

## The reason for the Project – Art In Iraq Today

*By Charles Pocock*



**Jabra Ibrahim Jabra**, Baghdad, 1970s.

I am often asked why we chose the title “Art in Iraq Today” for the book and exhibition series when the artists discussed are now part of the Iraqi diaspora and their recent work, exhibited at our Gallery, is more an outcome of their experiences as expatriates than a reflection of what art in Iraq is today. One of the major aims of this project was to highlight the enduring talent of contemporary Iraqi artists despite the circumstances that have forced them to relocate to various parts of the globe. Seeing that the artists discussed in this publication spent their formative years in Iraq, and have been profoundly shaped by such experiences, their work carries within it, along with their experience of exile, traces of what contemporary art in Iraq might have been today. Art in Iraq Today should therefore be seen as more emblematic than literal in its message. The title also needs to be understood in the context of the project’s inception, which is specifically linked to the writing of pre-eminent art critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra.

In March 2010, Dia Al-Azzawi and I discussed running

a series of exhibitions displaying the work of a group of contemporary Iraqi artists. We knew that the project would be a critical success, though not necessarily a commercial one, but we both believed that it was essential, not just for Iraq but also for the entire region. Two months later, in his critique of Col. Qais Hussein’s report surveying Baghdad’s explosions, Anthony Shadid of the New York Times noted that the house of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (b. Bethlehem, 1919-1994) had been destroyed along with all his papers. ‘Jabra’s house represented something far greater that has been lost,’ Shadid writes, ‘To some, its destruction serves as an epitaph of sorts, the end of eras in Iraq and the Arab world and the eclipse, in war and strife, of the ideal he represented.’<sup>1</sup> It was then that we decided to dedicate the project to the memory of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and his seminal essays about modern Iraqi art, titled ‘Art in Iraq Today’ (1961) and ‘Iraq Art Today’ (1972). The exhibition series and corresponding publication, *Art in Iraq Today*, thus marks the fiftieth anniversary of Jabra’s scholarly contribution, which was initiated in a different era, when Iraq was a very different country.

Modern Iraqi art represents one of the main foundation stones of modern Arab culture and by proxy, modern Middle Eastern culture. As with Iran, modern and contemporary culture in Iraq draws heavily on its rich pre-Islamic and Islamic heritage, from ancient times that brought us the Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Abbasid civilizations through to Ottoman Baghdad, the Iraq of the “Baath” party, and today an Iraq that has been ravaged by foreign invasion.

In November 2010, during the lecture organized in conjunction with TDIC and NYU Abu Dhabi Institute during the Abu Dhabi Art Fair, Nada Shabout, Shiva Balaghi, Dia Al-Azzawi and Parviz Tanavoli spoke about the artistic life of Iraq and Iran, the similarities of how both cultures are defined was identified. Though completely distinct from each other in many ways, each nation mirrored events that formed the independent cultures of each country - through to the present day



Jewad Selim, Atta Sabri, Hafidh Al-Droubi and others, Baghdad, 1940s.

with the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein - their demise and in the case of Iraq, the disintegration of the cultural fabric of its society.

In the 1970s, Iraq, specifically Baghdad, was at the centre of a pan-Arab art movement. The country's art scene and exhibitions, such as the 1971 One Dimension Group show, were bolstered by the highly influential Al Wasiti Festival held in 1972.<sup>2</sup> A year later, the First Congress of Arab Artists was held, followed by the First Arab Biennial in 1974. Prominent artists, who contributed and encouraged such collectives included Shakir Hassan Al Said, Dia Al-Azzawi, Rifa Al-Nasiri, Ismail Fattah and Kadhem Hayder. The artists of this generation had followed what had been established by Faiq Hassan in the 1950s with the Pioneers Group (Al Ruwad ) and developed further, and in a different direction, by Jewad Selim and his formation of the Baghdad Group of Modern Art (Jama'at Baghdad lili Fen al-Hadith).<sup>2</sup> Further artistic groups formulated in

the subsequent decades include the Impressionists (Al Intiba'ieen), Innovationists (Jama'at al-Mujadidine), and New Vision Group (al-Ru'yya al-Jadidah), who were predominately responsible for encouraging a pan-Arab focus, and the Al Wasiti Festival, which in turn led to the launch of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists.<sup>4</sup> During the late-1960s, a number of Iraqi artists began to exhibit their work outside of the country, with Al-Nasiri and Al-Azzawi exhibiting at Gallery One in Beirut,<sup>5</sup> followed by shows in Kuwait in 1969 at the Sultan Gallery. It was the Al Wasiti Festival, however, that had the greatest impact on the artistic scene, both locally and internationally, since it brought together artists from across the Arab world including Mohamed Melehi, Mohammed Al-Qasbi and Mohammed Chabia, from Morocco, Al-Hadi Al-Turki from Tunis, Araf Al-Rays and Amine Al-Basha from Lebanon, and Al-Bahjory from Egypt. This added a new dimension to modern Arab art, reinforcing a commitment to pan-



Faiq Hassan, Baghdad, 1960s.



Mahmoud Sabri, Baghdad, 1950s.

Arabism. International exposure was enhanced further with exhibitions of Iraqi art in London at the Patrick Seale Gallery, Casablanca at Galerie Nadhar, Paris at Galerie Faris and Geneva at Galerie Central. In the 1970s, many artists began to focus on different media such as printmaking—under a movement known as the Graphics Movement—and ceramics.<sup>6</sup> A number of groundbreaking publications were also released during the 1960s, including the critiques of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, up until the early 1980s. Notable texts by the critic include his 1961 and 1972 Iraqi art essays, as well

as ‘The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art’ (1983).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, it became clear to many artists that the art movement, that had originally developed organically and free of political intervention from the 1950s, was becoming a political tool of propaganda for the mandarins of the Baath party. Forced to work within the parameters set by the government in state funded shows – the Party Exhibition replaced the previously established Iraqi Artist Society annual exhibitions - because of the supremacy of the one-party state, a number of leading artists decided to leave Iraq for Europe and North America. In a milieu where the Iran-Iraq war pervaded every aspect of daily life, the government became the only dominant patron of the arts. Monuments such as the Unknown Soldier (1982) by Khalid Al-Rahhal, The Martyr’s Monument (1983) by Ismail Fattah<sup>7</sup> and The Victory Arch (1989), initiated by Al-Rahhal and completed by Mohamed Ghani, dominated the cultural program of the 1980s. The vibrant, intellectual approach to art in the previous decades became increasingly overpowered by the pressure to promote a political message, which resulted, in 1986, in the replacement of the National Museum of Modern Art with the Saddam Arts Centre, demonstrating the complete domination of the state over the arts.

The Iran-Iraq War was quickly followed by the invasion of Kuwait and the resulting sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations. Creative expression posed an even greater challenge, and it became extremely difficult for artists to earn a living within the country, forcing many to emigrate. Even so, artists such as Ghassan Ghaib, Ali Jabbar, Hanaa Malallah, Mahmoud Obaidi, Kareem Risan and Nazar Yahya remained in Iraq, and in 1992 the last real artistic manifesto was created under the name Baghdad Group (Jama’at Baghdad).<sup>8</sup> Devastation of the country deepened following the 2003 US invasion, resulting in the downfall of the Baath party and the execution by hanging of Saddam Hussein, making it impossible for artists to continue working or remain in the country.

The recent years of occupation have led to the obliteration of the modern and contemporary arts movements in Iraq. The Saddam Arts Centre was looted, and the collections held in the villas of art patrons completely



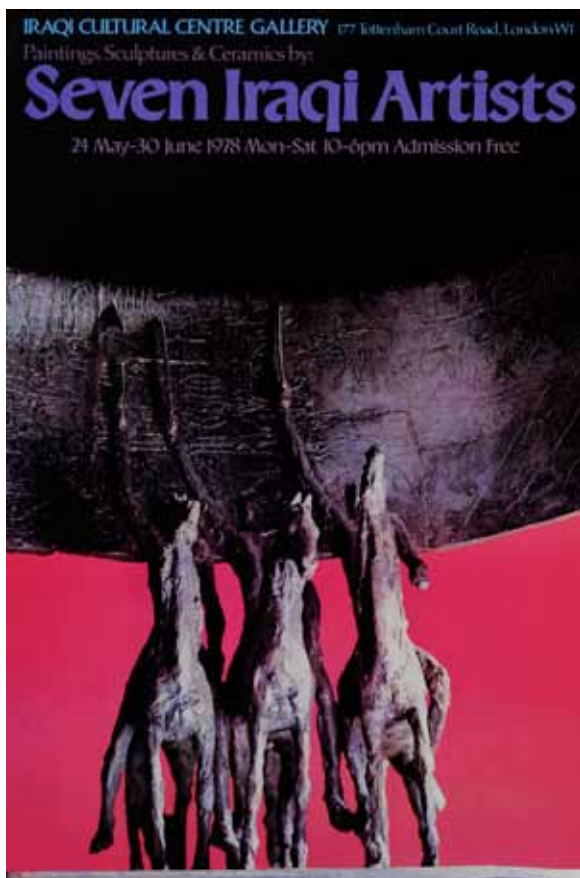
**Dia Al-Azawi, Ismail Fattah and Rafa Al-Nasiri, Baghdad, 1960s.**

ransacked. In April 2003, all records and officially held catalogues were decimated during the destruction of the National Art Library, and in March 2007, Al Mutannabi Street, the home of Baghdad's booksellers, was destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

Today, a new generation of Iraqi artists, now part of the diaspora, is receiving much deserved international acclaim. This includes Jananne Al-Ani, Adel Abidin, Halim Al-Karim, Wafaa Bilal and Nedim Kufi; their works are held amongst major collections in Europe, North America and the Middle East. Their oeuvres comprise photography and video installation and is conceptual in nature, exploring various manifestations of injustice within and outside the Arab world; with many of them, the events in the recent history of Iraq are expressed in relation to their personal experiences. Apart from Al-Ani and Bilal, all started their studies in fine art in Baghdad, drawing on the legacies of those before them. While they do not necessarily demonstrate a link to the previous generations of artists in their choice of medium, they do follow a similar course of documenting the present by referencing the past. This

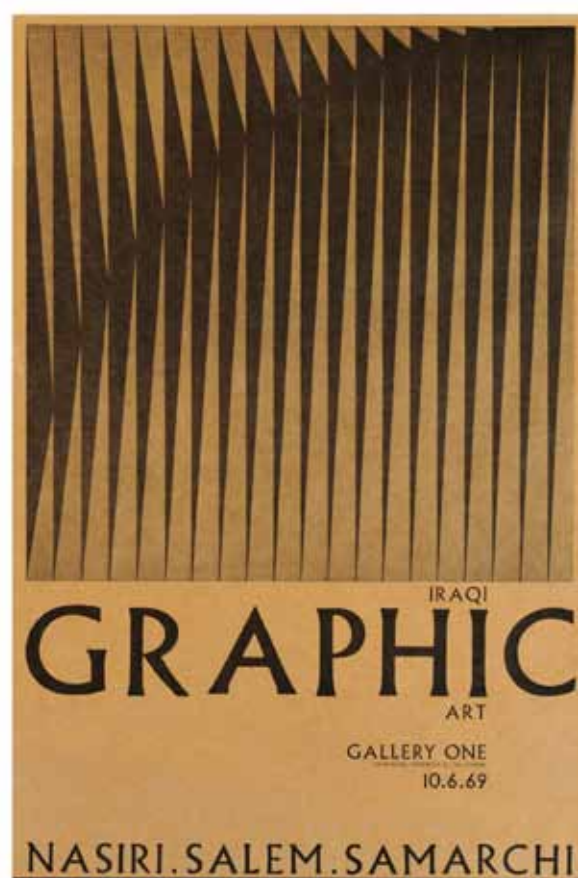
is reflected in their allusions to the Assyrian reliefs in Nineveh, the *Maqamat Al Hariri* by Yahya ibn Mahmud Al-Wasiti,<sup>10</sup> and the works of Faiq Hassan and Jewad Selim. Indeed, the return of the Iraqi Pavilion, 'Aqua Ferita' (Wounded Water), this year at the Fifty-fourth Venice Biennale (2011), which includes the work of Adel Abidin, Ahmed Alsoudani, Ali Assaf, Azad Nanakeli, Halim Al-Karim and Walid Siti, demonstrates the resolute spirit of Iraqi art and artists. After thirty-five years of absence from Venice, and thirty years from the international art world, Iraqi art is returning in force as a unified body. It is lamentable that this is no longer possible within Iraq, however, the contemporary arts of the country undoubtedly remain in the hearts and minds of artists of the diaspora. Iraqi art now draws increasing attention from international seasoned collectors and is at the forefront of modern and contemporary Arab art yet again.

Presently, nothing in Iraq remains that can relate to the movements established by the modern art pioneers and the legacies of the Pioneers Group, Baghdad Group of Modern Art, New Vision Group, and what was expressed



**Dia Al-Az z awi**, Exhibition poster (1978), Offset printing, 76x51 cm.

in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's essay 'Art in Iraq Today.' All this can only be found in the work of displaced artists; they remain alive in their hearts and minds, wherever they may reside. The creative legacies of the 1950s and 1960s generations are intrinsic to an understanding of modern and contemporary Arab culture, just as the cultural legacies of classical art, the Renaissance, Romanticism, Impressionism and Expressionism are crucial to the history of Western culture. What makes the situation so tragic is that outside the inner circles of the Iraqi cultural community, there is limited knowledge of what has shaped Iraq's modern arts scene. Unfortunately, this also provides opportunities for looters, who sell works, often through auction houses and dealers, to unsuspecting and ill-advised buyers who do not have access to enough information related to the subject. On a more positive note, however, modern Iraqi art has now found a home in the recently established Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, formally opened



**Hashim Sammarchi**, Exhibition poster (1969), Offset printing, 60 x 40 cm.

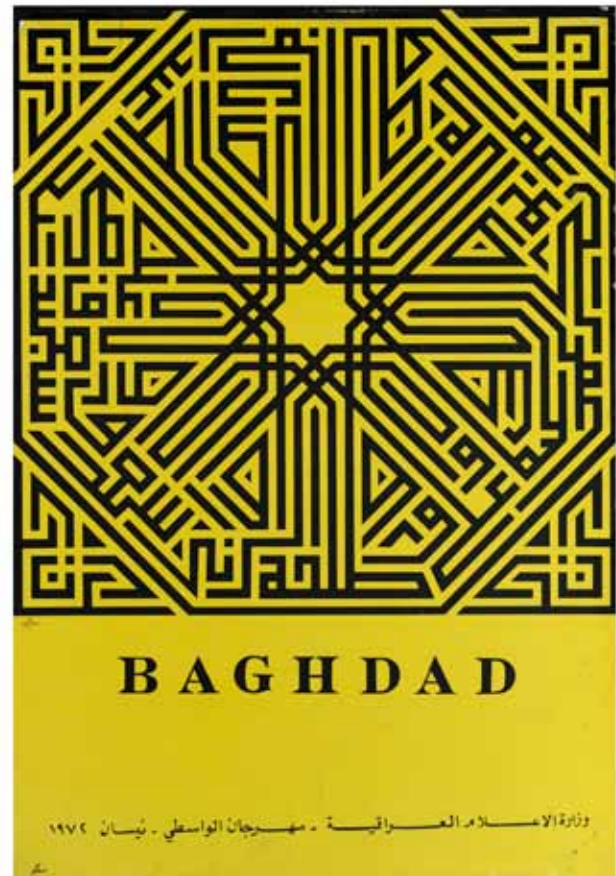
in December 2010, it holds an incredible collection of works by modern Iraqi artists. I believe, what we are doing will also make a difference: highlighting the contribution of pioneering artists and movements, working with artists to compile a complete catalogue raisonné of a range of work, and above all producing publications in English and Arabic.

With Art in Iraq Today, there are two key ideas that form its basis, and refer back to the question of our choice of title. The first is the contribution of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's study of modern Iraqi art. With the limited availability of modern Iraqi art resources, the significance of Jabra's essays became apparent. Apart from his essays and the work of a few others, particularly the Modern Iraq Archive (MAIA) initiated by Nada Shabout,<sup>11</sup> there is very little reliable source material relating to the modern art history of Iraq. With the destruction of Iraq's museums and libraries, as well as the limited access to written material related to the



**Rafa Al-Nasiri**, Exhibition poster (1971), Silkscreen on paper, 100 x 70 cm.

subject, an initiative to protect such sources was born in the founding of the Al Noor Institute of Middle Eastern Art (NIMEA). The institute holds an extensive modern and contemporary Middle Eastern and ancient Islamic art library, with a primary aim being to continue gathering a comprehensive collection of resources, both primary and secondary, relating to the arts of the region. By highlighting the work of writers such as Jabra, we also hope to encourage an interest in preserving the legacy of art critics and writers of the history of modern Middle Eastern art. The second point is that the work recently exhibited at Meem, and included in this publication, is the work of Iraq today if the Iraq of yesterday existed. What has replaced it is a country torn apart by corruption, death, destruction and hatred, leaving its people a nation with very little hope. There can hardly be room for creativity when there is barely any room to exist as a human being. The country's



**Hashim Sammarchi**, Exhibition poster (1972), Silkscreen printing, 100x 70cm.

heritage, be it in science, the arts or literature, has been obliterated through gradual and sometimes orchestrated destruction, by internal and external forces. The great tragedy is that such actions in Iraq are now accepted in a world where they would otherwise be unacceptable. When looters in the Cairo Museum damage a Pharonic figurine during the revolution of February 2011, the international press is horrified. When an entire museum in Baghdad is looted, they pay little attention. What we hope to demonstrate through this publication is that Iraq's modern cultural legacy lives on ideologically. Although a movement develops within a specific context and includes particular individuals, it is not a tangible form; it develops in the mind and it can travel, it can depart and it can return. The works included in this series cannot be exhibited in Baghdad because of issues with security, but also because there is no longer a viable platform for artists left in the country today. The



**Martyr's Memorial by Ismail Fattah**, An HH-60H helicopter assigned to the "Firehawks" of Helicopter Combat Search and Rescue Squadron/Special Warfare Support Special Squadron Five (HCS-5) flies over the Martyr's Memorial in Baghdad while returning from a combat mission. Baghdad, Iraq (Nov. 30, 2003), U.S. Navy photo by Aviation Electrician's Mate 1st Class Rex Sackett. Image courtesy of U.S. Navy Photo, Use of released U.S. Navy imagery does not constitute product or organizational endorsement of any kind by the U.S. Navy.

history of modern Iraqi art, as documented in Jabra's essays, lives and breathes in the artists and the works that comprise this project, which is why we decided to call it Art in Iraq Today.

This essay is taken from 'Art In Iraq Today' co-published by Skira and Meem Gallery, released in the MENA Region in November 2011 by Meem Gallery and internationally in the spring of 2012 by Skira. The publication is sponsored by Crescent Petroleum. Charles Pocock, FRAS is the Managing Director of Meem Gallery & Founder of Al Noor Institute of Middle Eastern Art (NIMEA)

#### *About The Writer*

*Charles Pocock is the Managing Partner of Meem Gallery in Dubai and the founder of NIMEA (Nour Institute of Middle Eastern Art) and the AL Noor Library. He is cultural advisor to the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation. He has written and produced books extensively on Modern Art from the Middle East on subjects such as Modern and Contemporary Iraqi Art, Parviz Tanavoli, Dia Azzawi, Ali Omar Ermes and Abbas Kiarostami as well as having a regular art column devoted to this subject in GCC Journals. He provides commentary on the Middle East Art market to a number of leading international newspapers such as the International Herald Tribune, The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times and The Art Newspaper. Pocock is a Fellow of The Royal Asiatic and The Royal Geographical Societies in London.*

## Notes

1. Anthony Shadid, 'Baghdad Ruins, Remains of a Cultural Bridge,' *New York Times* (22 May 2010), p. A1. Col. Qais Hussein's report (No. 25) was written on 4 April 2010. After the 1948 war, Jabra, a Christian Palestinian, settled in Baghdad. He was closely aligned with the artists of the 1950s generation, notably Jawad Salim. The house, where he resided until his death, also housed an extensive art collection.
2. 'Iraq Art Today' (1972) by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra was published for the first Al Wasiti Festival and the catalogue designed by Rafa Al Nasiri.
3. Formed in 1950, the Pioneers Group was first named the Société Primitive. Members included Ismail Al-Sheikhly, Issa Hanna, Zeid Salih, Mahmoud Sabri, Dr Khalid Al Qassab, Dr Qutaiba Al Sheikh Nouri, Dr Nouri Mutaftah Bahjat, Kadhem Hayder, Nouri Al Rawi, Ghazi Al Saudi, Mahmoud Ahmed, Mohammed Ali Shakir, Sami Haqqi, Hassan Abid Alwan, Jawad Salim and Lorna Salim. Information on modern Iraqi art groups is based on Ulrike Al-Khamis, 'An Historical Overview: 1900s-1990s,' in *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art*, ed. Maysaloun Faraj, (London: Saqi Books, 2001).
4. The Impressionists was founded by Hafidh Al-Droubi in 1953. Despite their name, members, which comprised Al-Droubi's students at the Institute of Humanities, did not work under a unified 'Impressionist' style. The Innovationists were formed in 1965, and sought to push Iraqi art forward by exploring the use of new media and techniques. Founders include Talib Maki, Nida' Kazim, Saleh Al Juma'e, Salem Al Dabbagh, Tahir Jamil, Faiq Hassan and Ali Talib; Amer Al Ubaidi and Khalid Al Naieb joined at a later date. The New Vision Group was founded in 1969 by Dia Al-Azzawi, Rafa Al-Nasiri, Hashim Samarchi, Saleh Al-Juma'e, Mohamed Mahr Al-Din and Ismail Fattah. Like Jawad Selim, New Vision emphasised the importance of referencing cultural heritage but with a regional as opposed to a local focus. Their manifesto titled *Towards A New Vision* was written in the year of the group's founding.
5. Gallery One was founded by the poet Yusef Al Khal in 1963 when Beirut was considered the cultural centre of the Arab world.
6. The Graphics Movement was formed under the guidance of Dia Al-Azzawi, Rafa Al-Nasiri and Saleh Al Juma'e. In 1978, the First Arab Graphic Exhibition was held in Baghdad and in London at the Iraqi Cultural Centre. An outcome of this project was the 1980 Third World Graphic Biennial. In 1979 and 1982, the First Baghdad International Poster Exhibition was held. Recognised ceramicists include Saad Shaker, Abla Al-Azzawi, Muqbil Al-Zahawi, Shinyar Abdullah, Wasma Khalid Al Chorbachi, Nuha Al Radi, David Kanikianian, Tarik Ibrahim and Siham Al Saudi.
7. Recent documentation supplied by Dia Al-Azzawi highlights that the plans for the Martyr's Monument (also known as the Al Shaheed Memorial) was initiated in 1978, prior to the Iran-Iraq War.
8. 1992, Ali Jabbar, Mahmoud Obaidi, Karim Risan and Haithem Hassan, formed the Baghdad Group. Their aim was to find a new vision in art 'beyond style, technique and function that goes straight to the heart of humanity.' Ulrike Al-Khamis, p. 32.
9. Al Mutanabbi Street is located near the old quarter of Baghdad, on Al Rasheed Street. Named after the tenth-century classical Iraqi poet Al-Mutanabbi, the street has often been referred to as the heart and soul of Baghdad's intellectual community. On 5 March 2007, a car bomb killed twenty-six civilians on Al Mutanabbi Street, making it a security risk for shoppers, resulting in the dissolution of businesses.
10. Al-Maqamat is the title of a book written by Abu Muhammad al Qasim ibn Ali al-Hariri (1054-1122) which comprises fifty short stories. Because of its highly-crafted interchange of prose and verse, the genre of the maqamat received much acclaim amongst contemporaries and has maintained its influence up until today. Al-Wasiti, a thirteenth-century Arab Islamic artist, was renowned for his illustrations of Al-Hariri's Maqamat.
11. See [www.artiraq.org](http://www.artiraq.org).