

From Yahya Alwasiti to Hafidh Aldroubi to Rafa Alnasira: Building Bridges

By Siba Aldabbagh



Al-Harith joins a caravan to Mecca and meets Abu Zayd along the way, fols 94v-95r from the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, written and illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti Iraq, 1237 AD

My academic research focuses on how poetry and visual art from the contemporary Arab world can work together to form colourful kaleidoscopes of cultural critique, political commentary and an even more encompassing philosophical debate.

In my first draft there was a concern that I hadn't made evident the art scene in the Arab world prior to the presence of the Iraqi artist Rafa Alnasiri partly due to my lack of schooling in art history, but also as a result of the insufficient scholarly work on the influence of the early arts of the Islamic and Arab world on contemporary art in the Middle East - for, methinks, we can all become Art Historians should we do our research properly, I

have found the journey towards enlightenment (yes a small 'e') a muddy trench to walk though. Not really my research interest, I have had to take a journey right back to the history of art in the early years of the Islamic empire. From this beginning, I have travelled right through to the cultural blossoming during the Abbasid caliphate and Yahya Alwasiti's colourful and detailed illustrations of *maqamat alhariri*, then to the expansion of the empire to Al-Andalus and the Fatimid caliphate from Egypt, all the way to the Ottoman empire and its patronage of the arts which was to become an international phenomenon in its own right influencing the likes of William Morris.

The modern and contemporary art scene has received considerable attention in today's art circles. From curatorial initiatives to academic studies on modern and contemporary we cannot avoid the word contemporary. Charles Pocock's 'Iraqi Art Today' exhibition and book, and his recent article published in the previous volume of *Contemporary Practices Art Journal*, and May Muzaffar's numerous articles in English show us how the developments in modern Iraqi art have led to the contemporary art scene, but there is nothing that adequately traces the trajectory from the Islamic empire proper until today providing a detailed analysis of the different art groups' agenda's, techniques and wider relevance to the political and social environments. This work does not even scratch the surface of the richly jewelled art history of Arab lands, but it is an attempt nevertheless. Let us hope it inspires more in depth future study.

The artist that I have chosen to discuss in this essay is Hafidh Al-Droubi. Very little is known about him, yet we are told time and time again that he is one of the leading figures in modern Iraqi art, having taught the now famous Dia Al-'Azzawi. Pioneering the Impressionist movement in Iraq, he later moved on to become one of the first artists to embrace Cubism, integrating both Impressionism and Cubism in his

works. Despite this massive contribution to the history of art in Iraq, Al-Droubi's works scarcely appear in discussions on modern Iraqi art, and if they do it is only a superficial scratch on the surface of his deep-seated dedication to the art movement in Iraq and does not discuss how Islamic art had an impact on his art. What this perspective underlies is that artists do not work in a vacuum. Their creative genius does not stretch so much so that they magically invent and master art forms and thought-structures. Their originality comes in later in the equation. It must be preceded by pre-existing art forms. I will begin by outlining the principle art forms of the Islamic world, the developments taking place in Iraq, the rise of the pioneers including Aldroubi to end with a discussion on the impact his art has had on contemporary art

The paintings of Alwasiti, which are some of the earliest proofs of figurative paintings in the Islamic world, documented the cultural practices of his day. Islamic arts, both of the same Abbasid caliphate and further west in Andalusia, were formulated around the idea of recreating a notion of a utopian paradise on earth. The Alhambra in Granada is an example of this. With richly dense gardens, to pools and ornately decorated walls, tiles, floorings and ceilings, the whole concept behind such a grand architectural project was not just what a reductive reading would have suggested to be a political statement bombastically exhibiting the strength and mightiness of Islamic presence in Andalusia to ward off the Christian armies, but was additionally coupled with a need to feel at 'home' with the progressive thought that home can only be the heaven promised by Allah to the God-fearing. This fundamental belief underlined all major architectural developments across Muslim lands. Nature was thus to be a major motif as the Quran describes Paradise in terms of its unimaginable abundance of all-prohibited and luxurious foods and drinks. How this was done varied, but it is sufficient to say there was an icon-indexical dialogue taking place in the art scene. I refer here to Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of icon as that which is a true likeness of the represented, and indexical as meaning a referent of the represented, for example, the tranquillity and harmony of water dripping in an Ottoman courtyard is indexical for the peaceful quietude in Paradise.

We know that Islamic art history is much more rich and varied than I have outlined above, but it gives you a frugal taste of what the art scene was like. Towards the end of the Ottoman empire, and with British and French imperialism on the rise, travel between the continents along with trade increased. Techniques and ideas were being exchanged, of course with a power struggle intertwined. Drawing closer to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, probably the earliest painter in modern Iraq, who studied painting in the European tradition was Abdul Qadir Alrasam who trained at the Military College in Istanbul. His style was realistic and he was known for his landscape paintings of Iraq, mainly 'View of Baghdad': the two rivers, open idyllic fields and farmers at work. In line with the utopian ideals presented in Islamic art from the previous centuries, Alrasam continues in this sense, but breaks with the past in the way that he shows this idealism. It is through picturesque depictions of the natural environment, unspoilt, untouched, conflict-free.

From Alrasam, we can already see many similarities with the artist surveyed here, Hafidh Aldroubi. Born in 1914, he taught drawing in Iraq being the first artist to open his own freelance studio before receiving a scholarship to study in Rome in 1936. He later studied at Goldsmiths College, London. On returning to Baghdad, he co-founded the first Iraqi Fine Art Society and was a member of the Pioneers. He did not completely abandon the concerns of Iraqi society, but like the early art of Alrasam, his techniques were based on Western art movements, in Aldroubi's case, Impressionism during his early career. Such adaptation of form for a unique Iraqi audience, culture and experience reflects Iraq's social and political platform during the 1950s and 1960s, the same period during which he established the Impressionists Group (1953). Despite the apparent dedication to Western Impressionism marked in this name, Aldroubi encouraged experimentation with a variety of techniques. Marking the latter years of Hashemite rule in Iraq, he took advantage of Iraq's social, political and economic ties with Britain and helped forge a positive tapestry of cultural borrowing and adaptation, whilst preserving facets of Iraqi tradition and norms in his paintings. Later, he became Dean of



Hafidh Aldroubi, *Souq in Baghdad*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 100x60cm - Private collection

the Iraqi Fine Arts Academy and, at the Alwasiti Festival in 1972, was one of the four artists honored by the state. For example, women dressed in the traditional abaya feature frequently in Aldroubi's works as do Baghdad's bazaars and other distinctive architectural features. The abaya is part of Iraqi folklore and tradition, representing Iraqiness but free from religious overtones. The abaya has been worn by Iraqi women for decades and does not constitute an outward sign of one's religious denomination. Aldroubi's insistence of having women feature in his works with the abaya is not an indication of his own belief in having women covered up, but is an attestation of his secular liberalist tendencies that all religious groups should co-exist without obvious demarcations singling out any particular group. This is also true of his political beliefs whereby his paintings do not conform to any ideological wave.

Instead, Aldroubi was more concerned with Iraq, and more specifically Baghdad. In fact, he was known as the

'City Painter' because he was interested in Baghdad, its streets, its markets and its people in his painting. This is an important feature of secular liberalist artists in Iraq. Tired of the polarised debates continuous in Iraqi intellectual and political circles, Aldroubi found it incumbent to embrace the nooks and crannies, buildings and markets of Baghdad; to paint the everyday, humdrum and simplicity of working class Iraqis and ultimately to celebrate the colourfulness of diversity undermined by ethnic, political, religious and sectarian strife. Following from romance with Impressionism, he moved on to explore Surrealism and Futurism, but is known for using the Cubist style to depict local themes. In his works, colors and abstract shapes traverse the canvas to create a feeling of spontaneity, of ephemerality, with a sense of *joi de vivre*. It is an artist's call to memorialize the youthful spirit of the Iraqi people despite all its struggles in the face of political instability due to the weak Hashemite monarchy having its arms twisted by the major players in Iraq's political circles. It is a nationalistic resistance, a struggle to survive and enjoy life to the max. But such optimism was not to last long. Soon came Qasim's coup d'état and subsequent execution of most of the Iraqi Hashemite family, followed by Abdulsalam Arif's overthrow of Abdulkarim Qasim and the installment of Iraq's first Ba'hist regime. It is this turbulence which changed the demographics of the art scene in Iraq, and from whence the contemporary artists we see today depart. Being drawn into such a morbid umbrella no doubt has its affect on the social psyche and artistic imagination. During the late 1960s, when Iraq reached its height of bloodshed, the New Vision Group of which Alnasiri was a member was born. Its artists produced a manifesto aiming to rid Iraqi art of its blindingly optimistic themes, and instead seek a new art which would demonstrate the demolition of previous quietude and simplicity. There was a new desire to plunge into the deepest and darkest ends of humanity, to explore the dire state of the Iraqi people and how this has affected notions of the self and human spirituality. Looking back at Aldroubi's heavy borrowing of European art sensibility, we could call it an occidental inferiority towards Europe, and a drive towards mimicry. But, had it not been for this, our contemporary artists would have had no grain to



Hafidh Aldroubi, Suhail Alhindawi, 2011, Ceramic, 40cm diameter - Courtesy of the artist.

“paint” against. His works are now found all over Iraq, from Saddam’s Palaces to museums in Iraq, Baghdad’s Nadi Al’alwiya and even in his own house in Baghdad, a part of which was turned into a gallery and where events and exhibitions relating to art were held. In the international market, some of his works have been sold by Bonham’s and Christie’s in Dubai; several others have simply gone missing during the lootings following the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Prior to that, Suhail Alhindawi received approval from the Ministry of Information to display a memorial to the major contributors to Iraqi society and culture, including artists, writers and scientists. But it was not to happen, for there was no culture to celebrate. Iraq was the land of the greatest dictator in living memory, part of the axis of evil who dug Iraqi civilisation beneath the rubble. Suhail Alhindawi is a ceramicist who was to have his dedication to Hafidh. Let us hope that someone wakes up soon and picks up the pieces to celebrate one of Iraq’s most important artists.

About the writer

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