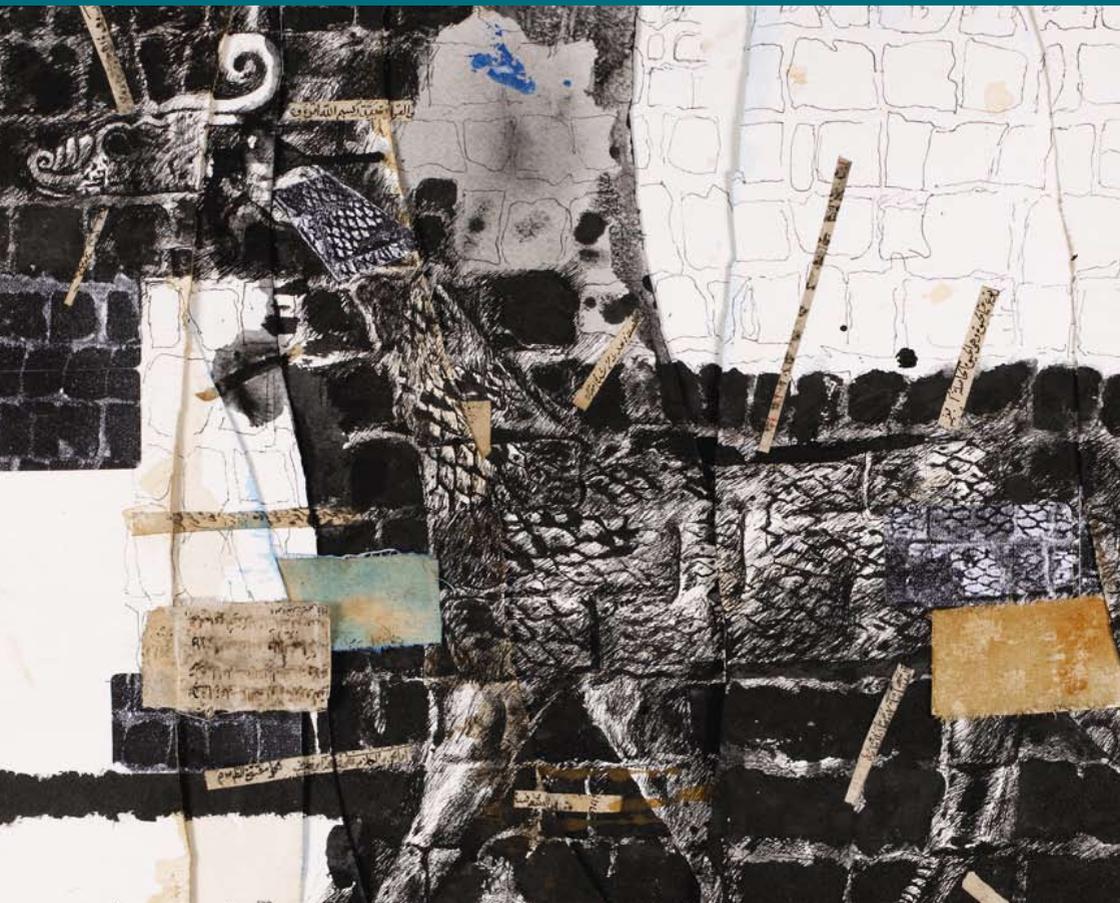


THE BRITISH MUSEUM



IRAQ'S PAST SPEAKS TO THE PRESENT

John Addis Islamic Gallery Room 34

10 NOVEMBER 2008 – 15 MARCH 2009

ماضي العراق يحدث الحاضر معرض صغير يضم أعمال أحد عشر فناناً عربياً معاصراً ، عشرة من العراق ، وواحد من سوريا . وقد أُعدَّ ليكون تكملة لمعرض المتحف بابل : الاسطورة والواقع ، الذي يتضمن معروضات مهمة من العراق القديم ، أو المنطقة التي كان الأغريق يطلقون عليها اسم ميسوبوتاميا ، أي بلاد ما بين النهرين .

وعُرفت بلاد ما بين النهرين أيضاً باسم " مهد الحضارة " حيث تمت هنا التجارب الزراعية الأولى ، وظهرت أولى المدن ، وطُورت أقدم أشكال الكتابة على أيدي السومريين وهي الكتابة المسمارية . وتضم مدونات العراق القديم التي وصلتنا قصصاً ذات أبعاد ملحمة مثل قصص كلكامش ، الذي ربما كان ملكاً حقيقياً لمدينة أوروك (الوركاء) والذي تحوّل ، منذ عام 2000 قبل الميلاد تقريباً ، عبر الشعر والانشيد ، الى بطل عظيم من خلال مجابهته أسئلة الانسانية الأبدية حول الحياة والموت .

إن ثراء البقايا الأثرية والفنية للعراق القديم يشكل مصدر إلهام لعديد من الفنانين ، فعلى سبيل المثال ، يُستكشف رأس التنين الافعى البابلي مشوّش في عمل هناء مال الله ، في حين يتناول عمل وليد سيتي زقورة بابل ، أو برج بابل الشهير ، وتلهم قصائد الحب السومرية نصير مونس ، أمّا الحصان ، الذي يمثل شكله عنصراً مركزياً في الإرث التشكيلي العراقي ، فنجده في رسومات ساطع هاشم ، وتظهر الكتابة المسمارية بوضوح في أعمال ميسلون فرج وفريال الأعظمي . بينما يتكرر تناول ملحمة كلكامش في هذا المعرض عدّة مرات ، ويتضح تأثيرها في أعمال ضياء العزّاوي ، وفيصل لعبي صاحي ، ومصطفى جعفر ، وسعاد العطار .

ويسبر هؤلاء الفنانون غور الأفكار القديمة والتقاليد لا لتذكير المشاهد بالعمق التاريخي العظيم لبلادهم فحسب ، ولكن ، مثلما يشهد عمل عصام كرجاج ، لكي يسجلوا حزنهم للتدمير المستمر لتراثنا المشترك من جراء الحرب والإهمال .

Iraq's past speaks to the present is a small exhibition which comprises works by eleven contemporary artists from the Arab world, ten Iraqi and one Syrian. This display is designed to complement the Museum's exhibition *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, which includes iconic objects from ancient Iraq, the region known to the Greeks as Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia has been called 'the cradle of civilisation' as it was here that some of the earliest experiments in agriculture were made, the world's first cities emerged, and the oldest writing was developed by the Sumerians in the form of cuneiform 'wedge-shaped' script. The surviving records of ancient Iraq include stories of epic proportion, such as the tales of Gilgamesh, perhaps a real king of Uruk (Warka) who, from around 2000 BC, was transformed through poetry and hymns into a mighty hero who confronted eternal human questions about life and death.

The rich archaeological and artistic remains from ancient Iraq form the inspiration for many artists; for example, a Babylonian *mushhushshu* dragon-snake is explored by Hanaa Mal-Allah, while Babylon's ziggurat, the famous Tower of Babel, informs Walid Siti. Sumerian love poetry inspires Nasir Mounes, the horse motif (a central element of the imagery of ancient Iraq) is found in Satta Hashem's drawings, while cuneiform is apparent in the work of Maysaloun Faraj and Firyal al-Adhamy. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a recurrent theme in the exhibition, and its influence can be seen in the works of Dia al-Azzawi, Faisal Laibi Sahi, Mustafa Ja'far and Suad al-Attar.

These artists explore ancient ideas and traditions to remind the viewer not only of their country's great depth of history but also, as exemplified by the work of Issam Kourbaj, to lament the continued destruction of our shared heritage through war and neglect.

Dia al-Azzawi

Dia al-Azzawi studied both archaeology and fine art in Baghdad, and a deep and thorough understanding of Iraq's cultural heritage underlies his artistic career as a whole. Al-Azzawi is a crucial figure among Iraqi artists as a pioneer and supporter of key art movements throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Today, al-Azzawi continues to promote the artistic talent of his fellow Iraqi artists from London, where he has been based since 1976.

Al-Azzawi's work displays an impressive range of media and techniques, and is often characterised by the use of prose or poetry, sometimes only a handful of letters, and strong, bright colours. The subject matter of ancient Mesopotamian legend as well as inspiration from pre-Islamic Arabia is often combined, which, in turn, has inspired many of the artists of following generations.

'The Mask of Gilgamesh (1985) is part of my research to go further than the flat surface of the canvas, by using a different material to construct the composition, while at the same time inserting different elements such as Arabic calligraphy. By this, I am not only adding another dimension, which can enrich the work, but also the piece becomes a freestanding object, which can stimulate the viewer's curiosity. The semi-geometric structures, the clarity of the colours and the textures of the materials such as wood, all serve to make the painting a reference to sculpture of the Sumerian civilization, in which the mythology of Gilgamesh was represented.'



Dia al-Azzawi, *The Mask of Gilgamesh*, mixed media on wood, 1985. Private Collection.

Faisal Laibi Sahi

Faisal Laibi Sahi was born in Basra and moved to Baghdad and later Paris for his studies. He is an important figure in modern Iraqi art, following principles laid down by the Baghdad group of modern art, which was led by the well-known Iraqi artist Jawad Selim (d. 1961). He was also among the group of Iraqi intellectuals who founded political and satirical newspapers and journals, both in Iraq and abroad.

Faisal Laibi Sahi is a painter, sculptor and draftsman, who expertly combines themes from all eras of Iraqi history with those of the western world, bridging the gap between where he is from and where he now lives and works. His eclectic style ranges from colourful painted works (these represent people in everyday life as well as abstract images) to detailed ceramics and simplified linear drawings.

In *Enkidu and Shamhat* (2004), the seduction of the prostitute from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is represented in a very simple, raw style directly inspired by the cylinder seals of ancient Babylon. This pen-and-ink drawing depicts the passion of the relationship between Gilgamesh's friend, Enkidu and his lover, the harlot Shamhat, as described in the first two tablets of the epic:

'She used her love-art, she took his breath with her kisses.
... held nothing back, and showed him what a woman is.'*

* This is taken from a new English translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from the original Akkadian by Stephen Mitchell (2005).



Faisel Laibi Sahi, *Enkidu and Shamhat*, pen and ink drawing, 2004. Lent by the artist.

Hanaa Mal-Allah

Hanaa Mal-Allah studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, under the renowned and influential artist Shaker Hassan al-Said, and she was recently awarded a PhD on the philosophy of painting, in 2005. She has taught and lectured at the Institute and the University in Baghdad and is currently a fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Mal-Allah is also a formative member of the Baghdad-based Iraqi Phoenix group, which was set up in 2003 to prove the resilience of creativity during war time.

Mal-Allah focuses upon the destruction and loss of Iraqi heritage and the recurrent cycle of Mesopotamian land being set on fire throughout history. Another main theme of her work is the energetic capability of such destruction to inspire and activate artistic creation: many of her pieces are burned and cut as well as being painted.

The God Marduk (2008) is a mixed media book, the cover of which is adorned with the ancient Babylonian motif of the *mushhushshu*, or dragon-snake. Marduk was the patron deity of Babylon and was worshipped in ancient Mesopotamia and Assyria, and the *mushhushshu* is symbolic of Marduk himself. It also possesses protective qualities, and appears in existing archaeological remains, most famously on the Ishtar Gate, the main portal into ancient Babylon. Underneath the cover of the book, the *mushhushshu* motif is repeated in the intricate layers of overlapping pages, some of which are treated with inks and paints, others with collages or burn marks.



Hanaa Mal-Allah, *The God Marduk*, artist's book (mixed media on paper), 2008.
Lent by the artist.

Mustafa Ja'far

Mustafa Ja'far studied art and design in Iraq and Italy, and he studied calligraphy under the master calligrapher Hashim al-Khattat al-Baghdadi. Ja'far teaches Arabic calligraphy at Birkbeck College and he wrote the British Museum's *Arabic Calligraphy: Naskh Script for Beginners* (2002).

Mustafa Ja'far was born and grew up in Southern Iraq, which was once ancient Sumer and the setting for the Epic of Gilgamesh. The suffering of this same area of land over time is explored in his art and when combined with his personal experience, the artist's work acquires a manifest poignancy. His most recent exhibition *Black Words in Red Ink* (2008) was dedicated to the war in Iraq.

His artwork for this exhibition (2008) is inscribed in brown ink in *muhaqqaq* script, while the vowel markings are comprehensive and each one is executed in several bright colours. The lines of the calligraphy are taken from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as translated by Professor Taha Baqir from Akkadian into Arabic. Ja'far grew up reading this version of the epic. Here, we read the opening line that refers to Gilgamesh, the protagonist:

'He was the one who had seen all things,
So honour his memory, oh my Country!'^{*}

^{*} This is taken from the English translation of the 1960s Arabic version of the Gilgamesh epic by Taha Baqir. It is translated into English by Summaya Damaluji (1989).

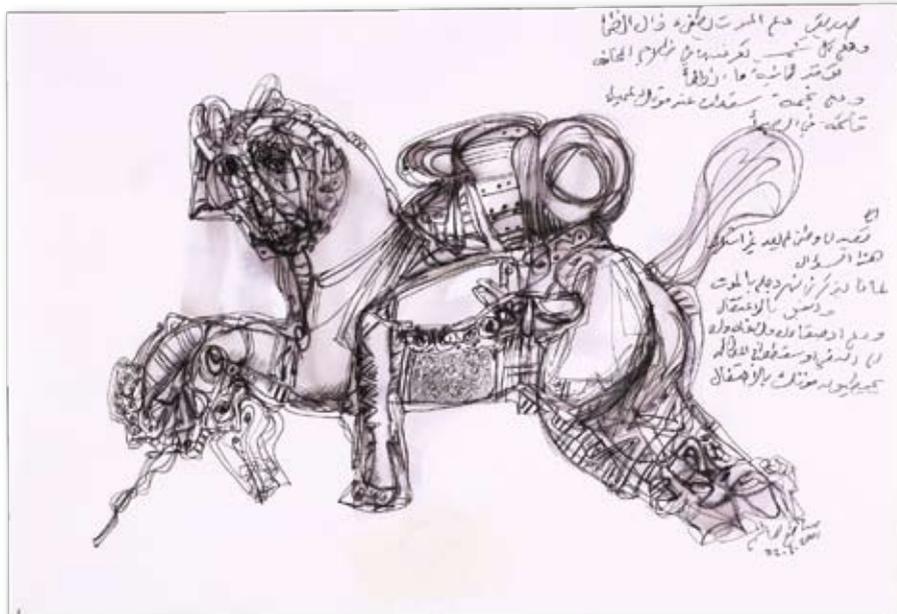
هُوَ الَّذِي هَدَىٰ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ
فَعَنَىٰ بِذِكْرِ الْيَاسْرِ

Satta Hashem

Satta Hashem grew up in Buhriz, near Tell Asmar, the remains of an ancient Mesopotamian town c. 2500 BC. Even as a child, he was amazed by the collections of antiquities in the Iraq museum, Baghdad. At the age of nineteen, Hashem's exile began when he left Iraq for Algeria. He moved to Russia as a student, where he was greatly inspired by the Arab and Persian collections of the Russian museums, as well as the skill of icon-painters. Hashem later moved to Sweden, where he spent ten years, and he now lives and works in Leicester.

Hashem's cultural origins in the ancient art of Mesopotamia resonate in his work. He also specialised in mural painting, during his studies in St Petersburg, and has done a number of permanent and temporary murals at public places in Stockholm and Leicester, among others.

This pen and ink drawing (2001) represents a horse, a central element in the imagery of the empires of ancient Iraq. On the right-hand side, in his own handwritten Arabic, the artist has inscribed a poem by the Iraqi poet Fawzi Karim. Hashem explains: *'This poem is a requiem for the writer's friend who was killed in prison in Iraq. The martyr was a well-known Iraqi lawyer. In my drawing, I tried to say that he never dies; in fact, he is still here with us. The horse and the rider were inspired by ancient Mesopotamian art, where the major theme of the period was the struggle between life and death.'*



Satta Hashem, *Untitled drawing*, pen and ink, 2001. British Museum 2005 7-22 04.

Suad al-Attar

Suad al-Attar was the first Iraqi female artist to have a solo exhibition in Baghdad, the city of her birth. She studied art in Iraq and America, and continued with printmaking when she moved to London, where she still lives and works.

Poetry, Sumerian legends and Middle Eastern landscapes have long permeated al-Attar's work, often adding historical depth to the sense of loss and alienation felt by her fellow countrymen. Inspired by this, prominent themes appear in her work, such as dreams and cityscapes, and the human couple.

Cry of Mesopotamia (2004) depicts a crying face seemingly emerging from an opening in the paper itself. The detailed ink work outlines the features, describes textures of the skin and hair, and there is dense cross-hatching in the background shadows. Al-Attar describes: *'Her face is etched with pain; within her dwells decades of sadness. She symbolises the horror of war, and seeing this face in a newspaper triggered a whole new chapter of my work, starting in 2003.'*

The title addresses such pain, linking both the ancient and modern worlds, enforcing the idea that the anguish felt in Iraq is that which has long overshadowed the region. Ultimately, the present cry transcends time; merging with that which has eternally sounded.

'My soul cries alas for thee,
O my land,
With a sigh like the blaze of a conflagration
My soul cries alas for thee,
O mine of excellences,
With a sigh
That makes me bite my thumb.'*

* Written by Ibn al-Rumi (d. 896).



Suad al-Attar, *Cry of Mesopotamia*, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2004. Lent by the artist.

Walid Siti

Walid Siti is a Kurdish-born painter and printmaker, who studied in Baghdad and later in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The artist currently resides and works in the UK, and his work was exhibited at Leighton House during the summer of 2008.

As an Iraqi and as a Kurd, Siti draws upon both personal and collective experiences and emotions of war, pain and loss. Siti explores the spiralling shape and its symbolic meaning as relevant to the relationship between people and landscape. *'In this series of work, ancient architectural icons became metaphors and signifiers to express the human ambition to stamp its mark upon the environment and onto history itself. It drives from my need to understand the subject matter in its historical context, in the hope that this may shed some light upon understanding our current history.'*

This sketched charcoal drawing (2001) is inspired by the shape of the ziggurats of Mesopotamia and the Tower of Babel, as described by ancient sources, such as the Greek historian Herodotus and the writers of the Old Testament. The drawing explores the spiral shape, which was also deeply influential in the mediaeval and Islamic era. In the ninth century, the 'Abbasid caliphs and rulers of Islam constructed a new capital city, Samarra, on the banks of the River Tigris, in central Iraq. The Great Mosque of Samarra (built in AD 847) is most famous for its enormous, spiral-shaped minaret, known as *malwiya*, and this design was replicated for minarets elsewhere in the Islamic world.



Walid Siti, *Untitled drawing*, charcoal on paper, 2001. Lent by the artist.

Maysaloun Faraj

Maysaloun Faraj was born in the USA to Iraqi parents. Her childhood was spent travelling, during which artistic creativity was a constant and reliable source of comfort in an otherwise changing environment. Faraj returned to Iraq for her formative teenage years and graduated with a BSc in Architecture from the University of Baghdad where she also married. She later moved to the UK, where she pursued further studies in painting and ceramics, and where she has settled since 1982.

Faraj is a supporter of Iraqi artists; curator of the ground-breaking, touring exhibition *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (2000–3) and editor of its coinciding publication; founder of both iNCiA (International Network for Contemporary Iraqi Artists) and ayagallery in London. In her own words, her work explores *'relationships between people and their surrounding forces; the 'other', past, present, nature and the invisible or unknown'*. It is also informed and inspired by the rich historical heritage of Mesopotamia and Islam.

Ancient Land is a concave, square shaped tablet made from earthstone clay with amber and bronze glazes and gilding. The piece is carved with ancient cuneiform-like script at the edges, fading into different symbols and motifs, including verses from the Qur'an (*Surat al-Baqara: Ayat al-Kursi*), which is recited particularly for protection. *'Ancient Land is one of my ongoing responses to the bombardment of our beautiful homeland, and the destruction of Iraq's rich historical and cultural heritage. However, with all its incisions and damage, she remains resilient and beautiful, like an obsolete artefact dug from beneath the debris, from an ancient past.'*



Maysaloun Faraj, *Ancient Land*, Glazed earthstone with amber glaze, bronze and gold, 2002.
Lent by the artist.

Nasir Mounes

Nasir Mounes was born in Baghdad, where he studied art before moving to The Hague in the Netherlands, where he continued his studies. He has lived and worked in London since 2007.

Mounes' work is concerned with the symbiotic relationship between poetry and painting and the natural connection between the poetic and the visual. Mounes emphasises that the visual form can be just as important a part of the poetic vision as the words themselves. Mounes, therefore, uses writing, whether engraved or burnt or drawn by hand; and often uses Akkadian-style script to represent the past.

The Sumerian Love Chants is part of a collection of thirty works, which are made of silkscreen prints pasted onto blocks. They are inspired by the ancient Sumerian myth of the wedding of the mortal shepherd-king Dumuzi and the goddess Inanna (the Sumerian counterpart to Ishtar), whose marriage ensured the fertility of the land. When Dumuzi was sent to the Underworld for six months of the year, it led to the dry, barren summers of the region, which relied heavily upon agriculture during the winter months. The new year was celebrated at the autumnal equinox, when Dumuzi rises from the Underworld and vegetation and fertility return once more: *'In spite of love and passion the marriage of Dumuzi comes to a painful end. The whole collection tries to make a comparison between the death of the Iraqi Dumuzi and his resurrection once again.'*



Nasir Mounes, *The Sumerian Love Chants*, silkscreen print on silk, 2005. Lent by the artist.

Firyal al-Adhamy

Firyal al-Adhamy was born in Baghdad and is a self-taught artist. She currently resides in Manama, Bahrain.

Al-Adhamy's work is inspired by the rich cultural history of Iraq. She grew up in an environment of traditional craftsmanship: from an early age she witnessed the process behind and the products realised through traditional crafts of jewellery and costume, textiles and woodwork. Al-Adhamy's objects of study are varied, although her single aim is to observe and faithfully replicate the object, thereby documenting and preserving it for posterity. Minute precision and attention to detail are characteristic of al-Adhamy's work.

She writes: 'In this cuneiform inscription painting (2005), I have expressed my anguished feelings over the looting of the treasures of ancient Mesopotamia in the Museum of Baghdad in 2003. The cracks and holes in these tablets not only depict the physical violence perpetrated against the whole heritage of Iraq, but they also symbolize the poignant wounds in my heart, a heart torn by the shock of irretrievable loss. It was this loss, and the grief I felt when I first heard of the crime that inspired me with the idea of reproducing these priceless pieces in my paintings.'



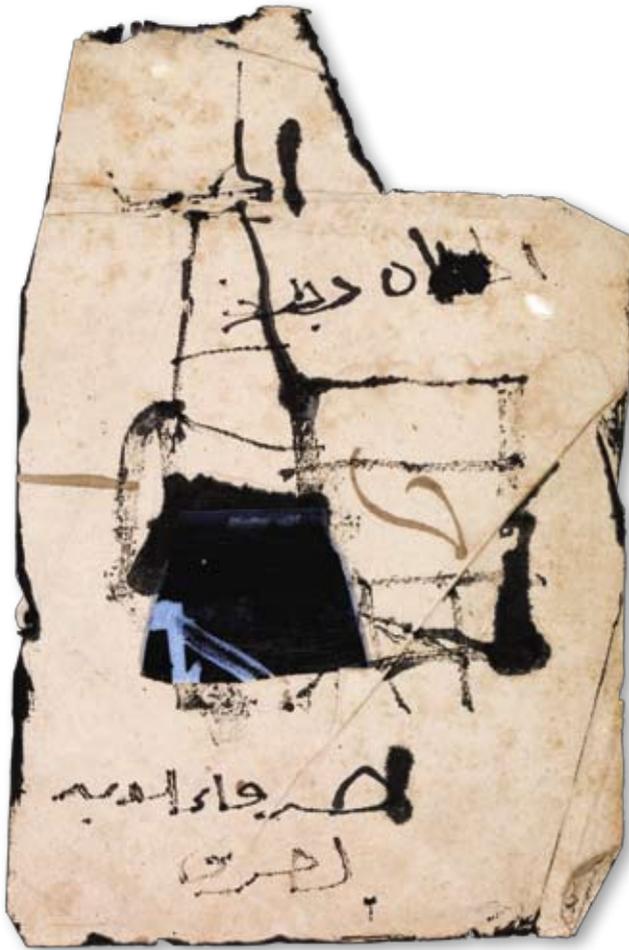
Firyal al-Adhamy, *Mesopotamian Inscription*, mixed media on paper, 2005. British Museum, 2008 60-31 1.

Issam Kourbaj

Issam Kourbaj is a painter, sculptor and theatre designer based in Cambridge. He studied in Damascus under the well known Syrian artist Fateh Moudarres (d. 1999), before completing his training in St Petersburg and London. He teaches within Cambridge University and is a Bye Fellow at Christ's College and Artist in Residence there.

Kourbaj is an artist inspired by what transpires around him in the course of daily life, yet he also embraces the non-representational. Lack of confinement by the limits of the paper, canvas and medium allows him absolute creative freedom, He also draws on the expressive and candid reactions observed in children's art; this could also account for the element of nostalgia that is recognisable in Kourbaj's work.

'Sound Palimpsest originated in thoughts that welled up in reaction to the second invasion of Iraq, and which have continued to preoccupy me. The sheer brutality of the war machine and the fragility of the humans facing it was the trigger for this project. Sound Palimpsest deals, in a subtle archaeological 'prose' using Arabic script, with layers of fragments: aural fragments of ordnance-sounds, visual fragments of Iraqi walls with children's graffiti, technical fragments of hospital and veterinary X-ray plates, fragments of books, fragments of Arabic songs.'



Issam Kourbaj, *Sound Palimpsest* (detail), mixed media on paper, 2003. British Museum, 2008 60-18 1.

Further reading

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Faisel Laibi Sahi, *Noah's Ark*, 2003



The British-Iraqi Friendship Society aims to inform the public about the culture of Iraq, its history, heritage, art, performing arts, language and traditions.

The British Museum is grateful to the British-Iraqi Friendship Society for their generous support for this guide to the exhibition. We are also grateful to the following artists for the loan of their works: Suad al-Attar, Dia al-Azzawi, Faisel Laibi Sahi, Walid Siti, Nasir Mounes, Maysaloun Faraj, Hanaa Mal-Allah and Mustafa Ja'far. The other works are in the collection of the British Museum. For the design of this guide, thanks to Mahesh Chudasama and for the text thanks to Louisa Macmillan.

Venetia Porter
Department of the Middle East

Gallery talks

Iraq's past speaks to the present: a display of works by artists from Iraq and Syria

Wednesday 11 February 2009, 13.15

Room 34

Some of the artists whose works are displayed will give a talk in **Arabic**.

Iraq's past speaks to the present: a display of works by artists from Iraq and Syria

Friday 20 February 2009, 13.15

Room 34

Venetia Porter and artists involved in the display.

For the full events programme visit www.britishmuseum.org

Related exhibitions & galleries

Babylon: Myth and Reality

13 November 2008 – 15 March 2009

Room 35

The exhibition explores the continuing dialogue between the Babylon of our imagination and the historic evidence for one of the great cities of antiquity at the moment of its climax and eclipse. £8, Members free

Supported by the Blavatnik Family Foundation

Exhibition organised with the musée du Louvre and the Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

The wealth of Babylon

8 December 2008 – 15 March 2009

Room 68

Coins from the mint at Babylon. Admission free

Mesopotamia 1500–539 BC

Room 55

Enlightenment

Room 1

Mesopotamia 6000–1500 BC

Room 56

Admission free

There is a free eyeOpener tour on Ancient Iraq daily at 11.45 in Room 56.

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