



PANEL: Sa'Academia and Social Justice: the Limits and Horizons of the ICC Conference held by the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship and the Arab Studies Institute at

Farewell Mohammad Ghani Hikmat

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by **Nada Shabout**

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"Baghdad, no matter what happens to you, you will always flower again," is the poem by Mustafa Jamal al-Din that Mohammed Ghani Hikmat found carved on the poet's tomb in Damascus, and intended to cast in bronze on a fountain he designed for old Baghdad. It was to be his new work for the city he loved dearly but had to leave after the US led invasion of 2003 for fear for his and his son's life. After seven years away, he could not resist her beckoning and his desire to help revive her.

It is nearly impossible for me to reminisce about Baghdad without the images of the Fountain of Kahramana, Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves (1969), or Scheherazade and Shahrayar (1971), setting the backdrop for my childhood memories. Ghani's creative hands have adorned his beloved city with the romantic



[Mohammad Ghani Hikmat (1929-2011)]

spirit and mood of One Thousand and One Nights, subtly reminding her inhabitants lest they forget her glorious past in the midst of her modern urban development. To Ghani, Baghdad is a beautiful and sensuous woman and he was gravely saddened and offended by her destruction and the world's disrespect of her status.

A prolific and passionate sculptor and an Iraqi icon, Ghani's imprint on Iraqi art is deep and wide. After graduating from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1953, Ghani studied sculpture at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome (graduated 1957), and then specialized in bronze casting in Florence in 1961. After returning to Iraq, he taught sculpture at the Institute of Fine Arts, the Academy of Fine Arts, and the College of Architectural Engineering at Baghdad University. He soon became one of Iraq's most prominent sculptors.

Ghani's legacy includes generations of sculptors following in his footsteps and keeping his spirit alive. Part of Iraq's pioneer modern artists, Ghani was a member of Iraq's most influential art groups, the Baghdad Group of Modern Art that was established by Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said, both his teachers and friends. His generation is credited with constructing an art tradition that is still present and persistent today and a culture that respected and valued art and artists. In the spirit of *Istilham al-turath* (seeking inspiration from tradition), his distinctive style synthesizes Iraq's history of aesthetics. In his distinguished Baghdadi carved wooden doors, Islamic abstraction merges with Sumerian cuneiform. His stylized and elegant figures combine his love for Mesopotamian epics and the humanistic tradition of Florence.

Ghani understood the responsibility of his legacy and his duty to history as one of its custodians. Finding the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion in ruins, with mounds of shattered sculptures and broken and empty frames, he acted fast. The destruction included the floor dedicated to his work, hosting the history of his career. Turning to colleagues and students, he organized a campaign of searching for and buying back stolen works. He formed and headed a Committee for Recovering Iraq's Culture and was able to recover about 100 important works by renowned artists, starting with Jewad Selim's wooden statue of "Motherhood." He pleaded with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and other foreign organizations for financial support and aid to save Iraq's modern heritage. Failing to get any funding, he continued his personal efforts even after moving to Amman.

Despite of his broken heart, failing health and age, Ghani's energy remained boundless to the end. One of the rare pleasures I had after 2003 was visiting Ghani in his studio in Amman, Jordan. Surrounded by maquettes of old works and others for new projects with the music of Munir Bashir in the background while drinking Iraqi tea and listening to him passionately speak about new ideas and projects, I could almost feel and mourn the loss of the energy and optimism of the Baghdad Group of Modern Art.

Ghani has been part of Baghdad's artistic and public history throughout his life. Apart from the hundreds of works he has in his repertoire, in his youth, he assisted and supervised the casting of the bronze frieze for Jewad Selim's Monument of Freedom in Florence and then its installation after the untimely death of Selim in 1961. After the death of the sculptor Khalid al-Rahal in 1986, Ghani had to finish the installation of the contested Arch of Victory. Who will now finish his last public pieces designed for Baghdad?

In the inaugural speech delivered at their first collective exhibition, the Baghdad Group of Modern Art declared: "We dream that there is a dream that connects us with all the beings that simply dream. A dream we call Baghdad." Unfortunately Baghdad is once again a dream for most Iraqi artists today. Born in Baghdad in 1929, Ghani's body returns to rest in Baghdad on Thursday, 15 September, 2011. His soul will forever restlessly hover over the land of his ancestors awaiting the redemption of the city of his youth. May it find peace soon.

Farewell my friend. I will miss our talks. . . but will not forget the lessons. My deepest condolences to Iraq.

Texas 13 September, 2011

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