

Dia Azzawi photographed by Celia Topping, 2012



IN THE LIBRARY WITH DIA AZZAWI

Iraqi pioneer **Dia Azzawi** explains why he loves the **Epic of Gilgamesh** and how his artist's books complement rather than illustrate great works of literature

by India Stoughton

Art and literature often go together, from great novels written about paintings — Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* — to great works of art inspired by literature — John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*, Salvador Dalí's heliogravures of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. For Dia Azzawi, one of Iraq's most prominent artists and a modernist pioneer, it was the ancient myths of Mesopotamia that inspired his early paintings.

Born in Baghdad in 1939, Azzawi was fascinated by the legend of Gilgamesh, an Akkadian poem considered to be the first great work of literature, about a demigod king who seeks eternal life. "Since a young age, I was fascinated by poetry," he says. "This became more serious when I went to study archaeology, which led me to discover the richness of mythology. In the richness of the Arabic language, I find that visual images, created by a kind of abstract tool, can be used to create a parallel vision."

The artist used ancient Mesopotamian myths to comment on the political upheavals rocking 1960s Iraq, but also to reflect on the human condition. "I was fascinated with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* not only as poetry, but also as a study of how the question of death goes together with friendship and love," he says. "I was also interested in the mythology surrounding the martyrdom of al-Hussein [the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad] — not in its link to religion, but as the notion of the eagerness of human beings to fight injustice."



above: Dia Azzawi, *The Smell of Love*, 2014. Poem by Abdul Zahra Zaki. Reproduced courtesy of the artist

below left: Dia Azzawi, *Prayer in the Temple*, 1990. Poem by Yusuf al-Khal. Reproduced courtesy of the artist

below right: Dia Azzawi, *The Birds*, 2010. Poem by Amal Dunqul. Reproduced courtesy of the artist



Dia Azzawi, *Drawings for the Land of Oranges*, 1973, reproduced courtesy of the artist



Dia Azzawi.
My Broken Dream,
2015, Reproduced
courtesy of the artist

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During the 1950s, Azzawi became part of a group known as the Pioneers, led by his mentor Faik Hassan. After the Six Day War in 1967, he began to seek inspiration in contemporary political writing and literature. He was particularly impressed by the work of Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani and his poignant reflections on the refugee experience. In 1973, Azzawi published a collection entitled *Drawings from the Land of Sad Oranges*, based on a collection of Kanafani's short stories.

In 1976 he moved to London, where he is based today. There he began publishing artist's books, seeking inspiration in works of literature. "My interest in book art was a combination of discovering Islamic manuscripts and the knowledge I had about the relationship between artists and poets in French art," he says. "My real interest was not to illustrate the words, rather it was to challenge myself to create an abstract visual vision, which is unique from and yet parallel to the image created by words."

As for his own tastes in books, Azzawi reads widely, enjoying both poetry and fiction. "There are many books that influence me, but of particular note are those by the French poet Louis Aragon (especially his book *Le Fou d'Elisa*), and the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, whose novel *The Fratricides* always reminds me of the time I spent in the army in Kurdistan," he says.

Earlier this year, Qatar Museums held a major retrospective of Azzawi's work, said to be the largest solo exhibition ever staged by an Arab artist. Azzawi chose the title *I Am the Cry, Who Will Give Voice to Me?*, a line from a poem by Iraqi writer Fadhil al-Azzawi (no relation).

"It was the voice of my generation," the artist says of al-Azzawi's poetry. "It reflected a kind of protest against the political system, as well as taking cause against the revenge mentality as a result of the 1963 coup. A lot of intellectuals were sent to prison (including Fadhil and myself), while many others were forced to leave Iraq."

Azzawi's eclectic practice has resulted in unceasing experimentation over the decades. He has worked across media including painting, sculpture and print, as well as his artist's books. His taste in literature reflects a similarly diverse palette. If he could take just three books to a desert island, what would they be?

"*Le Fou d'Elisa* by Louis Aragon," he says, in Arabic translation. "*The Conference of the Birds* by Farid al-Din al-Attar (in Arabic or English) and any book by the Iraqi anthropologist Ali al-Wardi." Titles for us all to add to our reading lists. ■

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