

The Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present:
Contemporary Art from Iraq and Syria
at the British Museum

by Gemma Tully

The British Museum is internationally renowned as a bastion of tradition. Although perhaps perceived as formal and intimidating, the epitome of what Robert Jones calls the problem of the British brown museum sign – ‘a capital M, raised on a podium, imprisoned in a box, and topped with a portico’ (August 2008: 16), the British Museum is redefining museological boundaries. Questioning people’s concepts of the museum as an institution, the leadership of Neil McGregor and the vision of a select few curators is beginning to relocate the museum’s role away from that of a dictator of history, to that of a conversationalist, provoking cross-cultural and cross-temporal dialogue. One of the most powerful methods through which this shift is taking place involves the incorporation of contemporary artworks both within specific exhibits and scattered throughout the body of the museum.

Iraq’s Past Speaks to the Present 1 represents one of the current manifestations of this creative coupling. The exhibition is curated by Venetia Porter, Assistant Keeper (Curator) of the Islamic and Contemporary Middle East. Porter is perhaps best known for the international success of the 2006 British Museum exhibition, *Word into Art* (2006, 2008), which brought together over eighty artists from the Middle East and North Africa though the theme of the Arabic script. *Iraq’s Past Speaks to the Present* is on a much smaller scale, but deals with a range of artworks, beyond the realm of script, and plays a vital role in the continued enhancement of the presence of contemporary art from the Middle East within the British Museum.

Situated within the John Addis Islamic Gallery, the exhibition reflects close collaboration with eleven artists from the Arab world: ten Iraqi, one Syrian. Exploring the depth of Iraq’s ancient traditions and history, alongside the destruction brought about by the current Iraq war, the

1- *Iraq’s Past Speaks to the Present* is a temporary exhibition running from the 10th of November 2008 until the 15th of March 2009 in the John Addis Islamic Gallery, Room 34.

SUAD AL-ATTAR, *Cry of Mesopotamia*, 2004. Courtesy of the British Museum.

artists reflect upon the inspirational archaeological and artistic remains from ancient Iraq and the role that the past has to play as they confront the Iraq of today.

Enclosed by two walls and occupying the central space in the John Addis gallery, the exhibition negotiates a position as a unique entity in dialogue with, yet not defined by, the surrounding traditional, Islamic artefacts. The dividing walls are lined with sixteen works which are complemented by two display cases containing pieces of small sculpture and various media unsuitable for hanging. It is within these cases that the visitor also finds a number of ancient items. For example, placed in the central case, the viewer finds: Tablet 3 from Sippar, a cuneiform tablet dated to around 1800-1600BC which tells the tale of Gilgamesh, and a fragment of brick with dragon scales from Babylon, dating approximately 600-550BC. Exhibited alongside Maysaloun Faraj's Ancient Land (not dated), which contains elements of cuneiform-like script, and Hanaa Mal-Allah's Babylonian Mushhushu dragon, The God Marduk (2008), the ancient and contemporary are engaged in a clear dialogue (Figure 1). This partnership is significant as it represents the first time that ancient artefacts and contemporary artworks have been displayed alongside one another in the John Addis Islamic Galleries (Pers. Comms Venetia Porter 26/11/08). The exhibition however, is not merely a retrospective on the Iraqi past; instead, it is through the highly visual and emotive channel of myth and history that the artists contribute a personal commentary on the Iraq of today, offering visitors something beyond the accepted Western, journalistic perspective. For these reasons, one of the pieces that I found the most

2- The carpet was specifically designed for the British Museum by the Sezgin family from Eastern Turkey in 1989

3-Babylon: Myth and Reality runs from the 13th of November 2008 to the 15th of March 2009.



WALID SITI, Untitled, 2001. Courtesy of the British Museum

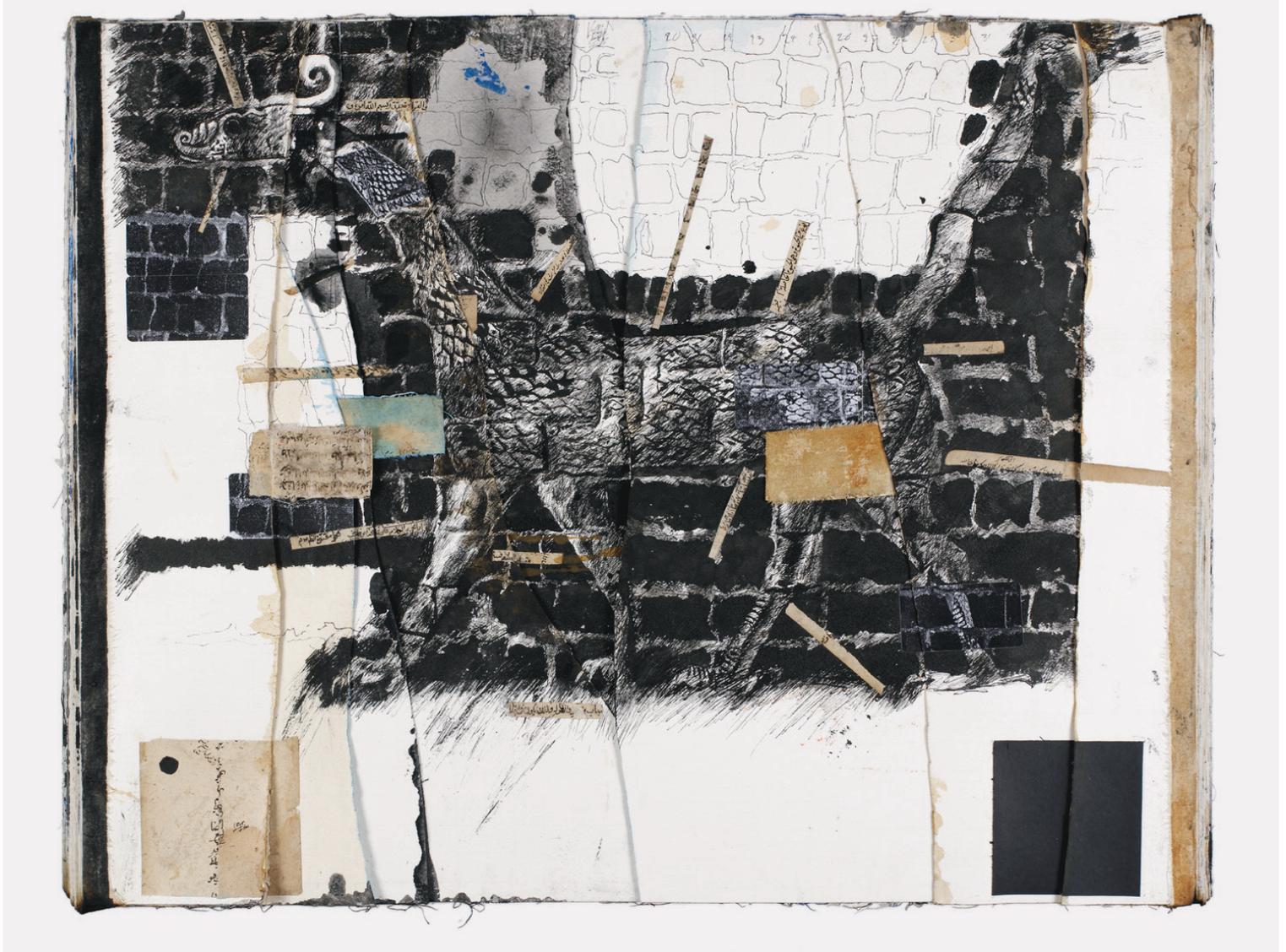
powerful was Suad al-Attar's Cry of Mesopotamia (2004, Figure 2). The work is displayed together with three of al-Attar's other ink and watercolours on paper. These three pieces include evocations of the ancient and the modern, from the iconography of the Gilgamesh epic, ancient sculpture, poetry, Arabic script and more recent Iraqi carpet patterns (Gilgamesh 1991 and after), to the timeless faces of numerous Iraqi men and women in the two other pieces (Untitled 2001-2004). Through the emerging face of a crying woman, taken from an Iraqi newspaper in 2003 at the beginning of the current Iraq war, Cry of Mesopotamia unites the afore-

mentioned pieces to address the pain felt in the region of Iraq, past and present, through what contributing artist Hanaa Mal-Allah describes as 'the cycle of war, burning and occupation' (Pers Comms 11/12/08). Suad al-Attar's image is incredibly moving, but empathy grows as the artist makes a connection in the display text with Ibn al-Rumi's (d.896) poem which begins:

My soul cries alas for thee,
O my land...

This combination of the poetic, the modern and the historical is evident throughout the exhibition and communicates with the viewer to express both the pain of modern Iraqis and how the current situation, inseparable from deeper histories,

has created new direction for many Iraqi born artists. The personal tone of the display text, enhanced by the beautiful colour and further detail of the exhibition guide, brings this potentially difficult subject matter alive. Warm spot lighting and the large, rich, red and blue rug which covers the entire floor area, also add to the exhibit's accessibility, creating an intimate and inviting space for perusal and reflection. It is small touches like this which are so important when presenting narratives and artistic styles with which predominantly Western, British Museum visitors may not feel familiar.



HANAA MAL-ALLAH, *The God Marduk*, 2008. Courtesy of the British Museum.

Building upon the element of increased accessibility for non-traditional display formats and subject matters is the fact that Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present was specifically designed to run in parallel with the British Museum's temporary exhibition *Babylon. 3* Curated by Irvin Finkel, Jonathan Taylor and Michael Seymour from the Department of the Middle East, Babylon. Myth and Reality aims to 'explore Babylon's story from ancient times to the present' (Exhibition display text). The archaeological objects focus on the 60 year period from which the myth that dominates many modern understandings of Babylon originates. Through the incorporation of art works that illustrate various understandings of Babylon, from the Tower of Babel to the 'writing on the wall', and dating from the 1300s to the modern day, the exhibition moves back and forth between myth and archaeological reality. Encouraging visitors to reconsider their views on Babylon,

the exhibition also brings modern Iraq into contemplation, adding contemporary relevance to the Babylon dialogue. Although it is a shame that logistical issues hindered the incorporation of contemporary Iraqi artworks into Babylon, particularly as Western examples are present, there is a bright side. While one cannot deny the more powerful connotations that the culturally direct, cross temporal dialogue of Iraqi art could bring to Babylon, to be successful, this form of art-artefact communication must be founded on clear links. Therefore, although pieces such as Hanaa Mal-Allah's captivating reincarnation of the Babylonian *mashhushshu* dragon, *The God Marduk* (2008 Figure 3) and Walid Siti's *Towers of Babel* (Untitled 2001 Figure 4), would have been obvious additions, those works interacting with elements of ancient and modern history through other channels, such as the *Gilgamesh* epic, would not have made the final cut. The compromise is therefore worthwhile, and when seen as a double act, Babylon and Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present

IN REVIEW

truly offer visitors something new, re-engaging with notions of Iraq's past but also making contact with the country's current situation, which finds resonance with us all.

References

Jones, R. 2008. Museums need to be rebranded if they want to show how much they have changed. *Museums Journal*, August 2008:16.

Porter, V. 2006. *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, London: British Museum Press.

Porter, V. 2008, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, Dubai: Dubai Holding.

Personal Communications

Venetia Porter, Curator. Location: Department of the Middle East, British Museum, 26/11/2008.

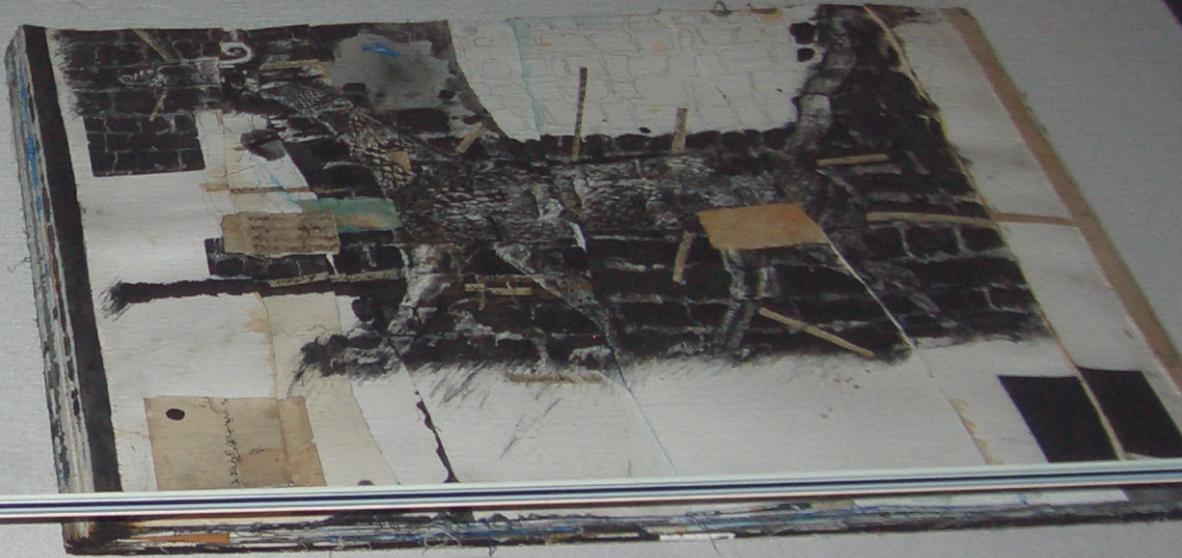
Hanaa Mal-Allah, Artist. Location: John Addis Islamic Gallery, British Museum, 11/12/2008.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Venetia Porter and Hanaa Mal-Allah for their insight into the artistic and curatorial process of *Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present*. I am also grateful to Alex Reall for his support and comments on the piece.



Display case showing the relationship between the archaeological objects and contemporary art works. Author's own image.



From one of
gates, several
patterns, design
element, herke
sample of
in the
Marsh and

Hanaa Ma'alallah
The Gulf Marshes (2009)

Ma'alallah studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, under the renowned and influential artist Shakir Hassan al-Isawi, and she was recently awarded a PhD on the philosophy of painting. In 2009, she has taught and lectured at the Baghdad and is currently a fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Ma'alallah uses the form of the artist's book to focus upon the destruction and loss of Iraqi heritage.

The cover of the book features the ancient Babylonian motif of the griffin/dragon or dragon-headed. Ma'alallah was the patron deity of Babylon and was worshipped by ancient Mesopotamians and Assyrians, and the griffin/dragon is a symbol of Ma'alallah herself.

© 2009 Hanaa Ma'alallah