



IRAQI PAVILION

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Free

The history of modern art in Iraq (which possesses some of the oldest works of art in the world) is some 30 years old. Between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries poetry is about the only personal art that did not entirely disappear in a country where the spoken image has always held a greater fascination for its people than the visible one.

Although in the first decades of the century two or three painters, notably Abdul Kader Rassam, did some serious painting, it was at the beginning of World War II that painting and sculpture revealed the first signs of revival. The colourful palette of some Polish refugee impressionists staying then in Baghdad had dazzled a few young Iraqis; and an English artist, Kenneth Wood, who did some painting in Baghdad in the midst of a group of keen youngsters contributed to the rising enthusiasm. As soon as the war was over, a number of students were sent by the Government on Art Scholarships to Paris, London, and Rome, and at the Fine Arts Institute,

established in 1939, a rapidly mounting number of students were enrolled until the Institute had to give morning as well as evening courses to cope with the demand. In the early sixties the Academy of Fine Arts was established and incorporated into Baghdad University.

The output, particularly in painting, has been considerable. On examining this ever-increasing output one is confronted with the question of tradition more than any other. Foreign viewers expect to see a dominant element which may be called Iraqi or simply Arab, and are likely to be critical of the visible influence of Paris. Iraqi artists, who are only too conscious of the need of an indigenous quality to mark their art, often wonder whether their critics appreciate the difficulty in which they find themselves when the whole idea of painting is practically a western import. But they have also realized that the indigenous quality they seek, so undetermined, uncrystallized, can

only be achieved when they have struck roots in their own soil and delved into the historical layers of a vast uneven heritage, the accumulation of forty centuries or so. It is interesting, therefore, to see how Iraqi artists attempt a fusion between a style ancient as civilization itself, and an attitude to the problem of expression as up-to-date as to-day's newspaper.

In the Arab world, cultural continuity was interrupted by a stagnation of several hundred years. As it is not always easy to pick up the thread where the ancients left off, the question of tradition, becomes something of a psychological problem. In art, the problem is even more acute, since painting, as we know it now, did not flourish in the Arab Golden Age. Painting in oil is practically a western invention, and its development is closely tied up with the historical development of western religious, economic, and social thought. Thus, Arab artists are acquiring a method behind which lies a historical

attitude, perhaps once alien to their public. On the other hand, the national impulse is so powerful that tradition, a force that can be creative as well as destructive, cannot be easily dismissed. In fact, it often is rather obsessive. The artists look back over centuries of their history in search of roots, but do not always find the ground that is entirely accommodating.

In Islam there has been a traditional injunction against the portrayal of the human figure: the injunction was intended to combat the proclivity of early Moslems to worship images instead of God, the One, the Almighty, but it gave Arab artistic genius an entirely new channel of expression. It was thus that floral and geometrical patterns were developed to exquisite perfection and employed to decorate anything from great domes and vast interiors to small copper pots and plates. With the passage of time, however, these elaborations and abstractions became less inventive, until they ended by being entirely

repetitive and survived as fossilized forms. These immutable forms have in fact become the *raison d'être* of numerous Middle Eastern crafts such as ceramics, carpets, and inlays, but they have become so impersonal in style that they allow little scope for the creative urge of the individual artist of to-day, who seeks self-expression through a more pliant medium.

Manuscript illumination was for centuries the visual counterpart of poetry: influenced by Mongol and Persian art, it also had roots in Middle Eastern paganism and Byzantine art. Although the general impression is that such Islamic art was mostly Persian, the Arabs, when they employed human or animal figures, gave it an expressive power of line and composition quite different from its highly ornate Persian counterpart. The endless books on medicine, physics, botany and other sciences that were illustrated by Iraqi and Syrian artists in the last three centuries of the Abbasid period and later

are now a veritable storehouse of Arab "painting". Most important are the magnificent illustrations of a famous story book called *Maqamat al Hariri* done in Baghdad by Yehya al Wasiti (A.D. 1237), which, together with a few story books illustrated by other artists, have been a source of inspiration for many modern painters in Iraq. The use of calligraphy as part of the dynamic design of the whole in such works has been particularly noted by a group of artists who now employ Arabic letters in their work with entirely novel effects, often with mystical overtones.

Going beyond this, many artists in Iraq look on ancient Mesopotamian sculpture and bas-reliefs not only as a source of influence, but also as the ground where their roots are implanted. In the massive and stylistic quality of Assyrian sculpture and the expressionist simplicity of Sumerian figures lies an attraction for today's artists almost as great as that of Islamic and Arab forms and symbols. In the same work by

an Iraqi artist to-day one therefore may find a combination of characteristics that hark back to Sumerian, Assyrian and Islamic motifs, with the added dimension of a personal style which relates the work to our times.

However, a number of Iraqi artists have insisted that only regional, social and, if necessary, political themes, could give their work the national character that might prove to be one more phase of a continuous tradition. Modern Mexican art has had its influence on some of them. Equally important for them is the drawing upon local folklore with all its implied symbolism and imagery. This is a salutary tendency so long as it does not drive the artist towards triviality and slipshod technique. Those who emphasize the importance of national themes are now learning that it is not the content of painting or sculpture that creates a school, but the style, the method, the vision. Without these, the work will lack in significance and personality.

The persistent problem, therefore, is that originality for our artists is, paradoxically, related to the national heritage of centuries, on the one hand, and the national aspirations of to-day, on the other.

Extract from:
IRAQI ART TODAY.
by Jabra I. Jabra

AMER AL-UBAIDI

He began by treating familiar folk themes and religious symbols in an abstract manner. In his early work he was fond of creating contrasts of colour, and he was sensitive to the relation between forms and the canvas they occupy; each painting displayed an intricate interlacing of colour and form that made use of every inch of the canvas. Some years later he began to employ a noticeably greater economy; empty space became one of his favourite devices. There was greater economy, too, in his use of colour, and in some of his works he confined himself to the use of white.

From the start, Amer Al-Ubaidi concentrated on

historical and epic themes derived from the legacy of the past, in an attempt to give the epic a contemporary context. He was concerned to define the relation between the human forms occupying the canvas. His frail, slender figures, as elusive as a desert mirage, always strive for proximity with one another. Sometimes these figures draw together to form a group. His concern with these human forms makes him sometimes neglect the relation between these forms and the space they occupy. The viewer needs to follow these techniques carefully in order to appreciate Amer Al-Ubaidi's work.

Dia Al-Azzawi

DIA AL-AZZAWI

Like other artists of his generation, Azzawi's paintings fuse traditional symbols and modern protest. Before turning to painting, he took a degree in archaeology at Baghdad University, and images from the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia – Sumerian beads and Babylonian lions – figure in his works. Other sources of inspiration include the richly ornate Arabic calligraphy, Islamic miniatures and Turkish architecture. These elements drawn from an indigenous cultural legacy have, under Western influence, been incorporated into works which are unmistakably 'modern' in aesthetic objective, and it could be said that Azzawi's forays into Europe—first to Salzburg in Austria where he studied etching in 1975 and now to London—have made the marriage of Eastern visual motif and Western sensibility more credible and authentic.

Azzawi, a man who gives an immediate impression of gentleness and integrity, is deeply concerned that his work should be accessible to

everyone, not merely to a Westernised gallery-going public. He was a founder member of a thriving group of poster painters in Baghdad, finding in this art form 'the most immediate artistic relationship with ordinary people.' Inevitably, in a country swept by revolution twenty years ago and since then undergoing political upheaval, social rebirth and breakneck modernisation, art is dominated by public events. Azzawi's work is concerned with injustice, oppression, the unhappy fate of the Palestinians, the violence of which man is a victim in an era of insecurity. Cries of anguish burst from the mouths of his ancient stone heads. Broadly speaking, in the artistic revival which started in Iraq in the 1930's, two schools developed. One is a kind of social realism which, in a somewhat facile way, glorified images of village life and the desert. The other is more experimental, more profoundly conscious of its own cultural roots, more ready to accept Western influence, more responsive to social and political problems, more committed to the people.

NOORI AL-RAWI

There is a deceptive softness of tone in Noori al-Rawi's paintings through which, soon enough, one senses an intensity of dream, on memory. There may not be a single human figure in this obsessive landscape, and yet it glows with a human passion, equally obsessive. The square houses, the solitary mosque, the domed tombs of holy men on bare hills promising miracles to generations of villagers, the distant river with the ancient water-wheels – all seem to emerge through a haze of childhood memories as much as through the moonlight or twilight haze of a haunted mind.

This is poetry of place. It is a way of going back to the roots through the evocative force of image. Conscious of the change his surroundings are going through – a process to which he has been contributing himself – the Iraqi artist finds

psychological sustenance in the mystery of his origins. So much talent comes to the ever-expanding metropolis from villages rich in associations, which a painter like Noori al-Rawi turns into a lyrical, allusive theme. His variations on such a theme are mystical in the purest sense: communication with nature is one of love and secret identification, where rocks and clouds, inner self and outer vision, are always interchangeable. And the Buraq, the flying horse of the Prophet, which may on a certain holy night open the gates of heaven for those who watch for it, is also the awaited sign of all wonder, when the seemingly empty houses of a mountain village may turn into the crowded city of God.

Jabra I. Jabra

RAFA AL-NASIRI :

Rafa Al-Nasiri has acted throughout his contributions to the exhibitions of the New Vision members (whose nucleus was their 1969 manifesto) together with a limited number of artists, as a spearhead in the experience of the Iraqi artists. He moves between the comparative and the absolute in a transparent and utmost sensitivity in presenting the resonance of the letter and transforming it into an abstract composition. After probing the arabic letter in the last ten years, contemplating it as a pure abstract form, he starts with a vocal symbolism to end up with a kind of mimic expression. He smoothly moves on to perceive every rhythm contained within these symbolic marks such as arrows, crosses and dots to emphasize the rhythmic sensuality of the environment.

Rafa Al-Nasiri's works, beginning with Tel-Al-

Zaatar quartet (1976) at least, have been advanced trials to go beyond the formal meaning of the letter's representation. He uses the mental movement (i.e. verbal interpretation) in terms of time and hence is inclined to abstraction outside the boundaries of limitation and figuration in his composition.

Thus the artist took into account the importance of linking the environmental rhythm, which was the focus of his attention, with the partial manifestations of nature such as smoke, distant horizons, stars, terrains and etc., as though they were a shining terminology he would like to use. They are probably the same letters that he once tried to find their impact out and is now viewing their astronomical importance.

Shakir Hassan Al Said

SHAKIR HASAN AL-SAID

has preserved an innocence, a freshness of vision, which made him draw creatively on local forms, symbols, habits, superstitions – all the folklore still active in the older alleys and coffee shops of Baghdad and the surrounding countryside.

Basically there has always been a religious streak in his work which has now assumed the proportions of a mystical vision. He started with the world as seen, and gradually developed towards a concept of the world as felt and thought; it has been a slow, agonised shift from the concrete to the abstract, but always with an emphasis on the local, the Arab, the popular. This has carried him through a succession of time (forms and themes associated with old Arab and pre-Arab art in Iraq) with a consciousness of place (folk motifs, customs, scenes), subordinating both to the needs of his own creative impulses.

Jabra I. Jabra



AMER AL-UBAIDI

Salute for the Hero, Tariq No. 1
111 x 112 c.m, Acrylic on Canvas 1978.



AMER AL-UBAIDI

Salute for the Hero, Tariq No. 2.
131 x 137 c.m, Acrylic on Canvas 1978.



DIA AL-AZZAWI

Sumerian Image No. 2
100 x 120 c.m, Oil on Canvas 1979.



DIA AL-AZZAWI

Sumerian Image No. 3
100 x 120 c.m, Oil on Canvas 1979.



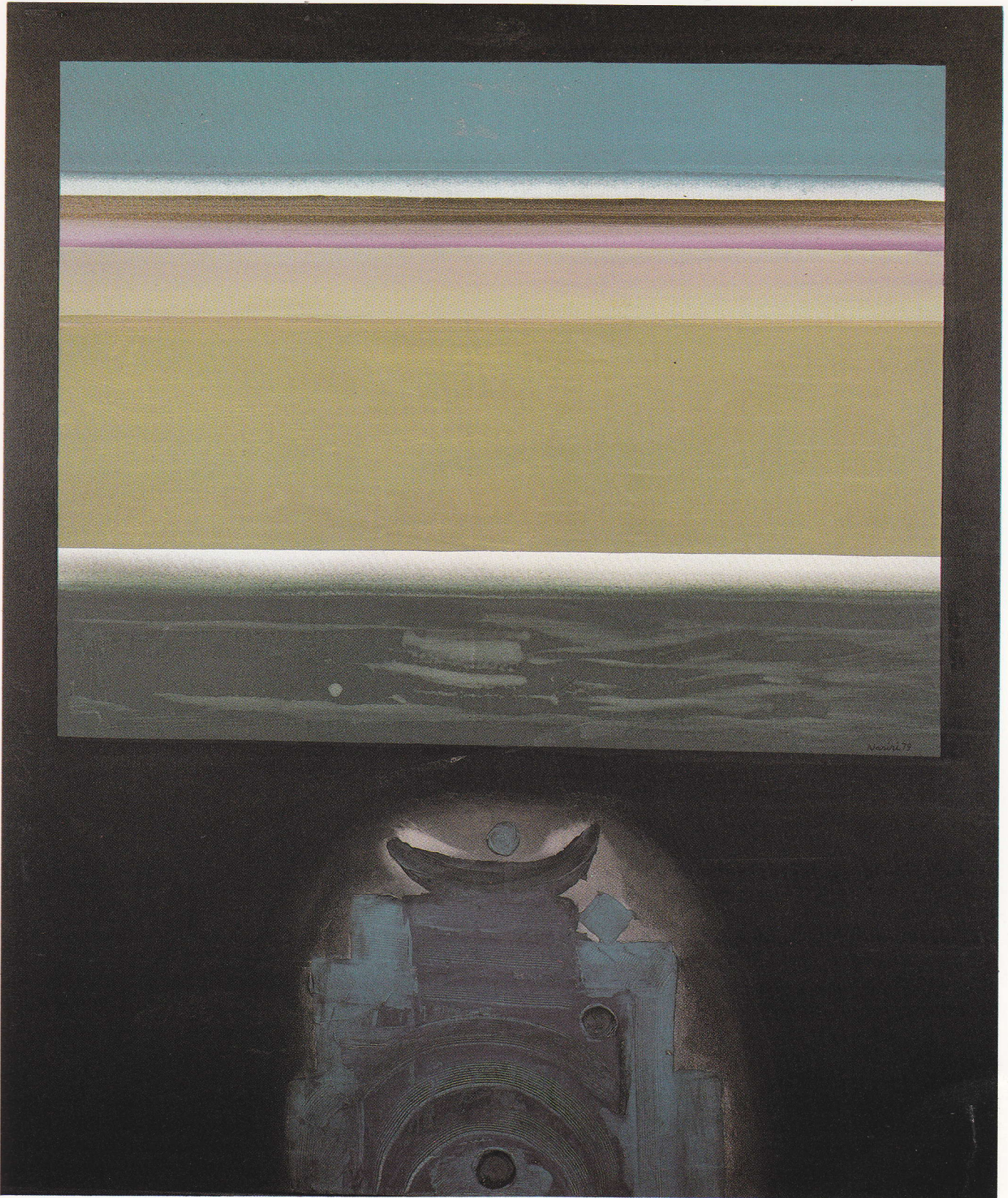
NOORI AL-RAWI

A village in memory
120 x 170 c.m, Oil on Canvas 1978.



NOORI AL-RAWI

Childish imaginations No. 1
110 x 130 c.m, Oil on Canvas 1978.



RAFA AL-NASIRI

Variations of the Horizon No. 1
120 x 130 c.m, Acrylic on Canvas 1979.



RAFA AL-NASIRI

Variations of the Horizon No. 3
120 x 120 c.m, Acrylic on Canvas 1979.



SHAKIR HASAN AL-SAID

Writings on the wall No. 3
120 x 120 c.m.



SHAKIR HASAN AL-SAID

Wall from Qunaitra
120 x 120 c.m, Acrylic on Wood 1979.

AMER AL-UBAIDI

Amer Al-Ubaidi was born in 1943 and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, Baghdad, in 1967.

He has held six one man exhibitions in Baghdad, Jeddah and Kuwait, and has participated in many group exhibitions including Contemporary Arab Artists, Part I, in London in 1978.

His works have been shown at a number of international exhibitions, including the Cagnes-sur-Mer Festival of Art, France, and he won the First Prize for foreign artists from the Ibiza International Exhibition, Spain.

He is now Director of the National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad.

DIA AL-AZZAWI

Born in 1939, he now lives in London as a full-time artist. After studying art and archaeology in Baghdad, Dia Al-Azzawi went on to hold fourteen one man exhibitions in Baghdad, Kuwait, Beirut, Frankfurt, Casablanca and London.

He has participated in many international exhibitions such as the Mobile Exhibition of Arabic Art in the Arab countries; the First New Delhi Triennale of International Art in India, 1974; the Fourth and Fifth International Biennale of Posters in Warsaw; the International Cagnes-sur-Mer Exhibition, France; the Venice Biennale, 1976; the International Exhibition of Drawings, New York, 1977. In addition, he has participated in several group exhibitions, among them the Four

Iraqi Artists' Exhibition, Baghdad, 1972; the Three Iraqi Artists' Exhibition, Beirut, 1972; the Six Iraqi Artists' Exhibition, Damascus and Baghdad, 1973; the Iraqi Graphic Art Exhibition, Beirut, 1975; Exhibition of Six Iraqi Artists, Baghdad, 1978; the Exhibition of Contemporary Arab Graphics, London, 1978; International Exhibition, Beirut, 1978; Seven Iraqi Artists, London, 1978; the Baghdad International Poster Exhibition, London, Baghdad, Beirut, 1979, and the Graphics Exhibition, Tunis, 1979.

Dia Al-Azzawi has written three books on art and has contributed many articles about Iraqi contemporary art and Arab art to the Arab press.

NOORI AL-RAWI

Born in 1925. After studying art in Baghdad, Noori went on to participate in many international exhibitions such as the New Delhi Triennial, India, 1968 and 1975, and to exhibit his work in Europe and throughout the Arab world. He has also participated in group exhibitions such as the Revolution Exhibition which toured Moscow, Sofia, Peking and Belgrade in 1958; the exhibition of Iraqi Contemporary Art which toured Rome, Vienna, Madrid, London and Beirut in 1967; the exhibition of Contemporary Iraqi Art which toured Poland, Bonn, Stuttgart in 1975–1976–1977; the Artists' Exhibition against Racial Discrimination, Baghdad, 1976.

Noori Al-Rawi is a founder member of the Society of Iraqi Plastic Arts and has published 6 books on art and many articles on art and art

criticism. He was a member of the Iraqi National Committee on Plastic Arts from 1973-74 and for several years presented a bi-monthly programme "The Plastic Arts" on Iraqi TV. He is now the Director of Art Exhibitions at the Ministry of Information.

RAFA AL-NASIRI

Born in 1940, Rafa Al-Nasiri went on to study art in Baghdad, Peking and Lisbon. He has held fourteen one-man exhibitions, in Hong Kong, Baghdad, Lisbon, Beirut, Casablanca and Kuwait and has contributed to many international exhibitions inside and outside Iraq.

He has also participated in the Iraqi Artists'

Society Exhibitions and group exhibitions such as the Four Iraqi Artists' Exhibition, Baghdad, 1972; the Three Iraqi Artists' Exhibition, Beirut, 1972; the Six Iraqi Artists' Exhibition, Baghdad and Damascus, 1973, and the Iraqi Graphic Art Exhibition, Beirut, 1975.

Other international exhibitions in which he has been involved include the International Graphics Exhibition, Leipzig, 1965; the Indian Triennial, New Delhi, 1968 and 1975; International Graphics Exhibition, Belgium, 1969, the Third International Exhibition, Cracow, 1970; the First and Third Exhibitions in Norway, 1972 and 1976, the International Poster Biennale, Warsaw, 1972/74/76/78; The International Exhibition of Drawings, Yugoslavia, 1974 and 1976; the International Cagnes-sur-Mer Exhibition, France,

1977; Seven Iraqi Artists, London, 1978; Exhibition of Six Iraqi Artists, Baghdad, 1978; Exhibition of Contemporary Arab Graphics, London, 1978; The First International Exhibition of Drawings, New York, 1977; International Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978; The Baghdad International Poster Exhibition, London, Baghdad, Beirut, 1979.

Rafa Al-Nasiri is now the Head of the Department of Graphics at the Fine Arts Institute, Baghdad. He is a past winner of the Honorary Prize of the Academy of Arts, Salzburg, Austria in 1974, the National Prize at the Cagnes-sur-Mer Exhibition of Painting in France, 1977, and was awarded the Honorary Prize from Fredrikstad, Norway, in 1978.

SHAKIR HASAN AL-SAID

Shakir Hasan was born in 1925. After taking a degree in archaeology in 1948 he continued his studies by taking a Diploma course at the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad in 1954, followed by four years of free art studies at the Beaux Arts Institute in Paris.

Six exhibitions of his works were held in Baghdad and Kuwait, and he has participated in various exhibitions in Iraq and abroad including those of the Iraqi Artists' Society, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, the One Dimension League and Contemporary Arab Artists, Part I, in London, 1978.

Shakir Hasan has participated in a number of international exhibitions, including the First Arab Biennale, Baghdad, 1973; the Second Arab Biennale, Rabat, 1976; the Art Festival of Cagnes-sur-Mer, France, 1975, and he rep-

resented Iraq at the Venice Biennale of 1976.

Back in 1951 he joined Jewad Selim to form the Baghdad Group of Modern Art with the aim of creating a national art based on the local culture of the country. In 1970 he became one of the Founder Members of the One Dimension League, which adopted the arabic alphabet as the elementary material for artistic works.

The Society of Iraqi Visual Artists awarded him an Honorary Prize in 1973. He also won the National Award for his participation in the Cagnes-sur-Mer Festival of 1975.

He is also the author of four books on art in addition to numerous articles dealing with Iraqi and Arab arts.

He is now teaching History of Art at the Fine Arts Institute, Baghdad.