

Art and Artists Crossing Borders

Untold Stories of the First Iraqi Art Exhibition in the USSR

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During recent decades, interest in different facets of contemporary Arab art has significantly increased. Although recent developments have played a key role in bringing Arab art into wider focus, gaps remain in scholarly discussions, such as the subject of Arab art and artists in the Soviet Union—a cultural transfer and migration of ideas across time and space. This article discusses the first Iraqi modern art exhibition in the USSR, in 1959. It was organized and carried out within the framework of the 1959 bilateral agreement signed between Iraq and the Soviet Union promoting mutual understanding and cultural exchange. More than 200 artworks were exhibited in Moscow, Baku, and Odessa for nearly three months. The exhibition's paintings, graphics, and sculptures represented both figurative and abstract art schools. Unintentionally, the show triggered heated debates: cross-regional conversations erupted not only in the official media but also on the pages of the guest books of its venues, Moscow's State Museum of Oriental Art and the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art in Baku. By looking at the debates around the exhibition content, this article seeks to shed light on how such an exhibition was made possible and how it was perceived in the USSR in the context of the inculcated ideology of socialist realism. What was the purpose of this exhibition and who were the cultural agents behind its organization? What was the role of official cultural players in the USSR in selecting the works and promoting the exhibition? How was the Iraqi exhibition received by the Soviet public? What was the reaction of the official press? How did the ideology of socialist realism affect people's perception of Iraqi modern art?

For insights into the history of the exhibition planning and setup, as well as the debates around the show, I relied mostly on previously unpublished archival material from the Ministry of Culture of the USSR and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, as well as other archival material from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts and the State Archive of the Russian Federation. Additional information was obtained from major collections of press clippings from Soviet newspapers, journals, and magazines from the 1950s and '60s.

Exhibition of the Revolution

Improved political relations between the USSR and Iraq at the end of 1950s were followed by dynamic cultural growth. Collaboration began immediately after the 14 July Revolution, also known as the 1958 Iraqi coup d'état, which resulted in the overthrow of the pro-British Hashemite monarchy and the establishment of the Iraqi Republic. As the Republic emerged under the leadership of Abd al-Karim Qasim, it gained enthusiastic support in the USSR. The geopolitical region of the Middle East, and of Iraq in particular, acquired strategic importance in the 1950s as a Cold War battleground, and in addition to political, economic, and military activities, the young Iraqi Republic allocated substantial resources to cultural diplomacy, presenting the country's story to the USSR through history, art, and culture.

The year 1959 was filled with cross-cultural activities, both in Iraq and the Soviet Union. On May 5, 1959, an official bilateral agreement was signed between the two countries promoting mutual understanding and cultural exchange.¹ The program of cultural activities to be undertaken under this agreement was distributed to various official organizations in the USSR, such as the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Higher Education, the Academy of Science of the USSR, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the Union of Sport Societies of the USSR, and the Union of Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in the USSR. Planned activities for the Ministry of Culture included inviting a delegation of cultural representatives from Iraq to become more familiar with Soviet art and culture; organizing a performance of a Soviet dance group, a festival of Soviet movies, and an exhibition of Soviet art in Iraq, and of Iraqi art in the USSR; sending two cameramen to produce a documentary about Iraq; and holding the premiere of an Iraqi film in the USSR.

The agreement undoubtedly facilitated the movement of artists, artworks, cultural programs, and educational services between the USSR and Iraq. As early as July 1959 a group of Soviet artists visited Iraq for the first time.² Their visit coincided with the official celebration of the First Anniversary of the Iraqi Revolution. The opening concert was attended by Iraqi governmental officials, including President Abd al-Karim Qasim. During their stay in Iraq, the artists gave six

performances that were attended by a total of 15,000 people. Their program was varied, and tailored to the taste of the Iraqi public. It included classical ballet pieces, traditional Russian folk songs, a magician show, a tambourine solo, a highland dance, a traditional Georgian dance, an acrobatic performance, and traditional Azerbaijani folk songs and Iraqi folk songs, performed in Arabic by a prominent Soviet singer, Rashid Beibutov. On August 21 and 22, an Iraqi movie, Said Effendi, was released in Moscow and Baku cinemas.³ And, during June and July, two Soviet cameramen visited Iraq and produced a film documenting the celebration of the First Anniversary of the Iraqi Revolution.⁴ A climax of the cultural exchange program was a major retrospective traveling exhibition of Iraqi art, dedicated to the First Anniversary of the Iraqi Republic, held from July 21 to October 19 in Moscow's State Museum of Oriental Art, in Baku's Azerbaijan National Museum of Art, and in the Museum of Western and Eastern Art in Odessa.⁵

The exhibition organizers had to address multiple challenges, from setting the opening date to selecting exhibition artworks and tackling issues of censorship. The initial intention was to open the show on July 14, to coincide with the First Anniversary of the Iraqi Revolution.⁶ However, due to unforeseen circumstances, and after the exhibition opening date had been changed at least twice, it finally opened at the State Museum of Oriental Art a week later, on July 21, 1959 (figs. 1 and 2).⁷ The official ceremony started at 4 p.m., in the presence of the Deputy Minister of Culture of the USSR, the Iraqi ambassador to the USSR, Abd al-Wahhab Mahmud, the Iraqi artist Faraj Abbo al-Numan, and members of the press and diplomatic corps.⁸ A delegation of Iraqi authorities was also present. They arrived in Moscow for a goodwill visit between July 13 and 26, and also visited Baku and Tashkent.⁹ Led by Salah Khales (at that time he held the position of Director General of the Ministry of Education, as well as Editor of *Al-Thaqafa Al-Jadida* journal, Chairman of the Iraqi Writers' Union, and member of the Communist Party of Iraq), the delegation also included Safa al-Hafiz, Chief Editor of the journal *Al-Thaqafa Al-Jadida* and General Secretary of the Iraqi Teachers' Union.¹⁰

The first exhibition venue was Moscow's State Museum of Oriental Art. The initial shipment of 102 artworks—paintings and graphic works—had arrived in May, transferred from China, where they had just been exhibited.¹¹ These particular works were created during the first months after the Revolution and represented the main body of the original *Exhibition of the Revolution* of 1958. The fledgling Iraqi Republic took the art exchange program seriously as a medium for positive propaganda. They organized the *Exhibition of the Revolution* in Baghdad, just two months after the September 1958 Revolution.¹² Described as a "point of departure," it was the first major touring exhibition of the new regime. It included works both by prominent artists and very young ones, and was intended to enrich cultural and artistic exchange among Arab artists themselves, to facilitate ease of movement for the artists and their works around the world, and to initiate international



Fig. 1. The official poster of the first Iraqi modern art exhibition in the USSR, 1959, State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow. Source: Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts.

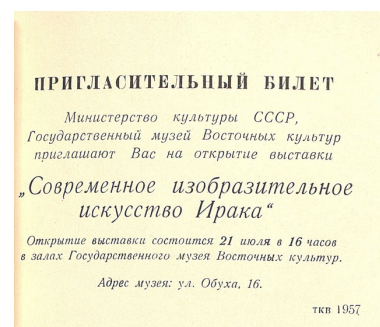


Fig 2. Invitation card for the opening of the first Iraqi modern art exhibition in Moscow, July 21, 1959, State Museum of Oriental Art. Source: Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts.

cultural and institutional exchanges. However, the quality of certain works was criticized immediately after the exhibition's opening in Baghdad. Subsequently, the content of the USSR exhibition was changed, and in a letter dated May 18, 1959, the director of Moscow's Oriental Art Museum informed the Soviet Ministry of Culture that the Iraqis had selected an extra 100 works by Iraqi artists who were known for their central role in formulating Iraqi modernism. This added another dimension to the exhibition and strengthened the initial body of 102 works, which had been described by the Moscow museum as rather "mediocre" and of "problematic artistic quality." In addition, the director recommended asking the Iraqi selectors to send more examples of applied art.¹³ In the same letter, he cautiously mentioned to the Ministry that among the artworks, "there is a number of abstract and formalist artworks"—a comment that was overlooked by ministerial officials.¹⁴ However, at least one work was removed from the Moscow exhibition on the opening day at the request of the Iraqi ambassador. It was a painting by Mohamad Ali Loqman, *Youth Celebrating a Victory Day*, which included not only a multigure composition but also an image of a banner displaying a portrait of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.¹⁵

The final version of the exhibition included more than 200 works, including artworks from the original *Exhibition of the Revolution*, additional works by other prominent Iraqi artists, and a wide range of applied art.¹⁶ The list of artists included Abd al-Rahman al-Gailani, Abd al-Amir al-Qazzaz, Abdul Qadir Abdul Sattar, Adhra al-Azawi, Akram Shukri, Ali al-Shalan, Ali Hussein Shawki, Aliya al-Qaragulli, Ata Sabri, Bugus Bablanian, Faik Hassan, Faiz al-Zubaidi, Faraj Abbo al-Numan, Fazul Abbas, Ghalib Naji al-Khafaji, Hafidh Druby, Hamid al-Attar, Hamid Yousif, Ismail al-Shaikhly, Ismail Fattah, Jewad Selim, Kadhum Haidar, Khaled Hamdi, Khalid al-Rahhal, Khalid al-Jadir, Khalid al-Qassab, Latif al-Hafaji, Lorna Selim, Mahdi al-Bayati, Mahmoud Husein, Mahmoud Sabri, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, Muhammed Salih Zaki, Nathira al-Kattab, Nizar Salim, Naziha Rashid, Naziha Salim, Noori al-Rawi, Qasim Naji, Rakan Dabdoub, Rashid Hatem, Saddiq Ahmed, Shakir Hasan al-Said, Suzan al-Shaikhli, Talib Makki, Tariq Madhloom, Wedad al-Urfalli, Zeid Saleh Zaki, Aziz al-Sabahi and others.¹⁷

Among the exhibited works were Jewad Selim's *Young Man and His Wife*, *A Girl*, *Motherhood*, and illustrations for *1001 Nights*; Khalid al-Jadir's *Portrait of a Girl* and *Koura Village*; Hafidh Druby's *Revolution of Light* and *Washing Day*; Khalid al-Rahhal's portrait of Abd al-Karim Qasim and a bronze bust portrait of a young girl; Nizar Salim's *Bedouin*; Khaled Hamdi's *Wall of Peace*; Mahmoud Sabri's *People in Darkness*, *In a Tavern*, and *A Stone Mason*; Ismail al-Shaikhly's *Watermelon Sellers* (fig. 3); Shakir Hasan al-Said's *The Victims* (fig. 4); and Talib Makki's *The Beloved*.¹⁸ The *Exhibition of the Revolution* included, among other works, the paintings by Kadhum Haidar, *The Iraqi Revolution*, *14th of July*, and *I See in Your Hands the Power to Destroy Colonialism*; by Noori al-Rawi, *Between Two Worlds*, *Affinity*, and *Radiance of Joy*; and by Tariq



Fig. 3. Ismail al-Sheikhly, *Watermelon Sellers*, 1958, oil on canvas, 79.5 x 97.5 cm. Source: Christie's auction, October 30, 2008. © 2019 Christie's Images Limited.



Fig. 4. Shakir Hassan al-Said, *The Victims*, 1957, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, Hussain Ali Harba Family Collection.

Madhloom, *The Sheikh and his Subject*, *The Immortal Incident of the Bridge*, and *Flame of Freedom*.¹⁹ A number of works were executed by former political prisoners of Nigret al-Salman prison, Rashid Hatem and Aziz al-Sabahi.²⁰ Khalid al-Rahhal's bronze bust portrait of a young girl became an unofficial emblem of the exhibition, often used as an illustration in various exhibition-related publications, as well as gracing the official poster (fig. 1).²¹

The selection of subjects ranged from portraits, landscapes, and everyday life, to anti-colonialism, modernization, liberation, and the revival of nationalist culture. Iraqi artists of the 1950s had experienced the stress and anxiety resulting from the political realities in their region, and many of them shared a common subject matter related to political and social problems. Judging from the exhibition's paintings, graphics, and sculpture, representing both figurative and abstract art schools, the unity of older artists in Iraq and the potential of the younger generation were equally displayed. The exhibition's main goal was quite clear: to unite scattered individual creativities into a strong cultural front, defining the positions of Iraqi artists and art within twentieth century.

After the exhibition closed on August 20, the artworks were transferred to the next venue, the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art in Baku, where they were on display from September 5 to 25 (figs. 5 and 6). Although it remained open for less than three weeks, the exhibition was attended by 7,000 visitors, and 40 guided tours were organized.²² The number of exhibited works was increased with the inclusion of seven paintings by the Iraqi artist Faraj Abbo al-Numan. He had been assigned to accompany the exhibition tour, and spent a month and a half in the USSR, from July 13 to August 31, visiting Kiev, Leningrad, and Baku, in addition to Moscow.²³ In the framework of this trip, he met with Soviet artists, visited various workshops, and attended exhibition openings and official meetings dedicated to Soviet-Iraqi friendship. Al-Numan also dedicated some time to painting while staying in the studio of the Soviet Union of Artists (known as the Senezh Studio). There he created a total of sixteen works, seven of which were included in the Iraqi exhibition and were shown both in Baku and Odessa.²⁴

The exhibition's next venue was the Museum of Western and Eastern Art in Odessa. Its duration there had to be sharply cut to only eight days. According to an official request from the Embassy of Iraq in Moscow, the exhibition items had to leave for Poland, its next international touring venue.²⁵ However, as the Odessa museum's press release later stated, during the opening days, from October 11 to 19, the exhibition was nevertheless attended by 3,750 visitors, and 25 guided tours were organized.²⁶ Immediately after it closed, 220 artworks were shipped to Warsaw.²⁷

Newspapers and art magazines in the USSR from this period were full of articles about the Iraqi exhibition. The recording from its opening was included in the news



Fig. 5. Iraqi modern art exhibition at the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art, Baku. Source: Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts.



Fig. 6. Iraqi modern art exhibition at the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art, Baku. Source: Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts.

documentary *Chronicles of Our Days*, which was screened in Soviet cinemas.²⁸ Exhibition reports were published in the magazines *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* and *Khudozhnik*, and the newspapers *Sovetskaya Kultura*, *Izvestiya*, and *Vechernya Moskva*.²⁹ The director of the Baku museum, Kazim Kazimzade, described the exhibition in a newspaper editorial as “a major event in the cultural life of the city. It forms strong ties between the Iraq and Azerbaijan people.”³⁰ Iraqi artist Faraj Abbo al-Numan wrote an article about the Iraqi school of plastic art and sculpture, which was published in *Iskusstvo* magazine, an official organ of the Ministry of Culture and the Soviet Artists’ Union.³¹ A prominent Soviet art historian, Sergei Pevzner, contributed an article titled “Young Art of Iraq” to *Iskusstvo*, giving a detailed history of the formation and development of Iraqi plastic art, and closely analyzing the exhibition artworks.³² Praising the works of Akram Shukri, Faik Hassan, Faraj Abbo al-Numan, Hafidh Druby, Ismail al-Shaikhly, Jewad Selim, Khalid al-Jadir, Mahmoud Sabri, and others, he also mentioned that

*perhaps, the most distinctive feature in relation to contemporary art in Iraq is the search for its own way of artistic expression. If the selection of subject matter is characterized by a certain unity—the artists dedicated the works to their native country, to its nature, to the everyday life of the Iraqi people—then stylistically the techniques used by painters are extremely diverse. While many of the artists followed the realist tendency in paintings and sculptures, others turned to the new Western artistic practices.*³³

Although it was hardly intended to become a battleground of opinions in the USSR, the exhibition nevertheless triggered heated debates: cross-regional conversations erupted, not in the official media, but on the pages of the guest books of its venues, Moscow’s State Museum of Oriental Art and, in particular, the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art in Baku.³⁴ Although we do not have a guest book record of the Odessa venue, we can sense the mood from the official letter sent by the museum to the Ministry of Culture: “Exhibition visitors noted in the guest book with great satisfaction the revolutionary energy, recorded in many paintings, praised the high skills of the artists, but at the same time expressed dissatisfaction with the manifestation of formalism in a few works presented at the exhibition.”³⁵

Social Realist Art in the USSR

It is important to remember that the ideology of socialist realist art had dominated all aspects of people’s lives in the USSR since at least the 1930s. This realist trend, which was based on the tradition of Russian art of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emerged in the Soviet context under the name of socialist realism, where it was viewed and used by the state as an instrument of its own domination. Socialist realism can be considered as an historical modification of the realist art movement that coexisted in Russian art with other forms of realism throughout the twentieth century. Socialist realism, however,

was declared by the state as the highest form of realism in art.

The concept of socialist realism was proposed by the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky in the mid-1930s, and was officially introduced at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, from August 17 to September 1, 1934.³⁶ It was viewed not only as a major transitional point between the old art and new Soviet art, but as a strategic, long-term art commission from the state to artists: from now on, the state (and only the state) was the sole commissioner, patron, and collector of all art. The cultural ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, who was Stalin's closest ally, reaffirmed socialist realism as an officially preferred artistic style. He defined it as "a depiction of a reality in its revolutionary transformation," and included it in the organization charter of the Union of Soviet Writers (and subsequently in the charters of all other arts and culture unions). It demanded a "realistic," easily understood, optimistic representation of Soviet life and the future of the Soviet Union. Those artists who did not conform to this officially approved style were labelled "formalists."³⁷

The state's all-powerful Bolshevik "realist" ideology had undergone various transformations between the 1930s and 1960s. What remained permanent was the importance of politically relevant subjects, arranged hierarchically according to the priorities of the dominant ideology. The highest position among the themes belonged to historical-revolutionary subjects; immediately after this were national victories, then labor subjects, which would demonstrate the main socialist achievements and the rapid triumphs of the new system. At the lowest level was the idealized theme of the transformation into a "new Soviet citizen." Marxist-Leninist aesthetics stated that art must adhere to a realistic format and serve a didactic purpose. Artists must truthfully portray reality and create clear, realistic images; artists could and must firmly express their authorial as well as political party position in their works. Although most of the Arab abstract artists enjoyed a privileged position in society and a degree of protection from severe censorship, in the Soviet Union abstract art was officially nonexistent, and abstract artists were severely prosecuted by the state. At the height of its power, the Soviet government sharply and aggressively responded to the slightest softening of the official aesthetic dogma about artists' works. Under Stalin, the "formalists" were doomed either to the status of social renegade marginals (consigned to poverty and oblivion) or, much worse, were sent to the Gulag.

From the mid-1950s, such artists were the subject of constant public criticism that infringed upon their civil status and seriously limited their earning potential—they were not exhibited, not published, and not commissioned. In the *Dictionary of Art Terms*, published in 1961, "formalism" is defined as a "reactionary trend in art and aesthetics, connected with the ideology of decaying capitalism."³⁸ The same dictionary states that "reactionary formalist art includes such styles and movements as Cubism, Futurism,

Constructivism, Surrealism, Suprematism, Purism and Dadaism [...]. All these different formalistic trends are based on the separation of form from content and on the superiority of form over content.”³⁹

This dictionary also comments that the “fight against formalist art is the prime goal of Soviet art, guaranteed by the total victory of the principles of Soviet realism.”⁴⁰ Realist art claimed to provide a faithful and objective reflection of life, so as to appeal to ordinary workers and be spiritually inspiring. In practice, it often entailed following the stylistic strictures of realism and glorifying the state, because the realist style was the preferred language to address the political issues of the day. In the Soviet Union, socialist realism represented the collective spirit of socialism, and abstract art was portrayed as a capitalist product of the capitalist world. Such an approach was naturally expected from the Arab states as well—and in our case, Iraq—because, as the Soviet art critic Boris Veimarn summarized in his article dedicated to Arab art, “National art can become genuinely progressive only on the path of realism, imbued with democratic and socialist humanism, which truly reveals the contradictions of life, which affirms the revolutionary creative deeds of its people.”⁴¹

However, if the ideology of socialist realism left no space for discussion or argument in the USSR, the attitude toward these artistic developments in the Arab world was quite different. Starting from the early 1950s, Arab art can be characterized by two broad schools: figurative and abstract.⁴² Abstract art occupies a double place in the Arab mindset. Artists and critics recognized abstract art as the international norm for advanced art, but at the same time many of them argued that the Arab-Islamic aesthetic tradition had always produced idealistic, abstract art, and they claimed that modern Arab artists were the legitimate inheritors of a long, philosophically sound tradition of abstract art. Practitioners of abstract art very often referred to the theory that a form of abstract art was rooted in local Islamic tradition, and was thus naturally integrated into contemporary Arab art. For example, the use of letters of the Arabic alphabet became mere forms in abstract composition, and the art of Islamic calligraphy, as well as of arabesque surface design, could be classified as biomorphic abstract art. In turn, realist Arab art claimed to provide a faithful and objective reflection of life that would appeal to ordinary workers and be spiritually uplifting—the same claim that was made for realist art by Soviet arbiters. Arab artists mainly practiced two types of realistic art: images of the surrounding natural world and of everyday life; and the realism of propaganda and political agenda. This is because realist art, with its symbolic resonance, was the most comprehensive way of responding to tragic events. The language of realism was the language of propaganda, and very often of the Palestinian resistance movement as well.

For the Soviet state, it was important to make sure that Arab art developed in the “right” direction (i.e., in the path of

realist art). Already in 1957, when the Soviet people became acquainted with Arab fine art for the first time during the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow, on July 28, 1957, the subject of realist Arab art was raised. The festival attracted 34,000 people from 130 countries. Its activities included an exhibition of modern art that showcased artists from more than 50 countries, among them several countries of the Arab world: Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Sudan. Most of the works had been created between 1955 and 1957, especially for the festival, and were done by the older generation of renowned masters, as well as by very young artists.⁴³ In the exhibition catalogue, the authors quoted the famous Syrian artist Nazem al-Jaafari:

Our artists do not belong to any art association, they work disconnectedly, but they are united by a common love for their motherland, an intention to work for the benefit of their people, risen to a new life. And it is natural that realism is a main dominant movement in our fine art. Abstractionism? Yes, we do have followers of this fashionable art movement, but they are not popular at all. The works of these artists cannot be comprehended by ordinary people. I personally think that abstract art attracts the followers not of the artist who are still looking for their own artistic style, but from those [people] who realized their own impotence, [and] understood the futility of attempts to create artworks full of deep meaning and artistic form, capable of capturing the attention of their contemporaries.⁴⁴

During the 1950s and '60s, various Soviet art critics repeatedly addressed the subject of realist and abstract art in nearly every issue of *Iskusstvo*. Describing abstract artists, Alexander Konstantinovsky emphasized the impossibility of finding a common art language with them, because "the scope of their creativity lies as far as possible from the real art, that it isn't even worth trying finding common language with them."⁴⁵ Semen Rappoport insisted that "abstractionism cannot be used in developing of modern and applied art."⁴⁶ Alexander Obretenov, when talking about Polish artists in his article, "For Realism and Against Abstractionism," maintained that

abstract art deprives the audience of a powerful tool of world discovery [...]. Abstractionism confuses the viewer. It leads the viewer to distrust his human senses, makes a mockery at normal human logic [...]. There is no doubt that with the elimination of social conflicts all relics of the past will disappear, including formalism, extreme subjectivism, abstractionism and other mysticism in art.⁴⁷

Critical analyses of the 1958 Venice Biennale were published by Andrei Guber under the title "Abstractionism is the Enemy of Truth and Beauty." He concluded that

abstractionism brought art to its complete denial, and, as a result, art criticism lost any connection in its judgments and analyses with any scientific approach, with any objectivity, with [any] connection with the works being analyzed. Such are the dull outcomes of not only abstract art, but also abstractionist art

*criticism. And the last Biennale in Venice clearly showed all the futility of this reactionary trend.*⁴⁸

Art critic Arseny Guluiga, analyzing the art theory of Arnold Gehlen, described abstract art as “the art of silence.” “Realistic painting tells a lot to a viewer; expressionism reminds [us of] gestures of a deaf-mute, who is in vain trying to express his feelings; abstract art—this is a kingdom of silence. An abstract artist is addressing no one, talking about nothing; not teaching viewers, showing no sign of agitation.”⁴⁹

In the context of such an ideology and with the plethora of anti-abstract art publications appearing in the Soviet press every month, it remains a mystery how the exhibition of Iraqi art avoided the Ministry of Culture’s censorship. It can be partially explained by a relative liberalization of art that penetrated Soviet society for a very short period which lasted from 1957, the time of the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow, to December 1962, the days of the “New Reality” contemporary art exhibition in the Manezh exhibition hall, organized to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of MOSSKH (Moscow Section of the Artist’s Union). At the latter exhibition, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev became very enraged at what he saw and ordered the exhibition to close. Its shutdown led to an official denunciation and prohibition of non-realistic art.

The Guest Books: Contemporary Accounts of the Exhibition

Preserved in the archive, the guest book pages are one of the very few contemporary accounts where Soviet visitors engaged in an anonymous discussion about realist and abstract art. The few pages of typed text of visitors’ exhibition reviews were most probably carefully chosen from a much larger selection of original opinions. They represent a summary of the impressions of the general public, presented as part of the exhibition management’s report to the higher authorities (here, the Ministry of Culture of the USSR). The reasons behind such a selection remain questionable. But the difference between the Moscow and Baku visitors’ opinions is striking. One might suggest that, for censorship reasons, only positive and blunt reviews from the Moscow show were selected (most probably to please the authorities). But the full range of diametrically opposed opinions were selected from the Baku guest book, giving an excellent overview of the public’s knowledge of and attitude toward abstract art, and how the differences instigated so many controversies.

Typical reviews of the Moscow show praised the exhibition and the artists’ works:

The exhibition of Iraqi art, organized in Moscow on the anniversary of the victory of the Iraqi people, leaves a wonderful impression with its variety of subject matter and wonderful examples of art. Ceramic works,

showed at the exhibition, are a manifestation of craftsmanship and preservation of national traditions. Unglazed pottery examples, created by unknown artisans, demonstrate outstanding artistic talent of the people. Artworks of master ceramists are exemplary. We are very grateful to the Department of Culture of Iraq for the opportunity to get to know better the art of this ancient country. It is especially agreeable that the exhibition happens during the days of the celebration of the establishment of the Iraqi Republic.⁵⁰

The exhibition of contemporary Iraqi artists is of great interest to the Soviet people, because it gives them an opportunity to get to know the works of Iraqi fine and applied art for the first time. Paintings are imbued with a sense of the exceptional importance of the progressiveness of Iraqi art. The exhibition will certainly promote and strengthen cultural ties between the Soviet Union and Iraq. I would like sincerely to wish success to the artists of Iraq and people of Iraq. Thank you for the exhibition.⁵¹

In only two reviews did visitors raise the question of realist versus abstract art:

I viewed the Iraqi exhibition in Moscow with great interest. I would like only to recommend to the Iraqi artists to present the life of Iraqi people in a realist manner, not in an abstract style. I hope that the next exhibition in Moscow will prove that Iraqi artists choose a realistic language in art.⁵²

The exhibition of artists of the Republic of Iraq is very good and diverse in the subjects represented, reflecting the modern life of Iraqi people. A large team of Iraqi artists will be able to lead the realistic trend in Iraqi fine art and ensure it will achieve full victory. I would like to wish Iraqi artists further success in improving their skills on the path of realism in fine art. Warm greetings to all the freedom-loving Iraqi people. All our people are following with great interest your progress in all areas of your life.⁵³

The reviews from Baku present a diverse range of opinions. From complimentary, such as:

We, the students of an art school, would like to thank you for the exhibition and we wish to see such exhibitions more often. Ideas, subjects, techniques of the works amaze us with its variety and diversity. Almost every artwork breathes modernity. This is a purely national exhibition. The art of Iraq cannot be confused with any other national fine art. We wish all Iraqi artists to develop within the spirit of modernity.⁵⁴

Exhibited works of masters of Iraqi fine art perfectly convey the spirit of the new republic, the spirit of the victory of the people of Iraq. In general, it's a good exhibition of very good works. One can hope, that with time, artists of Iraq will gradually reach a much higher

*level of excellence in painting, abandoning the style of imitation of Abstractionism, Cubism and other non-art of Western fashion, mainly because it is not national art, but an alien element. I wish Iraqi artists and sculptors success.*⁵⁵

While others are negative criticisms, for instance:

*Very good paintings, showing Iraq and the revolution, but some of them are unfortunately in the style of abstraction and are completely incomprehensible.*⁵⁶

*Visited the exhibition of artists of Iraq. With the exception of some sculptural works that more or less look tolerable, but as for painting, it is a horror. It's amazing how such works are allowed at an exhibition approved by an art council. We are horrified and disgusted to see such artworks.*⁵⁷

*The overall exhibition leaves a not very good impression, but it might be considered a blessing in disguise. Realist paintings gave a good impression, as well as a few sculptures. We liked the painting Bedouins very much. The sculptures Fertility and Motherhood made a terrible impression. We are not blaming the artists. Most probably we haven't yet grown to understand abstract art. You feel like a complete fool when you see the enthusiastic faces of other visitors. Unwittingly you want to ask a question: "Which one of us is a fool?"*⁵⁸

And the high point of all the reviews is a note by an unknown visitor:

*The "leftism" of the exhibition is striking. Artists of Iraq keep up to date with the contemporary art practices, so that our art masters should learn.*⁵⁹

An anonymous visitor thus unintentionally acknowledged Iraq's position not only as a regional leader on an intellectual and artistic level, but an international leader as well. This was a very fair observation, since Arab art in general and Iraqi plastic art in particular was never isolated from the movements of society, history, and the era.

Despite the critiques and controversies that the 1959 exhibition aroused, and the challenges of mounting a show of this kind, its artistic legacy was important in expressing both the aspirations and the failures of the Iraqi and Soviet peoples. In terms of heritage and contemporaneity, the exhibition was a product of both societies. It amply demonstrated the contradictory cultural politics of the Soviet Union—more tolerant and liberal when applied within the framework of international cultural agreements, but totalitarian when enforcing socialist realism ideology in a domestic context.

During the period of friendship with Iraq and the commitment to a cross-cultural program, the Soviet regime was unable to control or influence the selection of artworks for the

exhibition, and could only hope that Iraqi artists would choose a realist artistic language that would be politically acceptable. At the same time, exhibition visitors were given a rare opportunity to see another, more diverse art style in the USSR that differed widely from their own restricted one, and to express their opinions about it, if only through the guest book pages. The opinions varied greatly, from unconditional support of the state's art policy, to expressing encouragement and admiration of a genuinely free and independent Iraqi art. The Soviet state's suppression of formalism had led to the development of a rather crude, uniform, official art in realist style, but it was unable to completely extinguish original creative art, or the regard in which it was held among the Soviet public. Many of the Soviet visitors to the exhibition responded to the imaginative, attractive, modernist works of the Iraqi artists.

From such a promising beginning, Soviet-Iraqi cultural ties eventually went into decline. Just a few years after the historic exhibition in the USSR, Soviet-Iraqi relations cooled, caused by a series of events.⁶⁰ One of the main reasons was the bloody coup d'état that took place on February 8, 1963, when the Ba'ath Party of Iraq overthrew Qasim's pro-Communist regime. The leader of the Iraqi Communist Party, Husain al-Radi (also known as Salam Adil) was brutally tortured and murdered. Needless to say, this severely damaged Iraqi-Soviet relations for many years, including cultural collaborations. The next Iraqi art exhibition did not take place until 1971, in the Museum of Oriental Art, and only realist-style works were presented.⁶¹ Although realism was never designated as an official style in any Arab country, it was relatively widely adopted in Iraq by the 1970s, when the ruling Ba'ath Party dominated all major cultural centers and fine art schools, and a more propagandistic art that favored the socialist realist style took precedence.

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1. Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI), Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1138 – Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Department of External Relations. Records related to the cultural exchange and cooperation with Iraq and GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), Fund 9518, Inventory 1, File 498 – Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, department of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union. Department of Near and Middle East. File 150, volume I. Iraq 1959–1960.
2. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1009 – Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Department of External Relations. Summary Report of Cultural Relations with North Africa, Arab Middle East and Turkey in 1959; RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1140 – Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Department of External Relations. Records related to the cultural exchange and cooperation with Iraq.
3. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1009.
4. Ibid.
5. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1009; Vojtov 2006, 200–201; al-Numan 1959, 48–49; and Pevzner 1959, 50–55.
6. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1138.
7. Vladimir Vojtov, *Materialu po Istorii Gosudarstvennogo Muzeya Vostoka. 1951–1970: Ludi, Veschi, Dela* [Records Related to the History of the State Museum of Oriental Art. 1951–1970: People, Artifacts, Activities] (Moscow: State Museum of Oriental Art, 2006), 200. The source gives the opening date of the exhibition as July 14, 1959; the museum director indicated in his letter the preferred date of July 7 (RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139, Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Department of External Relations. Records related to the cultural exchange and cooperation with Iraq). However, we found an invitation card in the same file (RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139), on which the date of July 21, 1959, is indicated.
8. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
9. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1009.
10. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1140; RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1138.
11. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
12. Jaleel Kamal al-Din, “At the Exhibition of the Revolution 1958,” in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Lenssen, Anneka, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 181–186.
13. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. It is very difficult to define the exact number of artworks included in the exhibition. The Moscow venue inventory mentioned 217 works (Vojtov, *Materialu*, 200) in one list and 219 works in another (Vojtov, *Materialu*, 535). The inventories of the Baku and Odessa museums indicated that there were 220 works (RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139). This number included 51 items of applied art. Such confusion can be explained by the addition of extra works in the USSR by Faraj Abbo al-Numan, who painted 16 works depicting the life of Soviet people while staying in Moscow and Baku, and insisted on a few of them being included in the exhibition (RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1009). I have also striven to verify the information and data related to the exhibition to the best of my ability, but some names of the artists, the titles of the artworks, and overall information related to the exhibition’s international touring plan requires further research that is currently impossible. During the breakdown of Iraqi society that came with the overthrow of the Ba’ath government in 2003, the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, where the majority of artworks were stored and exhibited, was vandalized. More than 8,500 paintings and sculptures were stolen and archival materials were destroyed.
17. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139. Due to mistakes in the inventory list of artworks and poor transliteration, it is

- impossible to recreate a definitive list of participating artists and titles of their works.
18. Ibid.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Vojtov, *Materialu*, 201.
 21. Sergei Pevzner, "Molodoe Iskusstvo Iraqa [Young Art of Iraq]," *Iskusstvo* [Art Journal] 11, (1959): 50–55; "Vustavka khudozhnikov Iraqa [Exhibition of Iraqi Artists]," *Khudozhnik* [Artist] 10, (1959): 62.
 22. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
 23. Ibid.
 24. Ibid.
 25. Ibid.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Ibid.
 28. News documentary, *Chronicles of Our Days*, no. 30 (1959), accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.net-film.ru/film-10724>
 29. "Vustavka khudozhnikov Iraqa," 62; "Vustavka Iraqskego Iskusstva v Moskve [Exhibition of Iraqi Art in Moscow]," *Dekorativnoye Iskusstvo* [Decorative Art] 11 (1959): 48; Sergei Pevzner, "Kartinu Khudozhnikov Iraqa [Artworks of Iraqi Artists]," *Sovetskaya Kultura* [Soviet Culture] 101 (1959): 4; Ivan Kotov, "Iskusstvo Iraqskei Respubliki [The Art of Iraqi Republic]," *Izvestiya* [News] 171 (1959): 4; and "Sovremennoye Iskusstvo Iraqa [Contemporary Art of Iraq]," *Vechernya Moskva* [Evening Moscow] 170 (1959): 3.
 30. Kazim Kazimzade, "Vustavka Iraqskego Izobrazitel'nogo Iskusstva [Exhibition of Iraqi Fine Art]," *Bakinskyi Rabochyi* [Baku Worker] 210, no. 11683 (September 6, 1959).
 31. Faraj Abbo al-Numan, "Iraqskaia Shkola Zhivopisi I Vayaniia [Iraqi Fine Art]," *Iskusstvo* 11 (1959): 48–49.
 32. Pevzner, "Molodoe Iskusstvo Iraqa," 50–55.
 33. Ibid., 52.
 34. RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
 35. Ibid.
 36. Alexander Morozov, *Sozrealizm I Realizm* [Socialist Realism and Realism] (Moscow: Galart, 2007), 20. Also see Alexander Inshakov, ed., *Pozdnesovetskoye Iskusstvo Rossii* [Late-Soviet Russian Art] (Moscow: BuksMArt, 2019).
 37. Morozov, *Sozrealizm I Realizm*, 22.
 38. *Kratkii Slovar' Terminov Izobrazitel'nogo Iskusstva* [Dictionary of Art Terms] (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1961), 177.
 39. *Kratkii slovar' Terminov*, 177.
 40. Ibid.
 41. Boris Vejmar, "Progressivnoye Iskusstvo stran Arabskogo Vostoka [Progressive Art of the Countries of the Arab East]," *Khudozhnik* 1 (1971): 34–36.
 42. For a more detailed analysis of the term "Arab art" and the history of Arab art formation and development, see Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).
 43. Erikh Darsky, Oleg Prokof'ev, *Iskusstvo Obiedinnoi Arabskoi Respubliki, Livana, Tunisa, Sudana, Indii, Zeilona, Indonezii, Kamboszhi, Avstralii, N. Zelandii I Madagaskara* [The Art of the United Arab Republic, Lebanon, Tunis, Sudan, India, Ceylon, Indonesia, Cambodia, Australia, New Zealand and Madagascar] (Moscow: 1959).
 44. Ibid., 15.
 45. Alexander Konstantinovsky, "O Realizme v Sovremennom Iskusstve [About Realism in Modern Art]," *Iskusstvo* 3, (1959): 5.
 46. Semen Rappoport, "Abstraktnue Formu v Dekorativno-Prikladnom Iskusstve [Abstract Form in Applied Art and Abstractionism]," *Iskusstvo* 9 (1959): 42.
 47. Alexander Obretenov, "Za Realizm Protiv Abstrakzii [For Realism and Against Abstractionism]," *Iskusstvo* 7 (1959): 28.
 48. Andrei Guber, "Abstrakzionizm – Vrag Pravdu I Krasotu [Abstractionism is the Enemy of Truth and Beauty]," *Iskusstvo* 6 (1959): 27.

49. Arseny Guluiga, "Istinnaya Teoriya Abstrakzionizma [A True Theory of Abstractionism]," *Iskusstvo* 10 (1962): 71–72.
50. Multiple signatures, no date, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
51. Multiple signatures, July 21, 1959, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
52. Rostov-na-Donu, July 24 1959, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
53. Student of the Mendeleev Institute of Chemical Technology, Augst 07, 1949, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
54. Suleimanova S., Ettelbaum, Hachaturov M., Veisov R., Ali-Zade Servet, Gulya Medzhidova, Ragimova Gul'mira, no date, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
55. Signed, September 7, 1959, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
56. Signed, no date, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
57. Artist G. Portnov, September 6, 1959, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
58. Shehter Lylia, Dzsebrailova Nadezda, Yaramusheva Evgeniya, no date, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
59. D. Z., September 14, 1959, RGALI, Fund 2329, Inventory 8, File 1139.
60. Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to Now* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Anatoly Khazanov and Anatoly Olimpiev, *Sovetsky Souz i Blizhny Vostok d Godu Holodnoy Voinu* [The Soviet Union and the Middle East during the Cold War] (Moscow: Unity, 2017).
61. RGALI, Fund 2926, Inventory 4, File – Department of Exhibitions of the Union of the USSR artists (1946–1991); *Sovremennoye Iskusstvo Iraqa* (Contemporary Art of Iraq), exh. cat. (Moscow: 1971).