

CONTEMPORARY

ARAB ARTISTS

PART ONE

IRAQI CULTURAL CENTRE GALLERY

Designed by Dia Al-Azzawi

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CONTEMPORARY
ARAB ARTISTS
PART ONE

AL-UBAIDI, AL-KASMI, BOULLATA,
BELKAHIA, KHADDA,
MAHREDIN AND FATTAH.

IRAQI CULTURAL CENTRE GALLERY

This exhibition is part of the Iraqi Cultural Centre's attempt to present aspects of contemporary Arab culture.

In our earlier exhibition of Contemporary Arab Graphics, twenty-three Arab artists for the first time took part in a joint exhibition, displaying in their work the variety of Arab artistic experience in the field of the visual arts. In the present exhibition, and in a subsequent exhibition to take place next year, the Iraqi Cultural Centre aims to present representative works which illustrate and summarize the general characteristics of painting and sculpture in the Arab world – showing the continual quest for forms of national expression. In presenting this collection of work, we would like to express our deep gratitude to the artists who have contributed to the exhibition.

**The Iraqi Cultural Centre
London**

ARAB ARTISTS

To trace the history of painting and sculpture in the modern Arab world does not take us further back than the beginning of the twentieth century – though we should keep in mind that the date of the emergence of these arts varies from one Arab country to another. The pioneer artists faced many obstacles and hardships. Their history had witnessed centuries of great creative outbursts, but at the same time the tradition was not unbroken and there was a lack of continuity in artistic experience. As a result, the pioneers had no choice but to treat subjects and themes which derived their significance and vitality from a European frame of reference. Thus their work reflected the absence of characteristics peculiar to eastern temperament and experience.

Conditions were far too unsatisfactory to remain unchallenged for long. A number of artists – such as Mukhtar in Egypt, al-Sharqawi in Morocco, and Jawad Salim in Iraq – felt sufficient unrest and discontent to attempt to dispense with mere imitation and to strive to create works of art more closely related to their tradition.

The present collection of work, by artists from different cultural and artistic backgrounds, has this in common: an endeavour to solve creatively and technically the conflict between a European academic training and the requirements of the Arab environment and national culture. Some might argue that European trends and influences are clearly manifest in these works and that they stand in close relation to contemporary art movements. Yet what we are seeing is a lively dialogue between European culture, with its uninterrupted tradition, and Arab culture, which is still developing and facing numerous challenges. Thus the chief characteristic of contemporary Arab art, and hence of this exhibition, is its experimental nature: its

response to the attraction of diverse forms of expression, intellectual concepts, and the weight of technical requirements and skills (skills which are by no means lacking in these works).

Shakir Hasan Al-Said (b 1925) has a varied cultural background. He studied calligraphy and painting before going to Paris, where he undertook further study. He began by investigating the origins of folk art. His work at this time displayed a strong sense of colour and form. He dwelt upon the spiritual environment

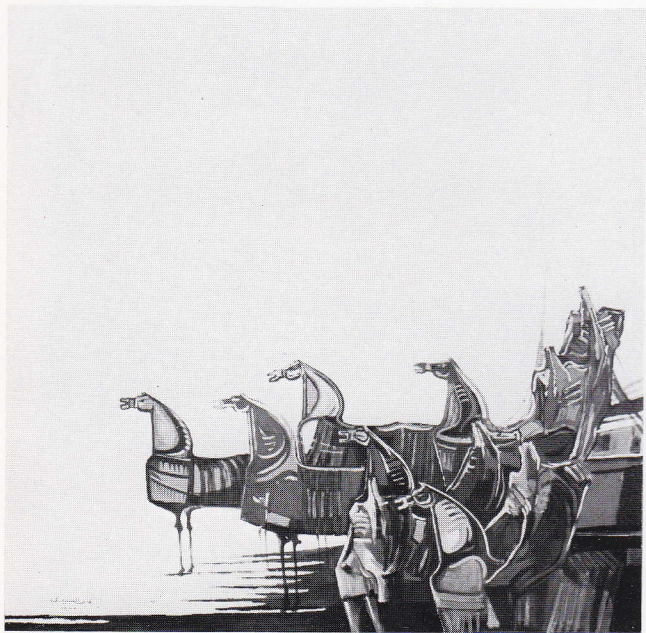


"Writings on a wall" by Shakir Hasan Acrylic/oil on wood
120 x 120 cm
1978

of the folk themes, rather than their colourful surface. He experimented with the use of Arabic script, studying the old forms of calligraphy and also the neglected writing (graffiti) found on walls. He forsook his earlier preoccupation with colour and shape in order to concentrate on a mystical treatment of his themes. His paintings began to display vast stretches of walls, a tiny part of which is given over to the artist's vision. The letters are sometimes indecipherable and the graffiti shock by their very simplicity and clarity. For the artist the graffiti reflect the workings of the human mind – projecting onto the walls both the conscious and the sub-conscious. The obsession with white springs from his spiritual

beliefs, for he believes that the external world is the conventional projection of vision and the imagination. In his theoretical writing the artist analyses the relation between his work and Arab culture, with particular reference to Sufism.

Amer Al-Ubaidi (b 1943) is the only artist in the present exhibition who has not studied art in Europe. 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.

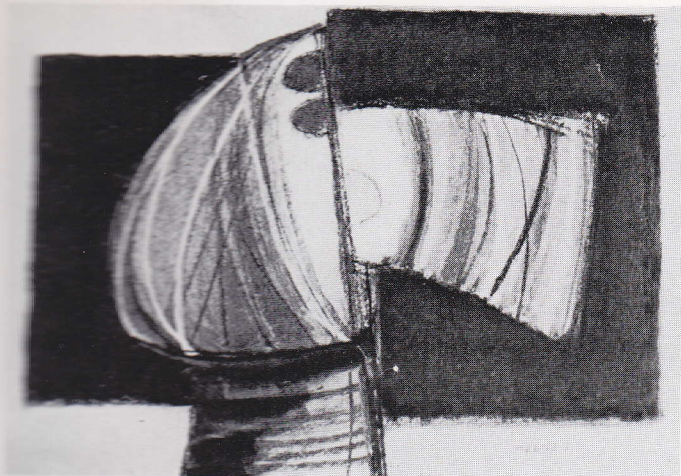


**Salute for the Hero,
Tariq (No 1)**

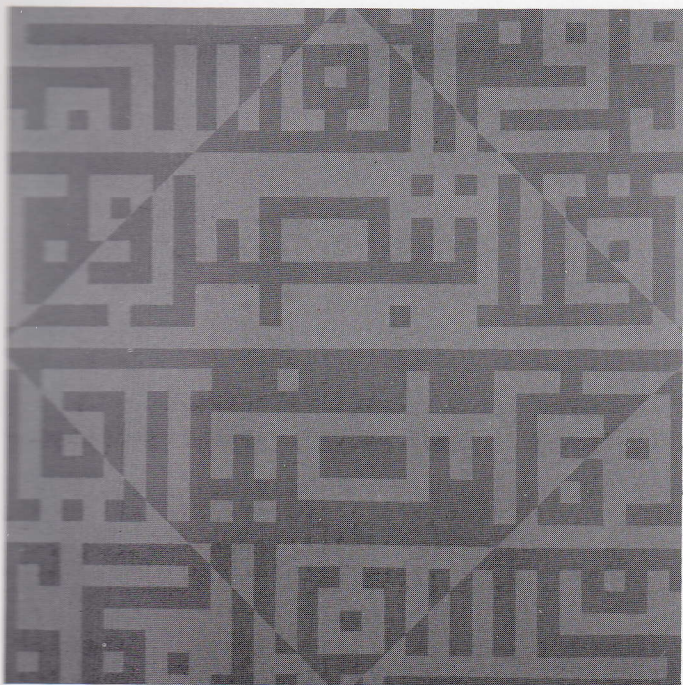
by Amer Al-Ubaidi
Acrylic
100 x 110 cm
1978

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 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



"Composition No 2"
by Al-Kasmi
Oil on canvas 90 x 80 cm 1977



"Ayat" by Kamal Boullata Silk screen 22 x 30 cm 1978

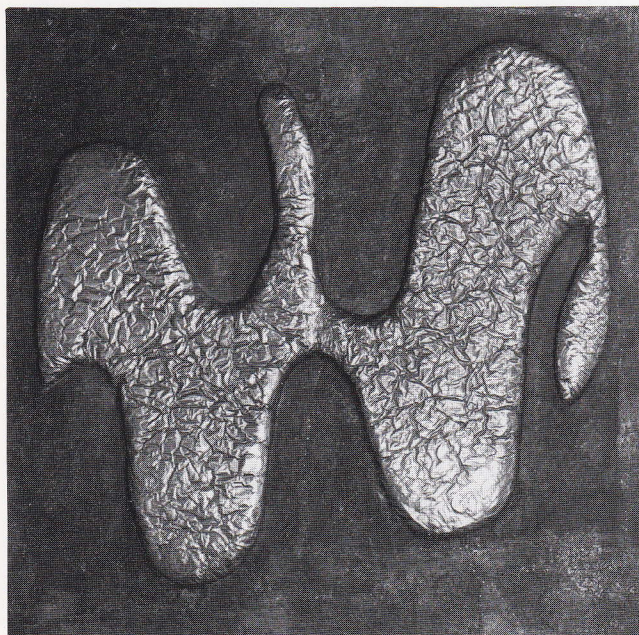
proximity with one another. Sometimes these figures draw together to form a group. His concern with these human forms makes him sometimes neglect the relation between these forms and the space they occupy. The viewer needs to follow these techniques carefully in order to appreciate Amer's work.

Mohammad Al-Kasmi (b 1942) seeks to work within the context of Moroccan history and tradition. His work is the product of long and sure experiments which achieve a harmonious affinity with all that is implicit in expression. Within the framework of this tradition, al-Kasmi tries to work with considerable freedom. His conception of structure and technique is not so much a justification for creation as an intellectual and artistic system which aims at encompassing the details of his specific method of expression. In spite of the fact that he experimented for some time, dividing his efforts between figure painting and an abstract treatment of the subject, his concepts retain an element of ambiguity which makes his art akin to poetry and literary expression.

"To practise art means to think" – this emphasis on rationalizing artistic method enables al-Kasmi constantly to review his relation to the fixed forms and conventions. This attitude gives al-Kasmi the freedom to oppose all modes of expression which aim solely at entertainment.

Kamal Boullata (b 1942) is especially known for his use of calligraphy in lively and vigorous paintings. They are enhanced by a prevailing epic spirit, especially where he deals with Palestinian themes. But his efforts have much in common with the work of other Arab artists who have tried to use Arabic letters as artistic units. The shapes of the letters constitute the structure of the paintings. His technique shows some European influences, especially in his use of colour. While his work may seem purely decorative to the European eye, the Arab viewer cannot fail to detect the shapes of Arabic letters, which have exchanged their linguistic values for purely aesthetic ones.

Farid Bel Khia (b 1934) This Moroccan artist displays great diversity and remarkable skill when working in copper and the method he uses recalls the practices and concepts of the applied arts. His work, therefore, inclines towards a public concept of art which enables him to reconcile the objectives of craftsmanship with the ideals of art. He believes that the three-dimensional form is necessary for him in realising his concepts. "What are good for me are the well-defined things which do not admit of chance." This statement of Bel Khia shows that he does not tolerate any failure in trying to find out the diverse uses of material and the methods of controlling it. These concepts were bound to make Bel Khia depart from the notions and conventions which he regards as traditional in a work of art.



◁ Relief III

Skin, Wood & Copper
187 x 155.5cm
1976-77

▷ "Olive Trees at Dawn"

by Khadda

▷ Oil on Canvas 92 x 65 cm 1977



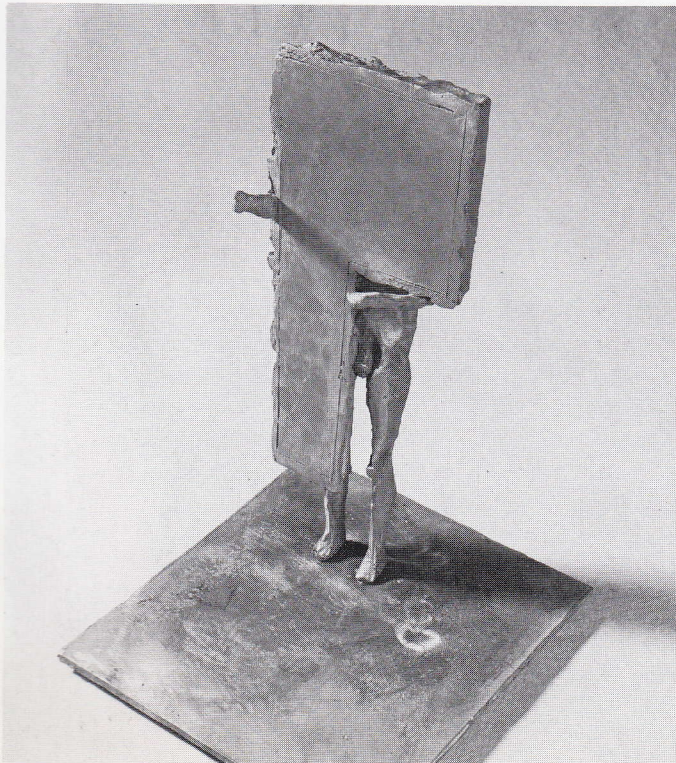
Mohammad Khadda (b 1930) This is the first time Khadda has taken part in a joint Arabic exhibition. Previously, his activities have been confined to Algeria. His works display a sophisticated study of colour, which constitutes the basic structure of his paintings. Through colour he strives to define themes: studies of nature, of Algerian olive trees and the Mediterranean skies.

Mohammad Mahredin Azim (b 1938) is an Iraqi artist whose work employs variations on one main theme: protest. In the early stages of



"Strange is the World"△
by Mohammed Mahr El-Dine
Poster/Acrylic
70 x 90 cm
1977

"Subject" (Standing figure)
by Ismail Fattah
▽ Bronze Height 36 cm 1978



his career he used different materials for each work, employing sand, wood and plaster. He developed a unique technique. Later he began to economize in his use of colour, sometimes confining himself to one colour. His experiments have influenced many other artists, but his mastery of technique has kept him ahead of his competitors.

Ismail Fattah (b 1934) After leaving school in Baghdad, where he displayed great ability in painting and sculpture, he went to Rome to finish his education. In Rome he was confronted with formidable technical traditions. His newly-acquired skills found expression in his sculpture, which tended to be governed by realism. Gradually his work began to display the intricate unity between the human form and its surroundings. In his figures he began to work out technical problems relating to space and detail. His symbols manifested themselves in the form of the relation between man and woman – yet this relation, as he conceived of it, remained one of solitude, with no actual contact.

Ismail Fattah later began to apply his symbols to his work with more diversity and greater elaboration; for example, he puts emphasis on square enclosures, in the middle of which stand his figures – an emphasis which brings to mind boxes, containers, cages – symbols which crowd the terminology of surrealism, and whose significance was indicated by Freud in his interpretation of dreams.

Fattah's early work in Rome sowed the seeds of future development: his depiction of women with severed heads, elongated figures of men, formulas which take their place side by side with the human figures on their pedestals. After returning to Baghdad, he tried to draw on his early experiments by moulding small figurines – shapes which caught his attention after frequent visits with his students to the Iraqi Museum. The tiny Sumerian statuettes, with their rectangular forms and their deliberate under-emphasis of background and subsidiary detail, with their relation to space and their power to stir the imagination, had a great effect on his technique and his imagination.

AMER
AL-UBAIDI
IRAQ

Born in 1943.

Graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts of Iraq.

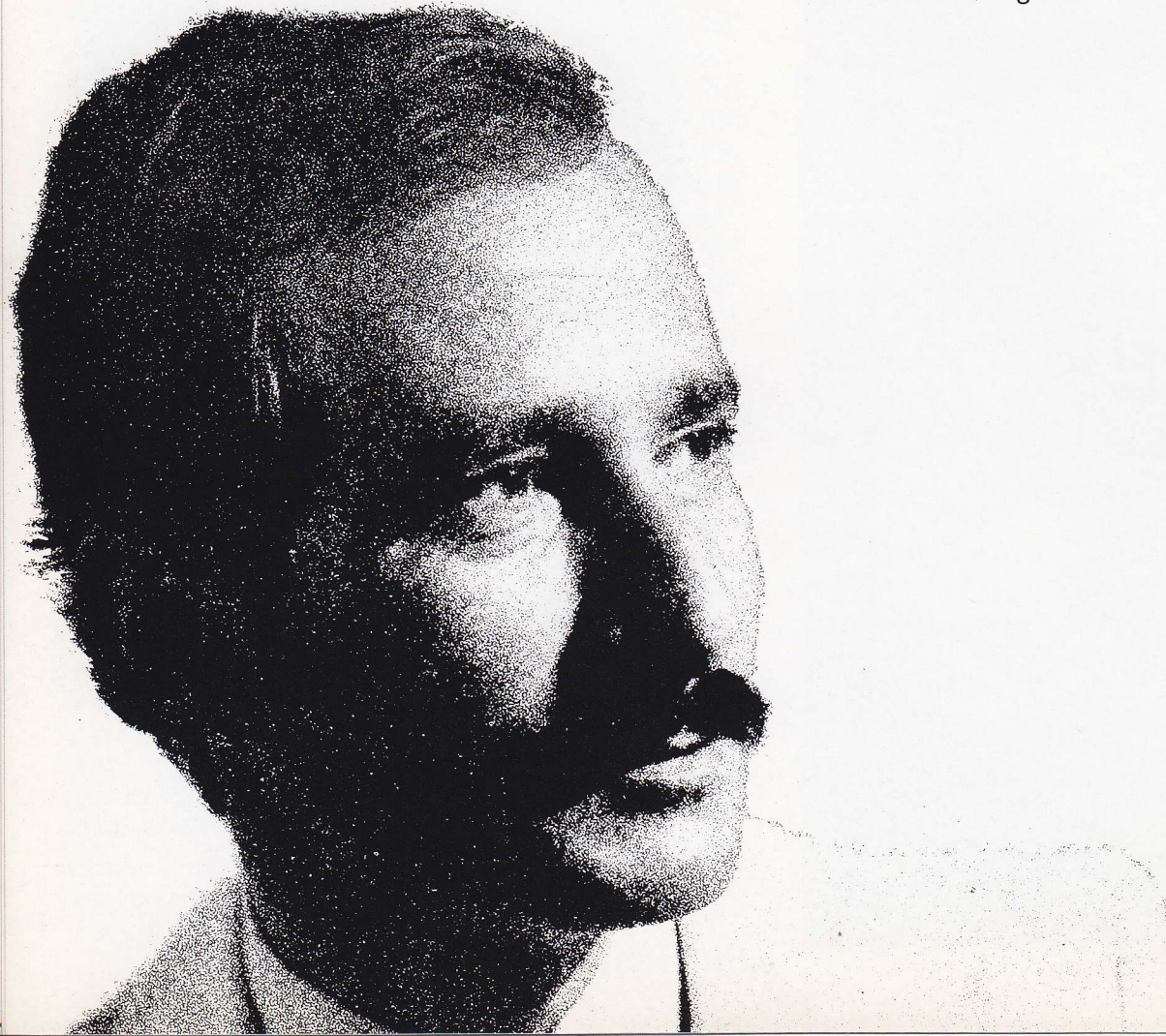
Held six one-man exhibitions in Baghdad, Jeddah and Kuwait.

Participated in various exhibitions at home and abroad.

His works were shown at a number of international art exhibitions including the Cagnes-Sur-Mer International Festival of Arts, France.

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.





"Salute for the Hero, Tariq (No II)" Acrylic 100 x 110 cm 1978

SHAKIR HASAN

ALSA'ID

IRAQ

Born in 1925.

Degree in Sociology in 1948, Diploma from Academy of Fine Arts, Baghdad in 1954, followed by four years of free art studies at the Beaux Arts Institute, Paris.

Four exhibitions of his works were held in Baghdad, the last of which covered all his works at the National Museum of Modern Art.

Participated in various exhibitions in Iraq and abroad including those of the Iraqi Artists Society, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, and the One Dimension League.

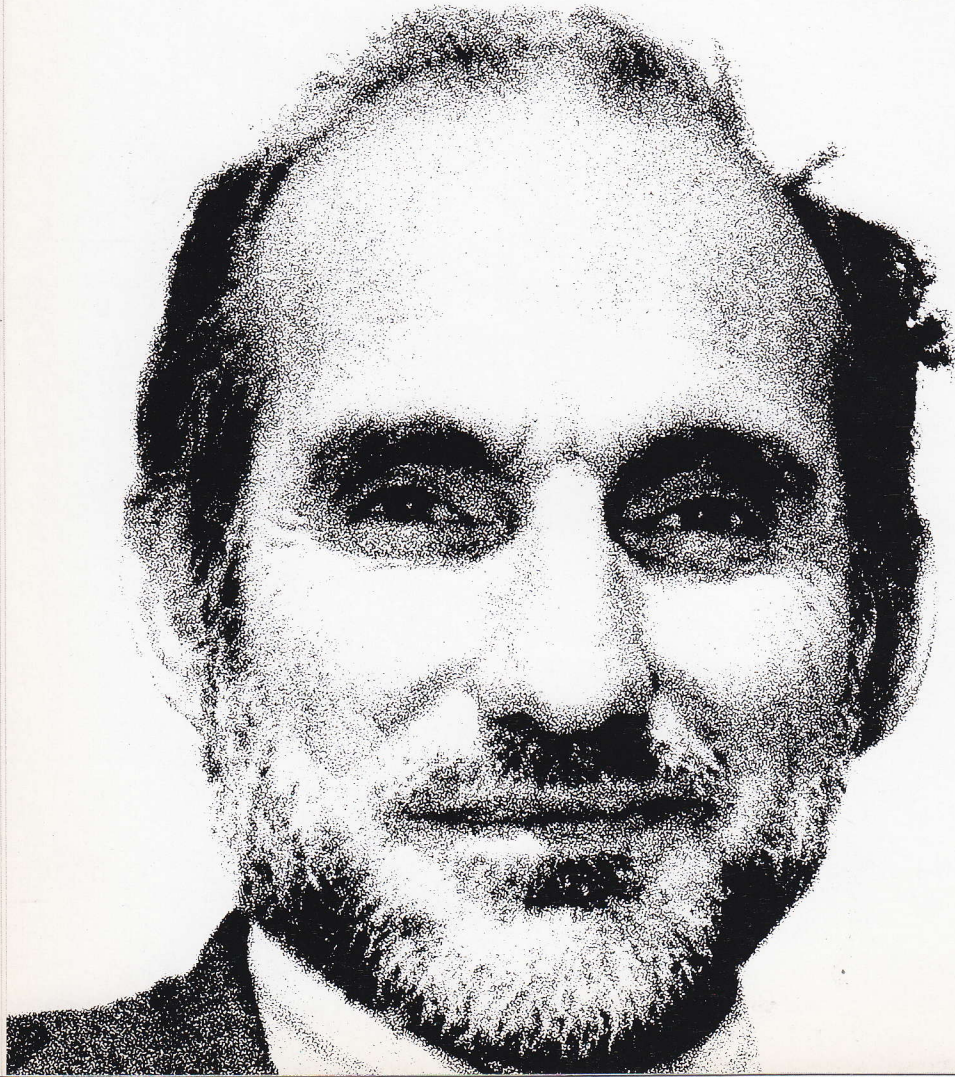
His works were included in a number of international exhibitions, e.g. the First Arab Biennale (1973) in Baghdad, the second Arab Biennale in Rabat (1976), the International Art Festival of Cagnes-Sur-Mer, France (1975). He was further nominated to represent Iraq at the Venice Biennale of 1976.

Back in 1951, he joined Jawad Salim to form the Baghdad Group for 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 Art 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 the History of Art at the Fine Arts Institute, Baghdad.





"Writings on a wall (H)" Acrylic/oil on wood 100 x 90 cm 1978

**MOHAMMAD
MAHREDIN
AZIM**
IRAQ

Born in 1938.

Studied painting and graphic art at the Fine Arts Institute, Baghdad, and graduated later from Poland.

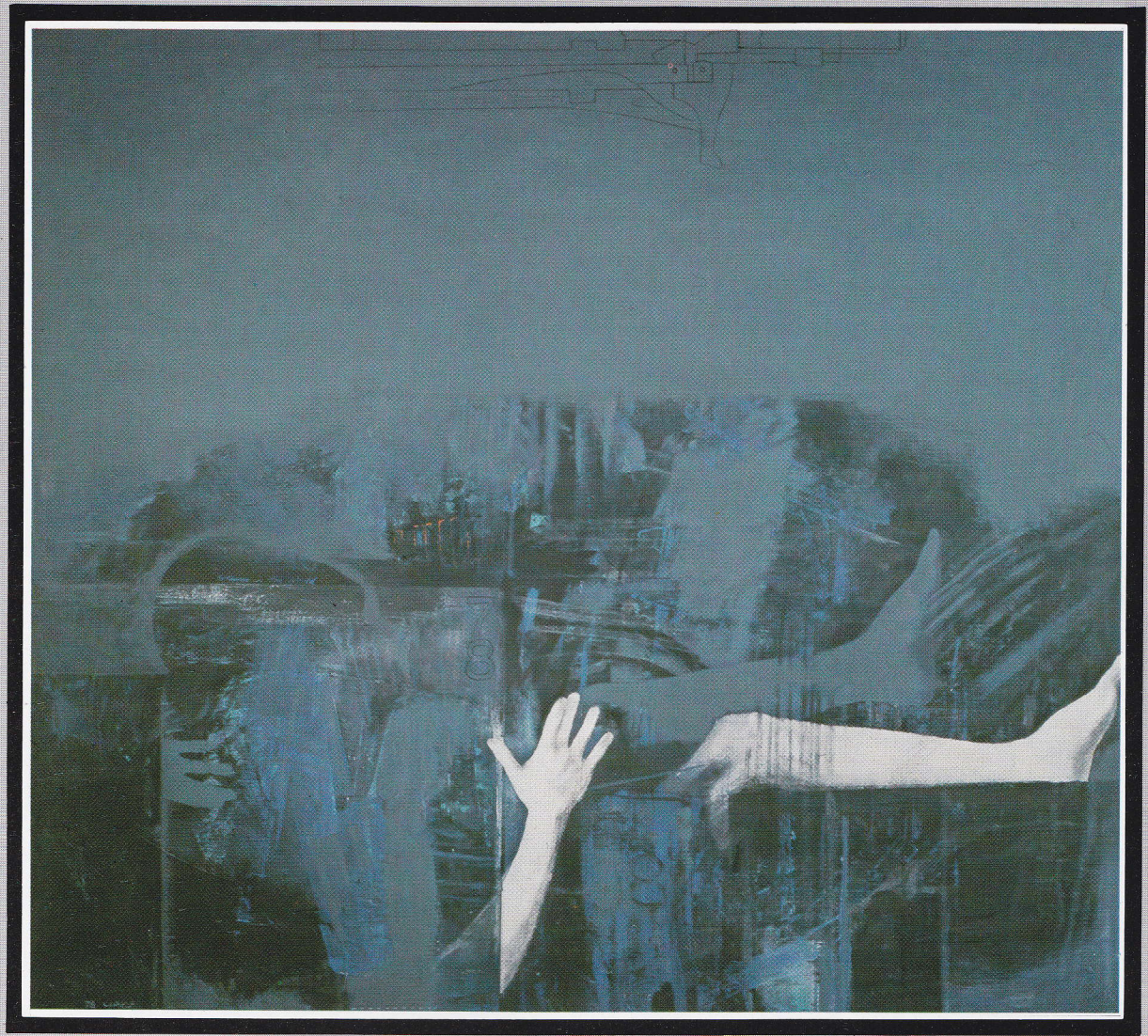
He has held three one-man exhibitions in Baghdad.

Participated in various local and international exhibitions including the First Poster Exhibition, the Wasiti celebration of 1972 and the 1976 World League of Visual Arts, Baghdad.

His works were exhibited at the Triennale of International Art, New Delhi (1975), The International Festival of Art of Cagnes-Sur-Mer (1976), the First Arab Biennale in Baghdad (1973) and the second Arab Biennale in Rabat (1976).

He is now teaching art in Baghdad.





"Civilization" Poster/Acrylic 120 x 120 cm 1978

ISMAIL
FATTAH
IRAQ

Born in 1934.

In 1958, he was awarded the Diploma of Painting and Sculpture by the Fine Arts Institute, Baghdad, and then went on to study art in Rome.

Held seven one-man exhibitions in Rome, Beirut and Baghdad.

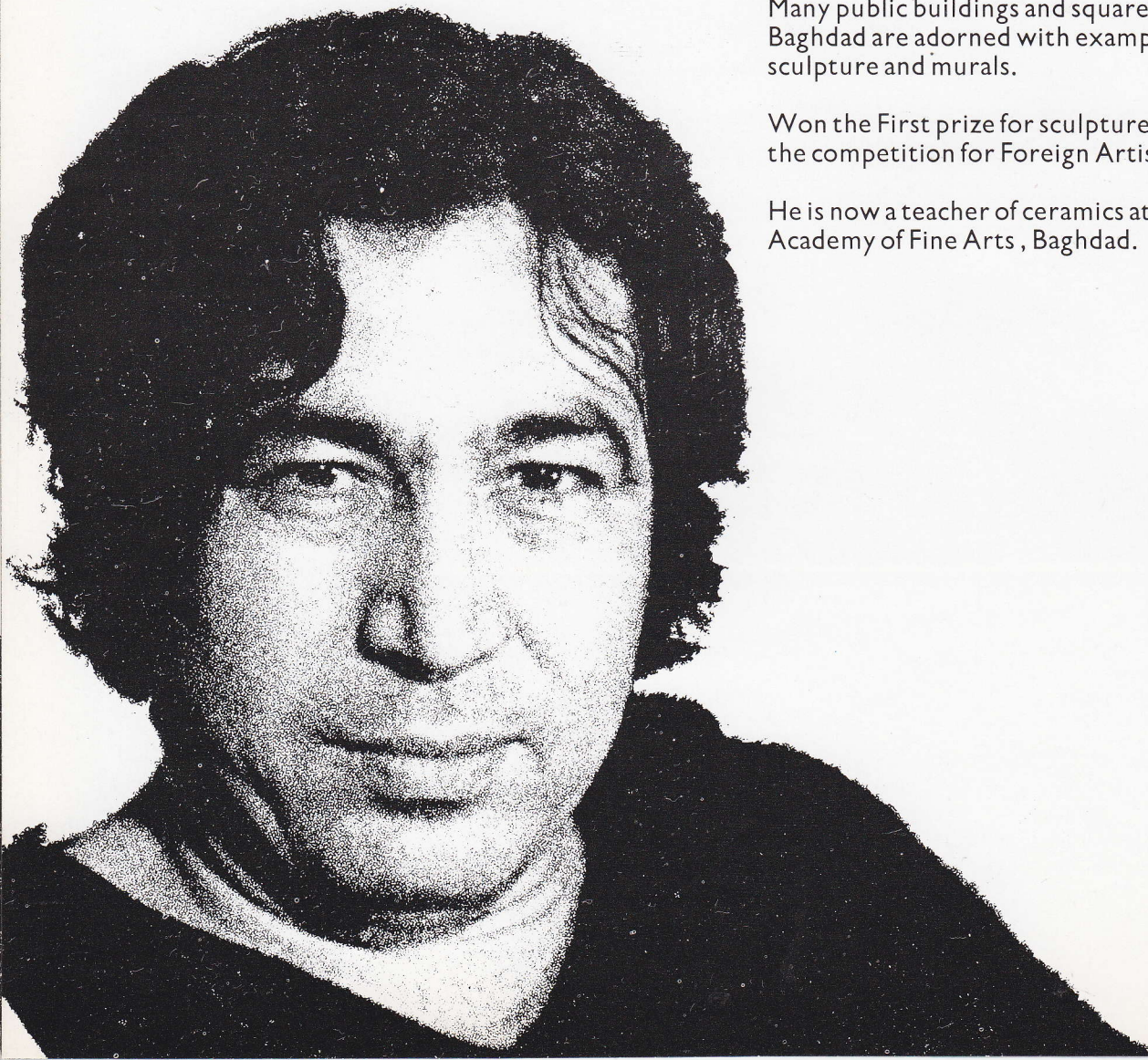
Participated in various national and international exhibitions.

His works were exhibited in various international exhibitions including the Venice Biennale (1976) and the India Triennale (1976).

Many public buildings and squares in Baghdad are adorned with examples of his sculpture and murals.

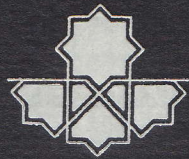
Won the First prize for sculpture (1963) for the competition for Foreign Artists.

He is now a teacher of ceramics at the Academy of Fine Arts, Baghdad.



"Group of women"▷
Bronze
Height 34 cm
1978





البركة والمعاني والآيات
التي هي من آيات الله