The Tawfiq Canaan Amulet Collection

Sala-Manca

Tawiq Canaan was born in 1882 in Beit Jala to a Christian Arab family. His father was the first Arab Lutheran pastor. Canaan attended Schneller High School in Jerusalem where he received a German education. In 1899, he and his family moved to Beirut where he studied medicine at the Protestant Syrian College. He completed his studies cum laude and joined the staff of the German hospital in Jerusalem where he married Margot Eilender in 1912. The two lived in the Musrara quarter of the city where Canaan also ran a private clinic. From 1919 until 1948, Canaan served as the medical director of the Jesus Hilfe Leprosarium where he conducted some groundbreaking experiments in treating Hansen's disease.

At the same time, Canaan was one of the fathers of Palestinian folklore studies and researched the living Palestinian heritage. As a doctor and folklorist, Canaan journeyed to Palestine's rural regions where he collected material culture and conducted observations. He tried to present a picture that differed from the one portrayed by most travel literature, which described the lives of the Palestinians and Bedouins as "authentic" reflections of Biblical life. He studied the connection between folk religions, magic, and madness, and started collecting amulets, some of which he received as payment for medical treatment he provided to villagers.

For a time, Canaan engaged in a dialogue about the possibility of a binational state with Judah Leib Magnes, the president of the Hebrew University and a member of Brit Shalom. Concurrently, he started to develop Palestinian national consciousness. After the 1929 riots, he signed

◂ Amulet. Hannan Abu Hussein. Concrete. 2014.

a declaration of support for the rioters. In 1934, he headed a delegation of Arab physicians demanding that the British limit the number of employment licenses issued to Jews, many of whom were at that time leaving Nazi Germany for Palestine. During the Great Arab Revolt, he was already very active in the Palestinian national movement and one of its important spokesmen. He was one of the first to formulate "the Palestinian problem," which, according to him, was rooted in a Zionist and British imperialist plot to dispossess the native Arabs. On the day that World War II broke out, Canaan was arrested because of his opposition to the mandatory government and was imprisoned in Acre Prison for two months. From that point onward, he severed all his social connections with Jews.

Despite his key role in the history of the leprosarium, Canaan is not mentioned in the historical exhibition about the institution and Hansen's disease. The exhibition was curated by Ruth Wexler, who, starting in 1988, served as the hospital's head nurse and worked there until it closed in 2009. Currently, the historical exhibition consists of two rooms featuring original furniture, patients' personal belongings, and office and medical objects, accompanied by placards with historical explanations about the building and the photographs.

Canaan's absence from the exhibition, his attraction to folklore, and his status as a Musrara resident, were the reasons we, the curators managing the art center at the former leprosarium and residents of Musrara not far from Canaan's home, took an interest in him. We decided to begin an initial project focused on the dialogue occurring within the walls of one of the places where he was a central figure. To do so, we invited artists to relate to this character and his absence from the history of the institution by referring to one of the doctor's several fascinating collections: some 1,400 amulets currently housed at Bir Zeit University. The university's website allows virtual access to the catalog.

In the June-July 2014 exhibition Footnote 12 and its related event, we dedicated a room to Canaan inspired by his amulet collection. The room was subsequently dismantled and reconstructed within the Ethnographic Department of the Museum of the Contemporary.

Three artists participated in the original exhibition, each of whom related to the amulet collection differently:

1. Hanan abu-Hussein chose to relate to a single medallion in the collection with the inscription "God gives, God heals." Using it as a model, she poured concrete to create about twenty enlarged medallions and hung them on the building's wall as amulets for the hospital itself (photograph on p. 34).
2. Anat Bar-El opted to relate to the magic dolls. Projecting enlarged photographs of these dolls on the wall, Bar-El created their outlines on the wall itself using white ceramics. During the exhibition, the doll sketches were peeled off the wall, thus losing their power and presence. Their magic powers disappeared alongside their referential force.
3. Yeshayahu Rabinowitz chose to recreate six amulets from Canaan's collection by replicating them accurately from photographs in the virtual catalog (photographs on pp. 38-39). The Palestinian amulets by Rabinowitz, an Israeli Jewish artist, raised questions about the essence of an artistic gesture, cultural appropriation, the construct of authenticity, appropriation of memory, and the line separating referencing from dispossessing. Rabinowitz's work refers not only to the amulets in Canaan's collection but also to fundamental questions of ownership, power, and artistic politics. The act in which Rabinowitz decided to engage not only recreated the original amulets but also their new context as catalog items. By also copying the labels the collection catalogers had added to the amulets, Rabinowitz gave the recreation a key aspect of the amulets' life: their new identity as sorted, catalogued, and political






▲ Left column: Amulets, Yeshayahu Rabinowitz, mixed media, 2014.

▲ Right column: Amulets from Tawfiq Canaan's collection. Cloth, leather, thread, metal.

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objects. Rabinowitz's amulet copies are not forgeries; they are original and "authentic" works of art when displayed in an artistic context.

The amulets in the exhibition apparently lack magic potency. They are not intended to be worn for healing purposes but they do have referential and reflexive power in relation to the history of the Palestinian amulet and the politics of cultural appropriation. Their recreation also has political meaning: the presence of the amulets reinforces their absence, the absence of their users, and the absence of Canaan from the Hansen House Historical Exhibition.

In his book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling writes that, in the modern era, observers must be presented with examples of authenticity.[1] Rabinowitz's amulets compete with the virtual representations of Palestinian folklore appearing in Bir Zeit University's website. Which of the two is the more original representation (if such a thing exists at all)?

In recreating Canaan's amulets, Rabinowitz, Abu-Hussein, Bar-El, and perhaps we, the curators, too, do we present ourselves as illegitimate heirs or self-appointed conservators of Canaan's heritage? In the absence of the original or in its inaccessibility, the copy might be considered an artistic alternative not only as a reference to an absent original but also as a different original, a starting point for critical historiography and ethnography through art.

[1] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 100.