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## HOW THE CIA SECRETLY FUNDED ARAB ART TO FIGHT COMMUNISM

BY **SULTAN SOUD AL-QASSEMI** ON 4/21/17 AT 3:45 AM



A man walks past "Baghdadiat" by Jewad Selim at the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha December 14, 2010. Selim was one of a number of Arab artists promoted in the U.S. by the AFME.

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, details began to emerge about the CIA's covert role in using art as a tool for political ends during the Cold War. The policy—known as "long leash"—was initiated to showcase the creativity of American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko in the face of "rigid" Soviet artistic constraints.

The United States government wanted to use the soft power of modern American art to combat Communism. Among the most effective of these initiatives was the Congress for

Cultural Freedom which funded a number of cultural projects including a major exhibition titled "The New American Painting" that toured Europe in the late 1950s.

Suspicious about the almost sudden spread and funding of American art movements such as Abstract Expressionism led critic Max Kozloff to describe it in a 1973 essay as "a form of benevolent propaganda." But while much is known about CIA funding for American art during the Cold War, their support for Arab art during the same period has rarely been discussed.

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In his 2013 book *America's Great Game: The CIA's Secret Arabists and the Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, Hugh Wilford documents the extent of the relationship between the spy agency and a "pro-Arabist" organization known as the American Friends of the Middle East (AFME).

One of the 24 Americans that founded the AFME in 1951 was Kermit Roosevelt Jr., a career intelligence officer who played a leading role in the CIA-backed coup to remove the democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953.

Unlike the Congress for Cultural Freedom, however, the AFME's goals were primarily internal, seeking to "get the truth about the Middle East before the American public," according to its first annual report. Wilford's book notes that Roosevelt channeled the CIA funding to the AFME to "foster American appreciation for Arab society and culture, and to counteract the pro-Israel influence of US Zionists on American foreign policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict."

The financing allowed the AFME to conduct numerous non-oil and trade activities including funding student exchanges, lectures, promoting diplomatic ties and holding cultural activities. The AFME soon established a Department of Intercultural Relations that oversaw the funding of art exhibitions and visits by Arab artists to the U.S..

In 1954, the AFME funded a major touring exhibition, lecture series and media appearances by Jewad Selim, one of Iraq's most celebrated artists, which saw 21 paintings and drawings and seven sculptures flown in from Baghdad and displayed in the L. D. M. Sweat Museum in Portland, Maine, the de Braux Gallery in Philadelphia, the Bellefield Avenue Gallery in Pittsburgh and the headquarters of the Mid-western office in Chicago.

The tour finished with an exhibition at the AFME's newly leased headquarters, which was known as Middle East House in New York City (the AFME eventually relocated to Washington D.C. in 1958). Selim sold a number of works in the U.S. and gave a painting titled "Woman

with Watermelon to Middle East House" that was then hung in their offices.

In 1955, the AFME organized four art exhibitions by Middle Eastern artists including Syria's Fateh Moudarres, Egypt's Jirair Palamoudian and Salah Taher, who was then director of the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art. Iranian, Turkish and Pakistani artists were also recipients of AFME's largess.

In fact in 1957-58 the AFME sent Pakistani art to Baghdad and Tehran in what appears to be an attempt to improve relations between America's regional allies. The AFME was particularly active in the year 1962-63 as it provided "assistance in scheduling interesting exhibitions" to galleries in New York, Minneapolis, Evanston, San Francisco, Spokane and Pittsburgh.



"Woman selling material" (1953) by Iraqi artist Jewad Selim was amongst the works exhibited by AFME in the US.

## BONHAMS

In 1965 the AFME funded exhibitions by Iraqi photographer Latif Al Ani, paintings by Tunisia's Jalal Gharbi, etchings by Sudan's Mohamed Omar Khalil and Hassan Bedawi Omar along with pottery work by Nasif Ishag George. The following year the AFME organized an exhibition of paintings and sketches of female Iraqi artist Widad Al-Azzawi Al-Orfali and her compatriot Faik Hassan at Middle East House.

The AFME funded many more art exhibitions including for Syrian artists Louay Kayyali and Mamdouh Kashlan but not all of them were documented in detail. For instance the 1967, AFME Annual Report states that it funded "exhibitions of Iraq's leading painter and seven other artists" although none are explicitly named.

These exhibitions would attract a range of people, including writers, intellectuals and celebrities as well as diplomats including ambassadors from Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia. It is worth noting that these artists were most likely unaware of any CIA connection to the support that their exhibitions would receive.

It is unclear exactly how much CIA money ended up at the AFME — officially its funding came from numerous sources, including oil giant Saudi ARAMCO, with an impressive budget that peaked in 1955 at \$500,000 (the equivalent of \$4.4 million in 2016).

A 1967 *New York Times* article uncovering CIA funding was a blow to the AFME, but the U.S. government's support for Arab art has continued to the present day under the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs — although its goals have drastically changed.

A recent study by the RAND Corporation titled "Artists and the Arab Uprisings" notes that the previous two U.S. administrations identified the "role that cultural outreach can play in achieving the long-term U.S. goals of combating extremism and promoting democracy and reform in the region."

The AFME changed its name to AMIDEAST in the 1970s, but in its two decades of existence as the AFME it played a major role in showcasing Arab art to an American audience. Some of the artists supported by the AFME—such as Iraq's Jewad Selim, who in 1959 designed the iconic *Monument for Freedom* in Baghdad—went on to play significant roles in the contemporary art movements of their respective countries and beyond.

Furthermore, it appears that most of the exhibitions that were funded were targeted inward at an American audience, in a way making them a reverse "form of benevolent propaganda" by using the work of modern Arab artists to build stronger cultural bonds.

Today, however, we see a plethora of exhibitions including Barjeel Art Foundation’s 2017 hat trick displays at Yale University Art Gallery, the Hessel Museum of Art and the Katzen Arts Center at the American University. These shows highlighting Arab art are being showcased in an increasingly inward-looking United States. But this time they are largely funded not by the CIA, but the Arab world itself.

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