

# PAINTING POETRY POLITICS

Dia al Azzawi has been striving to perfect his work — a combination of his rich oral and visual heritage with the most modern artistic techniques and cultural influences

For an artist working abroad, the memory of his own country is often his main source of inspiration, colouring his work with longing and nostalgia, or informing it with a sense of perspective that is not always uncritical.

In the case of London-based, Iraqi artist Dia al Azzawi, these influences are manifest. His richly-coloured abstracts in oil or gouache recall at once his Arab and Sumerian heritage. Yet in some of them, the distraught, misshapen faces, the falling dove, the sweeping desert landscape punctuated by distorted shapes, indicate the emotions of one who looks back with both longing and distress.

Azzawi's work is rooted in the turath, heritage. He is one of a pioneer breed of Arab painters who has sought, and found, a means of expressing himself in an essentially Arab genre.

This reflects the rich visual and oral heritage of the region. While Azzawi draws his images from the Sumerian and Islamic backgrounds, the inspiration for his themes comes most often from the poetry, stories and myths of the Arab literary tradition and from current political events.

The written word is almost always a central motif in Azzawi's art. In his *Seven Golden Odes*, a series of silk screens and one gouache directly inspired by the pre-Islamic al Mullaqat poems — some of his best work to date — fragments of the poems and the images they inspire are totally interlinked.

As one critic puts it: "To al Azzawi, the Assyrian, Islamic, Arab and modern elements in a canvas should be indistinguishable or simply felt and appreciated as a single entity. Just as a letter or character is part of a phrase, a word or a poetic phrase or extract should form an integral part of the various other elements in a painting."

Azzawi's painting career began during his years as an archaeology undergraduate at the Institute of Fine Arts in Iraq. The famous Iraqi sculptor Jawad Salim was then at his peak and his work had a tremendous influence on young artists. Through Salim's example, al Azzawi was able to make the connection between the ancient cultures he had been studying as an archaeologist and the modern techniques he had been perfecting in his painting classes.

"It was a great revelation to me," Azzawi explains. "There was a tremendous response from deep within me, I felt especially close to

the Sumerian ideas. I loved the simple lines, the great big eyes. It was new to all of us. We had almost no awareness of this aspect of our cultural past."

An early series of paintings based on the stories from the *1001 Nights* reflects this new awareness. The works are largely figurative, drawn along clear, simple lines, against a sparse, flat background. All the figures have the same large, all-seeing eyes.

Within a short time, however, Azzawi was moving towards the abstract, as portrayed in a series of illustrations for a book on the martyrdom of Hussein. This trend was to continue.

As with many artists, writers and poets, events in the Arab world have had a strong influence on Azzawi's work. In the wake of the 1967 war, of his own period of service in the Iraqi army, and of the events in Lebanon, the canvases become more violent and political.

In a series of about 40 gouaches, painted during the mid-1970s, Azzawi expresses the pain and anxiety experienced during the army days when fighting the Kurds. Terrible, distorted faces peer out from gloomy grey-blue or brown canvases, while in the background, the names of dead colleagues form the words written, as if carelessly, on a brick wall.

In a book commemorating Black September, Azzawi's stark, violent and often ghoulish images serve to capture the horror and incomprehension expressed in the journal of an unknown soldier, later missing, presumed dead.

When Tel al Zaatar fell in Lebanon in 1976, Azzawi turned to the writings of Arab poets Mahmoud Darwish, Taher Ben Jalloun and Yusuf Sayegh for inspiration. The result is a moving series of silk screens, in which the words of the poems and the images jostle with each other to catch the eye.

"The poem," says Azzawi, "is very important. It gives the artist a great deal in terms of atmosphere. I wanted to paint the tragedy of Tel al Zaatar. I started, but later I turned to the poems, they gave me the inspiration I needed."

In his quieter, more reflective moments, Azzawi seems to be looking homeward in large, richly coloured canvases, mostly gouache. These are almost totally abstract, often built around a word or phrase written in Arabic.

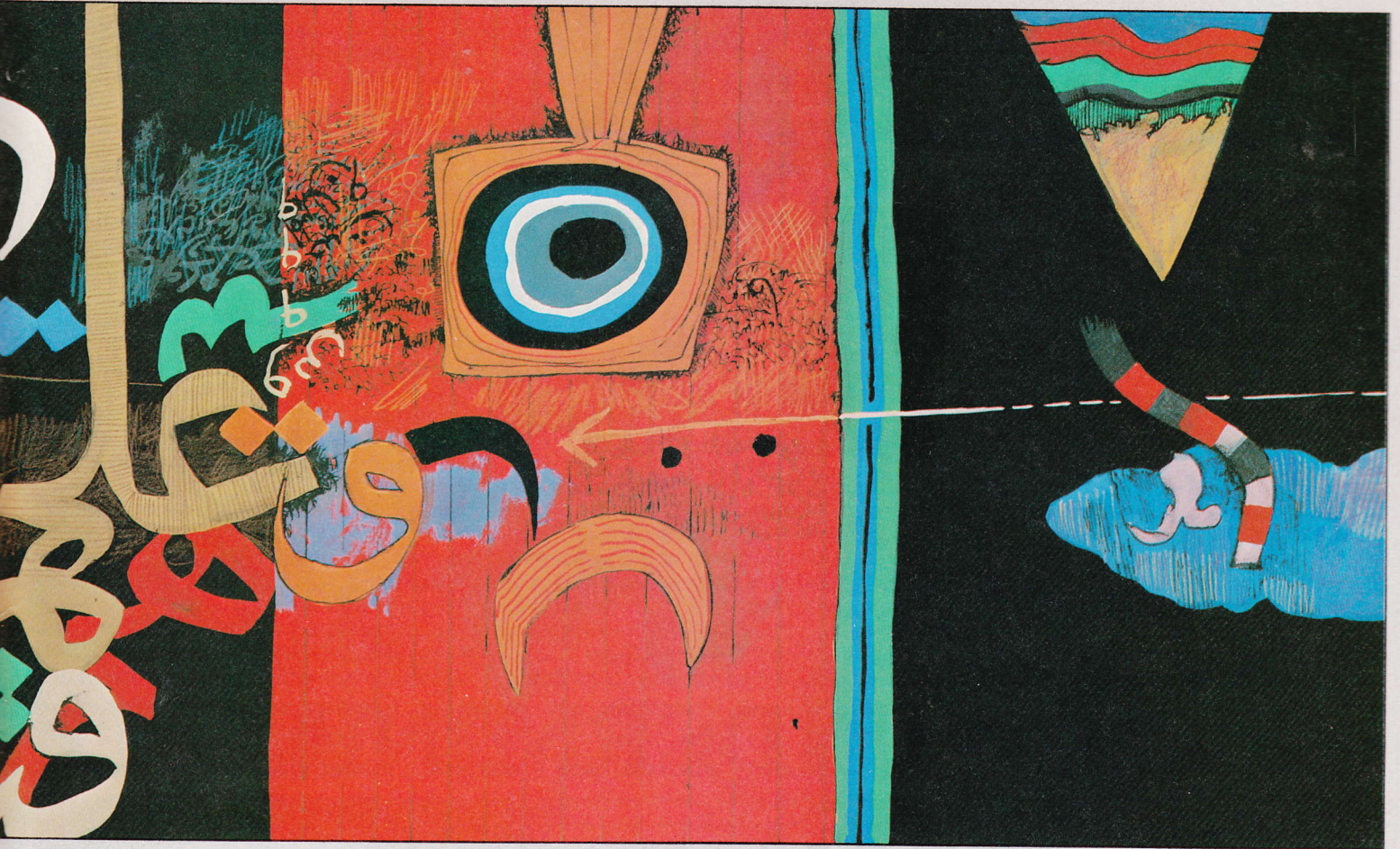
Since coming to London, Azzawi's colours have become more positive, and are dominated by warm reds, vibrant blues and heavy black, often in daring combination. When exhibited in London and Paris in recent years all were immediately snapped up.

While only a few can have the privilege of owning one of Azzawi's paintings, the British public in London unwittingly enjoys the benefit of his talent. For Azzawi is also a skilled graphic artist and his posters, advertising events at the London Iraqi Cultural Centre, have brightened up the city's underground and railway stations for a number of years.

Though this kind of work is a far cry from the culture which inspires Azzawi, it has been instrumental in drawing the attention of westerners to that culture.

**1 Gouache composition, 1980. 2 The only gouache in the series "Seven Golden Odes." 3 One of the silk screens in the series, 1979. 4 Tel al Zaatar, silk screen, 1976. 5 Islamic composition, oil 1965.**





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