

CONTEMPORARY IRAQI ART: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary art movement in Iraq began in the early 20th century, influenced by and interacting with the European styles emerging at that time, and with European methods of teaching and practising art. Later, with the “restoration” of ancient traditions from the golden age of Islamic art, a unique interplay was created between the rich artistic history of the region and the radical new possibilities offered by Modernism. The result was a flourishing and authentic contemporary art movement in the Arab world.

In the dynamic and unstable environment that has been Iraq from the mid-20th century to the current situation; the contemporary art movement has developed in part as a reflection of the socio-cultural situation in Iraq, and in part as a voice for criticism and comment on it.

This article will provide a glimpse at the development of this movement, which continues to evolve through the creative work of many Iraqi artists living inside and outside of Iraq, with special attention paid to the discourse of “restoration”, which forms a basis for some of the important recurring themes of recent Iraqi art. I will rely on demonstration; examining the work, aims, and cultural and artistic contexts of significant groups who helped to shape the unique direction of contemporary Iraqi art. As well as an introduction to these artists, this article will establish a basis for more in-depth future work.

FROM WORLD WAR I TO WORLD WAR II

Political realities in Iraq have long played a large role in shaping the social and cultural world. The media was the cultural phenomenon which played the largest role in presenting to Iraqi people images of the instabilities that afflicted their nation; war, peace, development and war again. These conditions are interwoven into Iraqi life, and have repeated themselves throughout history from ancient times to the present.

Early impulses towards modernity in Iraqi art were associated with the end of World War I, beginning with a group of Iraqi soldier artists educated in Turkey. They adopted the European academic convention of oil painting and applied it to local landscapes, military scenes and archaeological sites. Socially, these works attracted the patronage of the upper-class, who was attracted in part to its status as a new medium for delivering their conservative perspectives in political and religious discourse.

Government support for the arts in the post-World War I period was initially reflected in a number of sponsored scholarships for Iraqi artists, allowing them to study at fine arts academies in Paris, Rome, London and Berlin. These scholarships contributed significantly to establishing a solid base for a contemporary art movement in Iraq. The Music Institute was the first artistic institution to be established in Baghdad, followed later by departments for visual arts, drama, and design. Faiq Hassan (1914 - 1987) was Iraq's most prominent artist at this time, having completed his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris. He was chosen to be the Head of Painting at the institute. The European discourse of Modernism was being promoted and enthusiastically received in the Arabic and Middle Eastern region. It was seen as initiating a radical new era after a long period of control by the Ottoman Empire and its conservative ideologies. The education system was also swiftly developing at this time to meet the requirements of building the new state of Iraq under British supervision.

In the early years of World War II, Iraqi artists found many opportunities to interact with international artists. The arrival of Polish soldiers in Iraq in particular inspired new ideas and directions for Iraqi artists, as several of these soldiers were also practising artists. They were increasingly inspired to “abandon the clinical, academic style of the past and explore new horizons,” and it was felt that “an uninhibited, personalised and emotionally involved vision should be sought, not necessarily based on naturalistic representation, but penetrating beyond objects and phenomena to seek their true essence”¹. Artists such as Faiq Hassan and Jewad Selim (1921-1961) were particularly inspired by these new, Modernist approaches and explored Cubism and Expressionism in their work. The nature of the post-World War II environment was later reflected vividly in Iraqi art, which addressed the suffering it had caused locally and internationally as well as its effects on social and political life.

THE PHENOMENON OF ART GROUPS

The groups of artists that formed early on in the Iraqi contemporary art movement were clearly influenced by European practices. These groups were established and led by artists who had completed their higher education at European art institutions. The roots of these alliances should also be viewed within the context of modernisation at the time, which promoted collective action towards improving the socio-cultural fabric of Iraqi life. As a matter of fact, these artists contributed actively in creating the cultural structure of their society.

Al-Ruwad (The Pioneers) was the first group, formed by Faiq Hassan in the 1940s. Their first group exhibition was in 1950. They developed a movement towards incorporating local phenomena into art, and rejected what they saw as the artificial atmosphere of the artist's studio by engaging with nature and traditional Iraqi life.²



Figure 1: Faiq Hassan, *Desert*, 1975, oil on canvas, 100 x75cm (image courtesy of Rafa Al-Nasiri).

Jama'et Baghdad lil Fen al-Hadith (The Baghdad Modern Art Group) was established by Jewad Selim after he withdrew from the Pioneers group in 1951. For Jewad, “art was to be a tool to reassert national self-esteem and help build a distinctive Iraqi identity”³. He rejected Western imperialism and railed against its effects on life in Iraq and the Arab region. In Jewad's attempt to define Iraqi art, he drew attention to Iraq's unique artistic contributions to world art, from the products of ancient Iraqi civilisations to the miniatures of the Islamic golden age in the 13th Century. He endeavoured to restore many artistic practices from Iraq's history, and to reincorporate motifs from past eras into his contemporary work. According to al-Khamis, Jewad was “the first Iraqi artist to embark on a quest for national artistic identity within a modern conceptual framework”⁴. The seeds sown by the Baghdad Modern Art Group continued to grow even after the death of its main figurehead, with many young Iraqi artists, architects and designers building on the discourse it had created.



Figure 2: Jewad Selim, *Nusob Al-Hurreya (Monument to Freedom)*, 1961, Baghdad, Iraq.⁵ (image courtesy of Rafa Al-Nasiri).

RESTORATION

Iraq, being a conservative and religious oriented society, still harbours nostalgia for the artistic past in which symbols ornamenting objects held unlimited meaning. In Islamic art both the Arabic letters and the ornamental compositions (geometric and organic) which typically grace art works contain the power of divine symbolism in addition to their aesthetic values. This belief is based on the core position of the Arabic language in the life of Muslims, with the Quran miraculously utilising the language to present a precise description of religious truth⁶. There is therefore a strong societal inclination to present this discourse as an authentic context for art practice. This environment encourages what Jean Baudrillard calls the "nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity"⁷. In the 1950s, when Iraqi artists engaged with restoration, which was becoming a driving principle in creating an Iraqi artistic identity, their efforts met with broad acceptance from society.

Jewad Selim initiated the move in this direction on the basis of his direct interaction with ancient Iraqi artworks (through his early experience of work at the Iraqi museum). Other members of the Baghdad Modern Art Society followed suit alongside a number of newly graduated architects who developed their own trends toward creating a national identity within architecture.⁸

This movement was supported effectively by Government policies initiated after the 1970s. These were designed to enhance the role of historical motifs and styles as well as Islamic symbolism in Iraqi art and architecture. This support began in the wake of the 1958 revolution, which created a socialist, republican government and ended the monarchy which preceded it. The Academy of Fine Arts was established, offering degree programmes in plastic arts, drama, design, cinema, and later in calligraphy. This institution contributed much to the promotion of political and social consciousness in art principles and practice, and formed the core training ground for members of the contemporary art movement.⁹ Government support continued and in 1962 the National Museum of Modern Art was established, with the aim of providing a supportive environment for artists and of facilitating national and international collaborations.

THE NEW WAVE OF ART GROUPS

The continued evolution of the work of Iraqi artists is reflected in the emergence of new kinds of art groups, presenting alternative theories of how to engage with "restoration" and its context. They emphasise utilising its content and the tools it has employed to address the rapid development of modern life. This second wave started at the end of the 1960s, initiated by young artists who had graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and/or European and Far East schools of art.



Figure 3: Rafa al-Nasiri, *Light from Darkness*, 2008, acrylic & mixed media on board, 120cm (image courtesy of Rafa Al-Nasiri)



Figure 4: Rafa al-Nasiri, *Light from Darkness*, 2008, acrylic & mixed media on canvas, 120x120cm (image courtesy of Rafa Al-Nasiri)

Al-Ru'yah al-Jadida (The New Vision) issued their manifesto in 1968, announcing their revolutionary vision: "We believe that heritage is not a prison, a static phenomenon or a force capable of repressing creativity so long as we have the freedom to accept or challenge its norms... We are the new generation. We demand change, progression and creativity. Art stands in opposition to stasis. Art is continually creative. It is a mirror to the present moment and it's the soul of the future".¹⁰ The members considered the development of new concepts and techniques in Iraqi art works to be a key objective and commitment, a commitment which persists still (albeit without the group slogan) through the continued output of these members in the current Iraqi art movement. Rafa al-Nasiri (living outside Iraq from 1991) was a member of the group, and is now a key figure in the Iraqi contemporary art context. He is dedicated to experimentation and the creation of new, innovative methods and techniques in his works.

Shaker Hassan Al Said (1925-2004) played an active role in the Baghdad Modern Art Group throughout the 1950s, enhancing the philosophical principles of the group. He was heavily involved in broad intellectual research into the discourses of Islamic Sufism and Arabic literature. He used this wealth of data as an inspiration for his work as a painter and art theorist, and became a founding member of *Jama'at al-Bu'd al Wahid* (the One Dimension Group), which presented its first exhibition in 1971.

EXILE IN RECENT DECADES

The wars and isolation which faced Iraqis from the 1980s to the present have affected the nation widely and presented a massive challenge to social and cultural life. Art during this time has often been utilised to promote political agendas and propaganda. This, of course, meant that the state did continue to show support for artists, and to show an interest in what work they were creating. A climate of volatility and suffering either encouraged or forced many artists and intellectuals to settle abroad. For these artists, the current period is one of exile, and of looking back with strong emotion at their homeland. They are also engaged in cooperative and collaborative efforts internationally, ensuring that exhibitions and art projects are telling the world about Iraq and their people.

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- 1 Ulrike al-Khamis, "An Historical Overview 1900s-1990s", in Maysaloun Faraj (ed.), *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2000/2001), 23.
- 2 Shaker Hassan Al-Said. "The Iraqi Artists Groups", in Shaker Hassan Al-Said (ed.) *Dialogue in Plastic Arts*, (in Arabic), (Amman: Darat Al Funoon, 1995).
- 3 Ulrike al-Khamis. "An Historical Overview 1900s-1990s", in Maysaloun Faraj (ed.), *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2000/2001), 25.
- 4 Ibid., 25.
- 5 Ibid., 41. This artwork consists of 14 separate bronze castings averaging 8 metres in height. It spans a 10 x 50m slab, which is lifted 6m above a narrative of the 1958 revolution told through symbols meant to portray a verse of Arabic poetry, read from right to left. It is strikingly modern, yet pays homage to Assyrian and Babylonian wall relief.
- 6 Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab People* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005/1991), 59-75.
- 7 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2002/1996), 76.
- 8 Rifat Chadirji, *Al Ukhaider and the Crystal Palace*, in Arabic, (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books , 1991), 329-379.
- 9 Qassim Saad, "Design Education in Iraq: Reflections on its Emergence, Development and Contexts", in "Narrative in Design and Development", (Online Collaborative Project, 2006), 3. http://thinkcycle.com/tc-papers/?topic_id=55705&type=all as last accessed on 10 October 2008.
- 10 Rafa Al-Nasiri, "The Iraqi Artists Groups", in Shaker Hassan Al-Said (ed.) *Dialogue in Plastic Arts*, in Arabic, (Amman: Darat Al Funoon, 1995), 68-69. Texts from the group manifesto in 1968 were in the Arabic language and were translated by the author.