

Dia al-Azzawi: Iraqi Artist Blossoms in Exile

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(photo: Marwan Tahtah

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Dia al-Azzawi escaped the suffocating atmosphere of Iraq in the 1970's and quickly became a well-known artist during his exile in London. To this day, he refuses to return, particularly after the calamity that struck his homeland.

Dia al-Azzawi (b. 1939) spent half of his life in Baghdad, and the other half in London. However, he still regrets not leaving Iraq earlier. This regret stems from his inability, as a young man in Iraq, to experiment and grow as an artist.

The pressure to have his artwork conform with local tradition and identity often prevented al-Azzawi from broadening his artistic horizons. In fact, many Iraqi artists were affected in much the same way. This was evident in such art forms as poetry, architecture, and music.

There were still rising vanguards and people pursuing adventurous art, but they often remained constrained under the weight of tradition.

The modernization of Iraqi art was ushered in by the poems of al-Seyab, Nazik al-Malaika, and al-Bayati, along with Jawad Salim and his peers who sought to reimagine drawing and sculpting through the creation of local groups, most notably the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951.

Al-Azzawi managed to familiarize himself with the work of these men during the later years of their collaboration. He was a member of the Impressionists Group in 1961, and one of the founding members of the New Vision Group or *Jamaat al-Ruaa al-Jadida* in 1969 and the One-Dimensional Group or *Jamaat Al-Boaud al-Wahid* in 1970. These groups often debated such themes as identity and modernity, which would later influence al-Azzawi's art.

While al-Azzawi studied archeology in Baghdad University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, in addition to drawing at the Institute of Fine Arts, he became more interested in the idea of identity. This was particularly apparent in his early works where he drew wide eyes, human and animal shapes that were common in Mesopotamian art.

Al-Azzawi also included layouts taking the form of popular and traditional carpets and fabrics. His work was modern but also abstract – two essential characteristics that would later appear more often in his work.

Al-Akhbar met with al-Azzawi in Beirut at the Contemporary Iraqi Art exhibit, which he organized and participated in. The artist recalled some of his life story and how he was born into a family that had little interest in the arts.

Initially, al-Azzawi did not have a specific interest in drawing. He was instead interested in working with handicrafts. It was in high school that his talent as a visual artist emerged.

"My art teacher noticed my work and encouraged me to move in that direction," says al-Azzawi.

This coincided with his dismissal from school as a result of his involvement in a demonstration in support of the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

However, he was brought back to school for a scheduled visit by the king of Iraq. The king was impressed by one of his pieces, and asked to see him in his palace later. He also asked whether al-Azzawi wanted to continue his education abroad.

"I said: thank you, sir, while the headmaster was glaring at me with angry eyes," recalled al-Azzawi.

Two years later, the king was deposed and the opportunity disappeared. He then enrolled in the department of archeology at Baghdad University.

A turning point in al-Azzawi's life was when he met Hafez al-Drouby, one of the founders of the "Baghdad Group" or *Jamaat Baghdad*. Al-Drouby, who was a professor, encouraged him to study painting at night, in addition to studying archeology during the day.

Al-Azzawi joined a group of professors and offered contributions to their galleries. The press was particularly impressed by his work, giving him more confidence.

His first solo show in 1964 opened up new opportunities for al-Azzawi outside of Iraq.

"Yousuf al-Khal was visiting Baghdad during that time and he offered to host an exhibition of my work at Gallery One in Beirut. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra wrote an introductory note to the show, which I couldn't attend because I had been conscripted into the army," said al-Azzawi.

In the mid-1970s, the idea of traveling started to become more appealing to al-Azzawi. A conflict with his manager at the Directorate of Antiques, where he was working, was the straw that broke the camel's back. He submitted his resignation and left for London, where he was reborn as an artist.

Al-Azzawi soon became a well-known Arab and international name in the world of art. Exhibitions of his work, which included paintings, sculptures, print work, and poetry, were held in a number Arab, European, and American cities. But, his self-imposed exile did not distance him from his original identity.

Instead, al-Azzawi said "his identity became much more modest and relaxed."

Al-Azzawi still remembers when he was first introduced to the work of Francis Bacon, and his late discovery of Klimt, Frank Stella, and Tapies.

All these figures and their work expanded his own vision of the self. It became easier for him to leave a painting for a while and get back to it later. This was how he transformed the Arabic letter into abstract art, after calligraphy had become a cliché of the Arab visual arts.

Al-Azzawi immersed himself in the poetry of al-Seyab, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, and Sargon Boulus. He returned back to the classics of *Gilgamesh*, the *Golden Poems* or *al-Muallaqat*, *al-Wasiti*, the *Assemblies of al-Hariri* or *Maqamat al-Hariri*, and the *Ring of the Dove* or *Touq al-Hamama*.

These works inspired his art and poetry and around the same time al-Azzawi introduced wood and metal into his more traditional paintings. He even made paintings where the canvas was in the shape of a chair, a mini bar, and other three-dimensional shapes.

Al-Azzawi's moral and political views were certainly reflected in the aesthetics of his art. He set up a collection of his paintings alongside Mahmoud Darwish's poem, *Ahmed al-Zaatar*, documenting the massacre of *Tel al-Zaatar* refugee camp in Lebanon.

Al-Azzawi remembered the *Sabra and Shatila* mural that he painted after seeing the horrific images of carnage from the massacre.

Smiling bitterly, he said: "the mural has survived after remaining in the National Kuwaiti Museum for five years as per an agreement that expired a few days prior to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait."

In the 1990s, al-Azzawi started working with local artists on completing a project called "*The Artists' Files*" or *Dafater Al-Fannan*. This was akin to a visual history of Iraqi life, including its political and social reality. The topics in the project varied according to its time of completion and the mood of the various artists.

When the works were exhibited during a tour in the United States, al-Azzawi placed *Maqamat Al-Hariri* at the beginning of the collection.

This, according to the artist, was how the collection "continued the historical artistic experience that dates back to the thirteenth century."

Currently, al-Azzawi spends most of his time in his studio in the suburb of White City in East London. Meanwhile, his name has become widely recognized in the world of Arab art.

He recently completed a new project using photographs taken in Gaza.

When asked whether he will be returning to Iraq anytime soon, his reply was "never."

He concluded by talking about how he once intended to donate all his artwork to an Iraqi museum but then he changed his mind after what he described as the disgust and pain of seeing what was happening to his homeland.

Al-Azzawi said he left with the intention of never returning: "I imagine my return will make me lose Iraq as even a dream, just like I lost it as a home."

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.

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