

CHRISTIE'S

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5 minutes with... Ismail Shammout's *Odyssey of a People*

Masa Al-Kutoubi, Specialist, Head of Sale, examines an epic, six-metre wide painting that depicts the Palestinian struggle — and which was for many years hidden away in a pillowcase

Ismail Shammout (1930-2006) has long been recognised as one of Palestine's leading modernist painters. 'He really laid the foundations for an artistic visual lexicon used by the Palestinians of the 1950s up until today,' explains Al-Kutoubi. 'He helped to produce a national identity through artistic practice — one that rallied Palestinians and the wider Arab population.' Offered directly from the artist's estate, *Odyssey of a People* (1980) is 'highly political, poignant and haunting', says the specialist.



Ismail Shammout (Palestinian, 1931-2006), *Massirat Sha'ab (Odyssey of a People)*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 40¾ x 237¾ in (103.5 x 604 cm).

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Masa Al-Kutoubi with Ismail Shammout (Palestinian, 1931-2006), *Massirat Sha'ab* (*Odyssey of a People*), 1980. Oil on canvas, 40¾ x 237¾ in (103.5 x 604 cm).

The son of a merchant, Shammout was born in Lydda (now known as Lod). When he was 18, the *Nakba* — or 'catastrophe' — saw Shammout, his family and 25,000 other residents forced from their homes by Israeli soldiers. They marched on foot before settling in the refugee camps of Khan Yunis in Gaza, the experience leaving a lasting impression on the artist.

Shammout would develop a figurative style through which to communicate the dramatic events he had lived through. In 1950 he left Gaza for Cairo and enrolled at The College of Fine Arts, where he was to meet his future wife, the artist Tamam Al Akhal. The political scene in Cairo, with its rising tide of Arab nationalism, proved to be a major influence on his development.

In 2002, during the siege of the Palestinian Presidential compound, the work — which measures six metres across, and was first exhibited in 1981 — was removed from a gallery in Ramallah by Sakher Habash, a founding member of the Fatah political party, and hidden in his home. His wife folded the canvas and kept it in a pillowcase for fear of it being appropriated by Israeli authorities. The vast painting remained concealed for several years until the family was finally able to find a safe passage for it to be returned to the artist's home in Amman.

Reading from right to left — as in the Arabic language — *Massirat Sha'ab (Odyssey of a People)* depicts key events within Palestinian history. The *Nakba* of 1948 is succeeded by the subsequent wars of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. The despair felt by the Palestinian people is juxtaposed with a sense of hope and unity under the symbol of the Palestinian flag, all the way through to a final, dreamlike expression of liberation, hope and a faith in peace.

'It is very rare to see works by Shammout on the market,' says Al-Kutoubi. 'The artist's family has closely guarded the estate since his death, and being able to offer his most important work at auction is a way to pay tribute to the artist's pioneering position within the history of modern Arab art.'

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