

All Manner of Experiments: Legacies of the Baghdad Modern Art Group

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Shakir Hassan Al Said, *al-Khasais al-Fanniya wa al-Ijtima'ia L Risoum al-Wasiti* (Artistic and Social Characteristics of Al-Wasiti's Drawings), Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Guidance, 1964. Cover. Courtesy of Nada Shabout.

We, the Baghdad Modern Art Group, hereby declare the birth of a new school of art for the sake of our civilization, and for the sake of universal civilization.

... The following question will linger in the artist's mind: by what means will this new art be realized? Various answers will tempt his thoughts, and he will carry out all manner of experiments, as his head, eyes, and hands dictate.

— Baghdad Modern Art Group ⁰¹

As defined by their name, Jamaat Baghdad Lil Fan al-Hadith, the Baghdad Modern Art Group was established to negotiate modern art between Baghdad as a center of production and the rest of the world.⁰² It thus drew from both the history of its location in Baghdad, an Abbasid city that traces its lineage to the ancient civilizations of the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia), and its own age as manifested in modernism.⁰³ Initiated in 1951 by two of Iraq's most influential artists, Jewad Selim (1919–61) and Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004), the group grew to engage many of Iraq's leading visual artists and architects. Its legacy, however, reached beyond its active years and geographical borders, and its teachings continue to impact the Iraqi art scene today. Nevertheless, while the group is known by name, and its manifesto has been translated and published several times in the last decade, to date, no exhibitions or publications have delved deeper into its history.

All Manner of Experiments: Legacies of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, the first comprehensive exhibition to contextualize and historicize the collective, allows us to reflect on the group's formation, progression, members, challenges, and their bearing on following generations. The exhibition examines the group's development through the work of its two leaders and the contributions of its original members; it also tracks the changing membership over the collective's first decade and the attempts at continuity after Selim's untimely death. It considers the effect of wars and

⁰¹ Baghdad Modern Art Group, "Bayan Jama'at Baghdad li-l-fann al-hadith al-awwal" [The First Manifesto of the Baghdad Modern Art Group], printed in al-Adib (July 1951): 52. Translated by Dina El Hussein for "Manifesto," in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah A. Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 150–51.

⁰² We have opted to use the translated collective name Baghdad Modern Art Group to remain in line with *Modern Art in the Arab World*. It has also been translated as Baghdad Modern Art Group by the collective themselves and other scholars. We also note that the romanization of artists' names is not stan-

dardized and thus the spellings vary in the literature. For example, siblings Jewad Selim and Nizar Salim do not use the same English transcription of their family name. Moreover, Nizar is often spelled as Nazar, which is closer to the Iraqi pronunciation.

⁰³ This essay posits that modernism is not a European development but a broad nonlinear and non-chronological web of intersecting engagements with modernity around the world (itself linked to a series of events traced to several moments in world history). Modern art is to be understood as dialectical and discursive, encompassing global influences that account for the continuity of other artistic traditions and their ruptures.

instability in Iraq, along with the resultant loss of archives, which has affected our ability to fully reconstruct the group's history outside of the fragmented narratives offered in Arabic by Al Said and the group's champion, Palestinian critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. Indeed, this exhibition can be read through its navigation of absences and fragmentation as much as through the presentation of artworks and archival material. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq resulted in massive and at times irreversible cultural damage and institutional dismantling, which has been devastating for the nation of Iraq and its people, and for our purposes, for the visual arts. There are paintings we know were executed but have been lost either through theft or severe damage. Likewise, there are tantalizing references to documentation in the existing archival record that have no extant equivalent or have yet to be found. We thus acknowledge their absence and have attempted to represent them in the exhibition. *All Manner of Experiments* further investigates relationships between the artists, as colleagues and teachers, which led to the dissemination of their ideas today via the "Eighties Generation" of Iraqi artists, who currently live mostly in diaspora, a further loss to Iraq's cultural and artistic development.

The aim of this exhibition is to provide a space for critical inquiry and analysis, which in turn will generate further knowledge and studies about this famous group, ultimately situating it and its members correctly within the history of Iraqi art and global histories of modernism. We also intend to deconstruct the group's mythos, which springs from Jabra's idealized notion of the group as the triumphant and uncontested nucleus of the modern art movement in Iraq, when, in fact, the group's history is much more complex. In this vein, we envision this exhibition in the spirit of the group, hence borrowing the title from their manifesto: as a series of experimental narratives that move away from a fixed understanding of the group's path and seek to introduce various avenues for further investigation. The group's emphasis on an experimental environment to nurture a continually developing aesthetic is specifically what allowed for its robust pedagogical trajectory. We want to emphasize this discourse of experimentation, as it resonates with modern Iraqi art, but also offer it as an important model for contemporary artistic production in Iraq today. In response to the group's history and interests, the exhibition is structured through intersecting clusters centered on a historical moment or theme. To extend the group's teaching, curatorial notes are meant to situate selected clusters within the wider context of the group and modern art in Iraq.

Iraqi Modernism

The Baghdad Modern Art Group aimed to construct an identity and an aesthetic to represent it both locally and globally within

a rapidly changing, modern world. After the formation of the Kingdom of Iraq in 1932 as an independent, modern state, Iraqi artists endeavored to understand these new parameters. Following the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and colonization, within a context of world wars, the conception of art's purpose was severely challenged by the secularization of all domains of daily life; this caused artists to question traditional practices of "Islamic art" as a viable mode to present their contemporary realities.

In their search for a more effective visual language, Iraqi artists of the mid-20th century thought of modern art as a global, active space of shared humanity. Following their studies at art academies, mostly in Western Europe, and viewing their ancient heritage in European museums, they understood modernism's civilizational roots. They were, thus, eager to negotiate their own contribution to its development, particularly as it pertained to building the nation of Iraq with its distinctive culture. Conscious of their role in the newly formed independent nation, they embarked on creating novel structures and art traditions that would be capable of expressing their aspirations and those of their country.

Navigating the process of decolonization, Iraqi artists unpacked the nation's history, no doubt subjectively appropriating select episodes and their synthesis to achieve what they believed constituted the collective "Iraqiness" of the diverse factions of society. During the 1930s and 1940s, different art groups launched initiatives to introduce their publics to rising cultural imperatives around national representation, which included promoting acceptance and awareness of the modern art movement in Iraq. The Syrian Iraqi educator Sati al-Husri (1880–1968), the General Director of Education in Iraq in 1921, was a pivotal figure in constructing a national consciousness during Iraq's transformation from an Ottoman province to a modern state, based on the notion of Arabism. Al-Husri was the General Director of Antiquity from 1934 to 1941, and the National Museum of Iraq (Museum of Antiquity), established in 1926, came under his authority. His involvement in both education and the museum granted him much influence on modern Iraqi artists, who received government scholarships in Europe, then worked at the National Museum when they returned. He, and the growing interest in antiquities, helped to introduce and encourage young artists to study ancient Iraqi and Islamic art through preservation projects, thus instigating new understandings of their history and developments in style and concepts. As such, this period set the stage for the so-called "golden age" of the 1950s in Iraq, a time of maturation for a generation of artists who were pivotal in initiating rigorous standards of art theory and practice, thus charting new possibilities for future generations. Despite gross economic inequality, social unrest, and external political pressures,

the 1950s became a period of potential leading to a better life. It was essential in creating art cognizance and interest in Baghdad, instigating a culture that appreciated and collected modern Iraqi art before an official institution was established. Artists' awareness of their public would consequently position Iraqi modern art as an important identity marker for Iraqis, which it remains to this day.

The Two Protagonists ⁰⁴

It is clear from the group's history and practice that Selim and Al Said were not only the main leaders and teachers of the group, but effectively its dynamic core. Nevertheless, Al Said stressed that their role was to simply articulate the needs and aspirations shared by many artists at the time. Different in temperament and background, Selim and Al Said converged intellectually and ideologically around the formation of the group's central precepts and initial direction. Selim's personality, seniority, and unique experience in Baghdad positioned him as the natural leader. He was born in Ankara to a family of artists, which formed the basis of his artistic education. He then briefly studied sculpture in Florence (1938–39) and Paris (1939–40) with the help of scholarships, before returning to Baghdad due to the spread of World War II. He later finished his studies at the Slade School in London (1946–48), where he met his wife, Lorna. When he returned to Iraq in 1949, he was appointed the head of the sculpture department at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad.

Al Said was born in Samawa, a city in largely rural southern Iraq, and spent his childhood moving from village to village due to his father's work. After graduating with a degree in social science from the Higher Institute of Teachers in Baghdad in 1948, Al Said studied painting at the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad, graduating in 1954. It was there that he met Selim, who was one of his teachers. From 1955 to 1959, Al Said received a scholarship to study at the Académie Julian, École des Arts Décoratifs, and École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He thus was away from the

⁰⁴ Along with the destruction following the 2003 invasion, identifying works as looted or forged has been a delimiting issue for Iraqi modern art studies. The forthcoming catalogue raisonné for Selim will be of tremendous help for verification, as are collections publications. Nima Sagharchi and Zaineb Jewad Selim, *Jewad Selim: Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings and Sculptures* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2025).

⁰⁵ Following the decades of experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s, the art scene in Iraq shifted to support the Ba'ath propaganda with regular "maaridh al-hizib" (party exhibitions) and later demands for portraits of Saddam Hussein in different settings. Enrollment in the College's and Institute's day programs was restricted to members of the party, but others could study in the evening school. Neverthe-

less, for unknown reasons, Saddam and the Ba'ath party were less controlling of the visual arts than they were of literature, film, and poetry. Thus, Iraqi artists continued their work with little censorship and, for some, with the occasional Saddam portrait, mostly produced by students. Artists' self-imposed censorship, however, was manifest in the form of resistance to the status quo, meaning an insistence on producing "good art." That policy was exemplified in the continuation of abstraction as their preferred style and the avoidance of direct engagement with politics. Under the 1990s sanctions, their isolation was intensified. It was only after the 2003 invasion that they were able to realize the extent to which they were left behind in the artistic development of the world.

group during this period, which allowed Selim's ideas to dominate. While in Paris and navigating an existential crisis, Al Said turned to phenomenology, existentialism, and Sufism, which would profoundly inform and shift his work. When he returned to Baghdad, he taught art history at the Institute of Fine Arts and directed the Saddam Center for the Arts (effectively the modern art museum as transformed during the 1980s under the rule of Saddam Hussein). These positions allowed him to influence future generations of artists during his lifetime.

Despite Selim's short life, he produced a large amount of work that facilitated a distinctive Iraqi negotiation of modernism. Many have argued that the collective did not survive Selim's death. At the very least, the group changed and even fragmented as artists continued to engage in divergent experimentation. Al Said returned to Iraq while Selim was working on his last project, the Monument of Freedom. However, his deep theoretical interest had veered more into Islamic thought by that time, in his efforts to achieve abstraction on an intellectual and spiritual level through the notion of transcendence. In his early 1950s work, Al Said's interest in humans and their emotions was evident in his choice of subjects. While that and social commitment remained consistent throughout his career, he would fully abandon figuration by the end of the decade. In his search for the truth, as he defined it, his 1960s work thus became free of the illusion of representation. "The truth of a work of art," he argued, "is that it is a contemplation seeking to reveal the beauty of the universe and its majesty, that it is the perfection of its creator." ⁰⁶ His aesthetic experiments took on multiple interesting and different directions that, nevertheless, continued to be true to the principles of the group.

The Group

One could argue that 1951 was a critical moment for modern Iraqi art. Art groups, including al-Ruwwad,⁰⁷ led by Faiq Hassan, while still active, had run their course of providing spaces for Iraqi artists to hone their technical skills through different styles of modern art to represent the rich vistas of Iraq's cities and countryside. Selim was a member of al-Ruwwad and necessarily sensed the need to shift directions. Al Said argued that what specifically distinguished the Baghdad Modern Art Group from al-Ruwwad was their

⁰⁶ Al Said, unpublished notebooks, collection of artist's estate, 1(20) 2. Translated by Nada Shabout.

⁰⁷ Initially named Société Primitive, the group changed its name to al-Ruwwad, an Arabic word meaning "researchers on the move" (although generally translated as "the pioneers"), on the occasion of their first annual exhibition in December 1950. The name change seemingly signaled a more mature approach for the group, which was equally reflected

stylistically, as it marked a pronounced move away from the favored Impressionist style of the time.

⁰⁸ Throughout the 20th century, Arab thinkers and artists contemplated the role of heritage in modern art development. For a specific discussion on "turath as an enabler of modernism," see Samer Sayegh, "Matar al-Malik 'Abd al-'Aziz: shahada fanniya jadida" [Matar al-Malik 'Abd al-'Aziz: A New Artistic Declaration], *Finoon Arabiah* 3 (April 1982): 38–46.

differentiation between an art vision and an art style. While the discourse around identity in relation to modern styles and techniques continued among Arab artists, Selim had accepted modern art as a means of expressing the realities of a new nation, but he also recognized that these styles were seen as foreign to Iraq. His work at the National Museum of Iraq offered him a way to surmount this obstacle by harnessing the wealth of Iraq's heritage to position the past as an enabler of Iraqi modernism.⁰⁸ This vision set the conditions for a pivot in how artists perceived their practices and organizations.

Thus, within the sociopolitical context of 1950s Iraq, forming the Baghdad Modern Art Group was a protest and a charged artistic position against the status quo. It was an act of resistance calling for self-determination, akin to the political activities of the time; it was a rejection of dependence upon foreign alliances, which would ultimately lead to the 1958 revolution. Jabra stated that the group was created in a cultural environment that rejected Impressionism in art; it was dominated by existentialist thought as interpreted by the literary world and the Iraqi left, who were demanding an art that could represent the people on the streets.⁰⁹ Selim and Al Said were part of the wider conversations among Iraqi intellectuals that included poetry, architecture, and theater. The group's first meeting took place in Selim's house and was attended by his wife Lorna, his sister Naziha and brother Nizar, Al Said, sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, Jabra, and four other members, including an architect.¹⁰

The group drew on the new and growing artistic consciousness in Iraq and equally revolted against naturalism in art, which had become mainstream in Baghdad by then. The group's manifesto was most likely written by Al Said but expressed Selim's ideas. It effectively intellectualized and canonized an approach to form, initiating a modern method of thinking about making art that remains influential today.¹¹ They named it "istilham al-turath" (drawing inspiration from tradition). Istilham became the catalyst and mediator for a renewal in art. Through istilham, Selim and Al Said's journey to abstraction had further national significance beyond modernism. Al Said would later argue that abstraction for Iraqi artists represents a view of the world from a "purely Arab perspective."¹² They arrived

⁰⁹ See Al Said, *Fusul* [Chapters], part 1, 158. Also J. I. Jabra, *al-Rihla al-thamina* [The Eighth Journey] (Beirut: Mu'assasat lil-Dirasaat wal-Nashr, 1967), 198–99.

¹⁰ Abd al-Rahman Al-Roabie, "Jewad Selim wa munsha Jama'at Baghdad lil-fann al-hadith" [Jewad Selim and the Founding of the Baghdad Group], *Al-Aqlam* 4, no. 10 (June 10, 1968): 131–37. Two years later, the sculptor Ismail Fattah (al-Turk), a student of Selim, joined the group, as did other important art-

ists. He would leave his mark on Iraqi sculpture after Selim's passing.

¹¹ For the full text of the manifesto and speech, see Baghdad Modern Art Group, "Manifesto," in *Modern Art in the Arab World*.

¹² Shakir Hassan Al Said, *Jewad Selim, al-fanan wa al-akharun* [Jewad Selim, the Artist and the Others] (Baghdad: The Ministry of Culture and Information, 1991), 174.

at a specific modern iconography through exploring the abundance of symbols found in the different periods of Iraqi history. Leading through experimentation, the group provided Selim with an active space to explore the different ideas he had accumulated in his search for a balance between a new postcolonial national consciousness and what was perceived as a transnational modernism in Europe.

Initially the group's reception was split between those who criticized it as elitist in a society that did not need art for art's sake but rather art for people's sake and those who perceived their ideas and work as a refreshing way forward. At first, it was difficult even for Selim to convince many artists to join the group. However, the list of affiliated artists grew to include many of Iraq's influential modern artists, which ensured that the ideas and principles of the collective would be understood and perhaps unconsciously internalized by the Iraqi art scene. The group continuously affirmed that each member should retain a unique style, but all aimed to navigate this through the history of Iraqi culture, with the further aim of being able to visualize the country, the land, and its cultures in a modern manner. For a few years, their styles reflected Selim's theories.

Members and Their Exhibitions

Forming a comprehensive membership list and exhibition history of the Baghdad Modern Art Group is particularly challenging, considering the lack of a thorough archival record, along with discrepancies in records we do have. It seems that membership in the group was not fixed but a flow of people and ideas held together by a common impetus towards practical experimentation and aesthetic exploration. At any given time, members included artists, architects, patrons, and art enthusiasts. The group's exhibiting artists were not necessarily active members, and practitioners often followed their own trajectories. This fluidity was contingent partly on the presence or absence of the group's protagonists, Selim and Al Said, but it also reflects the dynamism of the art scene in Baghdad: artists were not only traveling and exhibiting on an international scale but also continuously reassessing the philosophical basis of their practices, moving on, for instance, to form new groups with differing motivations. However, this does not diminish the strong orbital pull of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, whose members and affiliated artists continued to exhibit as an entity for two decades after its inception.

Moreover, the overlap in membership between al-Ruwwad and the Baghdad Group eventually created conflict. Even though Selim was a member of al-Ruwwad when he co-founded the collective, Faiq Hassan demanded that members belong to only one group. That notion and personal allegiances consequently limited membership for the Baghdad Group. Even Selim himself had to make a choice. Nevertheless, members of al-Ruwwad did exhibit with the

Baghdad Group at times without officially joining. Similarly, the philosophy of the group would influence the experiments of many artists outside the group, including those of Hassan.

The Baghdad Group held annual exhibitions that continued until 1971. According to Khalid al-Qassab, a friend of Selim and member of al-Ruwwad, the first exhibition had about 79 works and included amateur artists.¹³ The nine artists who participated in the first exhibition were Jewad Selim with eight paintings, Shakir Hassan Al Said with twenty-four paintings, Lorna Selim with seven paintings, Mohammed Housni with fourteen paintings, Qahtan Awni with three paintings, Nazar Ali Jawdat with two drawings, Richard Ghanada with four paintings, Mahmoud Sabri with eleven paintings, and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra with six paintings.

While the group's first exhibition launched their ideas and principles, its popularity resonated more deeply over time. Nizar Salim wrote that three years after its establishment, there were nineteen official members. Moreover, accounts by Al Said state that the third exhibition in 1953 was more coherent in terms of expressing the group's aesthetics. Perhaps this is what prompted them, in 1955, to reaffirm their commitment to the first manifesto in a statement written by Jabra:

*The Baghdad Modern Art Group consists of painters and sculptors each of whom has his own style but all of them agree on being inspired by the Iraqi atmosphere in developing these styles. They want to portray the lives of the people in a new form defined by their concept and observations of the life of this country in which many civilizations flourished and declined then flourished again. They do not forget their intellectual and stylistic links with the prevalent artistic development in the world, but in the meantime they aim at creating forms which vest in Iraqi art a special and distinct character.*¹⁴

The group's presence and influence in other exhibitions is also noted. The Iraqi monarchy organized the first comprehensive exhibition of Iraqi art at al-Mansur Club (west of Baghdad) in February 1957, which was inaugurated by the young King Feisal II. The selection committee included Jewad Selim, Akram Shukri, and the British writer Allan Tim. So many quality works were rejected that another exhibition (a "salon des refusés") was organized under the leadership of artist Nouri al-Rawi, a senior student at the Institute of Fine Arts, under the title *Ma'radh al-Marfudhat*. Held at the Iraqi

¹³ Khalid al-Qassab, *Dhikrayat fanniya* [Artistic Memories] (London: Dar al Hikma, 2007), 85. ¹⁴ Nizar Salim, *Iraq Contemporary Art*, vol. 1, *Painting* Qahtan Awni (Lausanne: Sarte, 1977), 102.

Women's Union Hall, *Ma'radh al-Marfudhat* included works by Kadhim Haydar, Ismail Fattah (al-Turk), Widad al-Orfali, and Nouri al-Rawi.

After the success of the first exhibition, a second followed at al-Mansur Club in February 1958. The importance of these two exhibitions is in the official acknowledgement of the role of art and artists. Moreover, awards for excellence were bestowed on artists, raising the level of encouragement. As part of the professionalization of artists, the Association of Iraqi Artists was established. It was officially announced on January 11, 1956, in *al-Bilad* newspaper. For the first two years, the Association met at Khalid al-Qassab's house. An officially designated building was designed for the Association by architect Qahtan al-Madfa'i and built in 1962 on land donated by the government. One of the first events held by the Association was an Iraqi art festival in the spring of 1956, which included sixteen different exhibitions and lectures under its banner between March and May. Among the exhibitions hosted by the festival were al-Ruwwad's fourth exhibition on March 16th; the third Impressionist group exhibition on March 30th; the fourth exhibition for the Baghdad Modern Art Group on April 13th; as well as a commemoration exhibition for Abdel Qadir al-Rassam. The Association held its first annual exhibition at the Royal Sports Club on May 10, 1957, launched by King Feisal II. It included photography, ceramics, and architectural models along with paintings and sculpture. The exhibition was attended by Frank Lloyd Wright, who was particularly critical of the exhibited work that he judged as inauthentic to its culture.

Artist Dia al-Azzawi would later reflect on the group's exhibition history in an essay published in *al-Jumhuriyya* newspaper on the occasion of their 1975 exhibition, reassessing their achievements of the past twenty years. In it, al-Azzawi noted 1955 as the "birth of specific concepts," including "national history," "the local character," and the "collective approach." Considering the diversity of skills and retained individuality of its artists, he evaluated the collective's first few years as essential in creating an artistic and intellectual environment that had nurtured a sense of national belonging, supported by visualization in artistic production. He argued that "the importance of this group is determined first by the extent of the compatibility between the declared theoretical concepts and the artistic achievements presented for display, and second by the extent to which it develops the concept of the local character artistically and intellectually through practice. This conclusion is what I would like to discuss without addressing

¹⁵ Dia al-Azzawi, "Jama'at Baghdad lil-fann al-hadith ba'd 'ishrin 'aman: al-tanaquḍ al-fikr wa al-anjaz al-fanni" [The Bagdad Group for Modern Art Twenty Years Later: The Contradiction of Thought and Artistic Achievement], *al-Jumhuriyya*, no. 2338, May 20, 1975. He also listed 1955 as the date of their first manifesto. This could be a misidentification or perhaps, in his assessment, the actual date for the group's maturity.

the level of artistic and expressive skill.”¹⁵ However, he criticized the exhibition as presenting individual experiments that, while highly skilled, did not engage with the group’s philosophy in any way and did not present a coherent vision—essentially, that the group had ceased to exist as a unit.

The exhibition in 1975 was their last one. The exhibition catalogue included a part of a new, third manifesto, which reasserted their vision and philosophy. Ironically, the exhibition included works by artists Ibrahim al-Abdali and Mohammed Aref but did not include the main members: Jabra, Lorna Selim, Fadhil Abbas, and Ali al-Shalan. Al Said’s efforts to hold the group together, according to al-Azzawi’s article, failed to retain the collective vision and accepted individual freedom instead. Al Said attributes that to the different demands of the 1960s.

The group’s initial ideological impetus was kept alive through an unwavering reverence for Jewad Selim, which encouraged a myriad of engagements with the artist’s work and thus facilitated the continuing influence of Selim’s brand of *istilham*, even if indirectly. After Selim’s death, exhibitions and articles honoring his legacy proliferated. In 1968, a major retrospective of his work was organized at the National Museum of Modern Art, at this time housed in the Gulbenkian building near Tayaran Square in Baghdad. The exhibition featured almost 70 works by Selim, drawn from over a dozen collections, which included those of his friends and colleagues but also of the National Museum itself.¹⁶ To cover the exhibition, the Arabic-language journal *al-Adab* published an article by Abdul Rahman Majeed al-Rubaie, who recalled an evening of poetry in remembrance of Selim, organized by friends and admirers as part of the exhibition’s opening week. Naturally, a major part of this gathering was also to focus on Selim’s artistic practice and to imagine his influence on future generations; for al-Rubaie, this was an appropriate way to eulogize such an important artist.¹⁷

Two decades later, this desire to revisit Selim’s work within the idiom of commemorative engagement was still an important facet of the Iraqi art scene, even in diaspora. In 1989, the Kufa Gallery in London organized an exhibition entitled *Homage to Jawad Salim*.¹⁸ The show, of course, included works by Selim but also featured new works by Lorna Selim, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, Dia al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah (al-Turk), and Nadhim Ramzi that consciously responded to Selim’s artistic practice. These artists were deeply

¹⁷ See Abdul Rahman Majeed al-Rubaie, “Jewad Selim ... hayat jadida” [Jewad Selim ... A New Life], *al-Adab* 16, no. 3 (1968): 75. Available online: Modern Art Iraq Archive, accessed January 12, 2025, <http://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/215>.

¹⁸ The spelling of Jewad Selim is reproduced here as it appears in the exhibition’s catalogue.

¹⁹ Iraqi photographer Nadhim Ramzi was not a member of the group but exhibited with Selim and documented the artist in his studio. One of these photographs is featured in the brief catalogue for the *Homage to Jawad Salim* exhibition.

connected to the Baghdad Modern Art Group as members and associates, but also as close students and colleagues of Selim himself.¹⁹ The short text accompanying the exhibition emphasizes the already common rhetoric of Selim’s pervading presence in the artistic imagination of Iraq. The opening statement of the text declares, “No single artist has left as big a mark on the arts in Iraq this century as Jewad Salim [sic].”²⁰ However, it also acknowledges the individual contributions of the participating artists, making it clear that despite the undeniably profound influence of Selim, Iraqi artists engaged with his legacy and, by extension, that of the Baghdad Modern Art Group on their own terms and in their own times.

Istilham

“Istilham” is an Arabic word that translates in a simplistic sense as seeking inspiration. The verb “istilham” is derived from “ilham,” meaning “inspiration” or “instinct,” which is derived from the root “lahm,” meaning “to inspire” or “to pray,” hence passively aspirational. Istilham, however, is a call for action that requires active participation, drawing and transforming “al-turath” (tradition) into something new. It specifically invokes tradition through an innovative engagement with it. The notion of engaging turath was not new in Iraqi art, but, in its complex formulation by the Baghdad Group’s leaders, it came to exemplify a process based on being informed by history *and* contemporaneity, where the “local” is understood as the only claim for distinctive creativity—ultimately, to construct a unique and modern artistic vision. Istilham, thus, is a concept that mediates between the past and the present, as a form of negotiation of heritage and tradition, with the aim to not replicate but project forward and realize contemporary aesthetics.²¹

The notion of *istilham* thus resolved the tension between the new modern styles and the historical visual wealth the collective artists were learning anew at the Museum of Antiquity and in their studies abroad. The recovered images from the 13th century *Maqamat al-Hariri* (The *Assemblies of al-Hariri*), particularly in the paintings of Yahya al-Wasiti, served as the main facilitator in forming theories and aesthetics. The encounter with al-Wasiti came through images published in the French journal *L’Illustration* in December 1938, with an introduction by the French art historian Eustache de Lorey. The journal was brought to Baghdad by artist Atta Sabri from London in 1941 and then copied, enlarged, and studied by the artists. *Maqamat al-Hariri* visually represented the events, stories, and anecdotes of al-Hariri’s daily life in Baghdad and Basra. The *Maqamat* is the only manuscript from the so-called “Baghdad School of Painting” that survived the burning of Baghdad

²⁰ *Homage to Jawad Salim*, exhibition booklet, Kufa Gallery, London, June 1–21, 1989.

²¹ For more on *istilham al-turath* and the Baghdad

Modern Art Group, see Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetic* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007).

by the Mongols during the 13th century.²² While the text of the *Maqamat* has been celebrated for its eloquence, the accompanying images are extremely engaging and very modern in style. The most celebrated illustrated copy of the manuscript, renowned for the conceptual sophistication, scale, and quality of its images, was calligraphed and painted by Yahya al-Wasiti in Iraq (probably Baghdad) in 1237 CE.

The importance of this finding is further exemplified in a 1964 publication by Al Said titled *The Artistic and Social Characteristics of al-Wasiti's Drawings*, in which he analyzed a few images from the *Maqamat*. Evident from its title, Al Said recognized al-Wasiti as an artist whose work addresses social, racial, and class issues as well as develops a specific aesthetic for negotiating them. As such, al-Wasiti became a kindred spirit with shared concerns and interests. He wrote, "It is not an illusion that an Iraqi painter arose from the first half of the seventh century with the same skills as a modern painter." He located al-Wasiti's roots in Mesopotamian traditions, further explaining that "as part of the accomplishments of the ancient civilizations in Iraq ... the Mesopotamian artist chose to develop a unique creative genius, which is undoubtedly al-Wasiti's heritage."²³ Of course, by extension, this was also his inheritance and that of his generation of Iraqi artists.

Selim's Last Work: Nasb al-Hurriyya

Selim started his sculpting career with the goal to revive sculpture in Iraq, which he saw lacking in the modern age. Yet some of his strongest works and more mature experiments were realized in the mid-1950s in painting. His *Baghdadiyat* series presents an index for negotiating *istilham* as he specifically understood it; it is also a catalogue of his aesthetic experimentations with "hilaliyat" (crescent shapes), which deconstruct and merge ancient and Islamic forms to create a modern iconography. Nevertheless, he constantly agonized over the perceived tension between being a painter and a sculptor. He wrote in one of his journal entries in 1944, "I think in form and mass more than I do in color ..."²⁴ Selim's ultimate finale and possibly the source of the stress that ended his life was a sculpture. Selim's ideas, exploration, and experience culminated in his last masterpiece, which became a landmark of and for Baghdad, *Nasb al-Hurriyya* (Monument of Freedom). Selim dreamt of executing a public work throughout his career. After several failed attempts, he was commissioned to deliver the largest monument to be built in 2,500 years and the first modern outdoor sculpture to be designed and constructed by an Iraqi artist. Commissioned by the new Iraqi military regime through Majlis Amanat al-'Asima (the Baghdad City Municipality Council) in 1959 to celebrate the revolution of 1958, architect

²⁴ Jabra, *al-Rihla al-Thamina*, 27.

Rifat Chadirji was appointed to design and oversee the project. Chadirji's vision juxtaposed the modern notion of a banner with the ancient monument, invoking an Assyrian structure manipulated through light. He matched the width of the monument to that of al-Umma Public Garden (formerly, Ghazi Garden), in which it was situated, and built a large travertine superstructure on a concrete core (50 × 10 m in size), which was erected in 1959.

Chadirji thought of the monument as an eternal testament to the July 14 Revolution, materialized through three sections of reliefs that articulated the pre-revolution, the revolution, and the post-revolution, to be read from right to left. He engaged Selim, a friend and artist he admired, to execute the bas-relief mural in bronze. Its twenty-five connected figures, divided into fourteen bronze units, visually narrate the revolution and the events that surrounded it from the perspective of the people and without directly referencing the politics of its commission. In addition, the units resemble the letters of an Arabic verse in their movement and flow.

Despite rumors that the government wanted the likeness of General Qasim included in the monument, Selim had full freedom in visualizing the narrative suggested by Chadirji, who wrote about his excitement opening the crates when Selim delivered the finished pieces in installments between 1959 and 1960. Selim died in January 1961 in Baghdad, while the final installation of the pieces was taking place. According to Jabra, we must understand and "delve into Jewad Selim's work within its temporal framework: we must see it within the social and political context of Selim's Iraq and Arab world." Moreover, in a journal entry (dated January 15, 1944), Selim compared the work of a sculptor to that of a musician. Consequently, Jabra argued that Selim followed an "orchestral order" in installing the monument in his efforts to appeal to and draw in his audience. We must thus look at the installation process as a performance of intrigue and anticipation.

Selim succeeded in harmonizing the linear quality of Arabic script and the stylized forms of Sumerians and Babylonians into modern styles. The narrative was organized into several interconnected groups, expressing injustice, resistance, solidarity, hope, and ambition, which were portrayed in a style of symbolic realism. As a humanistic composition, it juxtaposes several familiar concepts in his oeuvre: eternal calamity, motherhood, and fertility. Stylistically, his visual iconography addresses and theorizes the principles of

²⁵ The individual pieces of the monument were made of bronze cast in Florence, Italy.

²⁶ J. I. Jabra, *Jewad Selim wa Nasb al-Hurriyya: dirasa fi atharihi wa arai'hi* [Jewad Selim and the Monument

of Freedom: A Study of His Influence and Views] (Baghdad: Wizarat al-'I'am, Mudiyyat al-Thaqafah al-'Ammah, 1974). Translated by Nada Shabout.

abstraction, ornamentation, mythology, and symbolism throughout the history of art, but is also capable of expressing his contemporary self and realities. The monument is one of the very few that survived successive Iraqi governments and the destruction following the 2003 invasion, and it remains an icon for Iraq and Iraqis today.

The 1960s Shifts

Selim's death and absence from the art scene in Baghdad were strongly felt. Yet what he started continued not only through the work of the group and his students at the Institute of Fine Arts, but in the specific, fundamental concepts he instituted in Iraqi culture and art. But the 1960s brought new dynamics and concerns. Rapidly, the optimism and potential of the 1950s dissipated in the face of local and regional turbulence. The euphoria following the 1958 revolution that forged the Iraqi Republic was quashed by a number of coups d'état, the last of which solidified Arab socialist Ba'ath rule in 1968. The new party changed the rhetoric from the national focus of the decade before to a pan-Arabism that was, nevertheless, in conflict with Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser's aspirations and directions. Moreover, "al-Naksa" (the Arab defeat of 1967), the general regional sentiments of denial and defiance, as well as the fever of pan-Arabism and desire for Arab unity strongly impacted Iraqi artists and intellectuals of the 1960s.²⁸

At the same time, what the Baghdad Group had accomplished left physical evidence that changed the environment for Iraqi artists and allowed for new directions of progress. Along with Nasb al-Hurriyya, other public art dotted the city of Baghdad. The al-Umma Garden complex was flanked by Nasb al-Hurriyya on one end and Faiq Hassan's 1958 *Celebration of Victory* mural on the other end, with Khalid al-Rahal's Nasb al-Umouma (Monument to Motherhood) in the middle. Rifat Chadirji's elegant arc of Nasb al-Jundi al-Majhoul (The Unknown Soldier Monument, 1959–61) occupied an important roundabout in the city.

The National Museum of Modern Art was inaugurated in 1962. The Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad (later the College of Fine Arts) was also established in 1962, with Polish artist Roman Artymowski heading the printmaking (graphic art) department, bringing about a new understanding of modernism. A new wave of artists studying

27 The monument was analyzed by many Iraqi critics at the time, notably by Jabra and Al Said. For a detailed reading of its iconography, see Zainab Bahrani, "A Revolutionary Monument: Reclaiming the Nasb al-Hurriyya in Baghdad," in "Shifting Terrains: Art, Environment and Urbanism in Iraq," ed. Nada Shabout, special issue, *Journal of Contemporary Iraq and The Arab World* 15, no. 1–2 (March 2021): 27–40.

28 The 1967 Naksa (meaning "crisis"), which resulted from the rapid loss of Arab armies against Israel in the Six-Day War, shocked and disrupted many conventional social and cultural understandings and propelled unfiltered reactions from artists.

abroad returned to Iraq, many of whom studied in China, Cuba, Poland, and the USSR. A number of art galleries were established, providing spaces for artists to exhibit their work and increasing public exposure to artistic production. Solo artists' exhibitions started in 1964 and multiplied over time. Two eponymous exhibitions, by Ismail Fattah (al-Turk) and Kadhim Haydar (in which was exhibited the *Martyr's Epic* in 1965), are noted by the art community as two of the most influential at the time. Fattah, a student of Selim, introduced a new understanding of modern sculpture through his work, and Haydar presented and transformed religious allegory into contemporary symbolism loaded with political significance.²⁹

In one of the Baghdad Group's attempts to remain relevant, a new collective of artists who were nurtured by the ideals and members of the Baghdad Group was formed in 1969: al-Ruyaa al-Jadidah (New Vision Group). The group consisted of artists Dia al-Azzawi, Hashim Samarchi, Mohammad Mehr al-Din, Rafa al-Nasiri, Saleh al-Jumaie, and Ismail Fattah (al-Turk), who defied the legacy of the 1950s artists while simultaneously building on it. The group's manifesto, published in October of the same year under the title "Towards a New Vision," expressed the group's philosophy in a strong language of defiance and rejection of social, cultural, and perceived political conditions and limitations. It was not a new school of art but an activist reaction to injustice. They declared:

*We reject the artist of divisions and boundaries. We advance. We fall. But we will not retreat. We present to the world our new vision. ... We reject social relationships that lead to deceitful masquerades, and we reject things that are given to us as charity. We justify of our existence through our journey of change. ... We defy the world. And we reject the military and intellectual defeat of our nation [our ummah]. We glorify the popular war of liberation in the chests of the martyrs, the glory of our nation.*³⁰

Thus the New Vision Group were explicit in confronting their contemporary realities and expanding their understanding of tradition

29 See Dia al-Azzawi, "Kadhim Haydar," *Nsus*, no. 1 (1994); reproduced in Dia al-Azzawi, Lawn Yajma' al-Basar: *Nusus wa Hiwarat fi al-Fan al-Tashkeely* [Color Motivates Vision: Articles and Dialogues in the Visual Arts] (London: Touch Edition, 2001), 50–61.

Samarchi, "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision" (1969), in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 308–9. See Arabic original: "Nahwa al-Ruya al-Jadida" (October 1969); reproduced in Shakir Hasan Al Said, *al-Bayanat al-fanniya fi al-Iraq* [Art Manifestos in Iraq] (Baghdad: Wizarat al-Illam, Mudiriyyat al-Thaqafa al-Amma, 1973), 31–35.

30 Dia al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah, Saleh al-Jumaie, Muhammad Muhraddin, Rafa al-Nasiri, and Hashem

beyond national borders. The revolutionary tone of their manifesto resonated widely in the region and would materialize in the initiatives to unify Arab artists in the 1970s.

Al-Azzawi, a leading artist of the group, felt a continuous need to re-evaluate and question conventional absolutes. Humanity and human suffering became increasingly central in his oeuvre and were manifested in a series of works drawing on Arab tragedy, particularly that of Palestinians. With degrees in both archeology and art, al-Azzawi's epistemological and holistic awareness of heritage—while also necessarily understanding the political ramifications of the second half of the 20th century, particularly with the obsession with identity—was evident in his works and positioned him as a pivotal figure in Iraqi art, both while in Iraq and later in diaspora after relocating to London in 1976, where he still lives today.

Al Said's Legacy

When Al Said returned to Baghdad from Paris, his notion of *istilham* had morphed into an intellectual spirituality that drew on a mediated understanding of Islamic Sufism and European existentialist philosophy. Ultimately, he arrived at an approach to making art that positions the work as a means for arriving at truth. He thus merged his pursuit of *istilham al-turath* as initiated and negotiated by the group, which derived from antiquity and Islamic aesthetics, with his search for spiritual knowledge. He situated this spiritual journey as the “destination” of the artist who has experienced the necessary stages of self-searching. He claimed to go beyond taking an interest in the modes of human expression to instead interrogate the reality of human existence. While his use of contemplation is epistemologically distinct from the more active *istilham*, it shares with it the search for continuity with the past, although through a different mechanism: one that excavates the archaic.

For Al Said, the artist's individuality is then only visible through the contemplation of a metaphysical truth. Making art in this way no longer concerns the artist's ego: it concerns their existence. Art serves as a vehicle for revealing the invisible by shifting the focus from the assumed “genius” of the artist to the creation of a set of essential existential truths extracted through experience. In this view, the personal self of the artist disintegrates into an eternal one. Al Said's contemplative theory, published in *al-Jumhuriyya* newspaper in 1966, negotiates art as a discourse for “the exploration of truth in all its dimensions.” As it restructures the association

³¹ Shakir Hassan Al Said, “Manifesto,” trans. Nari-man Youssef, in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 252. See Arabic original: “al-Bayan al-ta’ammuli” [Contemplative Manifesto] (excerpt), *al-Jumhuriyya*, June 23, 1966.

³² See Al Said, “Al-bua’d al-wahid: filasufat wa ruya” [The One-Dimension: Philosophy and Vision], in *Hiwar al-fann al-tashkili* [Dialogue of the Plastic Arts], ed. Al Said (Amman: Abd al-Hamid Shouman Foundation- Darat al-Funun, 1995), 125–42.

of the artist to the work of art, the idea of the contemplative also changes the relationship between the work of art and the receiver: “At its core, contemplation is *absolute passivity*.”³¹ For Al Said, the role of both artist and receiver is that of witness. The artist is a witness of the truth and reveals it through intervention: the artist becomes an “accountable witness” in the moment of creation, then shifts to a passive stance after the work is complete. The recipient of the work becomes a witness to the truths revealed, which becomes a stance of active contemplation. This engagement in both cases requires a loosening from the grip of selfhood.

Al Said found in the Arabic letter a point of convergence for negotiating his ideas and aesthetics. Between 1958 and 1965, the letter enabled Al Said's transition from figurative to abstract representation. He wove letters or words into compositions as mediating symbols. This interest began to take shape in his fascination with the line, evident in his earlier work. In 1971, Al Said formed al-Bua’d al-Wahid (One-Dimension Group), which gathered artists around a shared and complex theory that was at once a philosophy, a technique, and a style. Their second exhibition in 1973 addressed the theme of “art drawing inspiration from the alphabet.”

The One-Dimension, as a method of contemplating the visual world, presupposes that a work of art does not end or begin on the surface, but penetrates through to its surrounding world. Going beyond the surface transforms the relative existence of a work of art into an eternal act.³² The line, in the sense of a continuous series of points devoid of visual or material dimensions, is a representation of eternity as a surface. Structured as an archeological method of excavating the essence of being, the theory of “al-Tajathur al-Makani” (Spatial Rooting) further invokes the deconstruction of time and space. The “temporal now” is expressed through spatial means, where spatial reduction is achieved by piercing through the surface of a work (*décollage* and the use of slashes, cuts, openings, and cracks).

Al Said defined “*istilham al-harf*” (work informed by the letter), which replaced “*istilham al-turath*,” as taking the letter or the number as a point of departure to arrive at the meaning of line, as a pure plastic value. Moreover, the letter became a conduit for Al Said to realize “*al-zamam*” (the reins), the synthesis of beginning and end that he sought through the science of “*al-jafr*” (the numerical symbolism of letters). *Istilham al-harf* later manifested in Al Said's notion of “*istilham al-sahnah al-jidariyah*” (informed by or integrating “the wall”) in art. This latest negotiation of *istilham* would occupy Al Said until his death in 2004.

³³ This phrase is also more broadly applied to artists who were closely linked but not physically practicing in Iraq, like Amar Dawod, who left Iraq in 1979.

Through Al Said's various interactions with young art students and through his position at the Saddam Center for the Arts, Al Said was extremely influential in particular on the Eighties Generation. Many took his theory classes at the college, and he was a close teacher and mentor to many artists of this time.

Eighties Generation

This exhibition culminates in a collection of works produced by members of the Eighties Generation to demonstrate the lasting, but at times divergent, legacies of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, particularly as related to the influence of Shakir Hassan Al Said. The "Eighties Generation" is a phrase used to identify artists who were educated, came to artistic maturity, and practiced in Iraq during the turbulent decades of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.³⁴ These years witnessed the isolation and destruction of Iraq's political, cultural, and civic institutions and were punctuated by the Iran-Iraq War, the UN-backed sanctions, the Gulf Wars, and the US-led invasion of Iraq. These events necessitated a pivot in artistic production, as artists were forced to respond to rapidly changing circumstances, not only in terms of practicality but also in the interpretation of the world around them. For example, the harsh and encompassing sanctions imposed on the Iraqi people in the 1990s by the United Nations Security Council had a profound effect on the trajectory of art.³⁴ With the goal of complete isolation, the sanctions—which cut off travel and trade—forced artists to turn inward, not only to find supplies and materials, but also in the development and percolation of ideas. Therefore, the artwork of the Eighties Generation is characterized by an expressive use of novel materials, an introspective awareness of their immediate environs, and an intensified aesthetic and conceptual investigation of Iraq's archeological and artifactual past. These artists continued to produce artwork, despite the uncertainties of war, as a cathartic release and mode of expressing trauma; it was also as a means of understanding new artistic realities, which were very different from those of their predecessors. Denied access to the tools of contemporary practice and secluded from broader artistic communities, to continue to produce sophisticated, relevant work is a testament to their educational foundations and internal tenacity. The sanctions and isolation necessarily positioned the city's museums as the artists' only source of artistic knowledge, which in turn instigated the need past. All of the artists in this section left Iraq at different times during these years of isolation. In the diaspora, many reevaluated their learning and production. While Al Said had essentially adapted postmodern thinking into his teaching and philosophy, offering an alternative, the general leaning at the Art Institute and College remained connected to the modernist paradigms and teachings of the 1950s and 1960s. In time, and after leaving Iraq, artist

Hanaa Malallah, who was fully educated in Baghdad, came to the realization that her teachers had held her back for a certain period of time, which she argues is still a challenge she has not fully overcome. Others also realized that their understanding of contemporaneity was very skewed by their isolation.

Yet a number of the Eighties Generation, after settling into their new host countries, some furthering their studies and engaging with new local art scenes, would turn back to the Baghdad Group's ideal to reconnect them with their past and Iraqi heritage. The group would thus help them regain their identity, which was in flux under the new demands of the diaspora. After several years of trying to fit into the new scenes, these artists sought comfort in exhibiting in Arab cities, where their work is better appreciated. After the 2003 invasion and destruction of the art structure, the trajectory of Iraqi art was shattered. The Institute of Fine Arts and College of Fine Arts, once the center of regional art development, were completely disconnected from wider art communities. The few teachers who remained continued their work without engaging with the international art scene and, many would argue, severely stagnated. Observing certain parallels that require renewal, artist Amar Dawod looked again at the principles and objectives of the Baghdad Group for guidance. In his effort to reinvigorate the art scene in Baghdad, he wrote a new manifesto that invoked *istilham* as a way to navigate the perceived deterioration inside of Iraq.

³⁴ In response to the deterioration of art support and production, artists Ali Jabbar, Mahmoud al-Obaidi, Karim Risan and Haithem Hassan, met frequently in 1994 and established a new group then called The Baghdad Group that aimed to continue the work of the Baghdad Modern Art Group. They held their first exhibition in Baghdad in 1995 and issued their manifesto. However, they all had to leave Iraq soon after and all became occupied with their new lives.