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Cultural Continuity in Modern Iraqi Painting between 1950- 1980

Shakiba Sharifian*

Mehdi Mohammadzade**

Silvia Naef***

Mostafa Mehraeen****

Abstract

Since the early years of 1950, which represent the development period of modern Iraqi art, the “return to the roots” movement has been an impartible mainstream in Iraq. The first generation of modern artists like Jewad Salim and Shakir Hassan Al-Said considered “cultural continuity” and the link between “tradition and modernity” and “inspiration from heritage1” as the main essence of their artistic creation and bequeathed this approach to their next generation.

Having analyzed and described a selection of artworks of modern Iraqi artists, this paper discusses the evolution of modern Iraqi art, and aims to determine cultural and artistic continuity in modern paintings of Iraq. It also seeks to answer the questions that investigate the socio-cultural factors that underlie the formation of art and establish a link between traditional and modern ideas and lead to continuity in tradition. Therefore, the research hypothesis is put to scrutiny on the basis of Robert Wuthnow’s theory. According to Wuthnow, although configuration and the objective production of this movement is rooted in the “mobilization of resources”, the artistic content and approach of the painting movement (i.e. the continuation of the tradition along with addressing modern ideas) is influenced by factors such as “social Horizon”, “existing discursive context” and “cultural capital” of the painters.

Research results that are derived from historical-analytical methods reveal that modern Iraqi artists used the four Islamic, pre-Islamic or Mesopotamian, modern source and folkloric sources to create paintings which were modern and Iraqi at the same time that could be definitely called “Modern Iraqi art”. The impact of these mentioned sources can be seen in form and content or generally in aesthetic values of these works which are obviously traceable in large exaggerated Sumerian eyes, dark and thick tracing lines in Abbasid painting, indigenous colors and amulet, letters, Islamic calligraphy, crescent, dome, and themes of the Karbala incident. It can be asserted that the Iraqi artist depicts the forms and contents that offer a strong link to “place”, which is “Iraq”, as the place is the most important element in maintaining and preserving identity.

Keywords

Modern Iraqi art, Islamic art, Pre-Islamic art, Popular culture, Modern art, Mobilization of resources, Social horizon, Discursive context.

*. Ph. D. candidate . Faculty of Islamic Arts, Tabriz Islamic Art University, Tabriz, Iran. sh.sharifian@tabriziau.ac.ir

** . Tabriz Islamic Art University. mehdimz@yahoo.com

***. Geneva University. Silvia.naef@unige.ch.

****. Science & Research, Islamic Azad University, Tehran. ms.mehraeen@gmail.com

Introduction

Enthusiasm and practice of Iraqi artists in creation of modern works of art began in the first half of the twentieth century due to Iraqi artists' acquaintance with modern western art styles and movements. Having establishment a Faculty of Painting at the Institute of Music in Baghdad in 1939 by Faiq Hassan, the whole Institute turned into the Institute of Fine Arts and played a significant role in development and evolvement of modern Iraqi painting movement ever since. So, the foundation of the painting faculty can be determined as the renaissance of Iraqi art in the contemporary age.

In the early 1940s and after foundation of the Art Lovers Association, unanimity and solidarity increased among artists (painters, architects, calligraphers and novice trainees). From that day forward, Iraqi art became more active and numerous art groups such as the Pioneer Art Group by leadership of Faiq Hassan in 1950, Baghdad modern art group by leadership of Jewad Salim in 1951 and the impressionists group by leadership of Hafez Al Daroubi were established one after another (Salim, 1977:7). Regarding the nationalization of the oil industry in 1972 and global rise in oil prices, the government decided to hold numerous national and international artistic and cultural festivals and conferences. At that time artists were given scholarships of participation in the international exhibitions and education in the west. These activities led to the exchange and interaction of artistic ideas and techniques as well as art criticism which eventually led to accentuation of visual arts movement in Iraq.

However, "identity" was a major challenge since the formation of Iraq in 1920, so that King Faisal I comments about the national Iraqi identity: "I must say with regret that there is still no such thing as Iraqi people and there are only masses of human beings who are devoid of any feeling of patriotism; people who still live with religious and absurdities traditions without any common link" (Dawisha, 1999: 554). Ever since, the efforts of Iraq successive governments were on the discourse of their national identity. As a

result, the Iraqi artists took responsibility in defining and depicting Iraqi identity while being modern and internationally renowned. Thus, they focused on their rich artistic heritage and investigation in their tradition.

In order to study this cultural continuity, this paper primarily offers a literature and the research theory and methodology is briefly overviewed for further investigation in painting culture in Iraq. Thereafter, a selection of paintings by modern Iraqi artists between 1950 and 1980 were chosen that excellently demonstrate this cultural continuity. They were discussed along with their creator's biography for further analysis and association with Iraqi painting tradition.

Research Background

The research literature in the field of contemporary Iraqi art is filled with works that can be categorized as "painter-ology". In other words, they mostly introduce the artists and their works; For instance, *Modern Iraqi Art* by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1972), *Pioneers of Visual Arts of the Arab World*, case study: *Iraq* by Musa Al Khamisi (2009). Silvia Naef (2004) discusses the emergence of Western-style visual arts in Iraq and introduces the art groups and artists and their works in her article "Paris-Baghdad, visual arts and modernism in Iraq". "Iraq contemporary art" by Ruyin Pakbaz (2002) is among the few studies by Iranian researchers concerning contemporary art in Iraq that introduces contemporary art history in Iraq and Iraqi artists.

In most of the existing researches, little attention is paid to cultural continuity and the link between modern paintings and pre-modern painting tradition. In order to compensate for this gap, this study seeks to study the temporal cultural-artistic continuity of the modern Iraqi painting. What distinguishes this study from the previous researches is the study of cultural capital of contemporary Iraqi artists and their sources of inspiration in order to find out whether their works of art were an adaptation of western modern art or an abstraction of Iraqi art and culture.

This can answer a significant question of art research in Islamic world that investigates whether we can use the term “modern Iraqi Iraq” or better yet use the term “modern art in Iraq”.

Theoretical Basis

For a long time, studies and researches were about the relationship of art and social conditions under the influence and dominance of “cultural adaptation” and “social legitimacy” which formed the classic heritage theories of sociology (Wuthnow, 1989: 517). These two views which stem from Durkheim’s imitative view from culture, art and ideas, and Marx’s metaphor of “superstructure”, represent a dichotomy between the social structure and art and also determine a definitive and constant relation between these two views. However, these views are important for answering the most fundamental questions on what or who connects the social structure to art (Ibid: 535).

The “relative deprivation” is another theory which discusses why cultural-artistic movements are emerged. According to this theory, cultural-artistic movements are emerged in response to the mental needs of the population in the status of “social pressure”- economic poverty, decline of social mobility, upward of failed social mobility, loneliness, alienation, sickness, disability, natural disasters and anomie. These theories are based on a simple hypothesis; “Necessity is the mother of invention” (Wuthnow, 1987: 152). These theories emphasize on “the individual mood and spirit” of community members as a mediating mechanism that relates cultural-artistic movements with social structure (Ibid: 154).

Robert Wuthnow queries the main hypothesis of adaptation and correspondence between art and social structure by arguing that social structure and is always in interrelation with art in an ambiguous and complex way. Deeply believing that cultural and artistic movements are not reflective of social structures, he claims that the process of art creation and artwork production requires sufficient

sources for production and a proper social space for development. Since the formation processes of change in social structure and art processes are independent and autonomous, without necessarily one specifying another, historical milestones must exist to embody cultural-artistic innovation. Having discussed these points, Wuthnow believes that the art and social environment relationship has to be discussed within the framework that considers their “articulation”.

According to Wuthnow, moral order and institutional contexts are the most significant mechanisms in linking cultural-artistic movements and the social environment. Environmental changes do not affect the emergence of new artistic and cultural movements directly. Environmental changes provide the perfect opportunity for the emergence of new artistic movements by creating instability in the moral order of society. They help the creation of culture and art by providing necessary resources for the emergence of new artistic and cultural movements. Anyhow, the resources are driven into the process of cultural and art production by some intermediaries.

Institutional contexts such as government which configure existing resources in the huge social environment as well as cultural institutions such as educational administrations, universities, arts organizations and arts institutions which direct environmental resources into the production of culture and art are considered as the most important intermediaries that link the social environment with culture and art. Wuthnow believes artistic and cultural movements are not mainly associated with feelings of anxiety or their detachment with other psychological needs. In the contrary, the emergence of artistic movements root in changes of social order – in definition of society from moral duties and responsibilities- which make new efforts of demonstration of social relations essential. Wuthnow also emphasizes on disparity and disassociation of art and culture process by defining “episodes”. He rejects the classical approach that is based on the progressive evolution of culture and art and believes

the art production is a discrete and interrupted process. He believes that in each of the historical milestones, discourses or different artistic movements may become possible which have no link with their previous discourses and movements. According to Wuthnow, the formation of artistic content and direction of artistic movements can only be analyzed in the form of “discourse theory”. Hence, he presents the three concepts of “social horizon”, “discursive context” and “cultural capital of art producers”. He indicates that although art speaks for the social affairs or the social visions of a community, these contexts are processed and determined firstly under the influence of community dialogue and local tradition and active cultural ideas in the society and secondly under the influence of the production sector from this discursive context and cultural capital of the artist.

In other words, considering discourse theory, the process of artistic meaning production can be best analyzed according to the dynamicity of the discursive context. The content of art works is confined within the discursive conflicts of a community. Regarding this theory, the content of any art movement is a function of ideology or a more major discourse that the artistic movements tend to reflect.

Methodology

In order to achieve the research goal, the works of six outstanding modern Iraqi artists were studied. In addition, their works of art and inspiration sources and their link with Iraq cultural heritage were analyzed after describing the aesthetic qualities (form and content) of their artworks according to the existing literature and artist description.

Painting History in Iraq

The existing land territories of Iraq used to be the cradle of the first ancient civilizations. The remnants of these civilizations can be sought into cylinder seals, stone and clay tablets, busts, statues and bas-reliefs made of stone or glazed bricks. The first painting school in the Islamic world called Wasiti or Al-Rafidain, was established in Iraq in the 12th century which used to

translations of Greek illustrated books. Thus, Baghdad became a thriving center for calligraphy, painting and Islamic ornamentations. In the beginning, most of these books were scientific. In the meanwhile, some literary references were added subsequently. So, the functions of these paintings invoked a special visual aesthetics. The functions of these books were instructional in the first degree, so that the scientific books were not understandable without these images (Mohammadzade, 2014: 11). Therefore, these paintings were simple, realistic and devoid of any aesthetical values. However, literary books were more often associated with narrative illustration with more decorative elements, although nature is represented with the least elements. The most prominent artist of Baghdad, whose style was named after him, was Yahya bin Mahmud Wasiti. His paintings represent a combination of reality and fantasy, geometric composition, movement and secretive relation with aesthetic qualities and the painting subject. His works depict daily scenes of social life (the Arabs in a mosque, desert, libraries, ceremonies and etc.). He excellently “place” in his artworks and depicts the location, position and social status of the people on the painted scene (Abdulrahman Hossein, 2012: 15-17) (Fig.1).

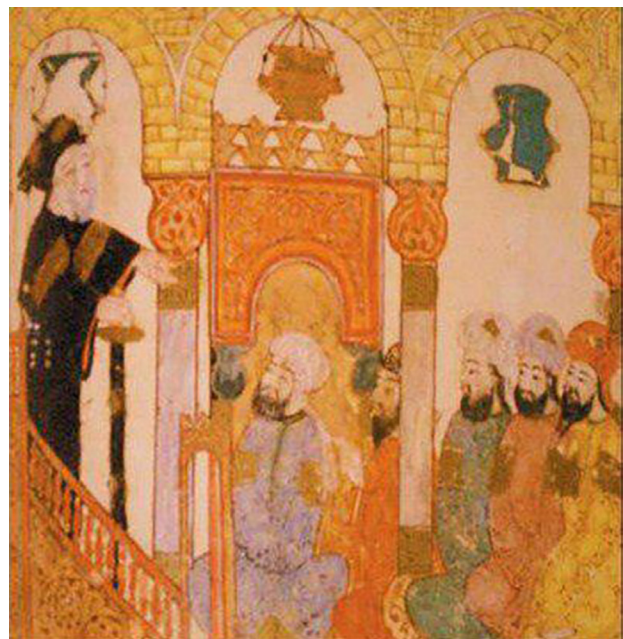


Fig.1. Yahya bin Mahmud Wasiti, the speech/ Abu Zaid in Samarkand mosque (the twenty-eighth Maghamat of Hariri) Iraq-Baghdad, 1821-2 AD, 280*259 cm. Source: Abdulrahman Hossein, 2012: 16.

Generally, remained illustrated paintings are common in some features such as lack of background color and frame, dark and thick tracing lines, and characters with Sami faces, unfilled compositions and little plant elements. Other features of symmetry and simplicity are other features of these painted scripts.

After Moghul invasion in 1258 AH (1842 AD) art and culture stagnated for about six centuries in Iraq. This invasion had devastating impact on social, economic and artistic-cultural conditions and hundreds of thousands of Arabs Muslims were massacred. Therefore, many artists were killed or they fled to neighboring west countries. The existing territory of Iraq was ruled by Ağ Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu Turkomans between ages of 14 to 16 AH. For one hundred years from 1508 AH Safavids and Ottomans were quarreling over reigning Iraq. Eventually, (until 1918) Iraq became one of the provincial assemblies of the Ottoman Empire. Despite the turmoil and successive invasions, Baghdad continued the tradition of painting which is traceable in Iraqi artworks in the 19th century. The artworks of Niazi Moulavi Baghdadi, the outstanding Arabic painting and calligraphy master of the 19th century are inherited from Wasiti style. His works are reflections of Wasiti's achievements and influences of Persian paintings (especially Isfahan style). He studied calligraphy aesthetic features through repetition and forming tissues in his later works. There are also some available manuscripts in Baghdad libraries that explain the profound impact of Ottoman painting on Iraqi paintings (Al said, 1983: 45-49). The first Iraqi artist-soldiers were trained at the Istanbul Military academies in the late 19th century. These painters propagated the tripod European style in Iraq and were painted based on their academic style (naturalistic) and in romanticism and impressionism styles as well. The main genres of these works were landscapes scenes (urban and rural), still life and portrait. Abdulghader Al Rassam (1882-1952), Ata Sabri

(1913-1987), Muhammad Salih Zaki (1888-1974), Asim Hafiz (1889-1956) and Haj Muhammad Salim were among the forerunners² of modern painting for their first efforts in the development of Iraqi art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Salim, 1977: 37).

Modern Iraqi Painting Evolution

The Forerunners style was predominant until the late 1930s. The first artists were sent to Europe to study art by the Ministry of Culture in the 1930s and 1940s. These artists brought the modern styles of Europe to Iraq which can be considered as starting point for the development of modern Iraqi art. Despite getting familiar with European art, these artists tried to establish a new style which presented modern and Iraqi styles at the same time. Having returned from Europe, most of these artists began teaching their modern style and shared their knowledge of art to students and artists at painting academy of Fine arts. This development thrived with the opening of the Faculty of Painting at the Institute of Fine Arts (Sabri & Ali, 2010:18). During 1950s, multiple art groups were established after another in Iraq such as the Pioneer Art Group (Primitive Group) in 1950, Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951, the Innovative Group in 1965, and the New Vision in 1968, one-Dimension in 1971.

The Pioneer Art Group was established in 1950 by Faiq Hassan with the aim of adopting a modern style for landscape painting and the daily lives of the Iraqi people. He graduated from the Beaux Arts in Paris and experienced many styles of painting such as realism, impressionism, expressionism and abstract styles in his lifetime. Having painted in abstract style, he found himself incapable of discounting it. However, the fear of losing his identity led him to depicting the real life of people of Iraq, the nomads and horses (Salim, 1977: 710). Offering a nationalistic approach, he continued to record a sense of Iraqi mood since he believed that true art should reflect the society (Fig. 2).

Jewad Salim (1919-1961) was another prominent

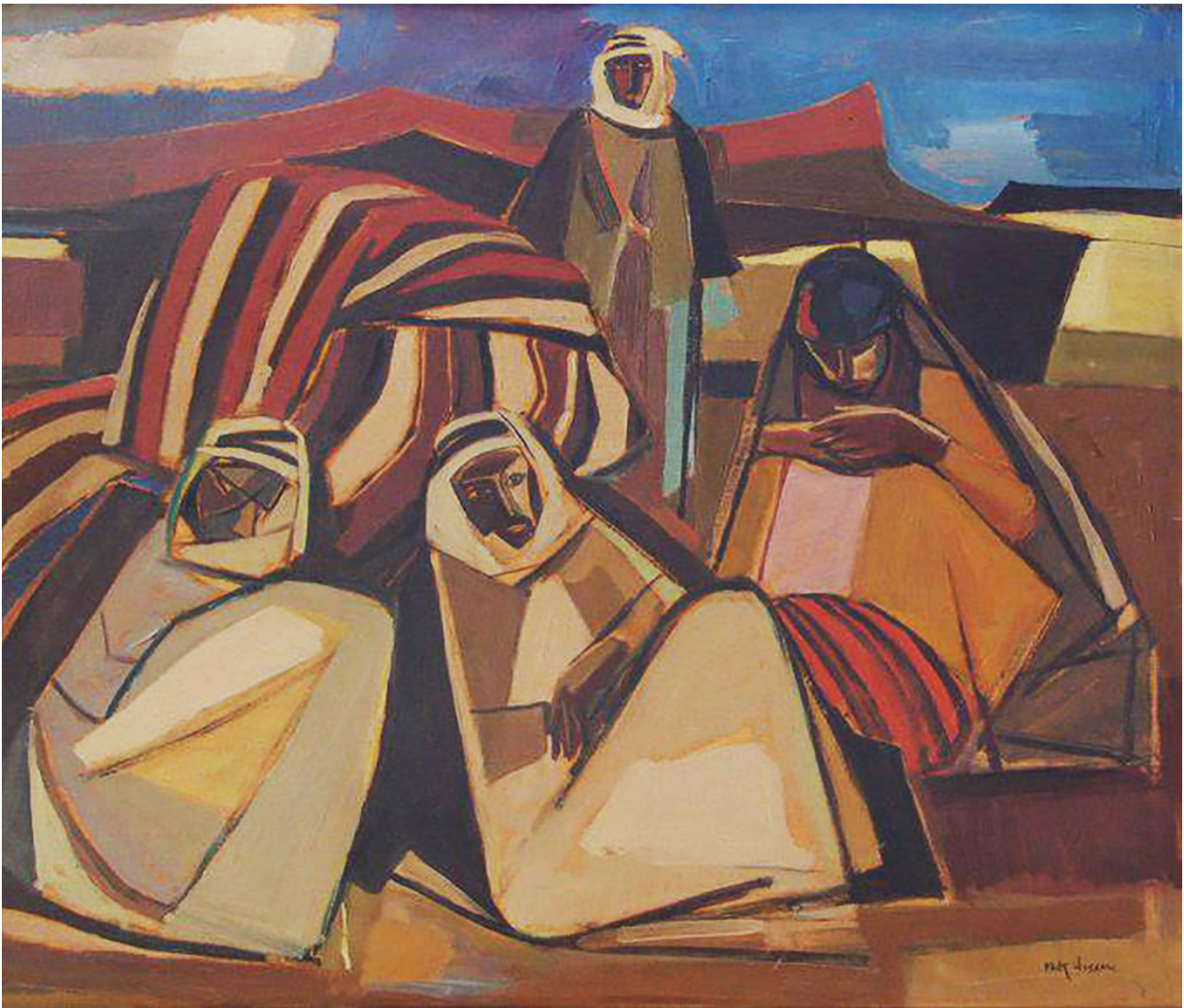


Fig. 2. Faiq Hassan, the nomads, 1956, oil on wood, 60*90 cm.
Source: Jabra, 1972.



Fig. 3. Kadhim Haydar, God, peace, 1970, oil on canvas.
Source: Salim, 1977:79.

painter who founded Baghdad Modern Art group which turned out to be one of the most influential and significant groups in Iraq. He achieved a governmental scholarship to study in Paris (1938-1939) and Rome (1940- 1939). He then started to study in England after World War II (1948-1946). During 1940 to 1945 he served as the Director of Antiquities and Relics in Baghdad which offered him an opportunity to study the art of the Mesopotamian art, Sumerian and Assyrian statues as well as Arab arts and works of Yahya bin Mahmoud al-Wasiti. His goal was to take inspiration from tradition and create a temporal and spatial relationship between the past and present. He believed that not only would this goal be possible through adoption of modern style, but also by introduction of Iraqi elements of in the

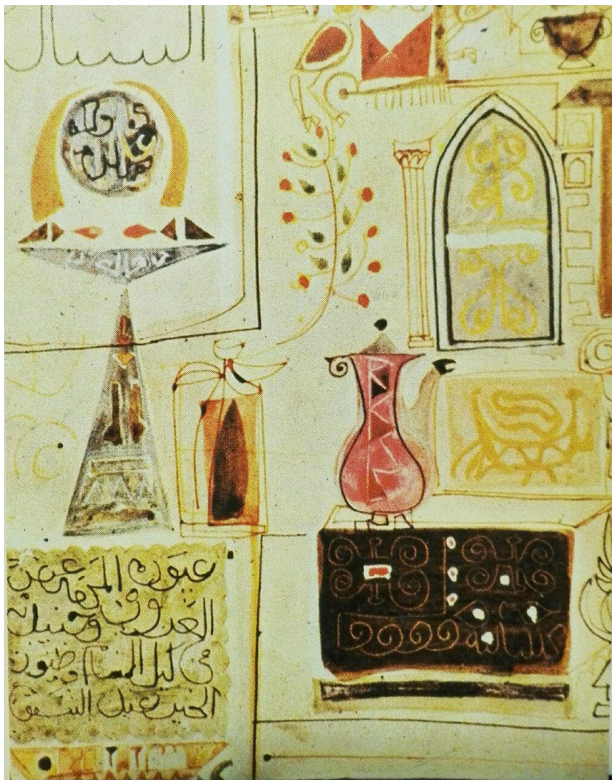


Fig. 4. Jewad Salim, Baghdadiyat, 1955, oil on canvas.
Source: Al Said, 1991: 129.



Fig. 5. Jewad Salim, Children playing, 1953.
Source: Jabbar Jayad, 2008:261.

form of modern Iraqi art.

Thus, he entered the identifying elements which were considered as the symbol of culture and civilization of Iraq into his works. He managed to do so by using the subject content and utilizing Baghdadi compositions, local traditional colors (black veil, traditional carpets and fabrics, etc.), motifs and symbols of Islamic Art (stroller, calligraphy and architecture) as well as the ancient Mesopotamian art and popular culture³ (such as street performers or water sellers). For instance, Islamic heritage elements such as handicraft, architectural elements, Arabic calligraphy and crescent symbols are seen in Baghdadiyat (1955) collection (Fig. 4).

In children playing (1953) repeated crescent forms, space composition and even the colors are evocative of painting and the dots remind the calligraphy. He combines these identifying elements in an abstract way and simultaneously tries to simplify the forms into geometric shapes (diamond, square and triangle). The general characteristics of the faces and eyes also evoke the Mesopotamian sculptures (Fig. 5). He has



Fig. 6. Shakir Hassan Al Said, close victory, oil on wood.
Source: Jabbar chiad, 2008: 270.

been successful in combining large and diamond-shaped eyes with specific eyebrow and turned the crescent shape into a cultural sign that was later used by other artists.

Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925-2004), Jewad Salim’s student and close friend, received his painting diploma from the Institute of Fine Arts in 1955 and



Fig. 7. Faraj Abbo, Islamic abstract ornamentation, 1970s, oil on canvas. Source: www.farjabbo.com



Fig. 8. Faraj Abbo, Islamic abstract calligraphy, 1980s, oil on canvas. Source: www.farjabbo.com

graduated in 1959 from the Beaux art school in Paris. He quitted figurative painting from mid-seventies to create abstract works through use of Arabic letters. He considered the words as tools of art expression and form rather than a linguistic mean. He devoted himself to illustration of folk stories from 1950s to the mid-1960s in which he was inspired by Arabic letters and Jafr science since the mid-60s (Jabra, 1986: 22).

In his more recent works, such as the wall collection, in addition to aesthetic and decorative values, he applied letters simply in form of script that are written or carved on abandoned walls considering their decorative and aesthetic values. By using some techniques to create cracks and holes (which are presumably perforate by bullets) he tries to make the walls look deteriorated. According to this artist, he is inspired by buildings walls of Baghdad abandoned neighborhoods in this collection (Fig. 6). Faraj Abbo was also among the early members of Baghdad Modern Art group. He received his diploma from the College of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1950 and another diploma from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome in 1954. Having joined Baghdad Modern Art, his academic style was gradually transformed into abstract style by simplifying forms, flattening the colors and using of popular culture. He abandoned figurative representation and started to study Arabic

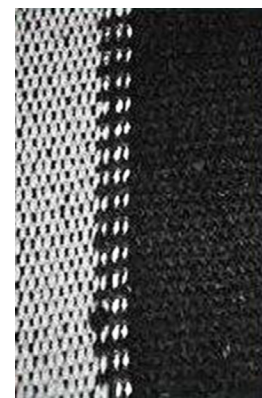


Fig. 9.a. An artwork by Salim Al Dabbagh called motion in time, 1970 which is inspired by the nomad tents that can be seen in the right figure. Source: Salim, 1977:

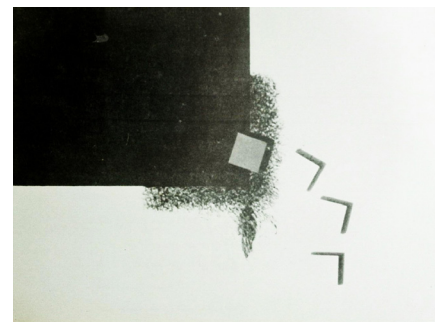


Fig. 9.b. an artwork by Salim Al Dabbagh called motion in time, 1970 which is inspired by the nomad tents that can be seen in the right figure. Source: Salim, 1977.

letters and Islamic Art and particularly Islamic geometric style in 1970s. In paintings in the airport in 1980s, he managed to combine Islamic and modern abstract professionally. The title of the artwork also confirms the claim. Other titles of his abstract paintings during 1970s to 1980 are: Islamic abstract ornamentation, modern Islamic abstract and Islamic abstract calligraphy (Fig. 7 & 8).

Salim Al Dabbagh (1941) was one of the founders of the Innovative Group. Having graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, he studied his education in graphics from 1967 to 1969 in Portugal. He started his works of art in abstract style as a student of Roman Artymowski, the Polish artist the representative of Polish abstract (1919-1993). However, in contrast to his master who used circular forms, he was enchanted by rectangular forms.

At the first glance, his works resemble European abstract paintings. Nonetheless, the difference is evident when the artist explains about the sources of inspiration in his paintings. Based on his descriptions, a type of implicit representation of Islamic and local contents can be found in his artworks. He was fascinated by the form of Kaaba in his first trip to Saudi Arabia and found the form of Kaaba (cube) as the purest source of inspiration. Since then, the rectangular shapes became an integral part of his creations. He also refers to black and white tents of the nomads that are woven from goat wool as another source of inspiration. As a child he had witnessed the women who weaved these tents on the streets. He merely uses the black and white colors inspired from these tents. He uses a group of lines that form human shadowed shape as well. According to the artist, these lines are derived from nomad tents and their special texture (Samia Touti, 2013); (Fig. 9).

Discussion: Aesthetic Continuity in Modern Iraqi Painting

At the beginning of the 1950s, Iraqi artists evoked “return to the roots movement” and inspiration from heritage in order to establish modern Iraqi art discourse. But what is the heritage of Iraq? A

minute investigation in modern Iraqi artists reveals that they benefit from four main cultural sources in their artwork: pre-Islamic or Mesopotamian, Islamic, modern and folkloric sources. According to the concepts claimed in the culture production theory of Robert Wuthnow, these sources create a framework of “discursive context” in which the Iraqi artist lives, thinks and sustains for identifying the direction of social issues. This discursive context configures the mind grammar and puts artists’ thoughts and artistic mentality into order.

Considering the life story of every artist, each of them is influenced by a part of this discursive context which is their cultural capital. Obviously, Iraqi artists have been under the influence of modern discursive context of their society and have benefited from modern cultural capitals according to their share of the modern ideas. Hence, as we have witnessed, traditional cultural capital of Iraqi artists in association with resulted aesthetic values (form and content) of modern Iraqi paintings, established the “return to heritage” painting movement. What is implied from Iraqi art heritage includes any available type of art prior to incoming of Western influences in the 19th century. In other words, all pre-Islamic art to Islamic art can be considered as heritage (Naef, 2000: 267). Thus, “heritage” means the artistic traditions remained from Mesopotamian civilizations to the Islamic period, especially under the influence of Wasiti painting style. In addition, popular culture is an important source of artists’ affiliation to their land, social commitment and a close link with the people and the present time.

Artists highly consider the customs and beliefs of the indigenous people, such as spells, amulets, tattoos and nomads’ rituals as a significant part of the artistic heritage of Iraq. Other reasons of artists tendency toward the popular culture is the considerable success of socialist and communist ideas among Iraqi intellectuals at that time (Ibid: 268). Moreover, utilization of art elements derived from the mass of people was another way to involve the excluded class of the society in the sublime culture; because

the lower classes were less affected by the Western culture and they were considered the perfect choice for return to roots movement.

As obvious, each of the artists found their own individual style and style for inspiration from the heritage which is briefly shown in Table 1. A slight glance to table 1 reveals that Islamic art has been the greatest source of inspiration for modern artists; especially Islamic calligraphy art and popular culture. For Jewad Salim and Faraj Abbo, calligraphy represents the nobility of Islamic art. Although letters cannot be seen clearly in his works, the lines and compositions are derived from letters in calligraphy which are expressed in abstract language. According to Shakir Hassan Al Said letters are the point of transition into noble value of “line” in art (Al Said, 1973: 39) and considered an

important element in Baghdad painting. In addition to the use of letters, there is an emphasis on “place” (the walls of Baghdad neighborhoods) in his works that mostly highlights the painting features of Yahya bin Mahmoud Wasiti. In the paintings of Salim Al Dabbagh the concepts of popular and Islamic culture are depicted through using forms (square) and colors (black and white). Although the forms may not seem inspired by folklore and Islamic art at first glance, the painting contents represent Islamic and folkloric ideas.

Having studied the paintings of Iraqi artists, a sort of emphasis on “place” can be sensed in comparison with modern European paintings. This means that the artist has used identifying elements such as Mesopotamian special palm tree, diamond-shaped exaggerated eyes, Arabic letters Calligraphy and

Table 1. Cultural continuity in artworks of modern Iraqi artists inspired by the heritage. Source: authors.

Row	Artist name	Cultural heritage source			Addressing type		
		folklore	Pre-Islamic	Islamic	folklore	Pre-Islamic	Islamic
1	Faiq Hassan	✓			Nomadism, horse herding and jockey		
2	Kadhim Haydar			✓			Good and evil content, Karbala incident
3	Jewad Salim	✓	✓	✓	Iraqi woman’s clothing, water sellers and street performers	Diamond-shaped eyes	Calligraphy, cart, Islamic architecture and the crescent symbol
4	Shakir Hassan Al Said	✓		✓	Illustration of folk stories, The walls of abandoned buildings of Baghdad neighborhoods		Calligraphy and Arabic letters
5	Faraj Abbo			✓			Calligraphy and geometric patterns
6	Salim Al Dabbagh	✓		✓	Nomad tents		Kaaba symbol

addressing the walls of abandoned houses in Baghdad neighborhoods in order to relate his work with the land of Iraq. Because the location, space and time are the main resources and tools of identity of which “place” is the most able to provide and maintain the identity. As mentioned earlier, this tendency is precedent in the tradition of Iraq painting.

Overall, it can be indicated that modern Iraqi artists were successful in establishing modern Iraqi art discourse by combining Iraqi heritage aesthetics – i.e. the application of principles of Islam aesthetic such as repetition, decoration, geometry, Islamic symbolism and calligraphy aesthetics and the authenticity of Iraq folkloric art.

Conclusion

The first generation of modern Iraqi artists studied in Europe and was well fully acquainted with modern styles of art. Three main outstanding figures of these artists were Jewad Salim, Faiq Hassan and Shakir Hassan Al Said by which other artists were directly or indirectly instructed. In order to establish the modern Iraqi art, these artists tried to combine modern art aesthetics which is avoiding of direct reference to natural forms (naturalism) and taking into account the universality of aesthetic form with Iraqi heritage i.e. the Mesopotamian, Islamic and Popular culture. Therefore, modern Iraqi paintings in comparison with European paintings have elements that represent their “identity”. Therefore, these artists were able to create a style with its own language and criteria of modern art that belongs to the land of Iraq at the same time and can be called “modern Iraqi art”. From the beginning, the “return to roots” and “cultural continuity” was considered the most important concepts in this artistic movement, and each artist had his individual approach to demonstrate the artistic-cultural continuity; some by using form, technique, composition, color palette, symbols, and some by using themes and content of the artwork. Sometimes inspiration from heritage is embodied through the use of motifs such as calligraphy, domes and the Sumerian eyes and sometimes just by implications that the artwork addresses. The interpretation of the artist on his work can guide the addressees significantly in the latter case.

Endnote

1. Istilham al turath
2. Or known as Al Ruwwad
3. Popular culture is equivalent to the word folklore that has been approved by the Academy of Persian Language and Literature. According to Amid dictionary, encompasses customs, legends, ballads, beliefs, local and folk songs (Amid, 2009: 1495). Dehhoda dictionary also considers primitive arts as folklore. It should be noted that popular culture can have in common with the religious culture but popular culture is not necessarily arise from religious culture.

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