

# ART IN IRAQ TO-DAY

BY

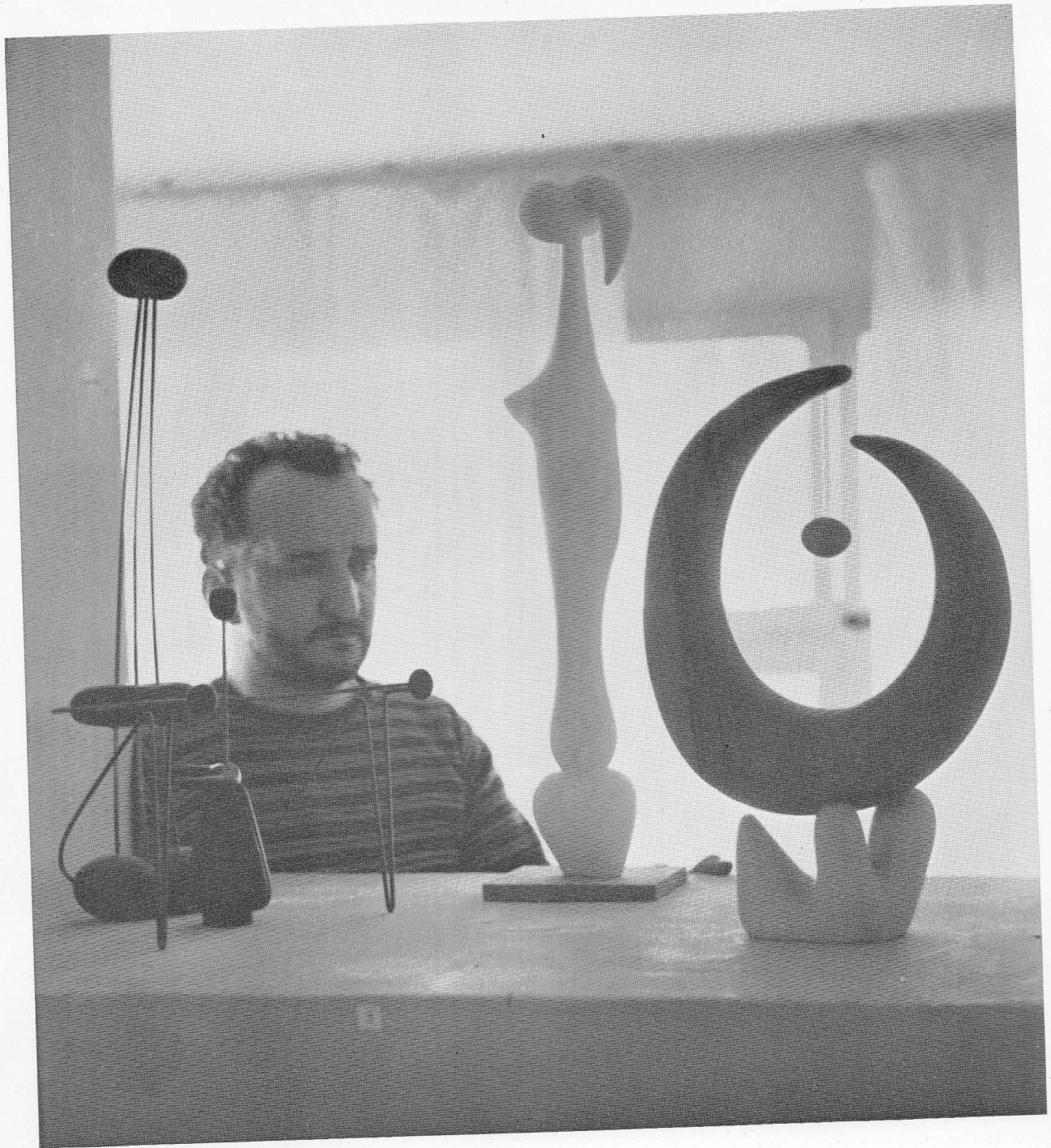
*JABRA I. JABRA*



**Bride at her Toilet on Wedding Night**  
By Khaled al Rahal



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The late Jewad Selim in his Studio

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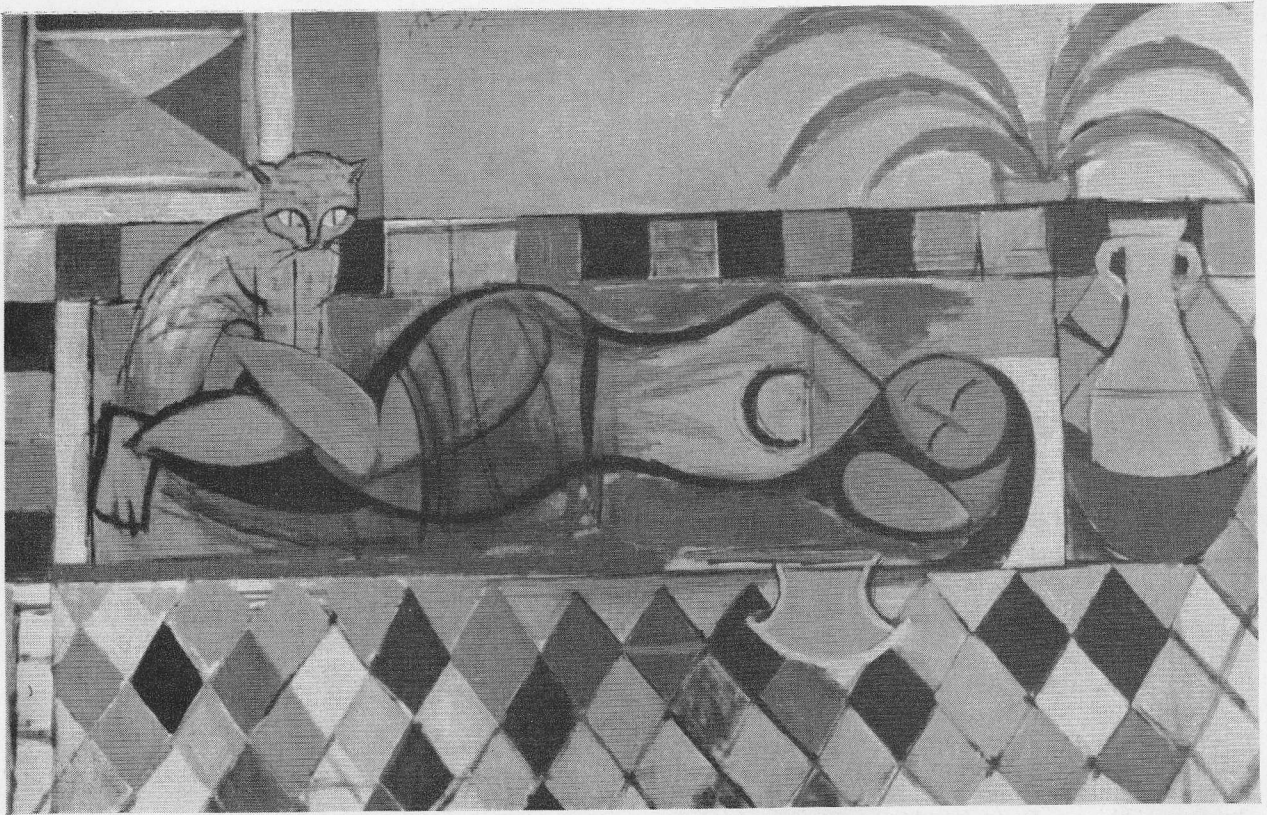
THE history of modern art in Iraq (which possesses some of the oldest works of art in the world) is some 20 years old. Between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries poetry is about the only personal art that did not entirely disappear in a country where the spoken image has always held a greater fascination for its people than the visible one. 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.

The output, particularly in painting, has been considerable. Many artists have already achieved local fame and Iraqi work has been, especially since the Revolution of 1958, exhibited very widely abroad. On examining this enormous 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 realized 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, particularly for the educated classes, 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 still alien to their public, if not always unintelligible to it. As in many other spheres of intellectual activity, we are perforce beginning, as it were, at the end, desiring to achieve fruition without the benefit of slow growth and ripening.

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 (just as the poets have done, although they have now begun to rebel) in search of roots, but never 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 and 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



**Siesta, by Jewad Selim**

to-day, who seeks self-expression through a more pliant medium.

Manuscript illumination was for centuries the visual counterpart of poetry. Though mostly Persian, it is an Islamic art with roots in Middle Eastern paganism and affected by contemporary Byzantine influences. In these illuminations, the objects of daily life are stylized into the stuff of dreams. In the linear figures and groups is the spirit of the arabesque, and in their content, the essence of highly figurative Abbasid poetry. But for the artist of to-day, the sophistication seems effeminate, and this very sophistication, in any case, appears to have been exploited to exhaustion.

In Byzantine iconography some artists find an enriching affinity with Arab tradition, since its sources were not limited to Greek art. Syrian influences in particular—deliberate distortion for the sake of power and expressiveness anticipating modern expressionism—and Iraqi and Iranian influences in general contributed a great deal to Byzantine art. However, the comparative difficulty of seeing this art in its full splendour, as well as its dominant Christian quality, has not yet encouraged our artists to devote sufficient attention to it.

Most 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. It is important to know that some of these great remains are more accessible to the average young man, in museums and excavations, than say, Persian illuminations. Moreover, there is in the massive simplicity of Assyrian and Sumerian figures an attraction for to-day's artists that the involved, but highly paradisiac linear patterns of Persian painting certainly lack in an age of conflict and unrest.

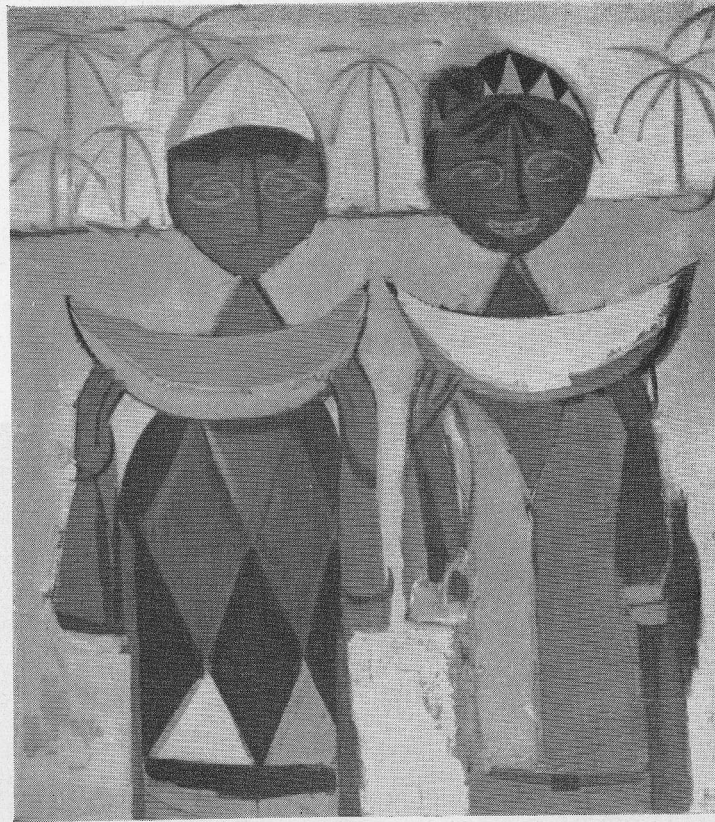
But even in the artistic wealth that archaeological excavations have brought to light, they do not always find enough to hold their attention. It is not only because of the interference of traditions nearer in time and culture, but also because the function of art has changed considerably since Assyrian days. The imposing images of ancient times were made primarily for religious or political purposes: it is by and large the art of a great hierarchy. Although since the Revolution in Iraq artists have found it exciting to express large political purposes, art to-day is still mostly a middle class household ornament or a means of direct individual statement.

Not only is the size of the art object much smaller, but the function is quite divorced from religion and until recently it held very little political or collective import.

Such, in brief, have been the pros and cons of the search for roots. A number of talented 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.



**Man and Horse, by Jewad Selim**



**Boys with Water Melons, by Jewad Selim**

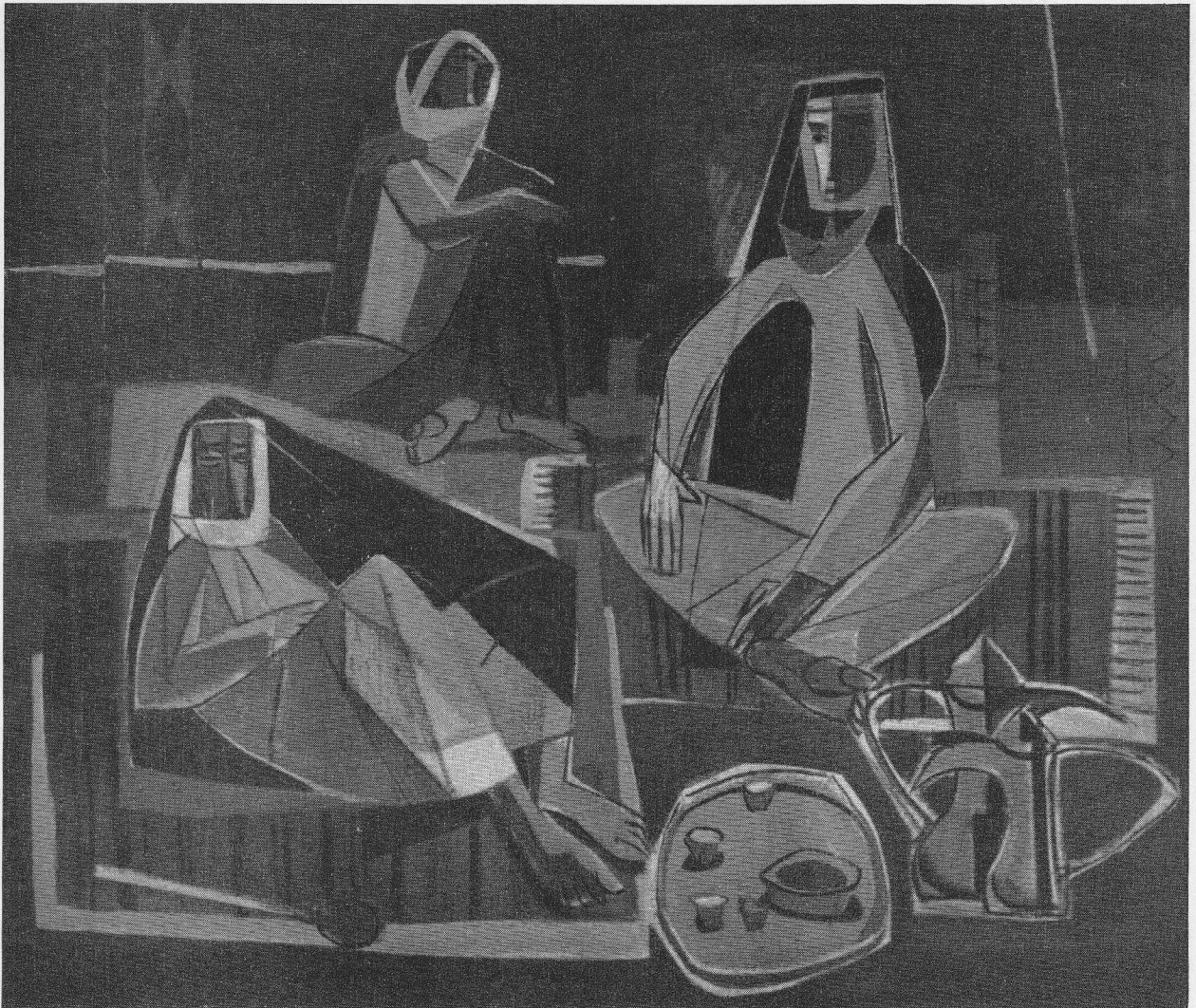
Leading among the dynamic figures of the movement in modern Iraqi art, has stood Jewad Selim, sculptor and painter. His sudden death last January, in his forty-first year, came as a shock to the art world of Baghdad. During the last twenty years of his life, Jewad's work, based on endless experimentation, developed rapidly through constant, untiring, discussion and theorization. He belonged to a family almost entirely made up of painters, and had the good fortune, after a short spell in Rome and Paris, of working during the war years at the Archaeological Museum in Baghdad. This gave him a thorough grounding in ancient Mesopotamian sculpture. Perhaps more than any other artist Jewad Selim, who later studied art in the London Slade School from 1946 to 1949, made his contemporaries aware of the problem of style and tradition. In spite of his immense knowledge of the history of painting and sculpture, Jewad preserved an innocence, a freshness of vision, which made him draw on local forms, symbols, habits, superstitions—all the folklore still very active in the alleys and coffee-shops of Baghdad and the surrounding countryside. When he formed the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1952, he had

no idea that he was, in fact, providing a volatile movement, whose members were an amazing mixture of professionals and amateurs, with a direction not so much rigid as inspiring. Himself a teacher of sculpture at the Fine Arts Institute, his work came out in an interminable flow of drawings, paintings, sculpture, book-cover designs, even designs for local silversmiths to have on caskets or carry out in ear-rings and jewelry. Perhaps it was only logical that, as soon as Iraq was declared a republic on 14th July, 1958, he should be asked to design the emblem of the Iraqi Republic. Equally logical was that he should be commissioned to make the Revolution Monument.

It was very tragic that Selim should die soon after he

finished casting the greatest and largest monument an Iraqi artist has ever made in the last 2,500 years. It is a 50-metre long frieze, 4 metres wide, consisting of a number of groups in low-relief bronze, flung bridge-like across the entrance of the National Park in the centre of the capital—a spectacular achievement for a young artist who, owing to various exigencies, had to complete the work in less than eighteen months! It embodies Jewad Selim's peculiar combination of power and lyricism, of the Iraqi and the universal, together with a mystical tragic love for his country.

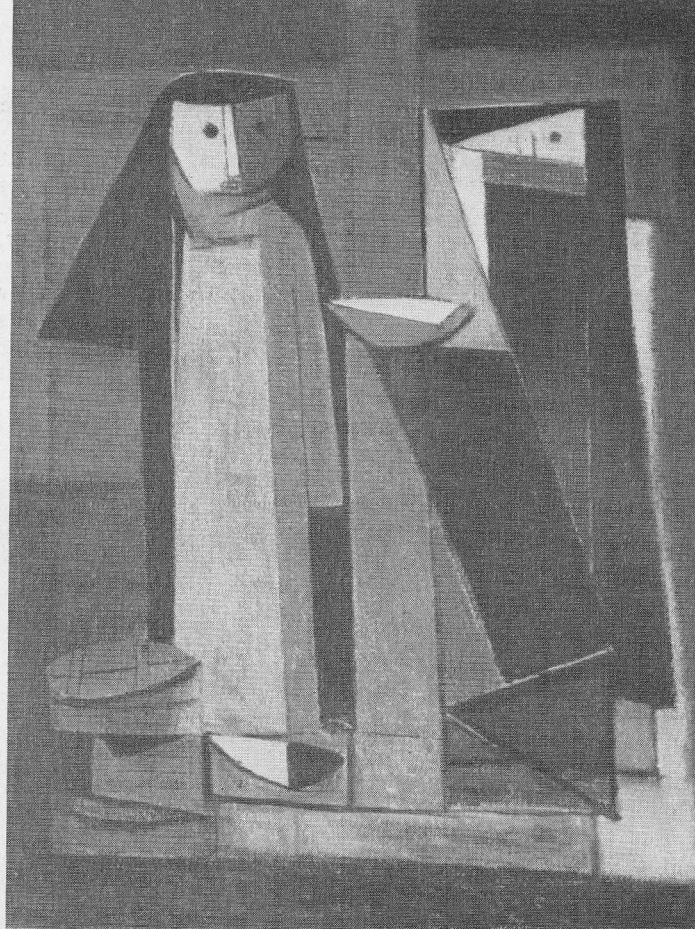
The other artist whose influence on the movement has been dominant is Fayek Hassan. For more than ten years he has been the centre of a group called S.P.



Guest-tent, by Fayek Hassan

(Société Primitive) whose members are known for their love of experimentation with form. French influences are more visible in their work than elsewhere, and Fayek Hassan, Paris-educated himself, has the group very much under his inspiration. Colour is his forte which, after a fertile period of impressionist landscape painting, has gradually changed its function for him until, during the last few years, it has approached the abstract. Intersecting planes of sombre colours cut across figures in country costumes or tents with sheikhs and bedouins reclining by their coffee pots. His group's interest in colour planes is perhaps more related to still life, often in cubist style, resulting in designs that have influenced modern architecture in Iraq, whereas he has in recent years based his experimentation with colour on figures which represent country life or bedouins in the city. Such figures, of course, help to provide just that extra quality of strangeness, with their flowing robes and prancing animals, which are a boon to an artist who wants to give some national character to his work. Assuming this to mean "social consciousness" some artists have taken up similar themes and developed them into

**Two Peasants**  
By Fayek Hassan



**Man and Earth**  
By  
Jewad  
Selim

something rather different and, occasionally, even more powerful.

Such is the case of Mahmoud Sabri. Sabri is an artist in love with line as a medium (he is an excellent draughtsman), and squalor as a subject. A quiet, soft-spoken young man himself, his painting is sharp, angular, and full of angry statement. His men and women are always going through a sort of public hell: their suffering is physical, never spiritual. Mahmoud Sabri's way of creating an "Iraqi art" is by emphasizing the Iraqi way of life, together with an outcry against injustice, social, or political. His earliest work portrayed vacuous-faced prostitutes in congested brothels or crowds, in similar congestion, marching in demonstration. As his draughtsmanship gained in power, the figures got less numerous on his canvases, the agony dissolving gradually into lyricism, until his hell-tormented men and women began to emerge as though in a trance of joy. His comparatively recent "builders" seem to dance as they handle their bricks and mortar.

Khaled al Rahal recaptures the element of joy in ordinary life more than any other. Like Jewad Selim, his knowledge of the alleys of Baghdad is first-hand, and having gone himself through the agony of the gutter he has come out with drawings, paintings, and sculpture all related in theme to his experience, but suffused with power and existential joy never plagued by sentimentality. I shall never forget how one evening in 1948 (he was twenty-two then, and unknown), he took me to a tiny, shabby room in a small shabby house in one of Baghdad's oldest quarters, where we sat on a rush-mat and out of a battered chest he produced, like a magician, a pile of most beautiful drawings, many of which were studies for his sculpture. They were mostly drawings of women: in public baths, or belly-dancing, or making love, all fat, full-fleshed, vibrating with the intensity of being alive. Later he studied sculpture in Rome, and has since translated this delight into plaster, stone, and metal, and a good number of paintings which, sometimes exploiting a clever primitivism, never lose this quality

of exuberance. His large stone sculpture of a woman and child recently erected in Baghdad's National Park, still has the sensuous qualities of those early drawings of his: a seeming flight, expressive of the relish and joy of life.

In a softer key are Lorna Selim's portrayals of the life of simple folks. Extremely inventive in the manipulation of a few themes, her approach to them, a blend of affection and humour, has left considerable influence on a number of artists. Through her work, spare, decorative verging on the dreamy and the mystic, other artists have



Peasants, by Mahmoud Sabri



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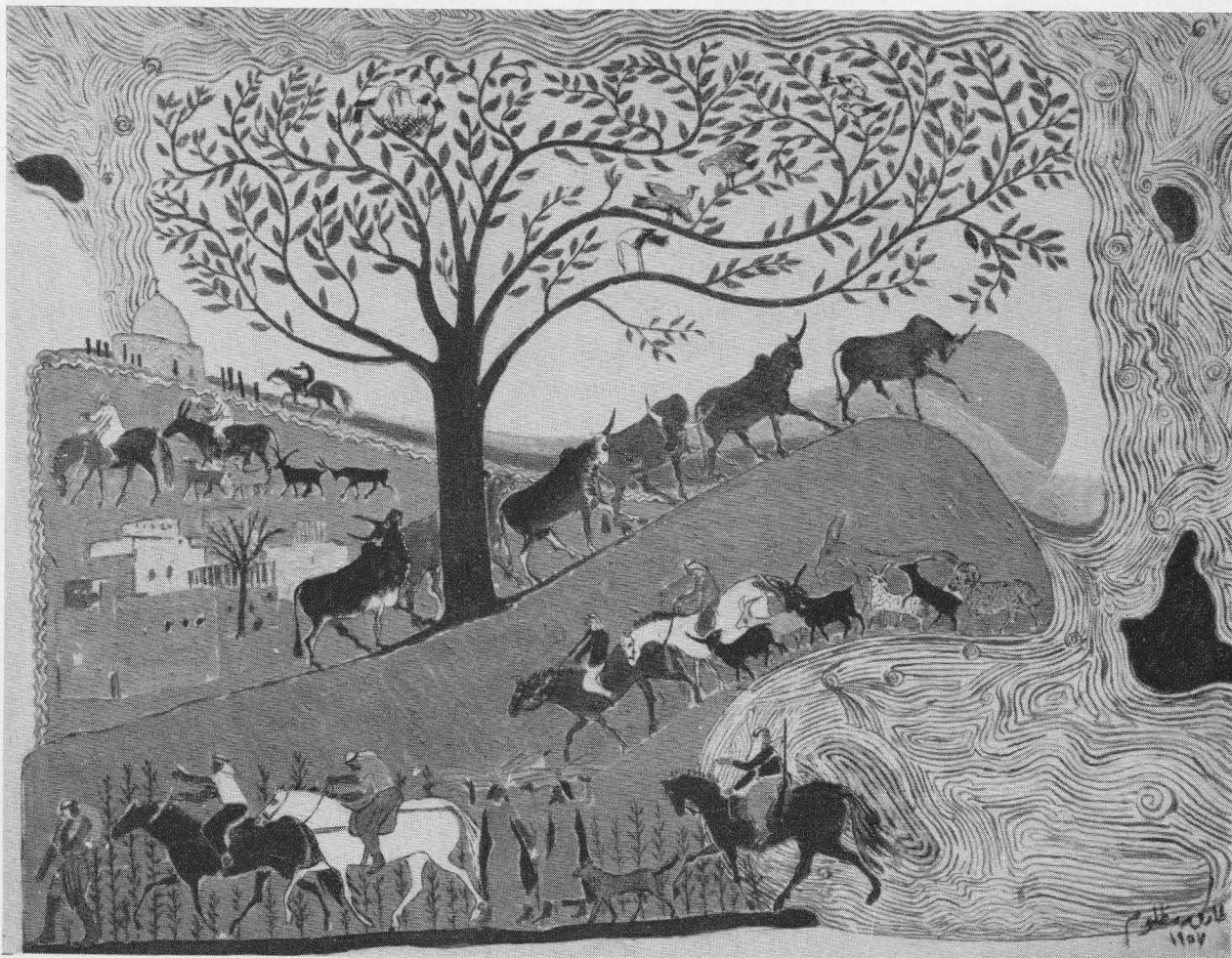
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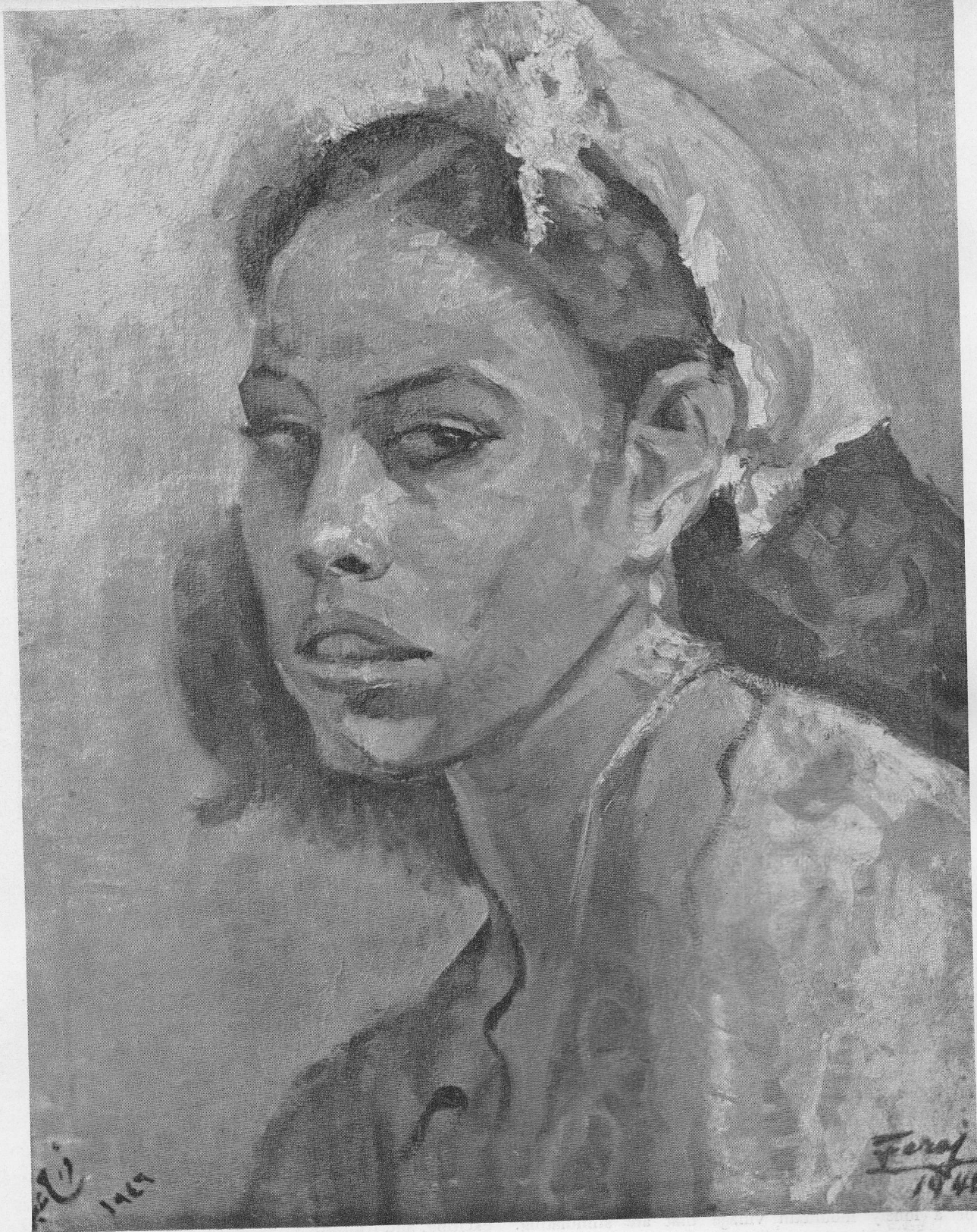
**The Flood, by Tareq Madhloum**

awakened to new possibilities of form based on national subjects.

After 1954 there has been a wave of "socially conscious" work obsessed with poverty, a very little of which has achieved the distinction of Lorna Selim's work or that of Mahmoud Sabri's. However, there have always been those who sing with their own voices. Shaker Hassan brings in a religious tragic note, an obsessive sort of questioning and dreaming, quite new to Iraqi art. Fadhil Abbas at his best is more concerned with the feeling of the city's crowdedness: his city being the busy old quarters, or the streets where black-robed women go out at dawn to sell their dairy products. For Ismail Shaikhli, the "local" coffee-shop is a rich source of subject matter, treated in the calm unemotional style of a later cubist, whereas for Atta Sabri, a member of the old guard and a very competent landscape painter, it is the earth, the trees, the wild vegetation of a back garden or a lonely mountain village that are stimulating.

Similarly Hafidh Duroubi's paramount interest, like that of Khaled al Jader and Faraj Abbo—all trained in England or France or Italy—is in the inner painterly possibilities of landscape and figure. In his more recent work, Duroubi shows considerable power in reducing his subjects to a highly decorative pattern—a departure from his earlier impressionism.

It is significant that nearly all the artists I have mentioned are also teachers of art. Their influence is all the more pervasive since they never work in isolation. As nuclei of ardent groups, their work arouses constant argument, often violent controversies about "humanism", "social responsibility," "Iraqi-ism," apart from the larger over-all question of tradition. The painters are myriad now, the competition intense, pupils often outstripping their masters. Evaluation, therefore, can only be partial, but of one thing there is not the ghost of a doubt: the Iraqi art movement is powerful, exciting, and fruitful.



Portrait of a Girl, by Faraj Abbo

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**Back Cover picture:**  
**Woman and Child, by Khaled al Rahal**

