

FROM ANTIQUITY
TO MODERNITY

STUDIES ON MIDDLE EASTERN
AND ASIAN SOCIETIES

Asia in the Mirror



*Self-Representations, Self-Narratives,
and Perception of the Other*

EDITED BY

Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano,
Angela Daiana Langone,
Emma Lupano, Valentina Serra

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Jamsheed K. Choksy
General Editor

Vol. 3

The From Antiquity to Modernity series is part of the Peter Lang Humanities list.

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PETER LANG

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Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano,
Angela Daiana Langone, Emma Lupano, and
Valentina Serra (eds.), with the assistance of
Mittal M. Trivedi

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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography;
detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

The volume is a key output of the “Asia in the Mirror” project funded by Fondazione di Sardegna (2021) and conducted at the Department of Literature, Languages and Cultural Heritage of the University of Cagliari, Italy.



Cover images: Erasmus Quellinus II, Jan Van Kessel the Elder - Allegory of Asia;
Kitagawa Utamaro - Takashima Ohisa Using Two Mirrors to Observe Her Coiffure.
Cover design by Peter Lang Group AG

ISSN 2328-9236 | ISSN 2328-9244 (online)

ISBN 978-3-0343-5872-9 (print)

ISBN 978-3-0343-5873-6 (E-PDF)

ISBN 978-3-0343-5874-3 (E-Pub)

DOI 10.3726/b23295



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Published by Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, USA
info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com

This publication has been peer reviewed.

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Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization and its Heritage in Modern Iraq.

Perceptions and Modern Representations

LUCIA AVALLONE AND GIULIANO MION

Introduction

The present contribution¹ aims to investigate, within the general framework of the research project housing this book, the multiple possibilities of describing how one of the cultures settled in the Asian continent perceives and narrates itself. In particular, the focus of these pages is on how an Arab country with an extremely long-standing historical tradition of different cultures perceives and narrates itself. The choice fell on contemporary Iraq and the historical period that this contribution deals with is the twentieth century. More precisely, the chosen period begins in the 1950s, continues until Saddam Hussein's regime, and ends in the present day, when some data belonging to the post-Gulf war period will be tackled.

Present-day Iraq is a country that is beginning to find a relative socio-political stability with an economy that is painstakingly, but gradually, recovering after a long stagnation resulting from many years of external and internal conflicts, following first the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), then the First Gulf War (1990–91), and, finally, the Second Gulf War (2003). The country is multi-confessional, with Sunni

¹ This work is the result of both authors' reflections and research. In the interest of practicality, however, Lucia Avallone is responsible for the second part while Giuliano Mion for the introduction and the conclusions.

and Shia Muslims, Chaldean and Syriac Christians as well as Mandeans, but also Yazidis, Bahai, Zoroastrians, and Jews. This multi-confessionalism goes along with a multi-ethnicity and multilingualism, because the population is composed of a majority of Arabs, but also Turkmen, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Shabak, and Circassians. This great complexity of the Iraqi population has been at the root of many sectarian conflicts that have developed as a result of successive wars in recent decades and, in particular, after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.²

In the Middle Ages, Iraq was the seat of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) during which, as stated by Marr (2017, 2), the country “came into its own as the center of a prosperous and expanding empire and an increasingly brilliant civilization that drew on the traditions of its immediate predecessors, the Greeks and Persians, in forming the emerging Arab-Islamic culture.” But it is also worth remembering that many centuries before Islam, during fourth and third millennium BC, Iraq was the cradle of the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian cultures which succeeded one another, all contributing to shaping its profile over the centuries and continuing until the present day.

The historical complexity of what is known as present-day Iraq coincides with a cultural richness that has rare counterparts, one of which is the case of Egypt that has been investigated by Reid (1997, 2019) retracing how the ancient Egyptian culture influenced the formation of the national identity of modern Egypt, as well as the connection of external intellectual forces, like that of the orientalist and foreign scholars who, after the Napoleonic invasion, influenced the psyche of the Egyptian elites all the way up to the era of Nasser. A similar phenomenon can be found in the case of Iraq, where the ancient Mesopotamian cultures have been used in order to raise awareness about the “golden” ages of the past and, consequently, create a national identity. But the most notable distinction between the Egyptian and Iraqi cases is that the use of the ancient Mesopotamian cultures increases alongside the rise of nationalism, and the acme of this phenomenon is represented by the era of Saddam Hussein. This doesn't mean that the Islamic past is sidelined, but instead one leaves with the understanding that in the ideological and political agenda, the pre-Islamic glories are projected in a sort of natural continuation with the Abbasid culture until modern times, as if there were no dividing lines between the completely different historical periods. Architectural elements, artistic works, monumental arts, and even literature, altogether contributed to regaining the past in order to glorify it and reshape the present according to a sentiment of continuity of the past, as if the flow of time was suspended.

2 For a general overview on the interconnections between ethnicity and conflicts in Iraq, see, for example, Ulack (2015).

In reconstructing the dynamics of identity that led to the valorization of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations in modern Iraq, the observations included in these pages have been inspired by the general theoretical framework of the theory of cultural memory, as proposed by the late German Egyptologist Jan Assmann in a long series of works related to collective memory and the construction of the identity of a community. Assmann's approach is particularly suitable in our case, because his research, for which one could refer mainly to Assmann (1992), is grounded on the study of cultural memory in antiquity primarily focusing on ancient Mesopotamia, Near East, Egypt, and Greece. Assmann's approach represents a sort of refinement and an application of the notion of collective memory that was originally conceived by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the first half of the twentieth century.³ The following is a summary of a couple of concepts related to cultural memory through which we can effortlessly understand the subject matter investigated in this study.

In order to be able to refer to the past, it must have entered as such in the consciousness of a social group, and this process presupposes at least two elements:

- (1) the past must not have disappeared completely, there must be some kind of documentation;
- (2) this documentation consists of testimonies that must exhibit distinctive features when compared to today.

The historical memory of the past events of a social group plays a large role in shaping its collective memory. While this may seem simple and obvious enough, the direct and indirect implications are nonetheless significant. When a social group insists on a specific interpretation of its shared past and strives to cultivate and pass on its memory, it performs an act of cultural memory. And collective memory is created precisely on this act. When a social group insists on a specific interpretation of its shared past and strives to cultivate and pass on its memory, it performs an act of codifying an accepted history. It is this precise act which creates cultural memory. This mechanism develops self-awareness of one's community and, thus, ends up forming the basis of a cultural identity. The social group which practices such an act of cultural memory is considered a community of memory. The opposite of an act of cultural memory is forgetting or removing one's past. This damages the collective memory to the point of compromising it, and in this way, the social group is deprived of the mechanisms that regulate its cultural identity. Its excessive weakening further encourages its assimilation by external forces,

3 See Halbwachs (1925, 1950), which are the works that inspired Jan Assmann.

condemning it to progressive decline. This brief summary gives a quick idea of why acts of cultural memory are so important to build a community of memory. A social group which identifies as a community based on shared memory constructs an image of itself that attenuates internal differences and insists on cohesion around a shared system of values, beliefs, and experiences, while emphasizing the differences between self and the other.

All these elements and dynamics are very relevant for a country that wishes to emphasize its national identity, and we have examples of this from all over the world in different historical periods. In modern Iraq, we find such phenomena over the nearly forty years of rule by the Arab Socialist Baath Party (1968–2003), when the ideology propagated by them (for which see Sassoon 2011) was used to facilitate the internal cohesion and the cultural experiences of the country. The interconnections between ideology and the representation of cultural memory in Iraq have been the subject of a fair number of studies (see Baram 1991); however, these analyses don't go as far as the Gulf War or even the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Therefore, the observation of such phenomena confirms that, in modern Iraq, the past was continuously reorganized according to the frames of reference of the present—memory proceeds in a reconstructive manner, narrating a past to justify its continuity with the present. Moreover, while this can be marked with monumental works or art, literature can also play a part. One of the most notable examples of this is the novel *Zabiba wa-l-malik* [Zabiba and the King], officially authored by Saddam Hussein and published in 2000. The story is set in the time of ancient Babylon and deals with the love between a girl, Zabiba, and a king. In this plot, the splendors of the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations serve as a backdrop that magnifies the country's greatness, and the relationship between the two protagonists is nothing but a metaphor of contemporary Iraq being threatened by the United States and the Western countries. As we are going to see in the following paragraphs, monumental and fine arts also played crucial roles in the construction of this sense of identity. But can these phenomena be considered acts of resistance to the external pressure?

Origins and Development of Modern Art in Iraq: A Historical Overview

In order to more fully comprehend the contribution of fine arts to the evolution of a modern Iraqi identity rooted in the rich history of its civilizations, we

will examine the origins and developments of these arts in the twentieth century. The arts of painting and sculpture have in fact a relatively recent history in Iraq, with the first significant examples of production emerging during the early years of World War II. Nevertheless, by the 1920s an interest in fine arts and crafts was clearly evident, as attested by an exhibition held at the Suq Ukadh Festival of Poetry in 1922 and the erection of the first public monument in Baghdad dedicated to the British General Frederick Stanley Maude⁴ in 1923. As Shabout (2009, 25–6) posits, a significant shift in conceptualizing the commitment of the artists emerged during the early 1930s, as art began to be regarded as a profession. This marked a rupture with previous artistic practices, paving the way for the advent of modern art in Iraq.

An important art exhibition was held at the Industrial and Agricultural Fair in Baghdad in 1931, with the participation of teachers and talented students, and three years after its inauguration (1936) the Music Institute in Baghdad was expanded to include sections for visual arts and drama. In the same years several artists undertook studies abroad in Europe, remaining there until the outbreak of World War II when they were compelled to return to Baghdad. During the war period the Institute of Fine Arts was founded (1941), with Faiq Hasan (1914–92) as its director. At that time Iraqi artists had the opportunity to become acquainted with Polish artists stationing in the country with British military forces. A strong bond was formed between Polish and Iraqi artists to such an extent that the modern art pioneer Atta Sabri (1913–1987) called them “brothers in art.”

During the war years, artists trained in Europe, especially in Paris, frequented Baghdad’s cafés, both giving and participating in lectures, as well as presenting their works in exhibitions organized there and in other Arab countries such as Lebanon and Egypt (Lenssen 2024, 92). A more modern approach thus pushed Iraqi artists to engage in experimentation and search for a national artistic identity and a plurality of individual artistic identities. In 1941, the Art Friends Society [*ġam‘iyyat aṣḍiqā’ al-fann*] was established as the first art association registered at the Ministry of Interior in Iraq.⁵ On November 14, of that year, the Society held its inaugural exhibition of artistic works. Young Iraqi artists, including Jawad Salim (1919–61) and Faiq Hasan, were encouraged to depart from the

4 This statue celebrated Maude as the liberator of Iraq from Ottoman domination, but it was dismantled in 1958, following the dissolution of the Iraqi monarchy, as an act of erasing a historical record associated with the domination of external forces.

5 The group included painters, sculptors, architects, and representatives of other arts. Among them were Akram Shukri, Faiq Hasan, Jawad Salim, Atta Sabri, Issa Hanna, Hafidh al-Drubi, Abdel Qadir al-Rassam, and Haj Muhammad Salim (see al-Khamis 2001, 22).

academic approach of their predecessors and embrace an art that transcended the naturalistic, realistic representation of reality, to penetrate “beyond objects and phenomena to seek their true essence,” employing styles such as Cubism and Expressionism (al-Khamis 2001, 22–3).

In the aftermath of World War II, the Iraqi government continued to provide financial and logistical support to artists within the country, as well as facilitating their participation in cultural missions to Europe and international exhibitions. Significant examples include the Cairo International Exhibition (1947), the exhibition at the UNESCO Conference in Beirut (1948), and the exhibition of Arab artists in Rome (1953).

The 1950s represent a pivotal moment in the development of fine arts and their crucial role in shaping the distinctive features of modern Iraqi identity. This was due to factors already mentioned, including the government’s support for artists, the emergence of cultural institutions and events, and the wartime climate of openness to foreigners. As Jawad Salim observes, “during the four-year period when Paris and Europe ceased to make beautiful work,” Baghdad continued to work, despite the difficulties (Lenssen 2024, 113).

It is noteworthy that several important cultural institutions were established prior to the Second World War, among them the Salam Library (1920), the Baghdad Antiquities Museum (1926), the Public Library (1929), and the Institute of Fine Arts (1939). Subsequently, the Baghdad Symphony Orchestra (1944) was founded, followed by the Popular Theatre Company and the Baghdad Film Studio in the post-conflict era. Within this dynamic setting, in a decade which also culminated in the overthrowing of the monarchy and the establishment of the Iraqi Republic (1958), the country saw the establishment of some key institutions such as the Modern Theatre Company (1953), the first TV broadcasts (1956), the Iraqi Artists Society, which was led by the architect Muhammad Makiya (1914–2015), and the University of Baghdad (1957). Several art and literature magazines also emerged, such as *al-Ṣibā* [Youth], launched by Nizar Salim (1925–82) in the late 1930s, and *ʿAštārūt* [Astarte],⁶ in the early 1940s, by Jamil Hamudi (1924–2003) which were both handwritten productions. It is significant that the title of the latter publication refers to one of the names used in ancient Mesopotamian civilizations for the female deities of rebirth and regeneration. The same artists also founded two other journals: *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīṯ* [The Modern Thought] in the

6 Only two issues of this magazine have survived, and they bear witness to its usual content: comments on art trends, articles on cultural phenomena, reviews of local exhibitions, sections on gallery containing examples of works (Lenssen 2024, 107).

mid-1940s, headed by Jamil Hamudi⁷; *al-Waqt al-Dā'i* [The Wasted Time] in 1946, headed by Nizar Salim (Alsaden 2018, 175–6). The latter was established in collaboration with al-Waq Waq Café,⁸ which served as a meeting place for artists and writers concerned with the status of art and literature and committed to ideas of political and cultural revolutionism. Despite its relatively brief existence, the café made a substantial impact on the formation of a contemporary Iraqi cultural identity (Caiani 2013, 38–41).

Within this context of rich cultural initiatives, the testimony of the Iraqi writer Naim Kattan, an exile in Canada, is worthy of consideration. In his recollection of the years spent in Iraq after World War II, he mentions collaborating with writers and artists such as Nizar Salim, Khalid al-Rahhal and Samir al-Shaikli, and describes meetings in Baghdad cafés during which they discussed the creation of a new Iraqi culture, beginning with the recognition of the country's cultural greatness and importance. This culture was to be promoted across borders and disseminated through an Iraqi magazine. It was thus that the avant-garde magazine *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīṭ* came into being (Joudar 2020, 178–9).

At the same time, artists who had been trained in European schools and later had held positions in Iraqi cultural institutions,⁹ gathered mainly in three groups: (1) the Société Primitive,¹⁰ led by Faiq Hasan, who abandoned the practice of studio painting in favor of painting *en plein air*; (2) the Baghdad Group of Modern Art,¹¹ founded by Jawad Salim and Shakir Hasan al-Said, whose intent was “to reassert national self-esteem and help build a distinctive Iraqi identity” through

7 He is considered a pioneer of the “Arabic Hurufiyya” artistic school and was later the founder of the magazine *Ishtar—Revue internationale pour une compréhension meilleure entre l’Orient et l’Occident* (1958).

8 At the time, Baghdad was home to numerous cafés where intellectuals gathered, fostering a vibrant cultural phenomenon known as “café culture.” They included al-Waq Waq Café, the Swiss Café, the Brazilian Café, Yasin Café, Shatt al-Arab Café, al-Baladiyya Café, the Parliament Café, al-Mu’aqqadin Café, al-Shabandar Café, al-Zahawi Café, and Hassan Ajami Café.

9 For example, Jawad Salim spent a year studying in Florence (1938–39) and a year in Paris (1939–40), and later he resided in London between 1946 and 1948. On his return to Iraq, he headed the sculpture department at the Institute of Fine Arts (1949) and also worked at the Iraqi Museum on the restoration of artifacts and statues from the Assyrian and Sumerian periods.

10 The group was subsequently renamed the *Ġamā’at al-ruwwād* [Pioneers’ Group] and comprised artists such as: Ismail al-Shaikly, Issa Hanna, Zaid Salih, Mahmud Sabri, Jawad Salim, and Lorna Salim.

11 The group was known in Arabic as *Ġamā’at Baġdād li-l-fann al-ḥadīṭ* and included Lorna Salim, Nizar Salim, Naziha Salim, Faraj Abbu, Rasul Alwan, Fadhil Abbas, Muhammad al-Husni, Khalil al-Ward, Abd al-Rahman al-Gailani, Khalid al-Rahhal, Muhammad Ghani Hikmat, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Shakir Hasan al-Said (al-Khamis 2021, 24).

the art (al-Khamis 2001, 24); and (3) the Impressionist Group gathered around the figure of Hafiz Drubi (1914–91).

As nuclei of ardent groups, their [artists'] work arouses constant argument, often violent controversies about "humanism," "social responsibility," "Iraqi-ism," apart from the larger over-all question of tradition. (Jabra 1961, 7)

Established in 1943 around the concept of original (*bidāʿ*), intuitive art, the Société Primitive held the first exhibition in December of 1950. At that time, the group also changed its name to *Ġamāʿat al-ruwwād*, and the call for a more active role of the artist in society, initially proposed by one of the founders, the painter Mahmud Sabri (1927–2012), also gained importance. Another significant contribution to the discourse on art was made by Jawad Salim. He promoted the concept of *istilhām al-turāṭ* [heritage inspiration], whereby inspiration from the ancient heritage, combined with a commitment to renewal, could be exploited in a way that would lead to the realization of a contemporary aesthetic (Shabout 2020).

In fact, in the 1950s, modern visual arts benefited from a surge in popularity, with a renewed interest in primitive art, daily life, folklore, and last but not least, the heritage of ancient Iraq, revisited with the aim of expressing modern life and thought in society. In particular, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art constituted the most considerable driving force behind the genesis of a national modern art movement. In fact, the cosmopolitan spirit that had previously dominated the Société Primitive gave way to a new vision of art represented by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art and its new style that was to become emblematic of Iraqi art and identified distinctly as Iraqi. The first group of artists was not concerned with achieving a style other than the Western one, although the content of the paintings often had local vistas as its subject. The latter group, on the other hand, proposed new forms of representation. As Jabra argues: "they called for a historical consciousness that would make of the whole of Babylonian and Arab tradition the matrix from which their style should emerge" (Jabra 1988, 167–8).

The 1958 coup d'état that brought an end to the Hashemite monarchy paved the way for a series of additional coups, in 1963 and 1968, that resulted in the ascendancy of the Baath Party, which remained in power until 2003. During this period, there was a transition from art which aimed to express the artist's vision of autonomy within the context of a national agenda to art that was confined to a specific space and served the interests of the regime in glorifying the spirit of sacrifice for the nation. In fact, the artists who were active during the Baath regime took part in the project of building an Iraqi art school, received commissions for

large-scale art works, were recruited to positions in the Ministry of Culture, and participated in exhibitions organized by public institutions.

From the early 1950s until the 1980s, a substantial number of artists drew inspiration from the themes of ancient Mesopotamia, receiving favorable reviews in the press and specialist periodicals. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the 1968 coup d'état, the General Institution for Archaeology at Iraq's National Museum held an exhibition of modern art, with the aim of fostering "the deep continuity between artistic creation of pre-historic eras, the Islamic era, and our [Iraqi] modern artists" (Baram 1990, 71).

The establishment of the Iraqi Artist Society in 1956 as a forum for the presentation of works by artists affiliated with collectives or engaged in independent practice proved to be a pivotal initiative in the advancement of the fine arts. This is evidenced by the considerable number of artists' contributions and the Society's exhibitions, such as those held at the Mansur Club (1956–58) or at the Royal Olympic Club in Adhamiyya (Gupta, Takesh 2021, 69). The remarkable success of the Mansur Club exhibitions signified a novel approach to the dissemination of art in modern Iraq, prompting a discourse on the pursuit of quality art and a meaningful engagement with the public (Alsaden 2018, 168).

The Revolution of 1958 thus marked the advent of a new era, one characterized by a renewed sense of optimism and an aspiration for a fresh start. This was reflected in the arts, as artists sought to express their ideas through artworks that often-enjoyed patronage from the regime and reflected emerging social ideals.

Culture, as defined in the report of the Eighth Regional Congress of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, was part of the development strategy of the Party and therefore, of the Iraqi government (El-Basri 1980, p. 12). Writers, artists, intellectuals and journalists were to be attracted to the Revolution, in order to help spreading its goals (Arab Ba'th Socialist Party 1974, p. 256). Cultural centers were opened abroad, in London and Paris for instance. The Iraqi Cultural Center in London was especially proactive: besides numerous exhibitions, it issued a lavish periodical, *Ur*, dedicated to the arts and literature, edited by the renowned artist Dhia Azzawi. In 1976, an exhibition of contemporary Iraqi art was shown in Paris, at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (*Art irakien contemporain*, 1976). (Naef 2012, 477–8)

It is worth mentioning that only a few years before the revolution, the artistic innovations that were maturing within the different groups of artists also led to the formulation of manifestos, such as the ones developed by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951 and 1955. These were closely linked to the theoretical perspective on art that emerged during the Baathist period, which emphasized the

significance of national identity within the context of Iraq's extensive history of civilizations spanning millennia. These manifestos put the emphasis on the local character, which was later termed the "heritage character" (Naef 2012, 477). The following is an excerpt from the 1951 Manifesto:

We thus announce today the beginning of a new school of painting, which derives its source from the civilization of the contemporary age, with all the styles and schools of plastic art that have emerged from it, and from the unique character of Eastern civilization. In this way, we will honor the stronghold of the Iraqi art of painting that collapsed after the school of Yahya al-Wasiti, the Mesopotamian school of thirteenth century AD. And in this way we reconnect the continuity that has been broken since the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols. [...] We, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, hereby declare the birth of a new school of art for the sake of our civilization, and for the sake of universal civilization.¹²

In relation to the 1955 Manifesto formulated by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the well-known Palestinian writer and artist refugee in Iraq, the concept of belonging to a nation with a rich history with origins dating back to ancient civilizations was also highlighted. Moreover, the use of innovative techniques for portraying the lives of individuals and incorporating local motifs was promoted. It was a matter of interpreting the present while simultaneously drawing upon the tools and concepts of the past (Jabra 1988, 167–8). The group was described as including painters and sculptors, distinguished by their individual styles and conscious of their intellectual and stylistic links with the wider world of art beyond Iraq. It was their contemporary perspective that would result in the emergence of new forms in Iraqi art and a distinctive identity (Salim 1977, 102).

The Baghdad Modern Art Group was not a conventional school; rather, it was a movement that was trained in Europe or by European artists. The thematic and stylistic influences of this group derived from Eastern sources (Streithorts 1958, 20). It provided a forum for experimentation in painting and sculpture, with Jawad Salim representing the pivotal figure around which the group coalesced. Salim's contributions were not limited to his own works, but also included ideas about art in general. In his volume devoted to modern Iraqi painting, Nizar Salim (1977, 103) cites Arnold Hottinger's assertion that the original work of Jawad Salim constituted a point of confluence and equilibrium between modern art

12 The excerpt is drawn from "Bayān Ġamā'at Baġdād li-l-Fann al-Ĥadīth al-Awwal," published in *al-Adīb* 10, 7 (July 1951): 52, translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein and published in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout 2018.

and ancient oriental traditions. His oeuvre and his conceptualization of art for Hottinger respond to the question he poses at the commencement of his essay on the artist: “How might one maintain an individual sense of self in the context of modern life? This question encompasses many of the challenges currently facing the Middle East. What is the significance of this assertion?” (Hottinger 1964, 61). For Hottinger (1964, 64), Jawad Salim

was one of the rare artists capable of mastering two domains together, that of modern art and that of Oriental art. He was able to bring them together, to create a living synthesis, and from it an original work which, if it represents a new world for the East, is no less the Eastern world itself.

Like many other artists he participated in a season of large-scale state-commissioned artworks. In fact, he was responsible for the decoration of a public monument that still marks the landscape of Baghdad today: *The Freedom Monument* [*Naṣṣ al-Ḥurriyya*], the wall structure which was designed by the architect Rifat Jadirji.



Figure 1.1: The Freedom Monument in Tahrir Square.

The monument symbolically narrates the Revolution and is composed of a series of images to be read from right to left like the Arabic script. In a modernist style that evokes the technique of a Mesopotamian bas-relief, Jawad Salim

represents both the struggle for freedom and historical legacy. In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the monument's meanings, we have highlighted some of the symbols occurring in the sculptures crafted in bronze and bearing specific messages:

- The ethnic, cultural, and social composition of the population represented through the depiction of Arabs and minorities as peasants in Sumerian and Assyrian dress.
- The rebellion against the domination of the monarchy and foreign control represented by a wild, unruly horse that has thrown off its rider.
- The ox, an element often present in ancient Iraqi imagery, which symbolizes strength, fertility and wealth.
- The image of martyrdom which has been a pivotal theme in Iraqi Muslim tradition and is also a symbol of suffering shared with Christians.
- Two Iraqi women symbolizing the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, with a young girl representing their tributaries.
- A woman bearing a torch who signifies freedom, in accordance with the ancient Greek style.
- The ancient Mesopotamian symbol of the sun disk, which indicates the return of light after darkness.

These motifs demonstrate the artist's historical perspective, which encompasses both the present and the past. The significance of the work extends beyond the political and cultural context in which it was created. Jawad Salim's modernity also transcends the fact that the monument was associated with the regimes in power during the Baathist era and the rule of Saddam Hussein. Even today, it continues to convey messages that speak to the whole of humanity.

Two additional monuments were commissioned by the Prime Minister, Abd al-Karim Qasim, to commemorate the 1958 Revolution: *The Post-Revolution Mural* by Faiq Hasan and *The Monument to the Unknown Soldier* by Rifat Jadirji. The latter was dismantled and replaced with a new monument by Khalid al-Rahhal in 1983, during Saddam's regime.

Furthermore, Faiq Hasan was tasked with painting historical panels, including *The Battle of Qadisiyya* (636 AD, between the First Caliphate and the Sassanid Empire), which has not survived to this day, and *The History of Iraq*, where the artist depicted three historical phases that are considered to be the roots of modern Iraq: the Sumerian, the Assyrian, and the early Islamic.



Figure 1.2: Faeq Hassan, *The History of Iraq*.

In portraying this triptych, the artist employed artistic conventions and stylistic elements typical of the referenced periods. These include Sumerian and Assyrian bas-reliefs, which were imbued with a sense of vitality and realism through the artist's painting technique, as well as Persian miniature art.

The oeuvre of another artist, the celebrated sculptor Khalid al-Rahhal, one of the most prominent figures in Baathist art, exemplifies a form of creativity intimately intertwined with the history of Iraq. Among his works is *The Monument of the Journey* [*Nash al-Masira*], located in the square in front of the Iraqi National Museum, representing the Baath Party as a ship on which three human figures are traveling (the monument was dismantled in 2005 as part of a de-Baathification campaign). One of the figures is a boy looking toward the museum, symbolizing the historical and cultural roots of his country. The ship is adorned with a series of bronze decorations that evoke motifs from ancient Mesopotamia, including a bull standing over a fallen warrior, a lion hunting a deer, and the goddess Ishtar. Al-Rahhal was also commissioned to paint *The Hanging Gardens of Ancient Babylon* and was the author of the marble group *Mother and Son*. In the 1980s, under the rule of Saddam Hussein, he was appointed to create the much-discussed *Swords of Qadisiyya* (also known as *The Victory Arch*), two huge twin arches consisting of swords held by the hands and forearms that reproduce the ones of the Iraqi president.

It is worth noting that the link with history, both in terms of a revolutionary present and a promising future scenario, is also firmly established with the Islamic

Golden Age. Indeed, among the monuments of al-Rahhal, the bronze bust of the Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, who founded the Round City of Baghdad in the eighth century, is of particular significance (the monument was partially destroyed by a bomb blast in 2003 and completely dismantled in 2005). In 1972 the statues of the poet Abu Nuwas and the medieval artist Yahya al-Wasit were created by Ismail Fattah al-Turk, who would create the iconic Martyr's Monument in 1983.

To cite a few more important examples of works of art that place the distant Mesopotamian past in continuity with modern Iraq, the two panels commissioned by the Sheraton Hotel in Baghdad from Hafidh al-Drubi depict one life in Hatra and the other in Babylon. In the mid-1970s, Muhammad Ghani Hikmat created a marble and bronze group entitled *A Child, a Mother, and Hammurabi's Stele*, which refers to the great Babylonian lawgiver (the Hammurabi's code inscriptions on the stele are in Arabic). The same sculptor is also responsible for monuments situated in public places in Baghdad that recall several medieval themes (historical or fictional) and feature, for instance, the figures of *Shahrazad and Shahrayar* (1971) and *Kahramana*, the wife of Ali Baba (1971), as well as the Abbasid poet *al-Mutanabbi* (1977) and *The Fisherman and the Genie* (1982). In more recent times, he created the monument entitled *Saving Iraqi Culture* (2010), which represents a five-armed



Figure 1.3: Muhammad Ghani Hikmat, *Saving Iraqi Culture*.

giant rescuing a metaphorical broken cylinder bearing the cuneiform inscription “here writing began” and symbolizing the culture that is at risk of being destroyed.

In the decades preceding the 2003 invasion, there was a notable shift in the role of public monuments in defining a national identity that was increasingly aligned with the state ideology. Some minor artistic expressions, such as posters and stamps, reflected this, coinciding with the cult of the commander-in-chief, President Saddam Hussein. In this context, it is unsurprising that Hussein was also portrayed in association with Nebuchadnezzar, even in the garb of an ancient warrior and alongside Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, the Muslim commander who opposed the European crusades (like Saddam, al-Ayyubi was a native of Tikrit).

Conclusions

In the first pages of the present contribution, one of the pivotal questions consisted in determining whether the artistic phenomena that have been considered within these pages could be interpreted, in the frame of Iraqi nationalist ideology, as acts of resistance to external pressures. Giving a definitive and unique answer is incontestably hard, but it seems quite obvious that the efforts in shaping a national artistic canon can be interpreted as a tool used for accelerating the dynamics of identity and otherness.

The word “canon,” here, may sound strong, but it is not used randomly. In Assmann’s approach, in fact, the formation of a canon, or “canonization,” is mainly intended in the sense of the process of collection of texts belonging to the past that form a sort of syllabus of cultural knowledge. Aside from the literary domain, a canon, intended here in a wider sense, represents a model of behavior for the community of memory and it turns out as one of the most influential strategies for the transmission of cultural memory.

As happened in similar cases, in Iraq too, the production and transmission of non-contemporaneity contributed to the formation of that cultural memory. The cases of both *The Freedom Monument* and *The Victory Arch* are undoubtedly emblematic, because they consist of examples of monumental art that can excellently show the intersections between different historical periods and that crystallize in the present the demonstration that are ideally interconnectible.

The first one embodies the link between the “antiquity” and the “golden age” of the Islamic civilization, that is, between ancient Mesopotamia and the Arab culture: the rhetorical device consists in the representation of an event from contemporary history, the so-called Qasim’s revolution, through both

Assyro-Babylonian themes and the readability of the image according to the directionality of the Arabic scripts.

The second celebrates the transition from the Sasanian empire to the Islamic age, a monument that alludes to the famous ancient battle of Qadisiyya: the rhetorical device here consists in the theme of the swords, to which the Islamic tradition, starting from the famous Prophet's sword (the so-called *Dū l-fiqār*), attributes the symbolism of religious and military power, but also in the choice of the site and the location, next to the Museum of Gifts to the President and the performing art center.

As we have seen, this general artistic attitude, which was reflected not only in monumental art but more broadly in all creative expressions of painting and sculpture, was an integral part of the ideology and politics of Baath which, over the years, favored and foraged those artists who made ancient Mesopotamia their source of inspiration. The demonstration occurs clearly in many documents, as we have seen for example in the 1951 Manifesto, which announced without mincing words, we could say almost messianically, a new artistic movement "for the sake of the civilization." And here we find a partial answer to our pivotal question, as the manifesto evokes the notion of civilization and the urgent need of its preservation.

These phenomena can be easily viewed as acts that contribute to build a cultural memory and permit shaping a national identity that conceives modern (Baathist) Iraq as a natural and evident result of all the previous historical periods. History is not re-written but is bent according to the needs and requirements of national(-ist) politics.

When looking at all these artistic expressions, the one-dimensionality of existence seems to be suppressed and life acquires a sort of twofold temporality, namely a life flowing in two coexisting different times, which persist through all stages of national evolution.

This twofold temporality is usually a prerogative of religions, in which it is not crucial to recognize that some celebrated remote episodes are truly historical or merely mythical, but it is important to entrench them in the consciousness of the believers and to make them relive cyclically in the social practices of the present, especially when implementing rituals. Instead, in our case this temporality doesn't depend on religious aspects and remote episodes don't relive cyclically in rituals, as the Baathist atmosphere had imposed a secular mentality, and ancient episodes revived through their static crystallization in creative works.

The everyday was nothing but the continuation of a past that the ideology of national identity wanted to persist.

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