



ATA SABRI. *Sunset at Sarsanq.* (By Gracious Permission of H. M. King Faisal II)

MODERN PAINTING IN IRAQ

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IN the spring of last year, the artists of Iraq toured India with an exhibition of their paintings. It was the first time that artists of this country had submitted their work as a whole to the judgment of a world beyond their circle of acquaintances in their own capital.

Iraq has no surviving tradition of painting, and until the comparatively recent discovery of animal frescoes at the old caliphal capital of Samarra, it had been solidly

maintained that from earliest Islamic times the representational arts had never been practised in this country, except by the occasionally imported artist from Persia. Whoever that ancient frescoist may have been, he left no school behind him, and the painters of the present day are offered the opportunity of an unexploited medium, their only competitor in the decorative arts being the glossy advertiser of Coca-Cola. But this very



KHALID AL-JADR. *The Guitarist*. (Collection of His Excellency Hussein al-Jamil)

vastness of opportunity, this absence of tradition, to which artists might refer, against which they might rebel, distracts them.

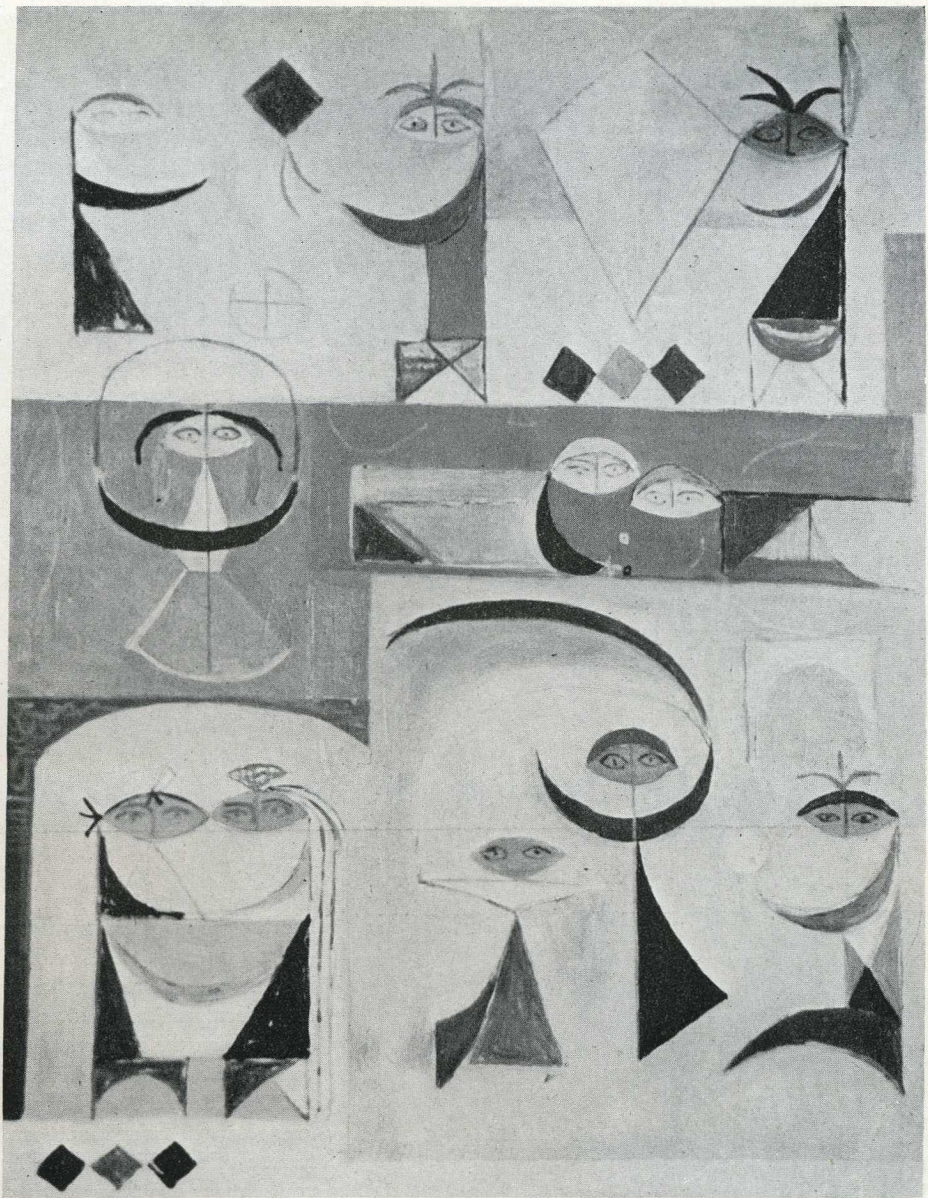
Iraq, for all its easterly position, is part of the western system. It is natural therefore that artists should look for guidance to the west, rather than to the shakily surviving 'oriental' school of Isphahan, where the great Imaami presides in spirit over a factory for Persian miniatures executed in an idiom four centuries demoded. But, turning towards the west, the painters are faced with a problem far more complex than the artistic fossilisation of their eastern neighbours. In the west, they see, not an out-of-date tradition, but the collapse of a number of traditions. Western painting, whether regarded as in decadence or in new youth, is unquestionably in transition. This instability makes an uneasy foundation for a national school of painting in a new and rapidly evolving country.

Painting in Iraq is centred on Baghdad and its Institute of Fine Arts founded in 1936. The professors of the Institute now, all of them young men, have mostly

studied in London, Paris or Rome since 1936. Painting in the modern manner in Iraq is thus barely 25 years old, adventurous and precocious, still at the exploratory stage.

The problem for the artist in Iraq is not what to paint, for the choice is one of unexploited novelty, but how to paint it; how much to borrow of western conventions, how much and how to adapt, how much to reject. Calculated solutions by leading painters vary from the modified academicism of Hafidh al-Drubi and the impressionism of Ata Sabri, to the sophisticated fantasies of Jawad Selim and the primitivism of Faik Hassan.

Of these artists, Hafidh al-Drubi, by virtue of his reputation as an academic painter, is respected as the doyen of painting in Iraq. His landscapes, with their even, clear lighting and fidelity of detail, remind one a little of the work of the Cotswold painters, and give pleasure without shock. His flower paintings, on the other hand, are impressionistic in manner and have a richness and depth that suggest he may be about to



JAWAD SELIM.
Children's Games.

change his earlier style for something less constricting.

Ata Sabri, who will be remembered as Chairman of the Hampstead Open Air Exhibition of 1949, is technically a more adventurous painter. Much influenced by Cézanne, his brushwork is bold and varied; exactly suited to his recent treatment of the crumbling red mountainscapes of northern Iraq. His output is regrettably small—like other professors of the Institute, time that ought to be spent in painting has to be spent in teaching.

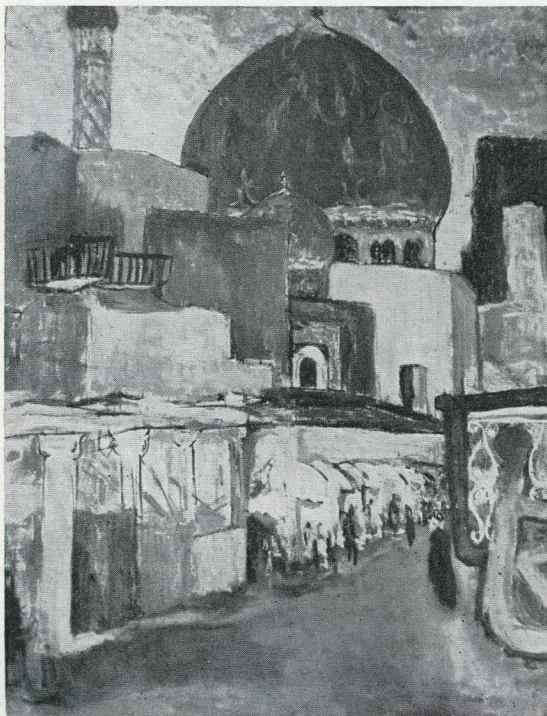
Khalid al-Jadr, a very prolific and versatile artist who has just returned to Iraq from Paris, has recently held a one-man exhibition of his last five years' work, causing

considerable excitement by its technical excellence. His landscapes with figures have a sombre lighting that perhaps owes something to Sickert but certainly represents the most dramatic treatment of landscape subjects yet shown by an Iraqi artist. Equally interesting is his series of drawings in indian ink applied with a sliver of bamboo. The originality, economy and delicacy of these sketches make a sharp contrast to his more solid and conventional oils for the Salon, and should exercise considerable influence towards refining the quality of draughtsmanship in this country.

The canvases of these three painters would not seem exotic in any western exhibition. However, there is



FAIK HASSAN.
Villagers 1



another group of artists whose work contributes more directly to the evolution of an independent national idiom. Of these, the best known outside Iraq is Jawad Selim, sculptor and painter. He has the distinction of having been the only entrant from the Middle East to win an award in the competition of *The Unknown Political Prisoner*. As painter and draughtsman he has learned much from Picasso and Braque. The wit and fantasy of his vision of the Iraqi scene—veiled ladies with huge eyes, amazing curves and transparent middles, banqueters so absorbed in the pleasures of swallowing that their heads have tilted right off their shoulders—show at their most delightful in a set of illustrations to Desmond Stewart's translations of modern Arabic poetry in *New World Writing*, 1954.

If Jawad Selim's approach to the national scene is through sophistication, Faik Hassan's is through neoprimativism and he treats that knife-edge route (between insincerity and silliness) with simplicity and power. His designs are of the simplest with the thick line reminiscent of Rouault, his colours rich and with the flatness of Dufy; his paintings of village life have

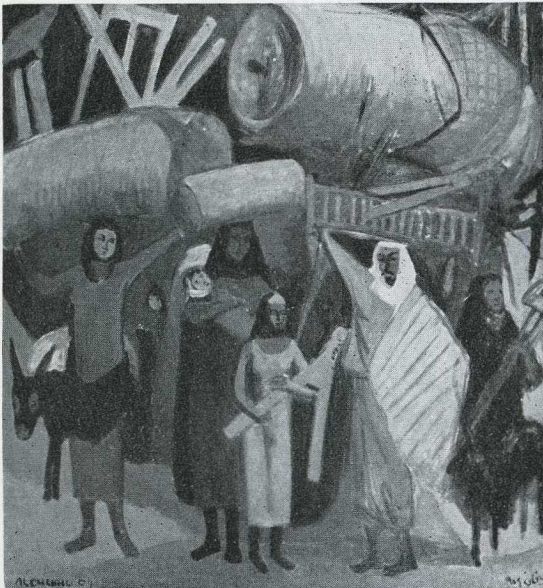
Left: NAZIHA SELIM. *Haidar Khana Mosque*.



JAWAD SELIM. *Portrait of Lorna in Arab dress.* (NOTE: The half-tone blocks for this reproduction were made from a colour transparency which was inadvertently used from the wrong side, thus reversing the picture from left to right. To give an accurate rendering of the original the plate should be looked at in a mirror.)



NAZIHA SELIM. *In the Shadow of the Mosque*



ISMAIL AL-SHEIKHLI. *On the move*

restrained explosiveness and a pathos sometimes tragic, sometimes gay. There is something too of Vlaminck about these paintings; yet Faik Hassan is an integrated, not an eclectic, painter. One would hesitate to compare artists of this country at each other's expense at the present stage of artistic development, but it should not be unfair to say that of the painters of Iraq, Faik Hassan paints with the most consistent emotional power.

Associated with him in his aims though more cerebral and influenced more by Dufy than by Rouault, Ismail al-Sheikhli has recently shown a series of decorative lithographs, of streets, coffee-shops and water-buffaloes.

Other painters in the experimental manner are Shakir Hassan whose work again shows the influence of Rouault and at its best communicates a mood of passive pain remarkable among these extroverted painters: Lorna Selim whose transplanted talents are completely identified with the new movement; Fadhil Abbas who specialises in crowded scenes of Arab cabaret life; Mahmoud Sabri, an admirer of Kokoschka and Rouault, and inspired by radical politics to paint torrid pictures of street and brothel; Naziha Selim, a more meditative painter of mosques; Akram Shukri who experiments with Babylonian and Assyrian motifs; Tariq Madhloum who draws his inspiration from neo-



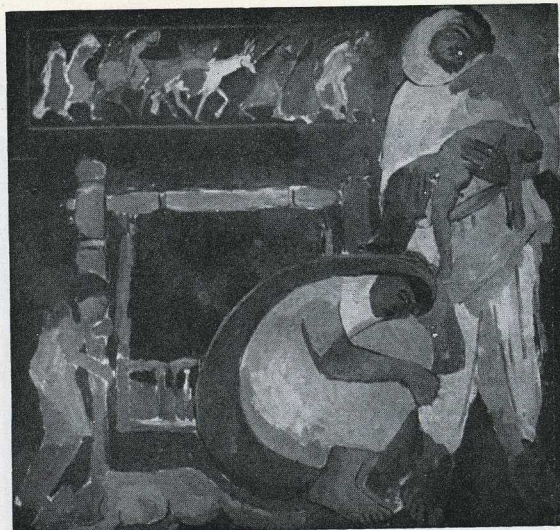
JAWAD SELIM. *Pleasures*. Water-colour



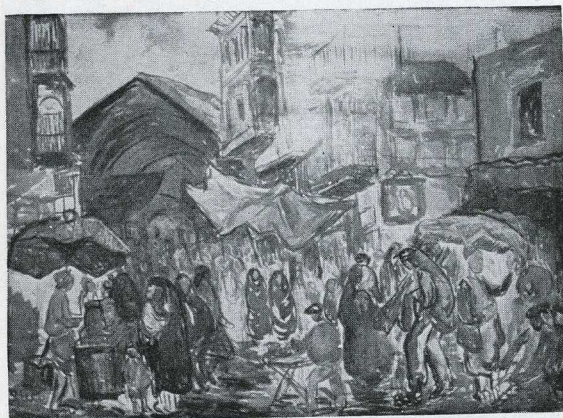
SHAKIR HASSAN. *Zein-al-Abdein in Chains*

lithic frescoes; and Kadhem Mohammed Haidar, a promising and sensitive young water-colourist.

Apart then from the occasional exploitation of archaeological motifs, it is rare to detect in modern Iraqi painting an influence earlier than that of Cézanne; the influences most widely at work are those of Braque, Picasso and Rouault, to a lesser extent Dufy and Kokoschka. As these influences are in process of assimilation, a critic's impression may be that the painters of Iraq are still unsure of themselves, and that, lacking conviction and aim, the younger ones tend to mistake mannerisms of western painters for the disciplines that have made the mannerisms tolerable. Such a judgment must be corrected when one takes into account how new the movement is, how much the established artists have already achieved towards making the new art at home, how enthusiastically they and their pupils are devoting themselves to an un lucrative profession; when one sees the brightness and vigour of their work; and when one hears the appreciative criticism of a rapidly expanding public.



TARIQ MADHLOUM. *Dead Child*



FADHIL ABBAS *Kadhemein Market*



MAHMOUD SABRI. *Flood Emergency*