



By Anayat Durrani

# Introducing Iraq's Contemporary Artists

Iraqi painter and printmaker Hanaa Malallah has said Iraq's long history in the fine arts is more valuable than the country's oil. After viewing the works of Malallah and other Iraqi artists, many would agree.

Malallah comes from a long line of talent that spans a celebrated history of fine arts in Iraq. Iraq's modern artists carry on this tradition and despite war, sanctions and occupation, represent the inextinguishable and enduring creative spirit.

Malallah is considered to be the leading female artist from Iraq. Her work was represented in the permanent collection of the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art, the former Saddam Center for the Arts, which was

damaged by fire and looting after bombings during the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

"I am living in Baghdad, a city that was burned many times during its history. And now I am seeing closely this burning, and I am seeing closely the looting of my city museum," Malallah told Fine

Art Registry™ (FAR®). "All these [images I see], I must record them in my works as a document, and when I am living in Baghdad in a very hard isolation in my studio, that sounds very good to me to work hard all the time."

One of Malallah's works entitled "The Looting of the Museum of



*Hanaa Malallah with one of her pieces.*



Art” (38-1/2 x 38-1/2 inches) documents what happened to the museum and was produced in 2003. It was created on wood that she cut, burned, and painted. Her works are held by the Royal Jordanian Museum and private collections worldwide.

Malallah has a studio in Iraq and continues to exhibit her work inside and outside of her homeland. She also continues to teach and lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad while pursuing her painting. Malallah is currently in Paris on a scholarship from Cité Internationale des Arts but will return to Baghdad. She holds a B.F.A. from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, an M.F.A., and her doctoral degree in the philosophy of art.

“Dr. Hanaa Malallah is today one of Iraq’s emerging artists, she is also the most developed and established artist, historian and theorist who had spent her life developing her theories, and is in fact one of today’s most intellectually based artists,” says Dr. Nada Shabout, assistant professor of art history at the University of North Texas, and known as the world’s leading authority on contemporary Iraqi art.

In an effort to bring more exposure to modern Iraqi art, Dr. Shabout organized an exhibit,



Painter Kareem Rissan, top, with two of his multi-media works, above, and opposite, and the book art “Baghdad Burning.”



Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art, which opened in Texas in 2005. The exhibit features book art by seventeen Iraqi artists spanning three generations and includes visits from artists such as Malallah. All of the artists included had exhibited work in the permanent collection of the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art before the museum was looted after bombings in April 2003.

Painter Kareem Rissan, who lives and works in Baghdad, was among those artists whose work was displayed at the Dafatir exhibit (Dafatir means “notebook” in Arabic). Rissan graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1988, and joined

the army in 1990, serving during the Gulf War. Rissan told FAR he has been able to document most of the events that happened in modern Iraq through his art. His book art is based on his combat experience and his abstract works “Graffiti City” and “Baghdad Burning” detail what he witnessed

up close and personal. “Baghdad Burning” is a boxed book of twelve folios that combine collage, drawing and printmaking.

“‘Baghdad Burning’ consists of images witnessed in the field and depicts the city of Baghdad being torched and pillaged and destroyed of its character, and the museums after the entry of the American forces in 2003,” says Rissan.

Artist Ghassan Ghaib’s work includes oils on canvas and mixed media. Ghaib has exhibited his work in Iraq and outside his country, including a

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joint exhibition with Rissan and Malallah in Baghdad in 2005, the Dafatir exhibition, and an upcoming exhibit in Bahrain. Ghaib has won several awards and participated in numerous exhibitions of contemporary Iraqi art including the touring exhibition, “Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art,” which began in London, 2000. Like other artists, the war in Iraq has greatly affected his work.

“The psychological, social and environmental impacts of the war create constructive atmosphere to the human spirit,” says Ghaib, who graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts, 1986, and the Academy of Fine Arts, 1997 in Baghdad. “The war had a great impact on my works, so that I borrowed remains such as textiles, photos, documents and metals like chrome which give industrial technology implications.”

For the past three years Ghaib has been living in neighboring Jordan. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, many artists were forced to flee their homeland. Several Iraqi artists now live in exile in Middle Eastern countries or Europe.

Amidst the shock and awe of the US bombing of Iraq in 2003, studios were abandoned, families uprooted, and visas were urgently sought as artists were forced to take





*Muayad Muhsin  
with The Picnic.*

*Fine Art Registry is working with Dr. Shabout to help document Iraqi artwork missing and stolen from the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, which was damaged by fire and looting after bombings in 2003.*

refuge in other countries where they had to start all over again.

The move is by no means easy. Dr. Shabout said residence and work permits are major concerns. In Jordan, obtaining long-term residency is difficult and requires a lot of money. She said many artists end up paying penalties or taking short trips for reentry visas. Work and money are additional concerns.

“They need to support their families and art in the best scenarios is not enough to make good money but to have to establish a name as an artist in a new country while competing

with local artists and non-existent infrastructure and support programs only complicates matters further,” explains Dr. Shabout. “To top it all, here is of course the feeling of displacement and leaving your life behind, while forced to adapt to a new system and environment, while your country is in chaos and all you know is threatened, that continuously affects production.”

Artist Muayad Muhsin chose to remain in Iraq where despite the lack of security, electricity blackouts, lack of services and an uncertain future he continues his work.

“Security is important for

everyone and increases the sense of life and creativity. Communication and the lack thereof is the frustration,” explains Muhsin, who does not leave his home much. “Despite everything, I still paint and draw and do much to keep busy. I create inside my head a dream of safety that allows me to paint and live through my paper.”

Muhsin received his art education at the Art Institute of Baghdad from 1979-1984. He was drafted into the military and fought in the Iran-Iraq War from 1984-89 and the Kuwait War from 1990-91. His experiences in his daily life in Iraq are reflected in his art, particularly the US occupation of his country.

“Stuff happens” is how former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld responded when asked to comment on the looting of Baghdad, including its museums following the bombings in 2003. Muhsin’s response was a 5 by 3 foot painting that took three months to complete called “The Picnic” which he says captures the US arrogance and unwarranted invasion of his country.

In the 2006 painting, Rumsfeld is depicted kicking back reading papers, with his combat boots placed on top of a ruined building. In the background is pictured the Lion of Babylon atop a ruined perch, a symbol of Iraq’s rich ancient history. The statue’s base is smashed open and from it comes white papers that whirl about Rumsfeld and then turn into birds and fly away. The symbolism represents the US failure to find weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. stated reason for the invasion. Instead of signing his name at the bottom corner of the painting, Muhsin chose to sign the painting in the middle to avoid having it under Rumsfeld’s boots.

Introducing Iraqi artists and their artwork to American audiences is a cause Dr. Shabout is very passionate about. She says Iraq’s visual production and its history are often skewed by the US media and by individuals with varying agendas. The few media stories on Iraqi artists tend to be “feel good stories” centered on a new liberated Iraq, which usually serve to praise US policies in Iraq.

“Invaded and occupied by the US, its visual production and modern heritage are further threatened by ideological destruction,” says Dr. Shabout. “Ignorance and superiority had resulted in its exclusion from art history development in general. Today, however, Iraq’s history is rewritten and its culture reconstructed by forces that are foreign to Iraq’s way of life, history, aspiration, etc., to be represented as conveniently aligned with the politics.”

She remains in contact with artists in Iraq and those scattered throughout the Middle East and Europe. For Dr. Shabout, trying to get established and emerging artists exposure is a priority.

“On the human level, it will provide possibilities for Iraqi art to be included in the art market and consequently income for the artists. On the material level, provide examples of Iraqi art and its history, and hope to consequently generate documentations [records of the art],” says Dr. Shabout.

Fine Art Registry is working with Dr. Shabout to help document Iraqi artwork missing and stolen from the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, which was damaged by fire and looting after bombings in 2003. FAR is also providing a platform for Iraqi artists to document and share their work with the rest of the world. How FAR is working with Dr. Shabout will be the subject of an upcoming article. [📄](#)