for future generations.

**Keywords:** Rijal Alma, Al-Qatt Al-Asiri, Asiri Women, Cultural Heritage

## \* Introduction

The province of Rijal Alma, located in the Asir region in southwestern Saudi Arabia (Figure 1.1), has a mythical quality and an ancient past that reflects an enchanting civilisation and a unique architectural style, and defying the trends in contemporary architecture. What distinguishes the Asir region is how it is covered in green, interspersed with streams pouring from the foothills of the nearby mountains. The village of Rijal Alma is located on a steep mountain that rises to about 1,800 meters above the level of the nearby Red Sea. Due to monsoon rains, its valleys and rifts turn into flowing pools of freshwater, which attract thousands of Saudi families who wish to enjoy its picturesque landscape as well as the welcoming local people who honour visitors to the locale. I discovered this province's secrets lie within its buildings when I visited in November 2019. I embarked on an hour-long drive to the village of Rijal Alma from the city of Abha<sup>1</sup> which is on the western side, through Aqbat al-Sama<sup>2</sup>. Walking around the village, areas of

green are intersected by the mountains of Qais and Salab<sup>3</sup>, an area famous for its picturesque scenery, bordered on the western side by the villages of Ghamra and Al-Madraqah<sup>4</sup>. Before climbing up these steep mountains covered with dense forests, a person can explore the area and enjoy the valleys surrounded by forests of Sidr<sup>5</sup> trees.



Within the village of Rijal Alma are what are termed 'palaces' which originally were fortresses that protected the country in times of war, such as in the case of the Ottoman invasion given that the area constituted a significant trading route linking Yemen with the Red Sea (Gingrich 2000) (Figure 1.2). These palaces have since been converted into housing, but their origin is still evident to the viewer from the outside. The villagers added

<sup>1</sup> The capital of the Asir region in southwestern Saudi Arabia.

<sup>2</sup> A mountain road, the link between Abha and the Rijal Alma.

<sup>3</sup> The most famous high green mountains in Asir.

<sup>4</sup> Located in the southwest of Rijal Alma governorate, its height is estimated at 2,700 meters. The village of Jabal Ghamra was famous for producing municipal honey.

<sup>5</sup> The most common plant species growing in the Asir region.

each new building to neighbouring existing buildings, reflecting the extent of their desire for social security, until the village has come to resemble a highly fortified military barracks. The main door of each palace is wide enough for a camel to enter with its carriage, and perhaps several camels which may surprise the visitor. This military past affects the style of architecture inside and outside the palaces and forts that were built from natural stone, clay and wood. It even influences the types of utensils and tools used inside the homes (Maghawi 2010). The elaborate interior and exterior engineering details of the palaces are strong symbols of a sophisticated civilisation and culture that the people of the area are keen to preserve.

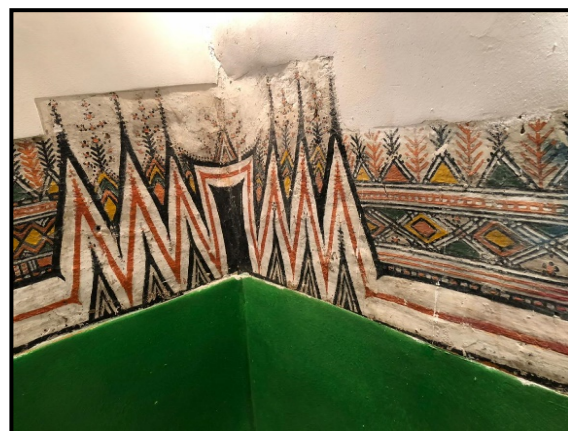


*Figure 1.1: Saudi Arabia States Map. 2018, digital image. Reproduced from: Wikipedia*



*Figure 1.2: Ashwaq Alsadi, Rijal Alma's Houses. 2019, photographs. Reproduced from: Digital Camera*

As for the houses themselves, they are engraved with the so-called ‘Al Qatt’ art form, which is a female form of craft that resembles abstract art, and no house is without it (Figure 1.3). The decorative paintings on the inner and outer walls of the rooms, the windows and the doors constitute important features of these houses (Moghwai 2010). The women of the Asir region have created decorations on the walls of their homes which reflect how they respond to the environment around them. The environment of the Asir region is a beautiful, diverse and unique one, which the women in this region have translated into their own distinctive aesthetic and artistic elements. According to Hesham (2019), a woman feels that home is her own domain, and that she expresses herself at home through household decorations and colouring preferences. Asir has developed with this art a special quality that distinguishes it from other regions. A distinctive aesthetic diversity and colour that forms wonderful paintings is very evident in their engravings. This makes it a rich source of artistic and aesthetic value.





*Figure 1.3: Ashwaq Alsadi, Al Qatt Ornamentation. 2019, photograph. Reproduced from: Digital Camera*

### \* Al-Qatt Al-Asiri

The term Al-Qatt Al-Asiri denotes traditional craftsmanship from the Asir region, specifically abstract wall painting. These are abstract symbols and patterns created by Asiri women to ornament and decorate their homes. This art is passed on from mother to daughter, primarily through observation and practice. According to the French researcher Thierry Mauger (1996, n.d.), and based on his discovery of this art, Asiri women typically comment, “We have always done it. Our mothers did the same. It is beautiful”. Women often invite other female relatives of different ages to help finish the painting. This teamwork has an important societal value, which is spreading shared knowledge and professional training for the future (ibid). While Haifa Al-Hababi (2012, 2) expands on this idea by explaining the purpose of working together that “there is some courage in competition or a challenge to prove the woman’s capabilities and personality among the women of the city, village or tribe”. This type of art is deemed to have a deep social value; for this reason, it was registered by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage (Alsheme 2017).

There have been different views on the meaning of Al-Qatt motifs. For





example, the researcher Ali Moghawi (2010, 92) who investigated Al-Qatt history by interviewing its pioneer practitioners, indicates that “today, various interpretations try to give a sense to miniature symbols in order to penetrate artistic secrets of this distant civilization”. Furthermore, he considers this art “similar to cubism, abstract art which is the expression of spiritual mystical state or rather a spontaneous intuitive state coming from pure art, which reverses image of real-life by emblems of colours and forms often confused and abstract” (ibid, 92). The women artists express their environment through motifs such as tree leaf lines, and triangles symbolising a series of contiguous mountains, or they may express their social solidarity. Al-Al-Hababi (2012) is an academic in Al-Qatt history who supports Maghawi’s argument that the symbols may reflect women’s connection with their surrounding environment, and she has interviewed the oldest living Al-Qatt artists in her study of Asiri women. Fatma Abo Ghass, who is considered a pioneer in this style of interior wall decoration, states that these symbols represent the religious belief of the women and their worship of God. This relationship is reflected by lines in the form of waves that reflect the pattern of prayer

practiced by the women. This art reflects the psychological aspects of the Asiri woman, and therefore the shapes of the symbols and the lines symbolise different things for each artist (Al-Hababi 2012).



Colour is a vital element in the identity of Al-Qatt art, as creating this art is hard and it takes a lot of time and energy to prepare the drawing and painting materials. Mauger (1996) in his chromatic analysis of Al-Qatt art indicates that the use of locally sourced natural mineral and vegetable dyes limited the colours available in ancient times. The artists use primitive tools such as sheep hair, goat’s tails, and feathers to paint the motifs on the walls (ibid). Ghass states that “Asiri women used to go into the mountains to collect gypsum, and sometimes we had to go down into caves to find it. Occasionally they had to crawl, and lumps of rock could fall on a woman” (Al-Hababi, 2012, 2). Al-Hababi (2012) expands on how the colours are prepared, for example, they start by using a material that is composed of sedimentary calcareous formations that is of a very white colour before the painting begins and apply it to the walls to create a white surface for working upon. The colour black is made by grinding coal and then combining it with tree gum to make the

mixture thick, consistent and stable. Iron-rich stones crushed and mixed with plant mucilage create the red colour. The blue colour comes from a sedimentary rock locally known as Blue Nile to which different amounts of water are added. Yellow is derived from natural sulphur powder from the mountains and hills close by, while green comes from plants around the village. This shows that, despite the risks and effort required, an Asiri woman is determined to decorate and colour her house.

Moghawi (2010) described some of the visual elements that make up the aesthetic style of this art form and divided them into categories as shown in Table 1. This art contains vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. He contends that the visual movement resulting from the lines indicates aesthetic meaning created by the linear vibrations. In addition, artists highlight the elements by using a black outline, and this can differentiate the variations between the square, the triangle and other abstract geometric shapes.

and takes the shape of trees.	
<i>El Maharib</i>	<i>El Rokon</i>
 It is a line resembling sea wave.	 Comprises large and contiguous triangles.
<i>El Balssana</i>	<i>El Amchat</i>
 A diamond shape that appears in the center of the decoration or at the bottom.	 A parallel line that is either horizontal or vertical.

**Table 1: Visual Elements of Al-Qatt Art**  
Source: Moghawi (2010, 94), Table designed by Ashwaq Alsadi

Element name & Symbols	
<i>El Banat</i>	<i>El Aryach</i>
 Emerges horizontally at the top of the decoration	 A plant motif that is used between the <i>El Banat</i> motifs.

Mauger (1996) suggests in his analysis of this art that it consists of a rhythm between patterns of motifs and colours. It consists of the regular repetition of the same design, the irregular use of motifs in groups, or the alternating use of many shapes and these patterns result in a regular sequence in Al-Qatt art. One of the contemporary artists who have been influenced by this art and use its linear and colour rhythms, is the Saudi artist Ibrahim Almami. Abstract symbols are the basis of his work which uses horizontal and vertical lines to create a distinctive aesthetic. To achieve colour balance, he uses two combinations of warm and cool shades. The artist also makes knife marks into the work surface and refines it with a base yellow colour. Repeating these elements produces variety and rhythm and a distinctive aesthetic meaning, as demonstrated in Figure 2.1.



**Figure 2.1: Ibrahim Almami, *Al-Qatt Al-Asiri*. 2017, acrylic on canvas. Reproduced from: Twitter**

Another example of the Saudi artists who have drawn on the cultural heritage of Al-Qatt Al-Asiri as inspiration for their contemporary work, is the work of Rahma Al-Asmari. She is considered one of the most important Saudi artists and she shows her interest in the revival of the Asiri heritage, especially Al-Qatt Al-Asiri, in a contemporary way. She transfers this art form, traditionally wall decorations, to paintings to display it to the wider community (Figure 2.2). She has also made determined efforts to spread the value of Asiri women's cultural heritage, has worked as a trainer in Al-Qatt Al-Asiri and even set up a home exhibition of traditional painting and costumes in Abha. In this exhibition, she displays some old drawings by Asiri women, and in doing so, made female Asiri art





visible through her passion for ancient heritage, beauty and the revival of the Asiri heritage.



*Figure 2.2: Rahma Al-Asmari, Al-Qatt Al-Asiri. 2017, acrylic on canvas. Reproduced from: Makkahnews.net*



### \* Conclusion

The shortage of literature and references on this artform has been a challenge in researching this art. However, the studies and analyses that Mauger, Al-Hababi and Moghawi provide have broadened our understanding of the concepts of Al-Qatt Al-Asiri. These concepts are a major part of Al-Qatt Al-Asiri because it focuses on reflecting the identity of the place where the Asiri women gather materials to create their paintings as well as on what Asiri art symbolises. The vertical, horizontal and geometric lines and the patterns that result from their repetition and rhythm form the basis of their own symbols. Their art is also based on using signature colours that are closely associated with this art, which are

generally red, yellow, blue and green, interspersed with black and white.

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