

MIDDLE EAST

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OUR COVER

FORUM's new cover was designed by John Carswell of the American University's Art Department (see page 9)

A refugee boy student in Gaza does his chemistry homework on the road

Photo: Myrtle Winter

UNRWA

UNRWA'S THREATENED REHABILITATION PROGRAM

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An examination of what UNRWA has been doing to rehabilitate the Palestinian refugees and of the extent to which its program has been endangered by recent budget cuts.

IRRIGATION

ALTERNATIVES OF IRRIGATION POLICY IN IRAQ . M.E. Ionides 16

In its eagerness to increase the total area of cultivable land, Iraq's Development Board has concentrated on large irrigation projects. A Member of the Board has something to say for the less spectacular, more immediately profitable possibility of increasing water supplies to already cultivated land.

CITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST

KUWAIT Said Abuhamdeh 18

One of the most rapidly growing, rapidly changing cities of the Middle East is Kuwait, capital of the smallest but wealthiest Persian Gulf sheikhdom. (Fourteenth in FORUM's series of city profiles.)

ART

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Iraqi painters are sometimes accused of imitating modern Western art too closely. Khalidun el Husri sees them as just setting out on a path of genuine national development firmly based on tradition and the contemporary Iraqi scene.

SPORT

ON DIVING AND LEBANESE WATERS Honor Frost 28

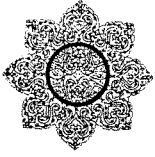
Aqualung diving, newest of sports, already has its devotees along the Lebanese coast. Honor Frost extols the charms of diving as a sport and describes the under-water characteristics of Lebanon's section of the Mediterranean.

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THE WANDERING

a study of modern Iraqi painting

by Khaldun el Husri

IRAQI painting is very modern in style and point of time. To understand the reasons for this one must first go back to Islamic history.

The Koran does not prohibit the representation of the human or the animal form. The prohibition on representational art in Islam derives its entire sanction from the *hadith*. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Those to be most severely punished on the Day of Judgment are the painters" and to have declared that, "The angels do not enter a house that has a dog or a picture in it."

Like many other hadiths dealing with many other subjects, the authenticity of these two hadiths and some others that forbid the Moslem to create or appreciate representational art, is to be greatly doubted. It is well known that the Prophet's wives wore dresses made of textiles that were embroidered with human and animal figures, and that his house contained some curtains similarly embroidered. This, with a great deal more evidence, has led some of the greatest authorities on Islamic art to the conclusion that representational art was tolerated by the Prophet and that hostility to it grew only later on among Moslem theologians in the eighth century.

A similar hostile attitude towards representational art can be found in some periods of the history of all religions. In the very same century, the eighth, Emperor Leo III led an iconoclastic movement that aimed at the removal of all pictures and icons from churches. However, there is not the slightest doubt that Islamic religion, unlike Christianity, exercised a very stifling influence on representational art. There was, for one thing, the absolutely human aspect of Mohammed's personality and activity. He was not like Jesus who fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, and who raised Lazarus from the dead. Mohammed always disclaimed having any supernatural power at his disposal; he was just an ordinary human being whose mission was to spread the word of God. There was therefore no possibility of developing a sanctified iconography

of Mohammed like that of Jesus in the Christian world. Islamic monotheism, for another thing, unlike Christian monotheism, had to fight idolatry. The Jews did not worship idols and "graven images," but the Arabs before Mohammed did. Therefore, it was natural that Islam should have developed an attitude suspicious of, and hostile to, representational art.

But in spite of this attitude Moslems indulged in the appreciation and creation of all sorts of representational art. Qasar 'Amrah, built as early as 715, was decorated with wall paintings of remarkable beauty. Caliph al-Mu'tasim, the builder of Samarah (830), decorated the walls of his palace with frescoes. Al-Mansur set upon the dome of his palace the figure of a horseman. El-Maqrizi (1442) wrote a history of Islamic painters.

Nevertheless, the prohibition and the hostile attitude, such as they were, had a most disastrous effect on the development of Arab representational art. It is impossible to understand Iraqi painting, or any other regional Arab painting, without keeping this fact constantly in mind.

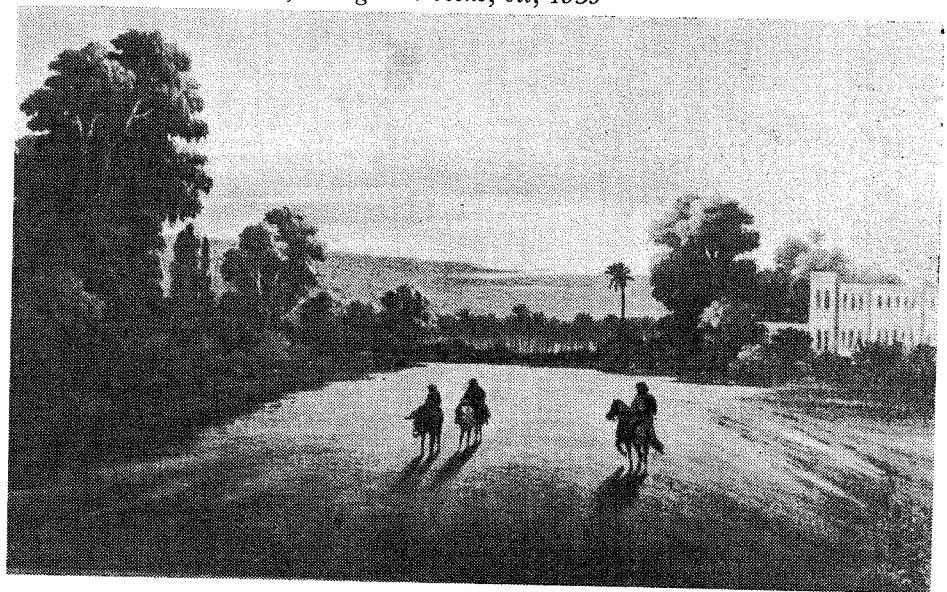
The Sultans of Turkey considered the representation of human beings a prerogative of God alone, and forbade Moslems to paint portraits. Turkish painters, therefore, had to

limit themselves to landscape painting.

In the 19th century some Turkish painters succeeded in creating a really Turkish school of landscape painting. This school had its faults—it paid too much attention to detail and its romanticism was often cheap. But its virtues were great, and they were best illustrated in the works of Salih Molla Ashki, the most original of the Turkish painters. His paintings have a peculiar beauty, a sophisticated grace and charm that are perhaps the result of the stiffness and studied formality of his composition.

The first Iraqis to paint were all educated in Istanbul and came into direct contact with this school. They were, naturally, profoundly influenced by it. They were amateurs, sons of well-to-do families; and today only a few pictures of their work are in existence. The only large body belongs to Abdul Kadir al-Rassam (1872-1951), who devoted himself completely to painting. He was, in fact, the father of Iraqi painting. He had had no art education whatsoever, except a short course in the use of colors for making topographical maps—if this can be called an art education. His work has the charm of the Turkish school. It reminds one of a Henri Rousseau painting within the narrow, formal and romantic bounds

Abdul Kadir al-Rassam, a Baghdad Scene, oil, 1939



of this school. His landscapes are often animated by small figures of men and animals that make them, in spite of their stiffness, more intimate.

In 1930 the Ministry of Education sent Akram Shukri to London to study painting at the Slade. Then, in quick succession, Faik Hassan was sent to the Ecole des Beaux Arts of Paris, Ata Sabri and Hafidh Drubi to Rome, and Jewad Selim to Paris, and then to Rome and London. These painters, who were all influenced by Abdul Kadir al-Rassam's school before leaving for Europe, were to come back and lead the revolt against it.

Instead of using their newly acquired technical skill and knowledge in perfecting the already existing style of painting and making it more typical of Iraq, they did altogether away with it. Their revolt was imitative in nature. They all painted like Europeans. And they all painted alike, because they were aping the academic traditions and characteristics common to all European Ecoles des Beaux Arts.

If we examine the work of Faik Hassan done in this period we are struck by its almost perfect technical mastery. But it possesses nothing else. The sheikhs and bedouins of this period were all painted with the usual romantically flavored realism of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, dull in color, showing very un-Iraqi looking men in European poses. One is reminded of the portraits of Arab leaders that Eric Kennington painted for Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; all that is Arab in the pictures are the robes, *kafi'as* and *igals* that the men are wearing.

IN 1941 the war brought Polish troops to Iraq. With them came a group of Polish painters. These were not first-class painters or among the well-known artists of their country. Only one of them is mentioned by name in a special Polish issue of the magazine, *The Studio* (January, 1945), written by leading Polish critics and dealing with Polish art at considerable length.

But in spite of their mediocrity, these Polish painters—who were all impressionists—were to change the course of Iraqi painting. It was through contact with them that Iraqi painters came to adopt impressionism.

Impressionism as a way of looking at, and a method of painting nature, is very unsuitable to Iraq. The im-



The drawing on the left is from an 11th century Anglo-Saxon manuscript, probably based on an Arabic original, entitled "Marvels of the East". Below, a painting in oil of a woman and child, by an unidentified Iraqi artist

pressionists had set themselves to capture the most transitory appearances of nature. They did this by recording the effect of the play of light and shadows upon form. Thus Monet painted his famous Hayricks series at different hours of the day and varying conditions of light, changing his canvas from hour to hour, to take it up again when atmospheric conditions happened to be identical. A similar experiment cannot be performed in Iraq. With the exception of occasional duststorms and some rain in winter, no atmospheric variation occurs in our country. The sky is almost always clear, grey-blue, cloudless, and the brilliant light of the sun constantly shines on a dusty-grey, monotonous flat land. The shadows of our national tree, the palm tree, that the sun throws upon our land is as thin and as sharp as a sword. We do not have the clouds, the rain, the fog, the frost, the light of the sun that can be orange, or lemon, or red, or white, and all the light-effects and shadows it produces on mountain slopes, in valleys, through the branches of different trees, and on the surface of water. But unaware of all this, Iraqi painters were to paint for some time as if they lived in Monet's country.

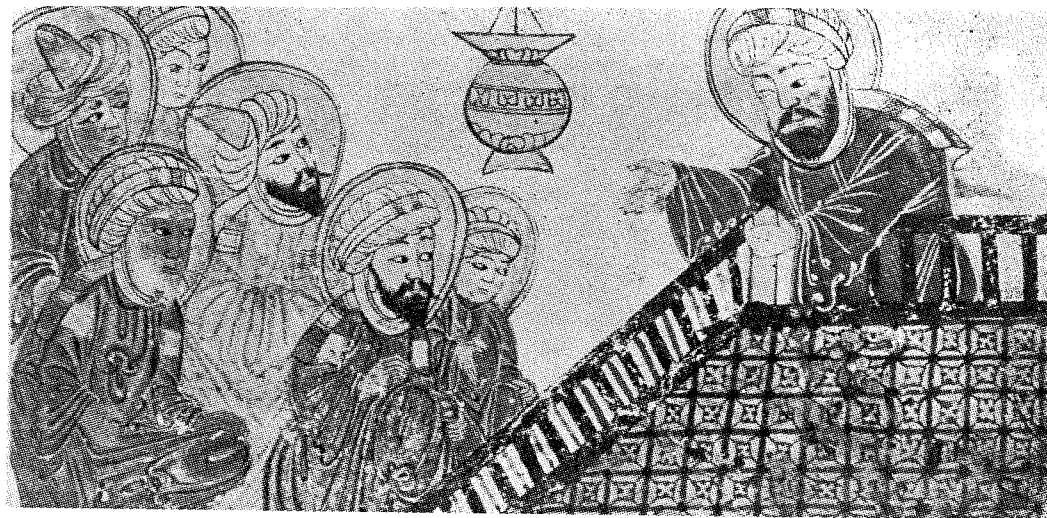
"The Trees in a Garden" painted by Faik Hassan at a later period, still shows the effects of Impressionism à la Polonaise on Iraqi painting. It is lush, rich in color, false and very un-typical of our nature.

By rejecting impressionism Iraqi painters were to prove the soundness of their artistic instincts. But, nevertheless, impressionism was to play

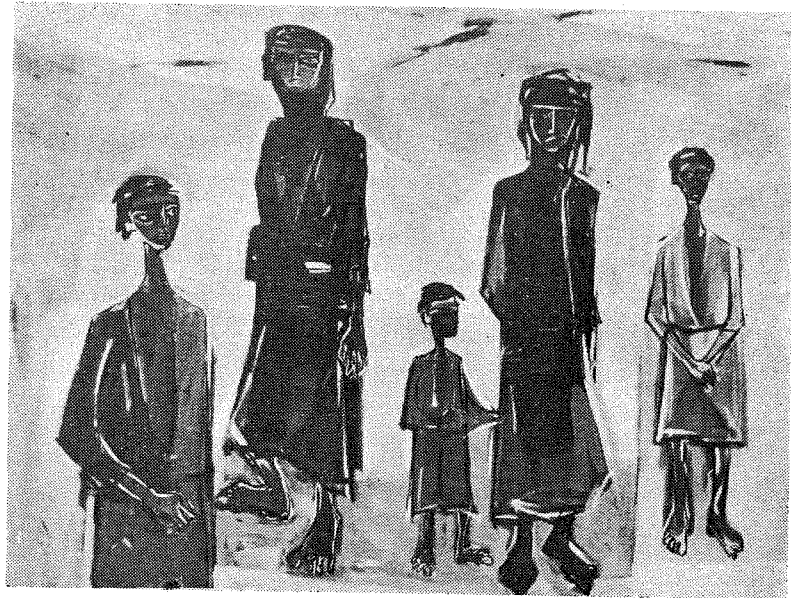


an important role in the development of Iraqi painting. It was to liberate Iraqi painters from slavery to the traditions of academic painting. Free from that slavery, in revolt against impressionism itself, they were ready

THE TRADITION...



Hafidh Drubi, Washing Day, oil



Lorna Selim, The Secrets of the Night, water color and ink

...linear quality

Above, Mohammed preaching his farewell sermon, from a 14th century Arabic manuscript in the Edinburgh University Library. Below, three modern Iraqi painters who exhibit the same agility of line and sense of design and pattern

THE MODERNS



Mahmoud Sabri, Bedouin family, oil





Above, a fragment of painted pottery from the Coptic Museum, Cairo, probably 11th century. Below, a greeting card designed by Jewad Selim, cut in linoleum



to start their latest, least imitative, and therefore most promising, phase of development.

In this latest phase one can see that they have started trying to paint Iraq as Iraqis. At times they are clumsy, very often as imitative as they were before. But their effort is always impressive and interesting.

Looking at their work one notices their perplexity, a timidity that approaches a sense of inferiority, caused by their belief that they have no tradition from which they can derive. Believing that there is no Arab artistic tradition, or that what there is, is dead and cannot be used, and yet realizing that they cannot go on imitating European art, Iraqi painters, like all Arab intellectuals, remind one of the men in a Matthew Arnold poem. They are:

“Wandering between two worlds:
one dead,
One powerless to be born.”

TODAY Iraqi artists are trying, with varying degrees of success, to create a really Iraqi school of painting.

But in spite of their efforts, it has not come of age yet. I cannot predict when it will. All that I can do is to point to some tendencies in it, that *if* developed further, can, in my opinion, bring it to full maturity.

Imitation of European art is its greatest weakness at present. It is caused by the Iraqi painter's assumption that he has no tradition of his own from which he can derive. It is true that, with the exception of the Baghdad School of the 13th century and of El-Wasiti, Arab contribution to Oriental painting is negligible; and that the Arabs, unlike the Persians or the Chinese, did not develop a school of painting all of their own. But Arab artistic genius, denied the right of expressing itself in painting, was to find for itself other means of expression. Thus, the Arabs were to create one of the greatest schools of architecture in the world; they were to evolve a decorative tradition of their own in color, pattern, line and arabesque; they were to weave some of the most beautiful silk fabrics known. They produced the most beautiful colored tiles in the world; they left behind them painted pottery of superb beauty; and they developed Arabic script into a complicated and beautiful art.

Colored tiles, decorative designs and patterns, and calligraphic specimens are not paintings; but they are the stuff out of which paintings are made. And as such they were to be used by some of the greatest European



On the right, a Romanesque wall-painting at Saint-Martin-de-Fenollar in French Catalonia; (the Romanesque style may have had its origins in the Near East). Above, The Sheikh, an oil painting by Jewad Selim, in the possession of Khaldun el Husri

painters. Giotto was to paint Arabic characters on the right shoulder of the figure of Christ in "The Resurrection of Lazarus" (Arena Chapel, Padua). Fra Lippo Lippi in the "Coronation of the Virgin" (Uffizzi, Florence) was to decorate with Arabic letters the sleeves of the Virgin and the borders of her robe. Henri Matisse, in our time, was to study Arabic textures, pottery, colored tiles, and Arabic decorative motifs, and to show their influence in his work.

It is only by becoming fully aware of this tradition *and* of the contemporary Iraqi scene, that Iraqi painting can reach maturity. An awareness of these two things is already apparent in the work of Jewad Selim, our most gifted painter.

His "Bedouin" is a superb picture. It shows us that Jewad Selim

is no longer painting the bedouin as a romantic Englishman or a sophisticated Frenchman would paint him. His bedouin is cruel and tragic at the same time. He is not painted in the sunlight of Matisse's North Africa, but in a blue-black night in which one can see nothing but a green mosque and a red palm tree painted like a star aflame in the sky. The thin, gaunt face is seen in the light of the naked electric bulbs that hang from the ceilings of Baghdad coffee-houses; the pupils of his eyes are two cruel red dashes in the tired shadowy face. The whole picture is tragic and probes great depths. It is not a picture "as comfortable as an easy chair" that Matisse said his own pictures were. Looking at it one sees that the Iraqi painter has at last found the right path in his wandering.

Only the future can tell us whether he has the stamina to continue along it, without indulging in facile experimentation, to the point of real achievement.



Khaldun el Husri is an Iraqi writer who lives and works in Baghdad. He is currently working on a book called "A Study in Revolution - with an Application to Egypt". The illustrations to this article were partly found for us by Rodney Alexander, a British student of art now in Beirut to gather material for a thesis on the relations between early Romanesque and 11th and 12th century Iraqi-Persian art.