WOMAN: FREEDOM AND IDENTITY

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

Asmaa Aljohani
December, 2015
Thesis written by
Asmaa Aljohani
B.A., Taibah University
M.A., Kent State University

Approved by

__________________________
Janice Lessman-Moss, MFA, Advisor

__________________________
Christine Havice, Ph.D., Director, School of Art

__________________________
John R Crawford-Spinelli, Ed.D., Dean, College of the Arts
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMAN: FREEDOM AND IDENTITY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hijab 1: Huda</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hijab 2: Rehab</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hijab 3: Tahani</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Professor Janice Lessman –Moss, for her continuous support during work on my thesis study and related research. Her guidance, patience, and knowledge kept me motivated during the research and working on this thesis. I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor for my master study.

Additionally, I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee: Professor Catherine Amoroso Leslie, Professor Kathleen Browne, and Professor Rebecca Cross, for their insightful comments and encouragement that inspired me to widen my research from various perspectives.

Also, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my friends: Rehab, Huda and my sister Tahani, who participated in this thesis. My completion of this thesis could not have been accomplished without them.

Finally, I wish to express my sincere thanks to my parents, sisters, and brothers. They have always supported me and encouraged me with their best wishes and confidence in my abilities.
“When I discover who I am, I will be Free”

Ralph Ellison

My thesis, entitled “Woman: Freedom and Identity,” presents a series of three large woven portraits of Muslim women wearing “Hijab”. The pieces are meant to represent the idea of choice, with the scale of the weavings, the facial expressions of the subjects and the decorative backgrounds carefully considered to reinforce the concept.

Hijab, one of the most recognized images for women's dress in Islamic culture is a scarf that covers a woman's head and neck while leaving the face visible. The word Hijab (حجاب) is often defined as a veil or a headscarf. A Muslim women might wear a Hijab for a variety of reasons, one of them being for religious purposes. Many observers assume that all women are required to wear Hijab, and while that is sometimes true, many women, including those depicted in my thesis portraits, wear Hijab as a personal choice.

This article of dress has a complex history. Some people think that Hijab originated with Islam. In fact, Hijab itself predates Islam by many centuries and is found in many civilizations. There are records that indicate it was used by women in Assyrian from the 13th century BC and can be seen carved on Greek and Hellenistic statues. Later, it was adopted by the Islamic religion and become a part of the culture. Worn by women, it signifies their religious and cultural identity. Within various countries where Islam is a dominant religion, it is worn and can identify the nationality of the wearer, For example: Chador or Shador is one of the Hijab styles worn by women in Iran.
The wearing of the Hijab, as a symbol of Islamic culture has been a source of political disagreement in some countries. In France, for example, the government passed a law that makes it illegal for women to wear Hijab.

As a Muslim woman, who chooses to wear Hijab, I want to share my perspective with other people, and emphasize the value of the cultural identity that contributes to my choice.

I am representing the subject by showing three women who also choose to wear the Hijab and believe it is an important part of their identity. The expressions on their faces have significant meanings. All of them have beautiful smiles and a relaxed posture, reflecting the state of a satisfaction in their choice. The women depicted in the weaving are friends of mine from Saudi Arabia. They were chosen for this project, because, like me, they are happy to wear the Hijab. They have made the choice because they want to honor their cultural heritage and religion.

All of the images of the women in the portraits are surrounded by decorative patterns. The Muslim culture is known for its love and extravagant use of ornamental design, which often features abstracted text and a range of geometric motifs. In all of these weavings the motifs used are symbolic, or are meant to convey more specific interpretation through the use of language. The similar compositions provide a sense of continuity in the series, but the decorative patterns that surround each portrait differ in response to the character of the woman depicted. Color is also used selectively to convey a sense of the individual.

In the weaving Hijab 1: Huda, the first in the series, I chose to work with traditional colors of black and gold. A pattern of circular motifs surrounds the portrait. As one of the most popular motifs in Islamic art culture, this motif reflects a sense of movement and continuity, which reinforces the idea of freedom and vitality.
Various English words are integrated into the motifs to reference both freedom and identity.

**Hijab 2: Rehab**, promotes the idea of choice by using wings as a repeat pattern. Larger wings are also represented behind the portrait to further reinforce the idea of freedom. The text in this weaving captures the voice of the woman depicted in the weaving. She was asked to convey her thoughts about wearing the Hijab and responded in an individual way. I wanted to reinforce the intimacy of the words by making the text appear to be hand written in pink.

Using Islamic/Arabic calligraphy, is a major form of artistic expression in Islamic cultures. In the third weaving **Hijab 3: Tahani**, this traditional Islamic pattern style encloses the image. Fancifully designed Arabic words are repeated to create an interesting design that appears purely abstract, but is actually composed of a meaningful message. The Islamic text repeated in this piece means “Islamic identity”. The color palette is more reserved in hue and contrast reflecting a more calm character.

Other strategies used to forward this thesis include the use of weaving as a process. Since the Hijab itself is a woven cloth, it seemed like a good connection. Each piece was woven on a large digital loom, which controls the intersection of the warp and weft threads in the construction of a strong cloth. This process provides a good metaphor for strength; a characteristic exemplified by the women in the portraits.

The scale was also considered carefully as I wanted to create larger than life size portraits. It is often believed that Islamic women are not respected or listened to in the culture. The size of the faces in these portraits makes them difficult to ignore. They demand attention and have a sense of power because of their size and also because of
their positioning in the center of the field. All of them are looking out at the viewer and seem interested in making eye contact with them.

Women: Freedom and Identity is not only a series of art works but also, a reflection of the strength of women in the culture. They are like other women around the world who choose to dress as they want as a way to express who they are: to reveal their personality, their presence and what they value in life. It is my hope to continue this series of large scale portraits of women in Hijab, recruiting participation from outside my circle of friends. This will be a way to connect with other Muslim women worldwide and create a sense of empowerment for those who feel free to make the choice to wear Hijab.
Figure -1

Hijab 1: Huda

Size: 62”x62”

Figure -2

Hijab 2: Rehab

Size: 62”x62”

Digital Jacquard Design,
Industrially Woven.
Cotton.
Figure -3

Hijab 3: Tahani

Size: 62”x62”

Digital Jacquard Design,
Industrially Woven.
Cotton.