Special launch fares to Langkawi
Book now
QATAR AIRWAYS
oneworld

Melissa Gronlund
Sep 30, 2019

SHARE

'What kind of story would Iraqi art say about Iraq?' asks Ahmed Naji

▸ The Iraqi author has worked to preserve the memories and artworks of the golden age of Iraqi Modernism

Lorna Selim, left, was born in Sheffield, and met Jewad Selim, right when they were both studying at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. She returned to Baghdad with him, where she developed her own art career. Makiya Archive

In 2003, after crowds and the US army toppled the statue of Saddam Hussein in Al Firdos Square, Baghdad, Ahmed Naji passed through on his way to the College of Dentistry, from which he had just graduated. Like the Iraq National Museum and the Saddam Arts Centre, the city's collection of modern art had been looted. "People were roaming the offices of my professors, going through dental materials, taking braces," Naji recalls. "I was furious. This is a teaching hospital. Patients come here to have treatments for free."

READ MORE
How one Dubai gallery is putting new Arab talent centre stage for Amman Design Week
Winner of Arab British Centre's Award For Culture spotlights regional talent in the UK
Lebanon's first Picasso exhibition opens in Beirut

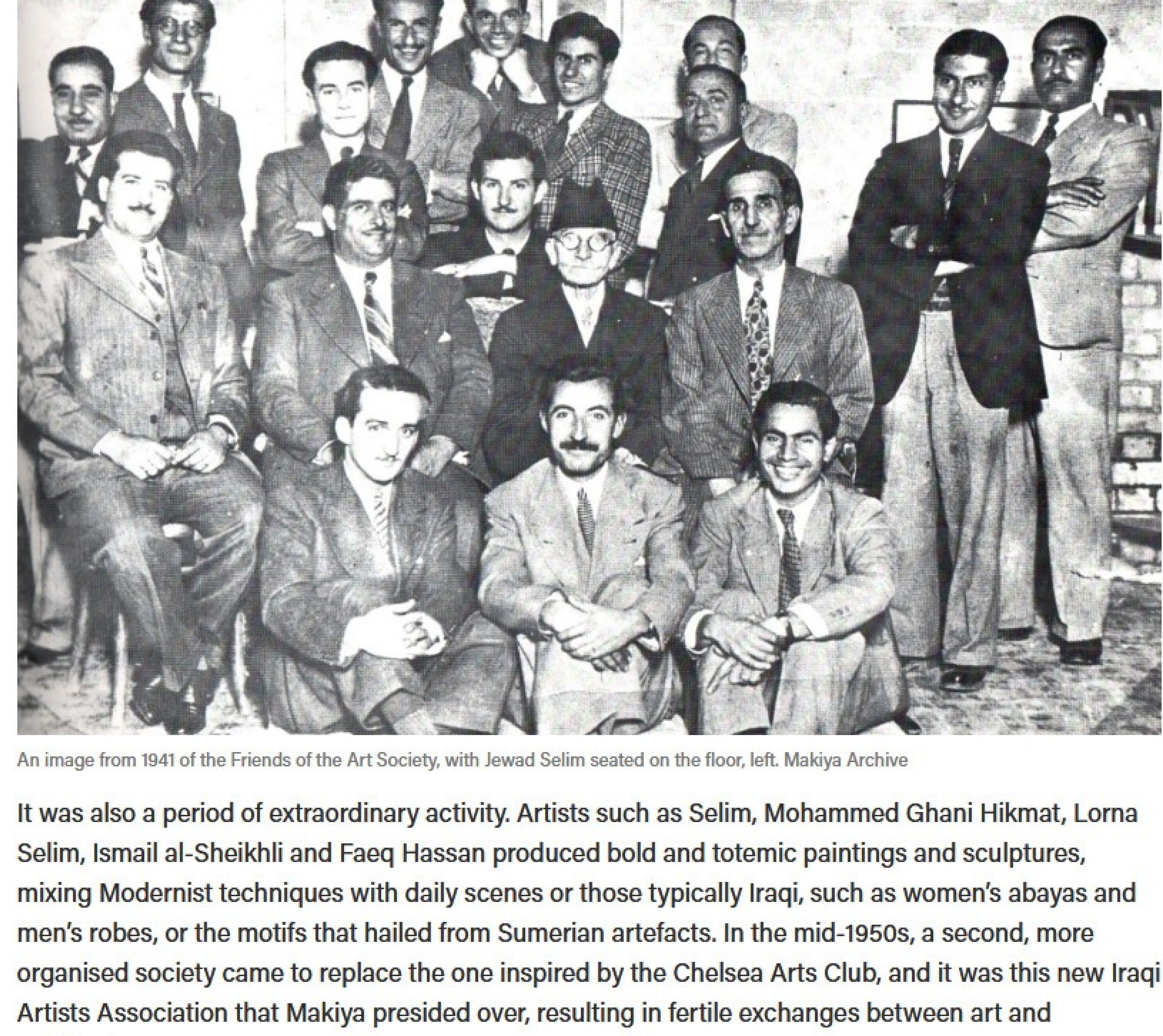
Back in the square, Naji found that a group of young artists had set up camp under the name of Najeen, or Survivors. Working with plaster and wireframe, they quickly erected a statue to replace that of Saddam, drawing not on nationalist ideology, but on the country's Sumerian past: of a woman, a man and a daughter, holding a crescent-shaped boat aloft. "That moment made me aware of the importance of art," says Naji, now a father of two and living in London (and still a dentist). "It was always important to me, but I realised that art is part of Iraqi identity and culture that was being destroyed and looted. Culture is a casualty of war."

Since that time, Naji has worked to preserve the memories and artworks of the golden age of Iraqi Modernism, when Baghdad was one of the two key art centres in the Arab world. This year, his study, *Under the Palm Trees: Modern Iraqi Art with Mohamed Makiya and Jewad Selim*, was published by Rizzoli. It focuses on the link between art and architecture in Iraq, and specifically on two important figures: artist Jewad Selim, who created the Freedom Monument in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, and architect Mohamed Makiya, who designed the Khulafa mosque in Baghdad and the Grand Mosque in Muscat. The book surpasses this brief, though. It becomes the story of how Iraqi art from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire until Saddam Hussein came to power.

Jewad Selim's famous 'Freedom Monument' in Tahrir Square in Baghdad. Alamy

"Iraqi art started with the nation of Iraq," Naji explains. "The idea was created by the state as an all-encompassing identity, from the Kurdish north to the Marsh Arab south, and this became central to the pioneering artists."

Many of the earliest artists in Iraq, as was common across the Ottoman Empire, had been part of the Ottoman military corps, where they had learnt draughtsmanship in order to record what they'd seen. After the Ottoman Empire dissolved, they found themselves looking for new work and travelled to study in Europe. They returned in the 1940s and '50s, shaped by their experiences, and were keen to integrate European culture both into the images they were producing and into the idea of a new art scene, one that was both social and cultural. "Their time in Europe kept them together," says Naji. "Makiya tells me that one of the main reasons they wanted to have an Iraqi artists' association was their experiences of the New Year's Eve party at the Chelsea Arts Club, which was famous at the time. That led to private art exhibitions in their homes, private parties, and social clubs such as the al-Mansour Club."



An image from 1941 of the Friends of the Art Society, with Jewad Selim seated on the floor, left. Makiya Archive

It was also a period of extraordinary activity. Artists such as Selim, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, Lorna Selim, Ismail al-Sheikhli and Faeq Hassan produced bold and totemic paintings and sculptures, mixing Modernist techniques with daily scenes or those typically Iraqi, such as women's abayas and men's robes, or the motifs that hailed from Sumerian artefacts. In the mid-1950s, a second, more organised society came to replace the one inspired by the Chelsea Arts Club, and it was this new Iraqi Artists Association that Makiya presided over, resulting in fertile exchanges between art and architecture.

An untitled work of Lorna Selim's from 1958. One of the contributions of Ahmed Naji's 'Under the Palm Trees' is to look at the work of this English-Iraqi artist in detail. Andrew Barklem

Selim and Makiya were linked in another way, too. They both brought back English wives, who became good friends: Lorna, an artist, and Margaret, later a professor of English literature at Baghdad University. Lorna Selim has long been critically ignored, but Naji looks in detail at her paintings, of the dusty, sand-coloured new environs she had moved to, and the women in abayas who populated it.

Naji's book pays close attention to the works themselves, letting the changes in painterly style tell the story of Iraq's cultural progression. It is interesting that people in the west best-informed about the current study of Arab Modernism are outside of the traditional knowledge structure of a university or a museum. Naji, for example, a dentist from an unremarkable north London suburb, has produced a book almost unrivalled among English-language material in its depth of knowledge and observations. "There are different degrees of freedom. I have a freedom that I'm not an art historian," he says. "I can navigate histories in a different way, make different connections, tell different stories."

Author Ahmed Naji with a copy of his book at a talk at Tate Modern earlier this year.

It helps, too, that Naji grew up with art; his father is a ceramicist and his great-uncle on his father's side is Shakir Hassan Al Said, one of the greatest Iraqi artists of the 20th century. ("I only met him once, when I was five," Naji confesses. "But I have read everything he has written, and everything written about him.") Al Said's soulful, sometimes physically scored works of the 1980s become the tail-end of the Iraqi side of Naji's story, which finishes, like Naji himself, in London.

While still a student in the 2000s, Naji worked at the Iraq Memory Foundation, a US-Iraqi venture that aimed to preserve oral histories and material culture of life under the Saddam regime. He recalls that when he first walked into their headquarters, in the Green Zone on the Tigris River, he realised the painting hanging in the entrance was by Al Said, from 1983. (Titled *Muntasiroon,* or *Victorious,* it is in now in the Barjeel's collection in Sharjah.) Naji was astounded: "How did this organisation manage to have that painting?" The answer was that it had come from the collection of Makiya, and there is a gentle justice in that it is Makiya's collection that forms the major part of this book, published a decade and a half later.

> This book is me trying to have a different reading of my country's history. What kind of story would Iraqi art say about Iraq? Is Iraq a country defined by war? Or is Iraq defined by resilience and creativity?
>
> **Ahmed Naji**

The collection now numbers around 500 works, and Makiya brought the core of it with him when he moved to London in the 1970s. He later added to it through the two decades of the Kufa Gallery that he set up in west London, which became a key meeting point for the Iraqi diaspora. It was there, too, that Naji came into contact with the architect years later. *Under the Palm Trees* began as the Makiya Collection catalogue: Naji had been asked to research it but realised its contents, and the stories it contained, merited a full-length book.

It took two years to write, and four years to publish because of the expenses incurred by the number of reproductions of artwork: a long process, but Naji says his belief in its importance never wavered.

"This book is me trying to have a different reading of my country's history," he says. "What kind of story would Iraqi art say about Iraq? Is Iraq a country defined by war? Or is Iraq defined by resilience and creativity?"

The work safeguarding Iraq's cultural history continues: one of the reasons this work has such lavish illustrations is to document the paintings, of which so many have been lost. An estimated six to eight thousand works are believed to been looted in 2003, and Naji's next project is a catalogue of what's missing.

Updated: October 1, 2019 05:40 PM