

# Artists Remember Celebrated Sculptor

## Jawad Selim's Monument Defines Baghdad's Tahrir Square



The "Epic of Liberty" monument over Baghdad's Tahrir Square. Undated pre-2003 photo.

By Maha Mohammed      02/04/2007

Baghdad, Apr 2, (VOI) -- The Monument of Liberty, which stands in the heart of Baghdad, is one of the capital's most significant symbols of art and a distinguishing feature in Iraqi cultural life. In fact, the monument is part of the memory of generations of Iraqis who consider it, along with Jawad Saleem, its sculptor, a memory of time and place.

These days mark the 86th anniversary of the Iraqi artist's birth. Saleem (1921-1961) was one of the most renowned sculptors in Iraq's modern history.

Saleem was born in March into a family known for its love of art and drawing. His father, Hajj Saleem, and his siblings, Souad, Nizar and Naziha, were all plastic artists.

Among his most prominent works was the Monument of Liberty, which now stands in Tahrir Square, in the center of Baghdad, and is regarded by many international artists as one of the most important monuments in the Middle East.

Among his other achievements was the establishment of a group in Baghdad for Modern art. Saleem was also a founding member of the Iraqi Plastic Artists Society.

Saleem is especially known for his sculpture the Unknown Political Prisoner, of which the United Nations keeps a bronze miniature.

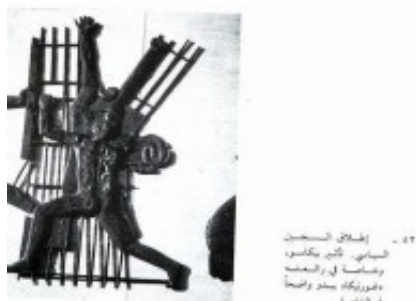
Saleem smuggled his sculpture into London and won the prize for best Arab work, while ranked sixth internationally, in a competition where he was the only entrant from the Middle East.

In commemoration of the anniversary of this birth plastic artists gave their opinion of Saleem, who predicted that chains of slavery will be broken.

Plastic artist Shaker Khaled, the director of art galleries in the art department at the Minister of Culture, told the independent news agency Voices of Iraq (VOI) that going through Saleem's works requires one to stop frequently. This creative artist is one of the most important symbols in the history of the plastic art movement in Iraq.

"When talking about the late Saleem, we talk about three decades of his life, as well as his persistence to work, creativity, the country's grievances, dreams, hope and occasionally pain," Khaled added.

On this occasion Khaled calls for reviewing all Saleem's creative work and seriously examining his artistic readings by holding a documentary



Detail from "Epic of Liberty" monument.

memorial festival.

"We felt grief and sadness at his death in the early 1960's and that he still had a lot to do. It is really a peculiar equation: in an age of diffusion and cloning and a return to different artistic references, we live in a state where art is an individual not a group practice. As individuals die, the creative memory lives the tragedy," Khaled continued.

"The sudden death of this artist caused a crisis and shock to Iraqi culture. Fate hurried to take him away. Had he remained alive Iraqi art would have been different from what it is now. We lost a lot with his death. I would say that plastic art suffered a big setback following his death," Iraqi sculptor Nidaa Kadhum, who created Al-Sayyab Monument in Basra, told VOI.

"No artist has ever contributed to art beyond Jawad's contributions. He was laying down the foundations of a Baghdad school; but unfortunately Iraqi art could not continue what Jawad established. We look forward to seeing future generations keep what Jawad established before their eyes, while honestly searching for all new and creative ways to contribute to Iraqi art," Kadhum went on, explaining his vision.

Repeating what Ismail Fatah Al-Turk said, Kadhum states "Iraqi art could only pass under the Monument of Liberty."

"This creative artist is an authentic Iraqi school and the founder of the Group of Baghdad for the Iraqi Sculptor. He had a major role in the construction of the School of Modern Art in Iraq, following his establishment of the Institute of Fine Arts, and his supervision over the graduation of scores of artists and sculptors who came after him," Taha Waheeb, a sculptor and drawer from the younger generation, who



Jawad Salim at work. Undated photo.

participated in many art exhibitions and learnt much from Saleem's school, said.

According to Waheeb, "Iraqi art acknowledges Jawad's favors. Without him it would not have been what it is now." Speaking about Jawad's talent, Waheeb says, "This artist was talented. At the age of 11 he received the silver prize for sculpture at Baghdad's first fine arts exhibition in the early 1930's. He managed to continue his academic studies at several international universities in Paris, Rome and London. He also managed to develop his skills in other fields other than sculpture, like drawing. This is demonstrated in the large number of his works

that have adorned books, particularly poetry books, including the divans of Al-Jawahri (The Collected Poems of Al-Jawahri), Hussein Mardan and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra."

It is worth mentioning that Saleem's works have been the subject of several pieces of research, in particular one conducted by Abbas Al-Sarraf, which was published by the Ministry of Information. A few years following Saleem's death a comprehensive exhibition of his works was held at the National Museum for Modern Art. Artist Khaled Al-Rahhal was quoted as saying, "There are two important epics in Iraq: The Epic of Gilgamesh and Jawad Saleem's epic of liberty."



Paintings of Jawad Selim.

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