



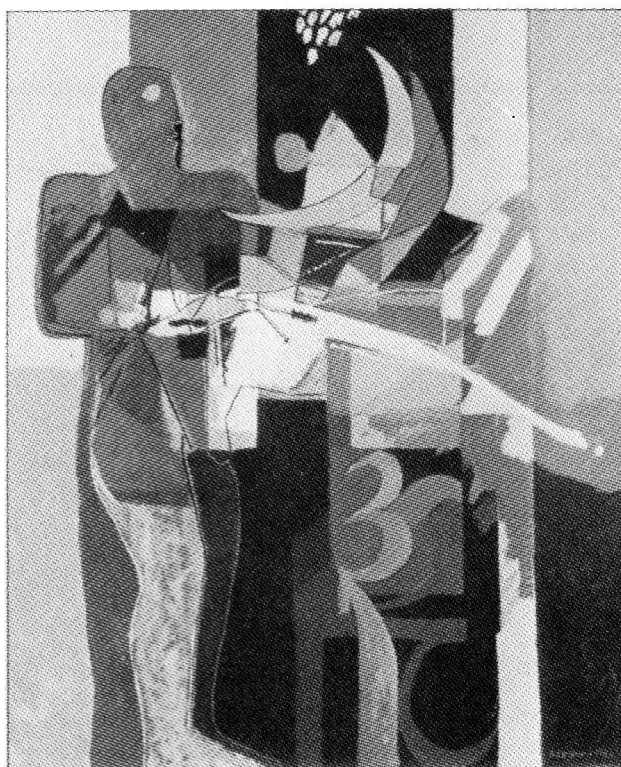
A Z Z A W I



Dia Azzawi

by Anne Mullin Burnham

The central challenge facing contemporary Arab artists is the integration of specifically Arabic influences and traditions with twentieth century Western art and its differing idioms and imperatives. It is a problem of maintaining the cultural identity of the one while responding to the inherent dynamism and flux of the other. Although, relatively speaking, the dialogue between the Western and Arabic artistic traditions is still in its infancy, there is no doubt that it is taking place, that it is vigorous, and that Arabic artists are producing art where Western sensibilities fuse easily with Islamic, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Sumerian imagery. The



*What Al-Niffari said to
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fusion is best when the art goes beyond iconographic reference and visual description and becomes something more than illustration or imitation, when the Arabic inspiration and motifs are not superficial or merely decorative but are integral to the conception and structure of the work.

Among the most successful artists in marrying the two traditions is Dia Azzawi, whose work was recently exhibited for the first time in the United States at the Arab American Cultural Foundation's Alif Gallery in Washington, D.C. Born and educated in Iraq, Azzawi has lived in London since 1976; his work is well known in Europe and throughout the Arab world. Azzawi's achievement, explains Alif Gallery manager Afaf Zurayk, lies in the fact that he intuitively comprehends the various visual traditions to which he is heir and, rather than describe them, can evoke them in an original and organic way.

His works from 1983 collectively have a powerful visual impact: vibrant, glowing colors, strong iconic forms, an exciting interplay of figurative and abstract elements, and a variety of textures and mediums. A closer examination of the individual work reveals the many ways in which Azzawi transforms traditional motifs and symbols into structural elements of his abstract designs. Calligraphy provides a ready example: the parts of the Arabic script he uses have no readable function—they are reduced to their essential form and incorporated as an integral part of the design in the same way that the

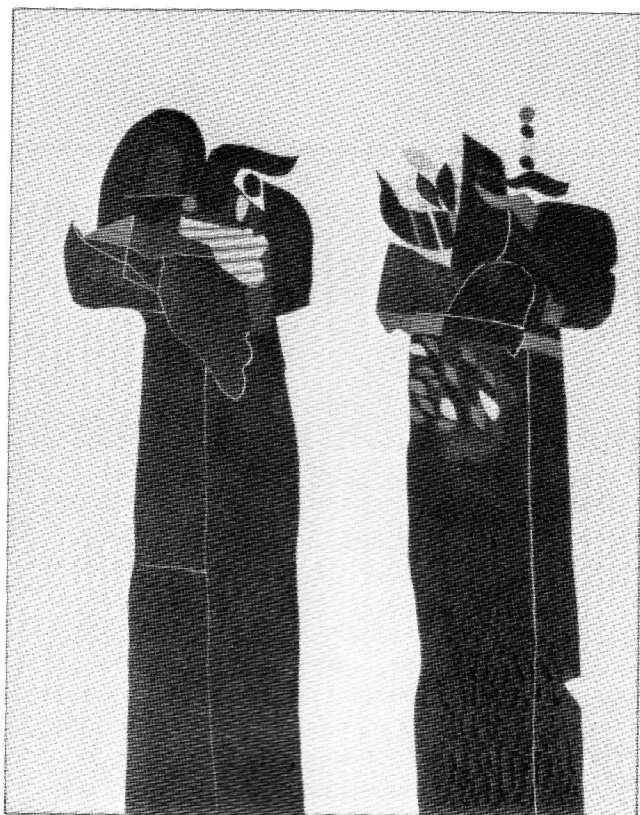


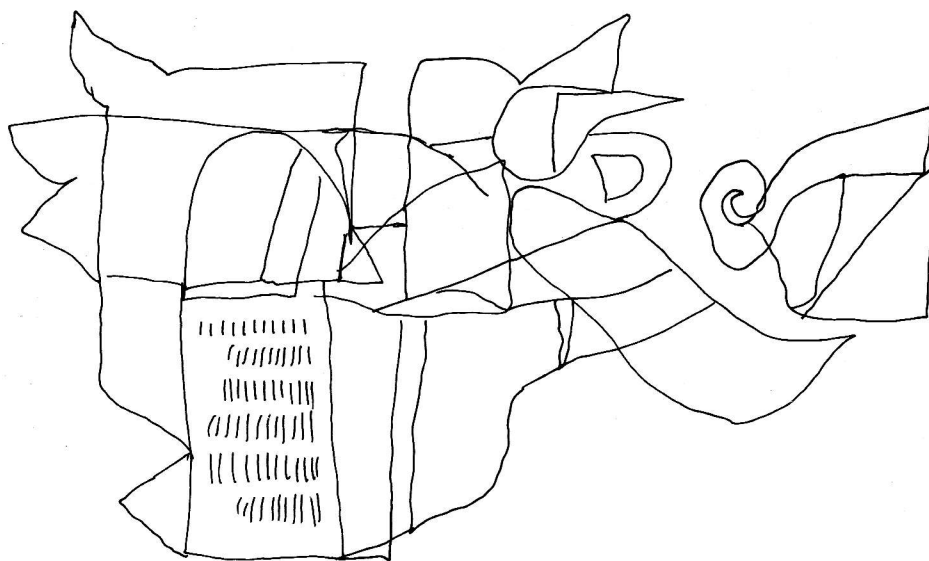
Image No. 3 1983

Cubists attacked and used geometric forms for pictorial purposes. Western eyes can appreciate them simply for their beauty of line and form and their relationship to the whole, while for Arabs they have a resonance on a deeper level as well.

Many other elements in the designs also suggest references beyond their structural function—the parallel lines of blinds and shutters; the squared shapes of windows that open to the world, or keep the world from entering; the broken clasp of the door lock in the wood sculpture *Old Baghdadi Door* can be read as the violation of a private world or the freeing of a force held captive, and the realistic handprint placed immediately above the lock increases the sense of tension and involvement for the viewer.

Azzawi's training as an archaeologist is seen in the totemic profiled figures with oversized eyes reminiscent of Sumerian stone sculpture in his series *What Al-Niffari Said To Abdullah*. Inspired by a poem by the tenth century Sufi poet and writer, this group of gouaches on paper explores the idea of freedom, both political and artistic, and the relationship the artist as exile feels to his country. The strong contrast of colors between the figures and the backgrounds creates the idea of separation and suspension suggested by the poem, but it also brings to mind the unique light of the Arab world where the play of light and dark sharpens and defines architectural and sculptural forms.

In all of Azzawi's work, whether gouache, acrylic



Untitled

highlighted with gold leaf, etching, sculpture or tapestry, his sense of design and color is unerring. He attributes this in large part to the Islamic tradition of abstraction, both visually and conceptually; to the constant exposure to pattern and color in everyday life where each element in a design is seen both as a unit in itself and as part of the whole. His colors seem to illuminate a work from within themselves and are not dependent on outside light sources. He favors vibrant blues, warm reds and he uses black in a dynamic way. "It is an unbelievable color," he says, "not neutral at all." Azzawi's blacks are alive with gradations of color, patterned in places with overall abstract designs, rich and deep.

One of the mediums Azzawi has been exploring recently is painted wood sculpture, and several examples were included in the exhibition. The possibilities created by working in three dimensions, freed from the constraints of a frame, appeal to him on both artistic and psychological levels. Shapes that jut out from the basic forms destroy the unseen but understood barrier between the art and the wall and the art becomes part of the space surrounding it, reinforcing the Islamic idea of art as part of life, not removed from it.

Dia Azzawi's deep attachment to his cultural heritage is evident in all his art. And what he has done successfully to express that heritage is to find a visual language that is both Arab and universal. □

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Dia Azzawi was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1939. In 1962 he graduated from the University of Baghdad in Archeology. In 1964 he received a degree in Fine Arts from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad.

He has exhibited his work in Casablanca, Baghdad, Kuwait, Beirut, Tunis, New Delhi, Nicosia, Basel, Warsaw, London, Paris, Rome and Geneva, and later this year an exhibition will open in Saudi Arabia. His work has been represented also in numerous international shows including the International Cagnes-sur-Mer Exhibition in 1975, the Biennial of Venice, and the International Exhibition of Drawings in Rijeka, Yugoslavia in 1976, the Biennial of Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1979 and the Salon de Mai, Paris in 1980. Among the international awards he has received is the first prize at the International Summer Academy Exhibition in Salzburg, Austria. Azzawi's works are in numerous public collections, including the National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad; the Museum of Modern Art, Damascus; the Gulbenkian Collection, Barcelona; the Art Monetary Fund, Abu Dhabi; the Art Development Fund, Kuwait, and the International Airport of Jeddah. Private collections of his work are found in Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. Several of the works in the Alif Gallery exhibition were purchased by Queen Noor of Jordan on her recent visit to Washington, D.C.