

Exhibition Denied



With his Palestine Poster Project, Dan Walsh Wants to Promote Democracy, Free Speech, and Dialogue About the Middle East

By Karen Olson

Posters have played an important role in the movement to gain a Palestinian homeland. The vibrant, colorful, sometimes rhetorical, often beautiful messages appear not only in the Occupied Territories of Israel (where they are frequently torn down by the authorities) but also on streets and in subways around the world. This outspoken art form is actually an international phenomenon in which Palestinian artists have been joined by artists from Israel, America, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, China, Cuba, and Venezuela expressing their feelings of solidarity and wishes for peace by creating posters.

Dan Walsh, a political art director in Washington, D.C., who collects, translates, and conserves revolutionary posters and serves as a consultant to nonprofit social activist organizations, has made it his mission to inform more Americans about this surprising artistic collaboration, which he calls a “completely original political Esperanto.” But he keeps running into roadblocks. After 20 years of trying, he has been unable to find a major museum, gallery, university, or corporation to host a retrospective.

Walsh, 52, is the unlikely keeper of what could be the largest collection of Palestinian solidarity posters in the world. Originally from the Bronx, Walsh was raised in an Irish Catholic family and volunteered for the Peace Corps. He was sent to Morocco in 1974. To practice his Arabic language skills, Walsh translated



Above: Spanish artist Pedro Laperal created this poster for the 1979 international poster exhibition “Palestine: A Homeland Denied,” held in London.

Next page: Designed by Israeli artist Tami Berger, this poster was published in 1988 on the first anniversary of the 1987 Intifada (uprising) and the 40th year of Israeli independence. It was banned by the Israeli government. Until 1993 it was illegal to show the Palestinian flag in Israel or in the Occupied Territories.

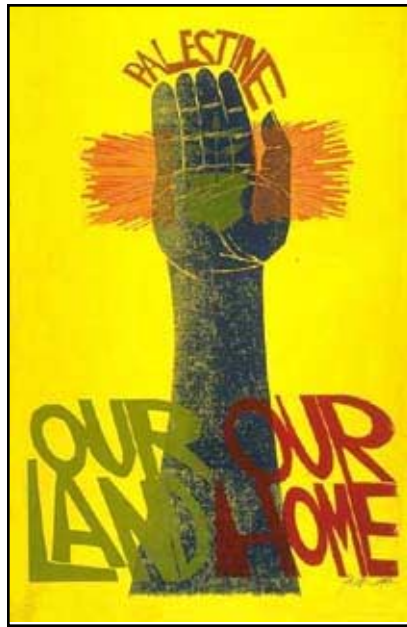
יום העצמאות תשמ"ה



המאה ה-20. תונת ספרים רח' שינקין 7, תל אביב. נל. 05-280761

Right:

Independent silk screen artist Paul Peter Piech, who lives in the U.K., created this limited edition poster (circa 1985).



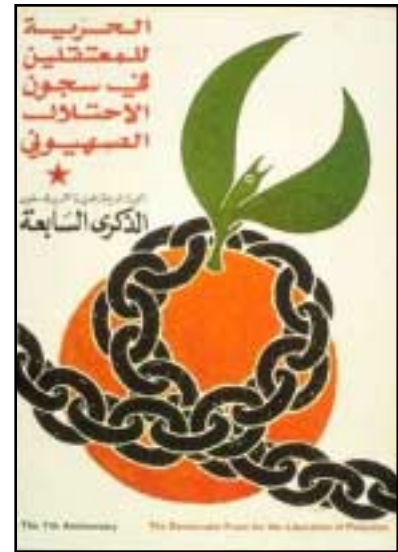
Below: Popular in Palestinian households, this poster by Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour is a reproduction of one of his paintings. The man represents the Palestinian struggle. His burden is the return of Palestinians to the city of Jerusalem.



posters—announcing concerts, theater performances, soccer games—while he waited for buses. One day in Rabat he came across a poster with a word he didn't know. He looked it up. The word was Palestine. He recalls his response: "Boy, it takes a lot of nerve to put up a poster in solidarity with Palestine. They're terrorists, aren't they?"

It was "the conditioned, Western, normative response to see things Palestinian in a very negative way," he says. But from that point on, he grew increasingly interested in the Palestinian posters; by the time he left Morocco he'd collected more than 300. As part of his Peace Corps obligation—to share some element of his experience abroad after he returned home—he decided to show others what he had learned about visual culture, and about Palestine. In 1976, with a small grant from the now-defunct American Palestine Education Foundation, he organized the posters into a slide show and started lecturing at universities, cultural collectives, and Middle East studies groups in the Washington, D.C. area.

Twenty-five years later, Walsh, a self-described pacifist, is still at work. He recently received another grant, this time to archive his collection, which has grown to more than 3,200 original posters—about one-third of them created by non-Palestinians. He is currently organizing the Palestine Poster Project, as well as the Cuba Poster Project, on his web site (www.liberationgraphics.com). Walsh still wants to share what he's learned, but his sense of duty, and scale, has changed. He believes these posters—whether they depict various aspects of Palestinian culture or



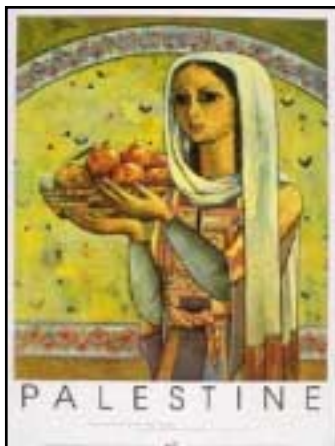
Clockwise from top left:

Published by the Jewish Alliance Against Zionism, this poster, (circa 1984), was created by American artist Lisa Kokin.

Created by Egyptian-born artist Hilmy Touni in 1976 for the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The text, translated from Arabic, reads: "Freedom for All Political Detainees Held in Zionist Prisons" The English text reads: "The 7th Anniversary: The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine".

This poster calling for secular, democratic peace was created anonymously (circa 1978) and published by a faction of the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Movement (also known as FATEH, an acronym formed by the organization's initial letters in Arabic).

Published by ROOTS, a Palestinian youth group based in Washington, D.C., Sliman Mansour's 1988 poster includes lines from "Poem of the Land" by Mahmoud Darwish: "Those who go forth into life ask not about their lives. They ask about the land: did she arise?"



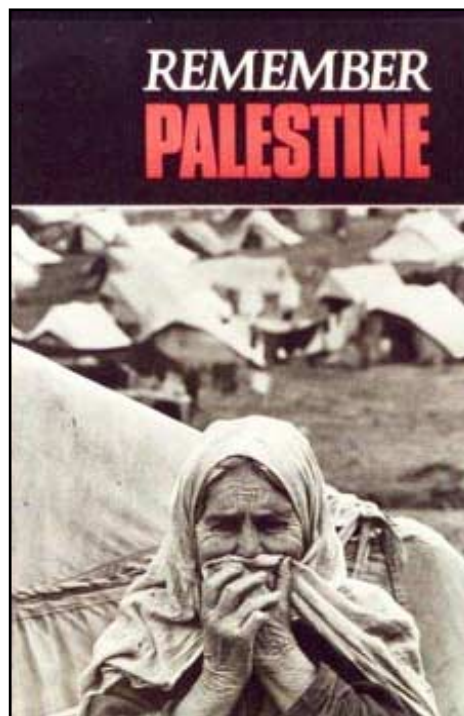
show support for reasonable Palestinian national objectives—have important lessons to teach Americans.

Palestinian solidarity posters are hard to come by. Many are created clandestinely, and most of them in Israel and the West Bank are torn down shortly after they are put up. But they have had some exposure in the United States. Some independent American artists, like Berkeley-based Doug Minkler, show their solidarity posters in galleries and sell them at fairs and through underground catalogs. A few years ago, Loyola University of New Orleans professor and graphic designer Dana Bartelt curated an exhibition called *Both Sides of Peace: Israeli and Palestinian Political Poster Art*, which employed the “balanced perspective” that seems to be required in this country to have any conversation about Palestine. For Walsh, the challenge is finding a major organization that will show Palestinian posters on their own.



Above: 10-year-old Mona V. Tamari, the daughter of Palestinian artist Vladimir Tamari, created this poster for the U.N. Day of Solidarity with Palestine. The Tamaris live in Japan and the poster was published by the PLO office in Tokyo (circa 1988). The captions read “Kuwaitis have Kuwait/Brazilians have Brazil/Soviets have the Soviet Union/Kenyans have Kenya/The French have France/ Americans have the United States/ Papua New Guineans have Papua New Guinea/The Japanese have Japan/ Palestinians don’t have Palestine”.

Right: This photograph was taken in a Palestinian refugee camp. The designer and publisher of this poster, (circa 1982), are unknown.



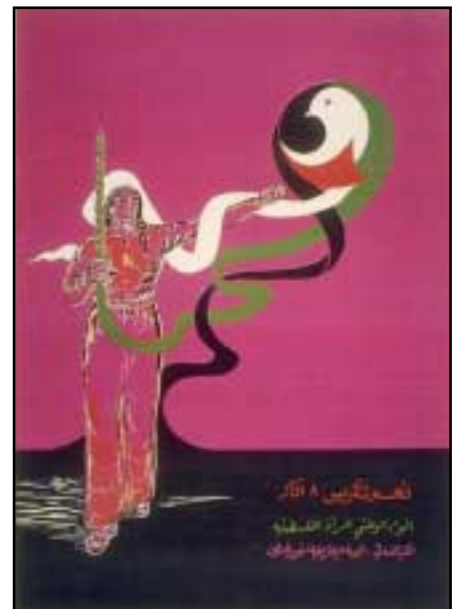
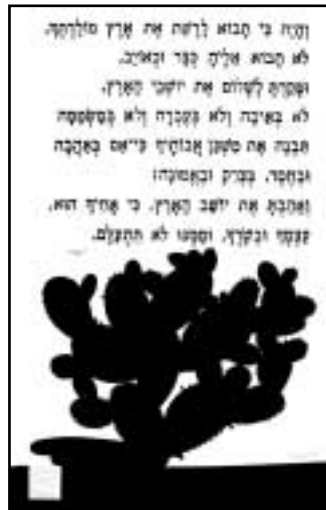
“It’s important for us to ask why Palestinian poster art, a major political art genre—one that can trace contributions from almost every country in the world including Israel, that is 50 years old, that includes many famous artists and many famous posters, that reads like a graphic book of modern Middle Eastern history—has never been considered on its own for exhibition in the United States,” he says, adding that such an exhibition would allow Americans to participate

in a nonideological, nonpartisan analysis of this genre. “Access to the artwork is



Above: Jacek Kowalski of Poland won first prize for this poster in the 1979 international poster exhibition "Palestine: A Homeland Denied," held in London.

Right: Israeli artist David Tartakover published this poster himself. The Hebrew text is a quotation from Rabbi Binyamin (pseudonym of Yehoshua Radler-Feldman) who was active in Brit Shalom Association, founded in 1925 to foster Jewish-Arab Relations. Translation: "If you should come to inherit your homeland, then do not approach it as an enemy. Rather, come to the inhabitants in the spirit of peace. Not by malice, transgression or animosity will you build the homeland of your forefathers, but by love, mercy, righteousness and faith. And you will love the inhabitants for they are your brothers of your own flesh and you will not disregard them."



Far Right: Created for International Women's Day (March 8) by Palestinian artist Jamal Al Afghani and published by the Women's Bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (circa 1982).

happening around the world, but not here. I find that profoundly ironic. We foot the bill for Middle East peace and war. The fact that we can't see these posters easily, that they have a criminal aura imposed on them, is a disservice to Americans."

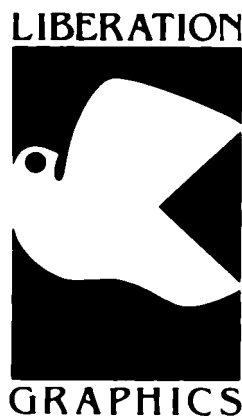
In most other countries, including Israel, there is wide public discussion about Palestinian-Israeli relations and Middle East policies. But in the United States, Walsh points out, we seem to believe that a person needs "expert" qualifications—through heritage, affiliation, or education—to engage in such dialogue. Walsh says the posters have an educational quality to them that allow people who are not Middle East specialists, nor Jewish or Muslim or Arab, to learn about Palestinians from a cultural perspective, in the context of discovery. The posters, he believes, could help Americans enter a more open, democratic discussion about the Middle East. "There are a great many creative and decent people who can add something to the dialogue, whose voices are not being heard," he says.

Walsh senses a taboo on discussing anything that raises questions about Zionism.

In fact, the current edition of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, includes the following as one definition of anti-Semitism: "opposition to Zionism: sympathy with opponents of the state of Israel." With such an idea embedded in our language, anyone who wants to talk about Palestinians and their situation is placed in an awkward position.

As a strong supporter of freedom of speech, especially through the arts, Walsh thinks we should take heart from the fact that so many people around the world are making posters. "People who do posters and host exhibits and paint images and translate them and share them, these people are interested in dialogue," he says. "They're interested in talking to people, in arguing about the issue. I would think we'd want to support that tendency. The posters are unparalleled in their ability to educate us – I would like the people of *this* country to see them."

A rotating exhibit of Palestine posters may be viewed at: www.liberationgraphics.com



Advancing Popular Democracy,
Downwards and Outwards,
via the Arts