TIMELESS TIES

History meets modernity in SAM’s simultaneous exhibitions.

BY BARBARA TRAINN BLANK

At first glance, the two exhibits that recently opened at the Seattle Art Museum may seem a world apart, but a closer look reveals connections that break through the surface.

The first exhibit, "Flowering Pleasure: Japanese Woodblock Prints," introduces museum visitors to the rich history of woodcut prints using some of the beloved images in Japanese art history. Although most of the prints are from the 17th and 18th centuries, the exhibit also features a few 19th-century works. The prints are arranged in chronological order, with each piece accompanied by a brief description of its historical context and significance.

The second exhibit, "Arab Spring," features works by contemporary artists from the Arab world. The exhibit includes paintings, sculptures, and installations that explore themes of identity, politics, and culture. The works are presented in a way that highlights the artists' unique perspectives and approaches to their craft.

The two exhibits complement each other, offering a unique look at different artistic traditions and periods. The comparison of these two exhibits highlights the ways in which art can connect us to the past and inspire us to think about the present.

But the two exhibits have much in common. The pieces in "Deep Roots" are inspired by traditional patterns and motifs of ornamentation, meaning decoration or embellishment. "The contemporary art complements the shared themes, patterns and aesthetic of the older art forms," Nye said.

"This unique pairing of exhibitions illustrates how ornamentation has been timeless across cultures," she said.

During the past century, Nye pointed out, embellishment and ornamentation fell out of favor, replaced by minimalism in art and architecture. "But many contemporary artists are now referencing and re-imagining traditional techniques of the past to root themselves in their own cultural identity," she said. "The artists in ‘Deep Roots’ demonstrate this in their mixed-media pieces, using rich patterns and textures and rooting our contemporary lives to the past."

In Patton's "Unfurled (Julia)" work from 2020, the floral patterns that appear in many of her paintings acts as personalized ornamentation by the artist. "In many cultures around the world, flowers denote care and devotion at weddings, funerals and celebrations," Nye said. "The florals in Patton's work serve as a metaphor to the lives of the figures portrayed. By enlarging the found photographs and adorning them with colors, symbols and patterns, she celebrates the women pictured."

Zughaib's piece, entitled "Arab Spring," reflects a complex background. Her paternal grandparents were from villages in the mountains of Lebanon. However, before the French colonists settled Lebanon and Syria, her family was considered Syrian.

In the Arab world, she was surrounded by the patterns on carpets, tiles, dishes and mosques and was drawn to the flat blocks of color and the way cultural patterns could tell stories and convey messages using symbols rather than figures. "These patterns and symbols can reach across borders and communicate among cultures," Zughaib said.

Alice Anne Schools, SAM's executive director, encouraged the opportunity and creative pairing of the two exhibitions. About once a year, Nye is "allowed to go all out" in creating an exhibition "from scratch," Schools explained.

"Flowering Pleasure: Japanese Woodblock Prints" and "Deep Roots: Ornamentation and Identity" ran through Jan. 22 at the Seattle Art Museum, 1001 N. 5th St., Seattle. For more information, visit www.seattleartmuseum.org.

The exhibits are accompanied by tours and activities for young people of different ages, coordinated by Rhonda Max Carver, education manager of the museum. Pastel artist Helen Zughaib will lead the sessions Jan. 15 and 24 for an artist talk and hands-on workshop.