Befriended by a king, arrested, then forced to fight... Artist Dia Azzawi on the destruction of his beloved Iraq

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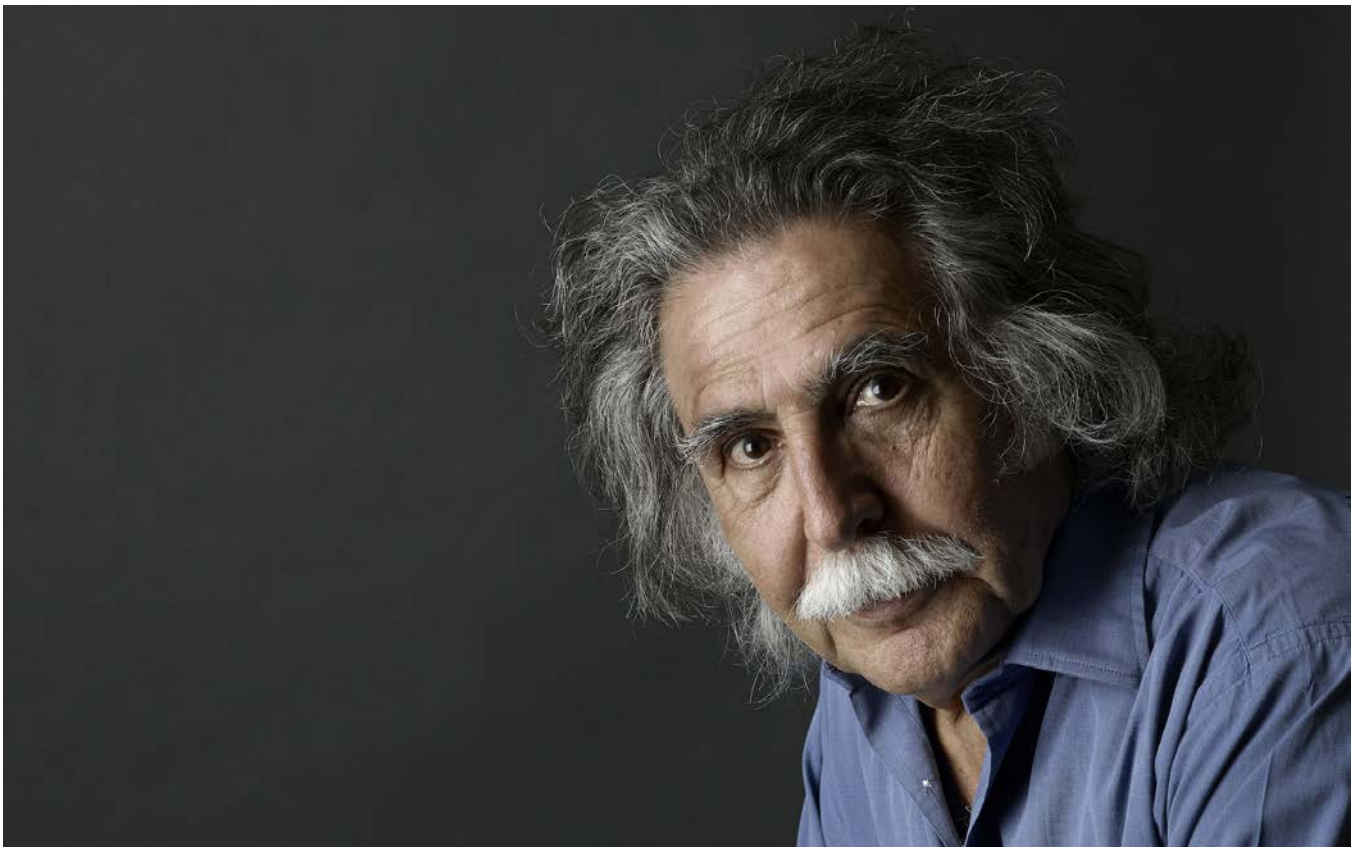


Dia Azzawi Credit: Henry Bourne

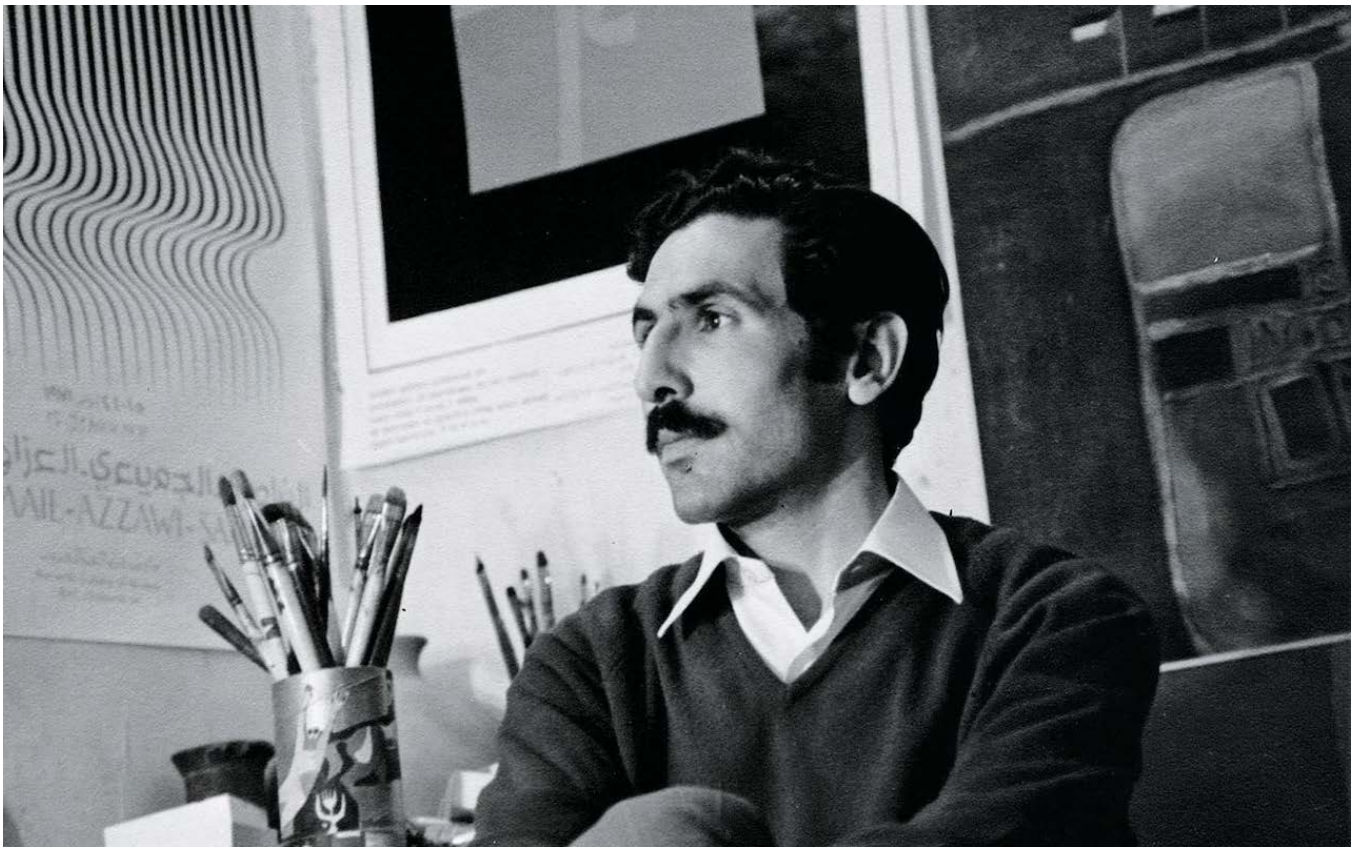
Befriended by a king, arrested by the Ba'ath Party and then forced to fight the Kurds, no wonder politics and painting go hand in hand for Iraq's foremost artist, Dia Azzawi

The Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi, 77, is sitting in his west London studio, reminiscing about his school days in Baghdad. It was 1956 and the height of the Suez Crisis. The Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser had just

nationalised the Suez Canal, electrifying the Arab world.

Azzawi recalls how, as a teenager swept up in the political fervour, he found himself among a group of friends throwing stones at the Iraqi police. The group were caught, reprimanded and, worst of all, 'I was kicked out of school,' he says, in his lilting, half-broken English.

'Two months later,' Azzawi continues, 'the King of Iraq announced that he would visit two schools in Baghdad, one of which was mine.' It was well known, he says, that the King liked art, and because of Azzawi's obvious talent his headmistress asked him to return to school. 'It was fantastic,' he remembers now. 'Otherwise I would have been finished.'



Dia Azzawi in Baghdad in 1972 Credit: Courtesy of Dia Azzawi

During the visit Faisal II praised Azzawi's painting of an Iraqi sheikh, and in the following weeks he was invited to the palace to meet the King again. 'We met in this very small room. He sat on a chair behind a simple table and said to me, "After you finish secondary school, I will send you to Italy

to study art." But then the revolution happened [toppling the monarchy],' continues Azzawi, 'so I never got to go!' He delivers the final words like a punchline.

As it happens, the 1958 revolution – a military coup that culminated in the assassination of the 23-year-old King – had little lasting effect on Azzawi's career. Based in London since 1976 and represented by galleries in Dubai and Paris, today Azzawi is one of the most successful Iraqi artists and a prominent figure in modern Arab art.

His work is widely collected in the Middle East, by those with links to the region, and increasingly, as institutions and museums acquire his work worldwide, by international collectors. In 2012, Tate acquired Sabra and Shatila Massacre – a mural-sized drawing made in response to the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut by Lebanese Christian Phalangists, which has been compared to Pablo Picasso's Guernica.

"There was an atmosphere of fear. If anyone thought you were a Communist, they would come and pick you up"

This week a 1970 work on canvas is expected to fetch in excess of £60,000 when auctioned by Christie's in Dubai. Azzawi's work is varied. Working across media including painting, sculpture, print and artist's books (visual representations of great Arab poems), he avoids limiting himself. Experimenting, he believes, 'is an artist's responsibility'.

Preparing for a 'major retrospective'

As Azzawi speaks, two assistants painstakingly photograph and document large-scale colourful and abstract canvases in preparation for his first major retrospective, which is to be held in Qatar – he has had a long association with Qatar Museums, having featured in the opening exhibitions of two spaces in 2010. Curated by Catherine David, deputy

director of the Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Centre, it is believed to be the largest-ever solo exhibition of an Arab artist.

Hidden down a side street in the industrial Park Royal district of west London, Azzawi's studio is a simple two-storey red-brick building. He leads the way through his chaotic workroom past sculptures of desert roses (crystal formations found in arid climates), stacks of paintings and the two assistants, busy at work, until we reach his study, at the far end of the building.

Donald Trump praises Saddam Hussein for killing 'terrorists'

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Here in the calm, Azzawi sits with his back to a bookcase filled with well-worn books on Picasso and Shirin Neshat, twiddling his bushy white moustache. His oversized metal-framed glasses and bouffant greying hair give him a slight air of a mad professor. Azzawi has a tendency to stray off topic, often to recount mischievous stories from his past. He is jovial, quick to laugh and unassuming, but his eyes reveal a deeper disquiet, most evident when he speaks of 'the repeated destruction' of his beloved Iraq.

Art and politics

Azzawi was born in 1939, the third of 10 siblings; his father was a grocer in central Baghdad while his mother stayed at home to look after the family. His parents, he says, were neither artistic nor politically engaged – both traits that would come to define Azzawi as an adult.

His fascination with drawing started young. ‘As a child I would draw anything I saw in front of me; it was often figurative, like my mum sitting, or one of my sisters,’ he says. But it was later, while studying archaeology at the College of Arts in Baghdad, that Azzawi began to develop his own aesthetic.

Dia Azzawi photographed in his west London studio in August Credit: Henry Bourne

By day he attended classes on ancient Iraq, sparking a lifelong fascination with the ancient region of Mesopotamia and its Sumer civilisation, which would go on to influence much of his work, while by night he studied European painting at the Institute of Fine Arts.

‘This contrast meant that I was working with European principles but at the same time using my heritage as part of my work,’ Azzawi says. In his early paintings he drew inspiration from the legends of Gilgamesh, a Mesopotamian epic about a king who does not want to die, and Imam Hussein, a Muslim hero and the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

It was at this time that Azzawi began working under the Iraqi artist Faik Hassan. Hassan was at the forefront of a group known as the Pioneers. Active in the 1950s, they aimed, through their work, to establish a continuity between historic and contemporary Iraqi art. This tension echoed through Azzawi’s early work, as he used the ancient stories of Mesopotamia to comment on the political upheavals of 1960s Iraq.

"It felt like I was fighting my friends"

But his art, he says, was not always political. ‘At first it was very normal, I was just trying to perfect my painting.’ Then, while growing up, a series of experiences changed his outlook and politicised his art. First he was arrested. It was in 1963, and the Ba’ath Party, which advocated a single Arab socialist nation, had just come to power in an army-backed coup, overthrowing the military ruler Brigadier Abdel Karim Qasim and ushering in an era of political instability.

Army, an atmosphere of fear - and arrest

‘There was an atmosphere of fear,’ Azzawi says, describing a harsh crackdown against left-wing parties. ‘If anyone thought you were a Communist, they would come and pick you up [and take you to prison].’ While Azzawi was not identified as one, he was still detained in prison for two months: ‘After that I would never believe in the system. It was inhumane; you could not trust what was going on.’

That was Azzawi’s first clash with the Ba’ath Party. The second came

shortly after. Between 1966 and 1973, Azzawi served three stints as a reservist in the Iraqi army. He spent his first service as a second lieutenant fighting Kurdish rebels in the mountains of northern Iraq. ‘It felt,’ he says, ‘like I was fighting my friends.’

Wounded Iraq, 2009 Credit: Dia Azzawi

One day a soldier in his command told him that Iraqi soldiers were approaching Kurdish girls in a local village. As their superior, Azzawi went to apologise to the village leader: ‘I told him that it was not on and he must

tell me what had happened.' But Azzawi was not sure that the man had understood his Arabic as all he said was inshallah, or God willing.

Three days later, the village leader sent Azzawi a clay jar of yogurt. This, he says, continued daily. On his last day in the area, Azzawi went to say goodbye: 'When I approached the man he spoke to me in fluent Arabic,' he says, laughing. 'He said to me, "Look, the way you spoke to us, I knew you were not truly an army officer." And he told me I would be safe wherever I went in the region.'

For Azzawi this encounter had a lasting effect: 'It made me think that you should always defend someone who has no voice. It is the small people, like the yogurt man, who are not heard.' Azzawi's way of defending the Kurds was to paint. After his last stint of military service, in 1973, he started working on a series of paintings called Human States, some of which feature in the retrospective.

> *"It was not a matter of freedom and democracy, it was a matter of destroying a whole society"*

In these the human form is distorted and compressed against a sombre background. In one a scrawled message in Arabic reads, 'Here is a corpse... except my soul is overwhelmed to the point of exploding.' Many feature lists of names or numbers. 'They represent the Kurds,' Azzawi says.

It is, however, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war that seems to have had the biggest influence on Azzawi's artistic development. In response to what it considered an act of aggression, in just six days Israel defeated the allied states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, capturing the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza strip from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria; 250,000 Palestinians and 100,000 Syrians were displaced.

Referred to as an-Naskah, ‘the setback’ in Arabic, the war reshaped the Middle East, and scarred the collective Arab psyche. In the years immediately after the war, Azzawi took inspiration from contemporary political writing. In 1973 he published a collection of work entitled Drawings from the Land of Sad Oranges, based on the short stories of the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, which focused on the experience of statelessness.

King Faisal II, who championed a young Azzawi, in 1952 Credit: Getty images

The year before, Kanafani had died in a mysterious car bombing in Beirut. Azzawi says he knew many Palestinian intellectuals who were struggling to work or express themselves under Israeli occupation and who, even in Lebanon, were not free to speak.

It made him feel he had a duty to speak out: 'I feel I am a witness. If I can give a voice to somebody who has no voice, that is what I should do,' he says, adding, 'Kanafani made me aware of the importance of being part of what is happening in your generation. You cannot be an outsider.'

It was for this reason that, in 1969 in response to the defeat of the Arab states, Azzawi published Towards a New Vision, a manifesto arguing that artists had an obligation to take a moral stand in political affairs. Written by Azzawi and signed by five other artists, it departed from the Pioneers' focus on Iraq.

"I feel I am a witness. If I can give a voice to somebody who has no

'For me the idea of Iraqi art was too limited,' he says. 'I wanted to create Arab art.' Azzawi organised a series of festivals, such as the Second Arab Art

voice, that is what I should do"

Biennale in Rabat on the theme of Palestine (1976) and the Third World Biennale of Graphic Art (1980).

'Like all the young, when they have the power to say goodbye to their teachers, they have to create something new,' he says. Why, I ask, if he was so committed to the region did he decide to leave Iraq in 1976? 'It was obvious that it was turning into a one-party state,' he says, describing how the Ba'ath Party was growing in power, extending its long arm into every sector of society, including the art world, stifling expression.

Having climbed the party ranks and orchestrated the coup that brought the party back to power in 1968, Saddam Hussein held effective power in Iraq along with President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr. 'I decided I had to leave. In London I had opportunities; it was the first time I saw original European work in museums, and every month there was something different to see,' he says.

Sabra and Shatila Massacre, 1982-3, in the Tate Credit: Dia Azzawi

On arriving in England, Azzawi served as an advisor to the Iraqi Cultural Centre, but even there he focused on promoting Arab, rather than solely Iraqi, art. 'To have a global, wider perspective was my intention from the beginning,' he says.

In London, Azzawi first focused on producing artist's books, returning to Iraqi literature and moving away from political texts. It was also in London that he met his Swedish wife, Shashten Finstrom, who worked at the Patrick Seale Gallery, where Azzawi had his first solo British exhibition, in 1978; that his daughter, Tala, now 28, grew up to be a writer; and that he lost his wife to breast cancer in 2008.

'Destroying a whole society'

Although Azzawi says he feels at home living in north London, it is clear that he cannot escape his homeland: 'I haven't been back since 1980, and most likely I will not visit [because it is too dangerous], but my concern is still Iraq and that part of the world.' He is highly critical of the 2003 invasion of the country, describing himself as 100 per cent against it.

'It was not a matter of freedom and democracy, it was a matter of destroying a whole society.' For Azzawi the rise of sectarian politics and radical Islam in Iraq can be laid squarely at the door of the American and allied invaders. 'The sectarian mentality? It comes from the invasion,' he says, explaining that part of his family is Sunni and part is Shia: 'There was no problem.'

Religion and sectarianism, he adds, are 'the new viruses in the Arab world'. The invasion re-politicised Azzawi's work. In 2009 he created Wounded Iraq – a relief of an injured lioness, a motif for the ancient land of Assyria, in the centre of a distorted map of present-day Iraq.

Another work, The Ugly Face of Occupation, 2009, is a photo collage of Iraqi people in the shape of an ancient Mesopotamian temple tower. On

top of the tower, a coalition tank spills blood on to the people. He blames the rise of Isil on the allied forces' de-Ba'athification of the Iraqi government: 'Isil is the result of the mentality of revenge. A lot of them were the officers of Saddam Hussein; they lost everything,' he says.

The Ugly Face of Occupation, 2009 Credit: Dia Azzawi

Azzawi believes the situation in Iraq to be worse today than it was under Saddam. 'Now we have hundreds of Saddams,' he says. Is there any hope for Iraq? 'No hope, no way,' he replies. 'The only way now is if a Mandela comes along. Then you can build a society that can flourish.' But this may not happen in his lifetime.

As for Azzawi, what is next for him? 'Sculpture,' he says, without hesitation. 'I want to make things that are monumental, and for this, sculpture is the most effective.' After more than 50 years Azzawi shows no signs of slowing down. Looking back at his career, on the eve of his retrospective, does he have any regrets?

He pauses. 'I would like to have more time to be more experimental with my work. I'm not completely happy with the line I took, but like anything, it's an accumulation of experience, of knowledge.' And with that it's out of the door, past the busy assistants, the desert-rose sculptures and stacks of paintings and back on to the London streets, which couldn't feel farther away from the dusty sidewalks of Baghdad.

I Am The Cry, Who Will Give Voice to Me? Dia Al-Azzawi: A Retrospective (from 1963 until tomorrow) opens at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, and at Gallery Al Riwaq (both in Doha, Qatar), and runs until April 16 (qm.org.qa/en)