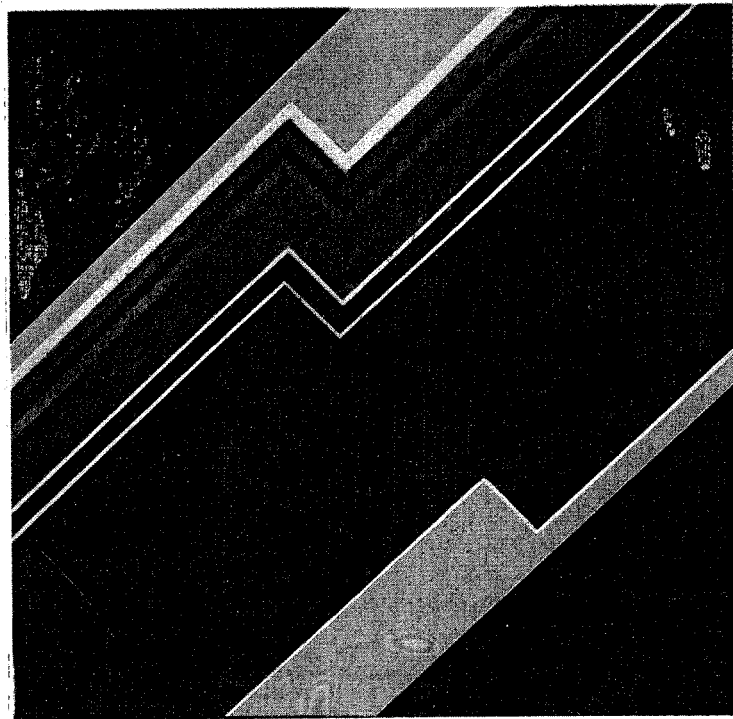


Modern Iraqi Graphic Art

Rafa Al-Nasiri



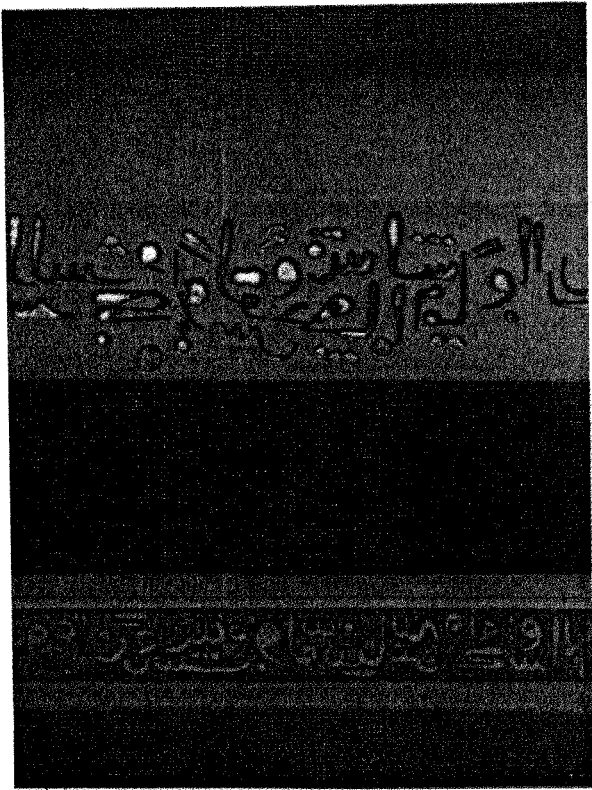
Hashim Samarchi 1968

It has been said that history began at Sumer, that small kingdom of the Lower Tigris-Euphrates valley which gave us during its more than two thousand years of existence many of the ideas, institutions and inventions on which our civilization is based. The Sumerians perfected a system of writing on clay. They knew how to solder and rivet, to engrave and carve on stone. Sumer was united with other scattered realms by the Babylonians, who were conquered in turn by the Assyrians. These and later overlords absorbed their predecessors' inventions and skills which then spread rapidly through Asia Minor and westward to the Aegean.

The Mesopotamians came very close to the

invention of printing. Their magnificent seals, carved cylinders of Lapis Lazuli, alabaster, steatite, limestone and other materials, were run off into wet clay on jars and tablets, leaving the imprint of ownership, rank and authority. Rolled over ink and printed on papyrus, vellum or textile, they would have approximated the principle of printing on the offset or rotary press as know it today!

Thus ancient Iraqis were the first to know the art of printing in history; and practising this art continued on and off along generations until we recognised another printing medium which was later applied in the southern parts of Iraq and in the holy cities such as Kerbala for instance, where woodcut



Rafa Al-Nasiri 1981

has been used to be imprinted on textiles for special religious occasions. These prints included poetic verses counting the epic of Al-Hussein's² martyrdom which is usually printed in black and white with a length measuring more than ten metres. They are used for decorative purpose on such occasions. Other patterns are also applied, in different sizes, representing mosques, arabesque and scattered Arabic words printed on coloured woodcuts, in red, black and green.

The printing technique, therefore, remained limited to this function and its folkloric craftsmanship. It neither developed its artistic motives nor its use of simple material, otherwise it would have established a folkloric graphic art similar to the Chinese Guardian Dogs which is also used for religious celebrations such as the Chinese new year. It would have also followed the same woodcut technique but enriched with colours, objects and lines though executed by popular craftsmen.

Modern graphic art was not introduced in Iraq until the 1940s where a number of pioneer artists studied the method during their academic courses in Europe. They brought back with them some printing techniques (etching, lithographs and woodcuts) which were done as part of their courses in Paris, London and Rome. Undoubtedly, those works were simply academic because graphic was introduced in those courses only as a complementary subject to accomplish their technical know-how. Therefore, those artists did neither bother to pay any attention to this art, nor to convey its knowledge to their



Dia Al-Azzawi 1978

students. This was due, perhaps, partly to their limited experience in this field and partly to their deep involvement in developing the basis of their own craftsmanship in painting and sculpture.

Twenty years passed and no influence of graphic art was traced whether in the artists' own work or the technical know-how in the art milieu least of all among students. It was not until 1959/1960 that the management of the Institute of Fine Arts decided to benefit from foreign expertise and introduce graphic courses and mural work in an attempt to expand the scope of painting courses. A contract, therefore, was signed with the well-known Polish painter and print maker Roman Artimovsky to teach graphic art as a subsidiary lesson to painting. Artimovsky established a small atelier with quite an old printing machine for etchings and another one for lithographs together with some other principal material such as limestone. All those materials were imported.

After a short time a higher department was initiated to be later called "The Academy of Fine Arts" (1962). Soon afterwards the graphic atelier was moved to the premises of the Academy. Many gifted students showed quite an interest in these courses, students such as Hashim Samarchi, Salim al-Dabbagh, Yehya al-Sheikh and Mehdi Mutashar who became the first professional print makers as we shall later see in the article.

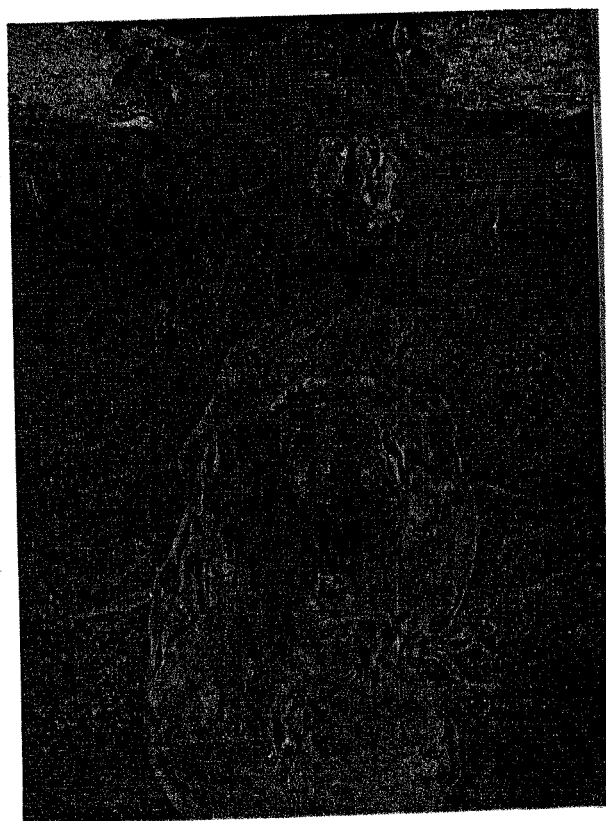
By mid 1960s, the production of this small atelier began to show its yield. In 1965 an exhibition of prints was held at the National Gallery of Modern



Salih Al-Jumai'e 1977

Art showing a collection of Iraqi woodcuts, etchings and lithographs. The exhibition was later moved to the National Gallery of Arts in East Berlin. This was not only the first Iraqi print exhibition ever held abroad, but one of the first Iraqi collective exhibitions showing abroad.³ Contemporary Iraqi graphic art, therefore, began actually in 1965 as the preceding years were simply preparatory and dedicated to establish and develop its basics. In that particular year, and in addition to the collective exhibition mentioned earlier, prints began to appear generally in collective exhibitions. In his one man show, held in the same year at Al-Wasiti Art Gallery⁴ Kadhim Hayder exhibited a number of prints (etchings, lithographs and monotypes) together with his oil paintings. The late artist executed those prints during his study in London.

Mohammed Mahr-el-Din, soon afterwards, held his one-man show⁵ at IA gallery⁵ showing a collection of graphic works which the artist did during his stay in Warsaw where he was studying painting and graphic. In 1965, also after those two exhibitions I held my own one-man show with a collection of woodcut prints which I had already brought back from Peking where I spent four years studying and specializing in graphic art at the Central Academy of Peking. My exhibition was held at the Czechoslovak Cultural Centre in Baghdad. The prints were partly in black and white and partly in colours using water-colour, a technique quite characteristic in Chinese art.

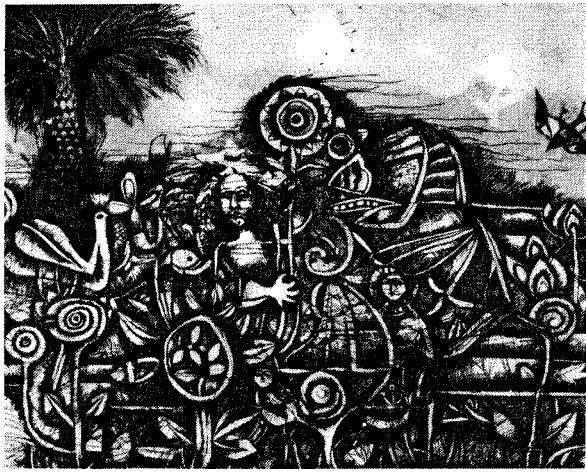


Hashim Al-Taweel 1981

During the second half of the 1960s graphic works were seen in collective exhibitions as well as one-man shows in an increasing quantity. In 1967 three artists were nominated by the Iraqi Artists' Society to enjoy a two-year scholarship granted by the Gulbenkian Foundation to Portugal for a training course at the Gravura Atelier in Lisbon. In two years time the three specialised artists came back with more advanced experience, to hold three graphic exhibitions showing modern compositions in etching and lithographs. The three exhibitions were held in 1969 respectively by Hashim Samarchi at IA Gallery, Rafa Nasiri at the gallery of the Iraqi Artists Society and the third was held jointly at the same gallery by Salim al-Dabbagh and Rakan Dabdoub. The three artists, namely Samarchi, Nasiri and Dabbagh, agree to show together in Beirut at Gallery One during the Summer of 1969.

We may therefore say that Iraqi graphic art, began to develop its features professionally and advance towards a mature stage. It even crossed out the border towards other Arab cities and began to take part in international graphic exhibitions. The three above-mentioned artists showed at the International Liege Graphic Biennale in Belgium in 1969. That was followed by a number of individual contributions in various international exhibitions such as Ljubiliana (Yugoslavia), Krakow (Poland), Friedrichstad (Norway), Bradford (England), Berlin (GDR) and others in 1969 and onward.

In the meantime graphic educational programme went steadily. At the Academy of Fine Arts Ghalib



Suad Al-Attar 1977

Nahi took over the graphic courses after Artimovsky whose contract ended in 1968. At the Institute of Fine Arts graphic had been taught as a subject subsidiary to painting as I used to give lectures on graphic techniques since my return from China in 1963. It was not until 1974 that I was able to establish an independent department for graphic arts which I am still running with my colleagues first Sami Haqqi who came at that time from West Germany and then Salim al-Dabbagh who is still working at the department.

During the first half of the 1970s a group of Iraqi artists began to return home after having specialized in graphic arts. Artists such as Yehya al-Sheikh came back from Yugoslavia and held his first one-man show in 1972 at the National Museum for Modern Art, Baghdad. Sami Haqqi returned from West Germany and held his exhibition at the same gallery; later on Mehdi Mutashar held his one-man show exhibiting a collection on silk screens which he had executed in France. Other Iraqi print-makers, living abroad, came to hold exhibitions in Baghdad in the mid 1970s such as Faik Hassan who lived in Madrid and Ardash Kakavian who is still living in France.

In 1975 two well-known painters, Dhia al-Azzawi and Saleh al-Jumaie joined the Summer Academy at Salzburg (Austria) to practise graphic art in an attempt to expand the scope of their artistic know-how. The two artists were essentially influenced by the New Vision manifests⁶ which declared that Iraqi art was in need of new expressive means and ideas.

That was the beginning of future projects and joint experiences for both Al-Azzawi and Al-Jumaie. Jumaie went further in developing his knowledge where he joined a two year course in the United States of America, and so did Al-Azzawi who is now a permanent resident in London. He has been developing his artistic tools since he first arrived in London in 1976. Al-Jumaie held a one-man show following his return to Baghdad and so did the well-known painter Su'ad al-Attar who also studied



Sami Haqqi 1978

graphic in London and held a one-person show of her works. Al-Azzawi also took part in several collective and one-man exhibitions, showing a number of his prints. We saw another exhibition of graphic works held by Hashim al-Taweel who studied in the U.S.A.

Students began to show an increasing interest in studying graphic now that the Institute opened a special department well equipped with means and materials and supervised by qualified teachers.

Graduates of these classes turned later to become well established young artists, competent in both painting and graphic techniques. Some of them even took part in international graphic exhibitions in Baghdad, London, Norway, Yugoslavia, Poland and South Korea. Among those artists were Hamid Abdul Hussein, Ammar Salman, Hayan Abdul Jabbar, Mudhir Ahmed, Samir Usama, Nadhim Muhsin, Yunis al-Azzawi and others.

Later, Iraq's participation in international graphic exhibitions increased enormously. Prints by Iraqi artists were shown at the Indian Triennale, Ankara Biennale, Cairo Biennale, Cuba Biennale and others.

In 1978 the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London organised and sponsored the Arab Graphic Exhibition in which a selected group of Arab artists took part. The exhibition took place in London and Baghdad. In 1980 the exhibition expanded to become a graphic Biennale for the Third World. Special regulations and awards were set and the jury members were carefully selected. Many well known artists took part in the exhibition. According to Matta, this gathering of artists was realized to enable artists of the Third World "confront their struggle and search for a culture that could become the third eye" a reference to the conflicts sure to drive their history between the other two worlds⁷. The idea of the two exhibitions was suggested and engineered by Dhia al-Azzawi who has been collaborating with the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London.



Usam Al-Sa'eed 1977

Finally I would mention quite an interesting graphic experience. The International Miniature Print Biennale in Seoul (South Korea) extended an invitation for Iraqi printmakers to take part in 1985. Ten Iraqi printmakers of different generations took



Salim Al-Dabbagh 1984

part introducing 35 prints. Editions of those miniature works were also exhibited at Orfali⁸ Art Gallery, Baghdad, in the same year. Five more artists took part showing 120 prints.

Translated by May Mudhaffar

Notes

- 1 The Art of the Print - Fritz Eichenberg - Thames and Hudson - p.24.
- 2 The Grand-son of Prophet Mohammed who was massacred with his family in Kerbala (1st Hijra Century).
- 3 Funoun Arabiya - a quarterly Arab Review - Contemporary Arab Graphic Art by Rafa Nasiri - (No. 1-1981), London.
- 4 Al-Wasiti Art Gallery was the first private gallery to be opened in Baghdad by a group of Iraqi architects.
- 5 IA is another private gallery which was established nearly in the same period also by an architect.

- 6 The New Vision: A group of artists namely: Dhia al-Azzawi, Rafa Nasiri, Saleh al-Jumaie, Hashim Samarchi, Ismail Fattah and Mohammed Mahr-el-Din, signed in 1969 a manifesto declaring the need of avant-garde work and new daring ideas based on modern aesthetic values and adhered to the human cause. They held collective exhibition but four of them including Fattah and Mahr-el-Din never showed with the group.
- 7 Matta: Statement by the Jury - Third World Biennale of Graphic Art 1980 - Iraqi Cultural Centre, London.
- 8 A private gallery opened in 1983.