

The Iraqi National Museum of Modern Art: Journey of Destruction

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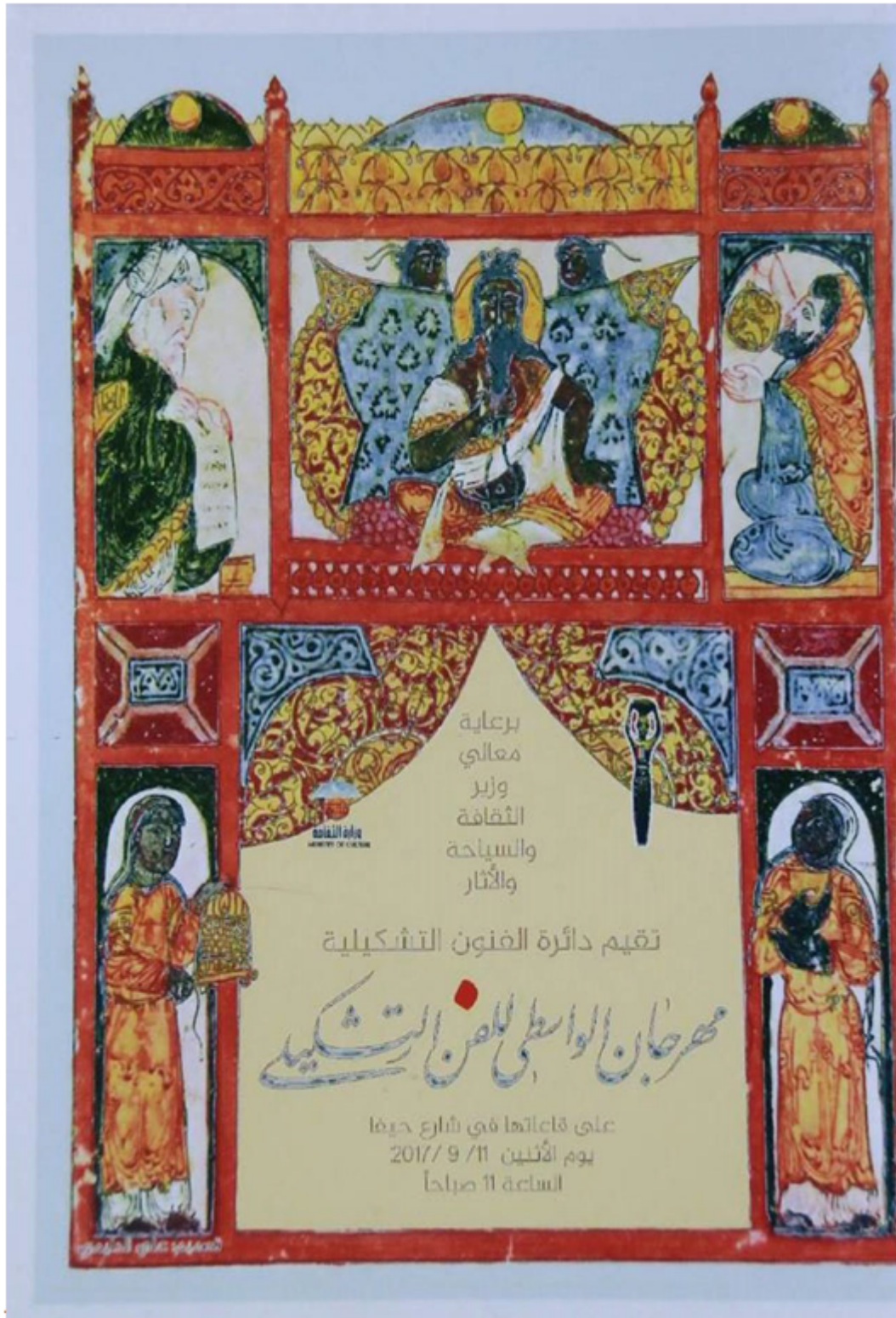
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A glimpse of the plastic arts in Iraq

The contemporary Iraqi plastic art is considered to be the legitimate heir of the ancient Iraqi civilizations of Sumer and Babylon. Relics have been found indicating that the Iraqi craftsman is the first artist in the world. He is the one who creates and produces such beautiful household pottery pieces for functional purposes for eating, drinking and other daily uses.

The Baghdad School of Art of Illustration was founded by Iraqi artist Yahya bin Mahmoud bin Yahya bin Abi al-Hassan al-Wasiti who laid down its pillars. Al-Wasiti lived in the seventh Hijri century and is considered to be at the forefront of Arab and Islamic creativity scene where the Islamic art of illustration could be straightened and become competitive. Then this School spread from Mesopotamia to all other Islamic countries. Al-Wasiti inspired others with his miniature manuscripts on which he painted topics and narrative facts from the collections of al-Hariri which were written by Abu Muhammad al-Qasim bin Ali bin Othman al-Basri, famous as “al-Hariri”.

These collections are considered to be among the Arabic literary masterpieces due to their richness of material, accuracy of observation and unique imagination. Artist al-Wasiti completed illustrating and scripting these collections in 634 A.H./1237 A.D., and they are now treasured at several international museums and libraries. These painted collections were quite famous. Rulers and affluent folks of the time were jostling for acquiring them due to their popularity and beautiful aesthetic illustration reflected by al-Hariri as a form of literary art, attracting artist al-Wasiti who was inspired by them, with a colored illustration emerging into the light during the first half of the thirteenth century A.D. They represented the peak of what the Iraqi School had reached in the art of painting and coloring.



The continuous colonial darkness on Iraq had shed its dark obscure shadow on the beautiful colored image of this early and essential artistic School. Because of the heavy burden of this long darkness and the negative effects it caused on the Iraqi social reality in general, the Iraqi art had also remained as a general concept in a deep stupor. It had to get a quick awakening, a renewed revival and a remarkably sustained activity so it could join the international art vanguard.

With the beginning of the 20th century, there was an emergence of a new dawn and the penumbra of lights that shattered the darkness of the dusk. Thus did the sun of the art of illustration in Iraq shone again to formulate from its threads a renaissance of contemporary

art ushered by an educated elite of hobbyist painters from among military officers who had learned illustration at their military Schools where painting formed a decorative aspect of their personal and private lives.

Abdul-Qadir al-Rassam, who was born in Baghdad in 1882 A.D., became the first eminent painters, the most brilliant in style and the most productive and outgoing among all others. He even was the most clingy painter devoted to the life and reality of the countryside and to the Baghdadi nature. He left a large collection of artistic oil paintings of different sizes which he had done between Istanbul, Turkey, when he was then an officer of the Ottoman army, and Baghdad.



Painting by Abdul-Qadir al-Rassam depicting a scene in Southern Iraq

Artist Abdul-Qadir al-Rassam continued his productive artistic career despite his difficult economic and health conditions until his death in 1952 after an age of more than 90 years, as well as other artists such as Assim Hafidh, Saleem Ali, father of the immortalized sculptor Jawad Saleem, Othman Beg, Natiq Beg, Hassan Sami and Mohammed Salih Zaki, the first to publish brochures on the art of drawing art in schools.

Those elite painters were called “the early” or the pioneers, and they were able to set the foundation block for the rules of the art of drawing in its proper academic form, especially after the Iraqi government had been established during the monarchy period when they left their military jobs to be completely devoted to teaching the art of illustration at private and official schools in Baghdad.

Thus did the Iraqi art of illustration grow day after day and year after another, and the official art scholarships started to send students abroad. Akram Shoukri was the first scholarship student sent in 1930 to London followed by artist Faiq (Faeq) Hassan who traveled to Paris in 1935. Then artist Jawad ←Saleem was sent to Paris in 1938 then to Rome in 1939 as well as artists Atta Sabri and Hafiz al-Durubi and others.

The year 1932 witnessed the holding of the first Iraqi plastic art gallery dubbed “The Industrial-Agricultural Gallery”, while in 1939, the scholarship envoys returned. The establishment of the drawing department at the Institute of Fine Arts then took place. Thereafter, the first art staff graduated, undertaking the lead of the plastic movement through art groups and joint galleries. Thus did artistic and creative mobility begin crawling little by little. So, in 1941, the “Friends of the Art Society” became the first art association in Iraq. It was followed in 1950 by a pioneer group led by artist Faiq Hassan, then in 1951, the “Modern Art Group” was led by artist Jawad Saleem. The Iraqi Impressionist Group was launched in 1953 from the atelier of artist Hafiz al-Durubi followed by the Contemporary Art Group which was founded by some graduates of the Fine Arts Institute.

In 1956, the Iraqi Artists Society was formed to incorporate art groups with other elite artists and began its activity in the same year when it announced the organizing of a series of art galleries, the holding of lectures and the showing of films under the title “Iraqi Art Festival.”

Thus, contemporary Iraqi art has taken its proper place on the cultural, political and even social scenes as well as its own trend towards contemporary approaches to express the humanitarian values and concepts just as the intellectual visions and technical methodologies have varied so that each Iraqi artist now has his own identity and imprint that distinguishes him from others in concept, color and line.

Because of this remarkable development and great advanced transformation the geographic and creative scope of which had expanded, there had to be a museum to accommodate this huge quantity and quality of experiences and outstanding art achievements to be documented and preserved.



Gulbenkian Hall

So was the Gulbenkian Hall in Bab al-Sharqi area in the heart of the capital, Baghdad, which was later renamed “the National Museum of Modern Art”, officially inaugurated in 1962 on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the July 14 Revolution to house the Iraqi Gallery.

This museum has had an active and significant role to play later in the march of the Iraqi

plastic movement through sponsoring personal galleries, collective festivals, evenings, seminars specialized in art and other cultural activities as well as accommodation in storing thousands of different illustrated artworks (museum work) of all its kinds, such as oil and water paintings, ink sketches, graphic designs of different techniques, Arabic calligraphy, sculpture of all materials, plus ceramics.

It became mandatory to establish a museum of a larger and more advanced area suitable for the Iraqi plastic art achievements, one which accommodates all this qualitative sum of artworks according to international storage organization system and gallery halls qualified to receive such creativities.

The beginning of the Museum's establishment

Before the July 14, 1958 Revolution, **the Iraqi Museum of Antiquities** played an important role in encouraging the art movement in Iraq. This Museum used to express its opinion on international art galleries after artist Akram Shukri had settled in as the director of the laboratory upon his return from his study scholarship in London.

Thus did he undertake to organize a collection of artworks in order to participate in the 1948 Cairo Gallery and in another UNESCO Gallery held in Beirut and in others.

After the July 14, 1958 Revolution, urgency necessitated the emergence for the need to accommodate the rise and growth of the art movement in the country, hence concepts and aspirations ended up in projects dictated by the circumstances of that period.

Thus did the National Museum of Modern Art come to be as a cornerstone for encouraging and sponsoring the Iraqi arts. As for this Museum, it was dubbed "Gulbenkian" after Armenian citizen Calouste Gulbenkian who had made a donation to build this Museum in cooperation with the State.

Actually, in early 1959, the Municipality started constructing a building in the heart of Baghdad City in Bab al-Sharqi area, and when this building was completed in late 1961, it later became to be known as the Art Center as it was destined to be. Deliberations went on between the then General Directorate of Antiquities and the Ministry of Guidance to take over the plastic antiquities housed in the Museum of Modern Art when the latter was abolished by the said Ministry that took over the responsibility of displaying them at a new museum.

Thus, the delivery procedures commenced within a short period of time, and the museum building was officially inaugurated in July 1962, starting with the opening of the Iraqi Art Gallery held on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the July 14 Revolution.

It must be mentioned that the year 1960 witnessed the establishment of the first nucleus of the National Museum of Modern Art by the Directorate of Art Galleries in the Ministry of Guidance at the initiative of pioneer artist Nouri al-Rawi who convinced the Minister to purchase the first painting collection of the pioneer artists, including those of Jawad Saleem, Suad Seleem, Naziha Seleem, Atta Sabri, Faiq Hassan, Issa Hana, Shakir Hassan Al Sa'eed, Isma`eel al-Shaikhli and others.

Al-Rawi kept exerting all his personal efforts to obtain an international scholarship. After his correspondence, he earned a scholarship from the Gulbenkian International Foundation in

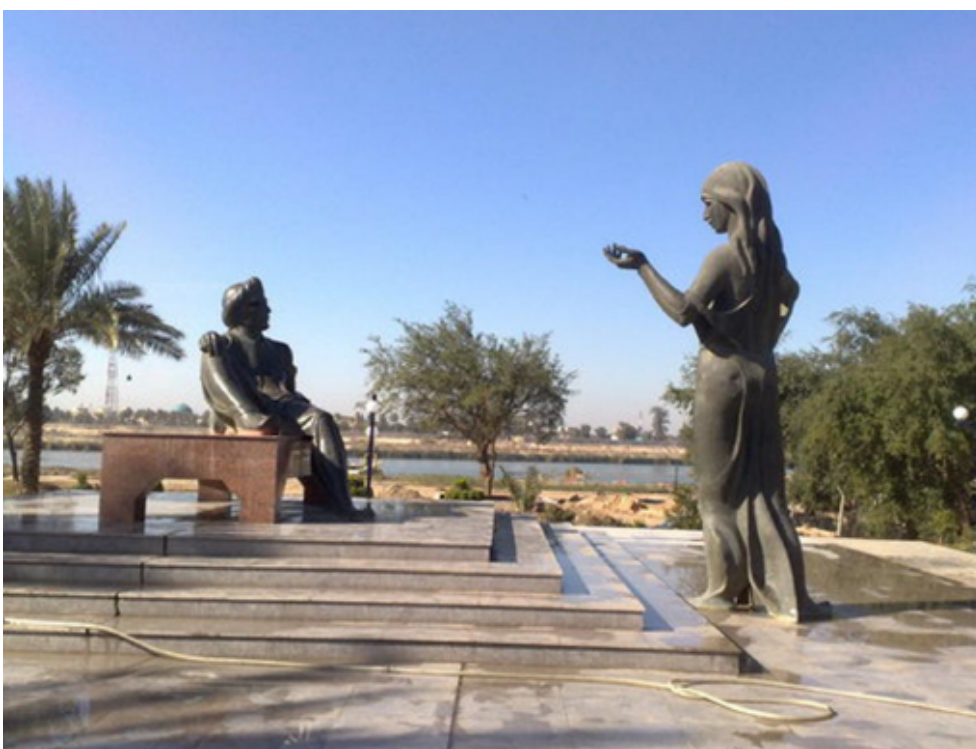
Lisbon, the Portugal, to build the National Gulbenkian Museum of Modern Art to be opened later and be the museum's first director.

The National Gulbenkian Museum of Modern Art is considered to be a cultural art monument illuminating the real face of the plastic art movement in Iraq, rather, a streaming center for all plastic art connoisseurs. It is the most attended and active place in presenting plastic experiences and researches and even submitting art data which some art groups have now adopted.

This Museum includes four halls, the largest is set aside for the Museum of Permanent Iraqi Art which includes selected samples of Iraqi artists' works in the plastic arts fields. It was not limited to only holding plastic galleries; rather, it went beyond that to also maintain artworks, prepare weekly evenings and cultural seminars, activities that went on throughout the 1970 decade.

In 1971, al-Rawi suggested the establishing of the "Plastic Archive" to document all what is published in the press such as follow-ups, press releases, critique articles and others that relate to the plastic art. Thus, lighting devices were introduced and a store was allocated for artworks which had been acquired by the State from artists. International galleries started to exchange with Iraq through managing the Museum directly through support from the Ministry of Culture and Arts as well as the organizing of weeks and days for the Iraqi art pioneers, inviting Arab and foreign artists to hold their own galleries there.

The result, therefore, was this Museum becoming active and undertaking later on a significant role in the march of the Iraqi plastic movement through receiving personal galleries, public festivals, evenings, seminars specialized in art and other activities. Add to this its accommodation of storing thousands of different varied Museum artworks. It was, hence, necessary to establish a Museum with a larger area and more developed facilities to accommodate the Iraqi Plastic Art Achievements and all this qualitative storage of artworks according to an international standard of storage organization and gallery halls eligible to receive such creativities.



A sculpture by Muhammed Ghani Hikmat depicting a scene from the Arabian Nights. The Tigris River appears in this photo.

The Art Center Opens

There it was, the opening of the first contemporary plastic monument for the Iraqi art, actually the most important art monument in the Middle East area, dubbed in 1986 “Saddam Arts Center” at Haifa Street equipped with all important and modern requirements for success and for rehabilitating all administrative and art sections according to the advanced and modern requirements, such as archiving and documenting.

This section includes all detailed information and documentation about the march of art and artists one by one since the beginning of the 20th century, a library of hundreds of titles and art references in Arabic, English and some other languages, an audio-visual section, an artworks’ maintenance section and spacious halls for lectures and seminars. It also allocates full floors of selected groups of these collections. Two floors were allocated for the experiments of Iraqi artists from different generations that followed the pioneers generation while one floor was allocated for artists’ works, the early ones first then beyond that. That floor was given the name “The Pioneers Museum”. Another separate floor was divided into two sections: one allocated for graphic arts and the other for Arabic calligraphy and decoration. There are other floors which include separate wings for some prominent artists such as sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmat who donated all his artworks to the Art Center. As for the ground floor, it was allocated for the galleries and continuous periodic festivals or what is called Roving Galleries.

The coordination of art display process has been characterized by the floors’ wide areas where there are high ceiling walls, appropriate floors, natural and electrical lighting, rolling iron slides for stored paintings, central air conditioning that all suit the safety of artworks and materials plus other services and requirements that are complementary for the success and sustainability of the Museum’s message.

This Center has remained an outstanding and distinctive lighthouse in its continuous outgiving and enriching interaction with the cultural and art scenes inside and outside Iraq over the past period.

My Personal Testimony: Before and after the destruction of this Museum

Prior to the zero hour announcing the invasion of Iraq in 2003, most Iraqi official and semi-official offices as well as public organizations had undertaken preventive precautionary measures to preserve their buildings, movable and immovable funds, etc.

Thus, the Art Center used to contain thousands of art museum works for rare experiments, varying from oil and graphic paintings to water sketches, Arabic calligraphy paintings and decorations, sculptures of all materials and ceramics, all by prominent art figures from the first generation of Iraqi artists up to the beginning of the invasion.



American tanks roll on a main Baghdad street in April 2003

Due to the large number of artworks that exceeded eight thousand items of various sizes and were of extreme art significance, some of them were displayed on an area covering the center's entire fifth floor. Some were stored in the basement. There was no safe place to preserve them except the building's huge basement which was tightly controlled from all directions. So it was very difficult, rather impossible, to move this huge quantity of artworks to places outside the Museum's building. We also could not get many of them out of their frames because they were frail and damaged due to being old and exposed to complete or partial damages. Even if we had moved them distantly elsewhere, they would have been stolen, whereas all official offices and alternative sites had been looted and brutally devastated.

What was important is that the then director of the Fine Arts section, artist Mukhalad al-Mukhtar, assigned me to form a committee of the office's employees and started issuing directives to first preserve the artworks of the pioneers, to wrap them with nylon and ropes, then to take them down to the corners of the vast and safe basement.

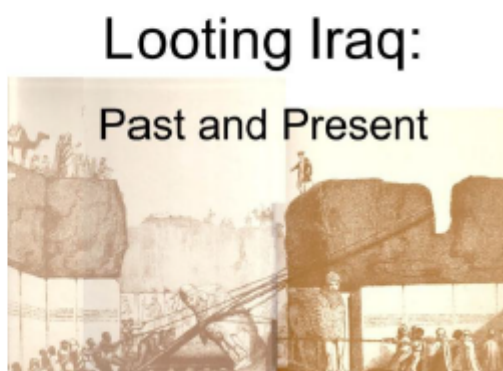


An American tank turned this museum into a parking space for it... How convenient!

We actually undertook quick measures whereby large numbers of artworks were preserved and the basement's doors were well controlled only so that many other artworks were to be

displayed on the walls of the center which became a storage area containing thousands of important artworks.

There were security guards from the army and police as well as private groups that spread throughout Baghdad areas, including the geographical area where the Museum has always been located on Haifa Street. There were round-the-clock employee sentry duties at night and during daytime despite the exit of people out of Baghdad who feared the military operations that began to escalate day after day. By then, Baghdad became a ghost city filled with fears, panic and an unknown future. A harbinger of pessimism began crawling throughout the country, and people began to realize our dire situation as being a reality from which there was no way out. We were searching for a bit of food to fight our hunger, and our tired bodies did not taste sleep or rest. All types of public transportation disappeared from the streets. Shops and restaurants were closed, and nobody was there in the city other than the security and military units that kept patrolling the city here and there with signs of apprehension on their faces especially after the U.S. forces had overrun Baghdad's International Airport and violent armed clashes erupted in its vicinity.



We, employees inside this Museum, had to exchange duties to check on what was left of our families, to make sure they were safe, and to bring some food.

Two days before the fall of the regime, I went to check on my family on foot all the way from Haifa Street to the New Baghdad area where I lived hoping to return the next morning after getting some food for my colleagues.

But we were taken by surprise due to the chaos caused by thieves and the elements of vandalism that started stealing whatever weighed less but cost a lot. All our institutional and official facilities, offices, schools, universities, hospitals and banks are destroyed and burnt and and.., Yet despite the contingency plans and strict arbitrations, there was a rapid and unexpected dissolution the like of which we never expected.

The barbaric invasion scene kept repeating itself time and over again in Baghdad. The scene we sensed was one of people who had harbored all hatred and hostility towards humanity, civilization and culture. People were killed without reasons, and there were burning and looting everywhere. This went on till the destruction and vandalism had taken their toll on this Art Center: Its huge library, historical archives and other administrative properties were all burnt.



American soldiers looked on as they witnessed the looting...

Thus did darkness cast its shadow on Iraq, taking us back to the dark ages, just as then U.S. Secretary of State, the cursed Albright, wanted and desired even before the invasion had taken place. It was all pre-meditated.

Anyway, we were stranded, the chaos intensified and the revenge emerged in the form of killing, looting and robbing. I was delayed from going there for a few days after Baghdad had been completely destroyed and everything was burnt. I finally reached the Museum, and what a horrible scene it was! I could not accept and digest the extent of the calamity and will never be able to do that because I did not imagine that in such an insane tide, all this huge Iraqi heritage which impressed the whole world could thus be dealt with. It was all destroyed by those who brag about civilization and human rights, meaning apparently to only their civilization and rights and not to those of others...

Everything came to an end in the form of torn paintings, frames stripped of stolen paintings, Museum documents and identification cards, all lost from each Museum's work by name, material, date, subject, year, etc. We had worked for many years to archive, tabulate and store items in special CDs, but now all was lost...

Moreover, there was burning of all archive files, including everything about the march of the plastic movement in Iraq according to our indexed and quite accurate tabulation. Our library stood out in its essential Arab and international sources and references; it, too, was totally and completely burnt...

The share of the destruction of Museum artworks is the loss of more than eight thousand artworks to the fire, according to the basic administrative records which were also lost to organized theft and other barbaric actions. Artworks were ripped. A large number of them were intentionally damaged, and the serious damages reached 100%, rendering these artworks out of the scope of art presentation. Most, if not all, do not qualify for any maintenance or preventive art treatment of any sort.

What was left from the rest of the Museum's artworks did not exceed one thousand artworks which had been moved to the building of the Iraqi Museum of Antiquities for the purpose of securing and preserving them temporarily until the chaotic situation could settle down. This step was provided with special protective measures.

Despite our communication with the American forces, which were present there and then, to

provide necessary protection for what was left at the building of our Art Museum, those American forces refused to oblige. The Rasheed Bank, which faced our Museum, was with protection backed by one armored vehicle! Apparently, to those Americans, money came first...

Once the tragically chaotic situation had settled down, we gradually were able to continue our official job at the Directorate of Folk Heritage located in the Iskan area, and we retrieved our preserved Museum artworks to store them in a narrow room space...

Despite the very painful circumstance that had taken place and the tragedy of the humanitarian and cultural proportions which had afflicted this huge monumental Museum, we did not stand idly by but knuckled down, and our sincere and confident efforts had resumed carefully again to rehabilitate and maintain the Museum in an attempt to bring back a sort of normalcy. According to the available possibilities to restore the glitter, splendor and luster to our educational mission, we left scattered artworks on the ground in a very deplorable condition. Those had been collected by volunteers, and some of them were completely damaged or partially torn.

The facts were later revealed that most artworks which had been stolen from the Museum by thieves as well as painting dealers who knew their real material value, many of those dealers came back to me to offer to sell the artworks which they had stolen in order to return them to the Museum because they had "bought them on the market", but I refused because I was not authorized to negotiate with them, so I invited them to directly hand the artworks in their possession over to the Ministry of Culture, perhaps the said Ministry would buy those artworks from them. But the Ministry and its officials were also busy with financial corruption, and the outcome was those artworks were smuggled out of Iraq to be sold for high prices; this did the curtain finally fell on them. Although we tried to reach and communicate with the UNESCO, the INTERPOL and art gallery halls inside and outside Iraq, there was no answer to our calls or interest to hear us...

Following the destruction of the Museum

We, the elite folks, had to initiate specialists in the plastic art to try to trace the Museum's artworks which had been stolen during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, so a specialized art committee was formed for the purpose of retrieving what could be retrieved of those lost artworks. This committee was headed by late sculptor Mohamed Ghani Hikmat and the membership of each of the following gentlemen: Ali al-Dulaimi, Taha Waheib, Najim al-Qaisi and Salah Abbas. Indeed, a large collection of them could successfully be retrieved. Other Museum artworks were handed over to us by artists and other citizens. In turn, we presented them with certificates of appreciation for their honorable patriotic gesture. Later, we held several galleries for these artworks after rehabilitating them. The most recent was a gallery for rehabilitated damaged frames of a collection of paintings. This gallery became possible due to a grant from the British Embassy in Baghdad in cooperation with the Kahramana Art Society.



All this could have been prevented...

An inclusive media campaign was launched inviting all those who retained in their possessions artworks to return the latter to this Museum or to provide us with information to their whereabouts. Indeed, these sincerely patriotic calls resulted in a good response by some honest citizens and cultural institutions and authorities inside Iraq. Some lost artworks were recovered and transferred to the maintenance section for repair and treatment from the damage thereto, though to a modest extent, to at least stop any further damage to them. Special galleries for the restored artworks were organized after appropriately preparing the halls of the art galleries to reactivate the role and mission of this Museum and to continue documenting the movement and march of plastic arts in Iraq.



No words can describe this catastrophe...

We have an art maintenance section affiliated with the Museum the role of which is to restore and maintain various artworks in academic ways in order to retain the sustainability of artworks for display in a nice way despite this section's lack of many advanced devices

and raw materials and to the fact that it is not being supported by courses on specialized training outside the country.

This Museum presently contains two gallery halls, the first is the Pioneers Hall on the first floor of the building housing the Ministry of Culture, whereas the other is on the same floor; it is the Modernity Hall.

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