

PALESTINIAN CARTOON HERO, by Martha Wallner



Naji Al-Ali, the Middle East's most famous political cartoonist, died on August 29, 1987, five weeks after being shot on the streets of London, just outside his office at the Al-Qabas newspaper. His murder was never solved, but it is generally agreed that Al-Ali, who had received many death threats in his lifetime, was assassinated because of the political content of his work. Fifteen years after his death, the graffiti image of Hanthala (also transliterated as Handala), the little boy created by Al-Ali, continues to appear on the besieged walls of the occupied territories.

Naji Al-Ali was born in 1938 in the Palestinian village of Al Shajarah, in the Galilee near Nazareth. In 1948, his family was exiled to the Ein Al Helwe Refugee Camp in southern Lebanon. There Al-Ali became politically engaged in the Palestinian struggle and began developing his skills as an artist and cartoonist. His first 'canvases' were the zinc walls of the precarious structures of the refugee camp and the cell walls that surrounded him during various periods of incarceration. Later, he worked for the largest independent daily in the Middle East, Al-Qabas, in Kuwait, and for Al-Safir, in Lebanon. His cartoons were published daily in Cairo, Beirut, Kuwait, Tunis, Abu Dhabi, London, and Paris--in newspapers across the political spectrum--and often skewered the Arab governments, the PLO, Israeli and U.S. policy, and the general international apathy towards the Palestinians' plight. For this he suffered censorship and multiple detentions.

It was in Kuwait that Hanthala was born. When asked about the character, Al-Ali explained: "Hanthala was born 10 years old and he will always be 10 years old. It was at that age I left my homeland. When he returns, Hanthala will still be ten, and then he will start growing up. The rules of nature do not apply to him... I drew him as a child who is not beautiful; his hair is the hair of the hedgehog who uses his thorns as a weapon. Hanthala is not a fat and happy, relaxed or pampered child. He is barefoot like the refugee camp children... At first he was a Palestinian child, but his consciousness developed to have a national, and then a global and human horizon."

Susan Greene, a Bay Area public artist and clinical psychologist, first learned about Hanthala when she traveled to Palestine in 1989 during the first Intifada. She was there as part of the "Break The Silence Mural Project," a collaborative effort between Jewish women and Palestinian artists. Greene was intrigued by Hanthala who had become a symbol of resistance and of the Palestinians' desire to return to their homeland.

**Naji Al-Ali:
an Artist With
Vision**

Yerba Buena Center
for the Arts
701 Mission Street
October 15, 2002 @



7:30m

The murder of Naji Al-Ali remains an unsolved crime.

This documentary supplies clues to his assassination through a detailed examination of his life and work. Shot in Lebanon, Palestine and London, the film combines location footage and interviews with leading Arab journalists, as well as a poignant interview with Naji's widow, Widad

The mural project brought Hanthala to San Francisco, and until June of last year, he could be seen in his usual stance--back to the viewer, hands crossed resolutely behind--on a mural at 21st and Mission streets. The mural was vandalized intermittently over the years, but after the start of the second Intifada the attacks turned virulent. Fearing for his life and his livelihood, the storeowner who had hosted the mural decided to board it up "until peace returns." Not long after, Greene decided to launch the Handala Project, Portal to Palestine website, which invites visitors to download the Hanthala graphic (also spelled Handala) and "become part of the story," by promoting his image and linking to activist websites.

Hanthala's persistent presence on the walls in the occupied territories and his more recent appearance in cyberspace would probably not surprise Al-Ali who once said, "[Hanthala] is witness to a generation that did not die, and he will not leave life, ever, he is eternal. Hanthala, whom I created, will not end after my end. I hope that [it is] not an exaggeration when I say that I will continue to live [in] Hanthala, even after I die."

To learn more about Naji Al-Ali and Hanthala visit:

www.handala.org, Handala graphic and links to activist sites.

<http://hanthala.virtualave.net/mandate.html> Autobiographical statement by Naji Al-Ali, poetry and information on human rights violations in Palestine.

<http://araflora.com/naji.htm> Extensive gallery of Ali's cartoons.

www.oneworld.org/index_oc/Caroon/palestine/palestine.html. Gallery of Banned Cartoons from around the world which include Ali's work

Martha Wallner is a media activist and a member of Jewish Voice for Peace.