

Iraq Historical Overview, Photographic Evidence: “I Never Thought Iraq Would Arrive at What It Is Today”

Latif Al Ani: ‘I Was Documenting for the Sake of Archiving. The Iraqi photographer considers his photographic preservation of a long-vanished Iraq, his preoccupation with beauty, and the desire to share his country’s pain with viewers

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*In 1957, the historian **Hugh Trevor-Roper** described Iraq as “efficient, energetic, prosperous, complacent: a Levantine Switzerland”, a description that is now almost impossible to fathom given the later succession of atrocities beleaguering the country – sectarian violence, chemical warfare, a US-led invasion waged on spurious evidence, and Islamic State’s subsequent onslaught. With the photography of **Latif Al Ani** (b1932), to some extent, seeing is believing, in a series of images presenting scenes of what is often referred to as Iraq’s “golden age” of cosmopolitanism, enabled by the flourishing oil industry, a crucial factor in the country’s burgeoning prosperity.*



Latif Al Ani. Al Aqida, High School, Baghdad, 1961. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

Al Ani’s photographs recall Pathé’s earlier documentary [Ageless Iraq](#), with its similarly halcyon images of horseracing, music, and boats languidly sailing along a canal in Basra. Al Ani’s early photographs were commissioned by the Iraq Petroleum Company and, like Pathé’s film, convey an apparently untroubled process of modernisation: shepherds strolling with their flocks alongside electricity pylons, dam-building, women with heads uncovered playing sports, studying and working. This was also a country of ethnic and religious accord, as attested to in images of Yazidis, Kurds and Mandeans. Architecturally, international modernism co-existed with remnants of Iraq’s past as a cradle of civilisation, the Arch of

Ctesiphon incidentally having also been photographed aerially in 1940 by Roald Dahl while flying solo in a biplane.



Latif Al Ani. Building the Darbandikhan Dam, 1962. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

To what extent “modernisation” was synonymous with “westernisation” in this context is debatable, as is the extent to which Al Ani’s images, like the Pathé documentary, can be considered propagandistic. He later established the photography department in Iraq’s Ministry of Information and Guidance, documenting social, industrial and agricultural aspects of a socialist Iraq. Less talked about are Al Ani’s more unusual “eastern” depictions of the west in his photographs of East Germany and the US, although he rejects the notion that these images are in any way different from his Iraqi ones.



Latif Al Ani. Al Malak, Baghdad, 1964. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

Regardless of the formal nature of the Iraqi photographs, their very existence conjures a quasi-miraculous aura given the grievous unfolding of Iraq’s history, including the looting of the Ministry of Culture’s photographic archive in 2003. When Saddam Hussein’s regime made it impossible to photograph in public, Al Ani abandoned his work entirely, but scrupulously conserved his extensive archive, now a *musée imaginaire* of a lost country.

Angeria Rigamonti di Cutò: A crucial aspect of your photographs is their recording of a lost world, an especially poignant loss given the grim fate of Iraq. At the time, did you sense an urgency to document something that would be destroyed

and, if you had a kind of premonition, how did it affect your work?

Latif Al Ani: I didn't have a premonition, I was documenting for the sake of archiving. I never thought Iraq would arrive at what it has today.



Latif Al Ani. Lady in the Eastern Desert, 1961. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

ARC: Several of your images recording the modernisation of Iraq - whether architectural or socio-cultural - frame remarkable contrasts that recall Sergei Eisenstein's "dramatic principle", produced by the collision of contrasting visual elements. In your case, did the formal impact of the image take precedence over the documentary aspect?

LAA: It did as far as wanting to ensure that each image was beautiful, in addition to being documentary. I was always preoccupied with beauty.



Latif Al Ani. Yarmouk, Housing Project Offices, 1962. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

ARC: At the same time, within these visual contrasts, there appears to be considerable harmony, in terms of architecture, gender, ethnicity, or even between past and present. The period you documented is often referred to as a “golden age”, but how selective were you in the framing of your images - were there situations that you excluded?

LAA: I was selective as far as wanting to show a scene that the viewer would enjoy; I always thought about the viewer. What I excluded were things that I considered ugly or backward.

ARC: You also experimented with aerial photography, and the formal impact of those images is quite different. For example, you shot the Arch of Ctesiphon from a bird’s eye view, but also in closeup with a shepherd and his flock, and again with a Rabab player and an urbane American couple, with all three photos creating different meanings. Did an aerial viewpoint affect your way of seeing apart from, obviously, the visual result?

LAA: It enhanced my sense of beauty, because everything looks more beautiful from above. You are far from the earth and cannot see as much ugliness.



Latif Al Ani. Tahrir Square, Baghdad, 1962. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

ARC: As part of an Iraqi press team, you accompanied Saddam Hussein to Paris in 1972. What were your impressions of him? Did you have a sense of how bad things could become?

LAA: He gave me the impression of being an able leader, and I never imagined that things could become as bad as they did.

ARC: In the 60s, you also photographed the German Democratic Republic and various North American cities. In formal terms, those images are similar to your Iraqi ones. How did you experience those places, and were your photographic priorities the same?



Latif Al Ani. Rashid Street, Haydarkhana, 1961. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

LAA: They are always the same. I am a photographer and I cannot be two different people in different places. My priorities are the same.

ARC: You stopped photographing completely when taking pictures in public was no longer permitted under the regime. It must have been very difficult to end such an important part of your life, having produced such a remarkable body of work. Were you ever tempted to leave Iraq?

LAA: I was revulsed by the fact that holding a camera became a dangerous act, and I didn't want to be a photographer any more. I left Iraq briefly, but came back because it is my home.



Latif Al Ani. Baghdad, 1961. B+W digital print on Hahnemühle Baryta Fine Art paper, 25 x 25 cm. © The artist and the Arab Image Foundation, Courtesy the Ruya Foundation.

ARC: Your work has recently received considerable international attention following its showing at the Venice Biennale in 2015. What do you hope the impact of your photographs might be on viewers accustomed to images of devastation in Iraq?

LAA: I think viewers are surprised or shocked when they see them in contrast to what they see of Iraq today. I hope that they make people think and feel the pain we feel, and get inspired to help Iraq have another “golden age”. I’m happy that my work has had the interest it has had, this late in my life.

A selection of Latif Al Ani’s photographs was exhibited at the end of last year, for the first time in the UK, by the Ruya Foundation at [Coningsby Gallery, London](#).

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