

# FEATURE: Iraqi Artist FARAJ ABBO



Probably one of the few painters who is always seen wearing a suit in every photograph taken in his studios while painting, **Faraj Abbo** (1921-1984) was an Iraqi painter who was born in Mosul in 1921 and passed away in Baghdad in 1984. Abbo's artistic talents began to become evident at the young age of 13 when he was commissioned to produce paintings for local churches in Mosul; such as the one seen in Mar Eshai Church. Four years following the completion of secondary school education in 1939 Baghdad, Abbo joined the Friends of Art Society, and was an instrumental teaching member at multiple Teachers Centres across Iraq. The Friends of Art Society was first established by Iraqi painter Akram Shukri as a collective that paralleled the European art societies he was directly involved with in England, and indirectly by the major influence of Polish artists in Baghdad during the WWII period ([x](#)). Faraj Abbo

then travelled to Cairo where completed a BFA in Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in 1950, which was then followed by a period in Rome, Italy where he received an Honors Diploma in Fine Arts with highest distinction in 1954. Upon his return to Baghdad, Faraj started teaching at the Institute of Fine Arts and became the head of the Department of Plastic Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad University. He also spent a few years teaching free-hand sketching at the Engineering College at Baghdad University. The 1950s period was marked by the formation of Al Rowad Arts Collective; an artistically distinctive collective that included figures like Jawad Salem and Faiq Hassan.

Faraj's artistic style is one with a fluctuating nature due to his exposure to different movements across the globe, particularly in Russia, to which he had travelled to on his motorbike from Iraq. As mentioned earlier, prior to his travels to Russia, he first joined the Friends of Art Society in 1944, whose members were highly influenced by Russian painters at that period, adhering to a characteristic figurative and symbolist approach. During the 1970s, Faraj Abbo's art began to depart from realism and instead adopted a very abstract approach, one that was very foreign to his previous work. The first exhibition of such work was held in 1971 in Gulbenkian Hall, Baghdad; here is an excerpt of what Palestinian author and art critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra wrote about this transformation:

## فرج عبو

لقد راح فرج عبو يتطور لعدة سنوات في اتجاه ربما كان حتمياً عليه ان ينتهي الى التجريد . غير أن طفرته الأخيرة في التجريد جريئة جدا ومغامرة ، حتى لبدهش لها كل الذين يعرفون أعماله الفنية . ان الصلات بأعماله السابقة يمكن تقصيرها أحيانا بتأليفه الهندسي الأساس ، غير أن انطلاقه في اللون المحض والشكل البحث قد أسفى على عمله طاقة وقوة . فهو دائب منذ سنوات ثلاث على معاملة الرؤية كتجربة في اللون والضوء ، وغدت كل لوحة لديه محاولة جديدة لمعالجة حالة من حالات الضوء ، او الجو ، وسواء أكانت تلك نيرة باهرة أو قائمة مكتومة ، فان وقعها في الأظلم دينامي . لم يكن الفنان يوما على هذا القدر من الانصاح ، ولعله ما يلفت النظر أنه لم يحقق أقصى الايصال الا عندما تخلى عن الرسم التشبيهي . لقد نضاً عنه جلده القديم ، بعد أن لبسه طويلا ، وبذلك أعاد الزخم لتعبيره . ولكن يشكك البعض في أصالة هذا كله . فان في جهد الفنان المتواصل واصراره الدائب ما يدل على تفحصه الدقيق لتوازعه الابداعية . والنتيجة هي هذا التمجيد الحسي للحياة . وتمجيد الحياة ، في التحليل الأخير ، هو وظيفة الفن الحقيقية .

جبرا ابراهيم جبرا

## FARAJ ABBO

Faraj Abbo had been developing for several years in a direction that was perhaps bound to end in some form of abstraction. But his last leap into the abstract is so bold and hazardous as to surprise all those who know his work. The links with his previous work are sometimes traceable in his basically geometrical composition, but his breaking into pure colour and form has endowed his work with energy and power. For three years he has been treating vision as an experience in colour and light. Every painting is a renewed attempt to cope with a mood of light, of atmosphere and, whether dazzling or subdued, the impact is often dynamic. The artist has never been so articulate; it may be significant that only by abandoning figurative representation has he achieved maximum communication. He has shed his old skin, having worn it only too well, and thereby revitalized his expression. One may have doubts about the originality of all this, but the artist's determined and sustained effort suggests a close scrutiny of his own creativity. The result is this sensuous celebration of life which, in the final analysis, is the true function of art.

Jabra I. Jabra

Faraj Abbo's work can be see across Iraq in places like Baghdad Airport and Ministries across the region. Shatha, one of Faraj Abbo's daughters also took the artistic path and is now an established painter residing in Qatar.