

Gallery talk

Admission free

The John Addis Gallery (Room 34)

Modern Syrian art at the British Museum

15 December 2011, 13.15

Louisa Macmillan and Issam Kourbaj, featured artist

Further reading

- Adam, S., 2009, *Sabhan Adam: Masterpieces & Museum collection* (publisher unknown)
- Adonis; Toorawa, S.M. (trans.), 2004, *A Time between Ashes and Roses* (Syracuse, NY)
- Amirsadeghi, H., Mikdadi, S., Shabout, N. (eds), 2009, *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century* (London)
- Attasi, M. (ed.), 1998, *Contemporary Art in Syria 1898–1998* (Damascus)
- Badawi, M.M., 1992, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge)
- Eigner, S., 2010, *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran* (London)
- Moudarres, F., 1995, *Fateh al-Moudarres* (Paris/Damascus)
- Porter, V., 2006; 2008, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, British Museum Press (London/Dubai)
- Shabout, N., 2007, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL)

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**THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM**



**MODERN SYRIAN ART
AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

4 JULY 2011 – 8 JANUARY 2012

THE JOHN ADDIS ISLAMIC GALLERY

ROOM 34

FREE

INTRODUCTION

This booklet accompanies a display examining the work of modern Syrian artists in the British Museum's collection. It features work by a range of artists including Fateh Al-Mouddarres, a leader of the Syrian modern art movement and an influential teacher. Also on display are prints, paintings and works in paper by Marwan, Youssef Abdelké, Issam Kourbaj, and a diptych by Sabhan Adam. A rare triptych by the poet Adonis is shown alongside artists' books inspired by his poetry.

The display reveals the influence of modern European art on Syrian artists and the later emergence of a distinctive Syrian style. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, the earliest modern Syrian artists were sent to Europe to study, as was also the case in other Arab countries such as Egypt and Iraq. The developing Syrian art style initially reflected imported European artistic styles, for instance through the influence of German Modernism in the work of Marwan. Increasingly however, motifs and themes from Syrian tradition and everyday life began to be included, especially as artists returned from their studies in Europe. By the early 1960s, a Faculty of Fine Arts had been founded at the University of Damascus, which enabled younger artists such as Kourbaj to be taught by established artists like Moudarres.

In the works shown here, the human form is used to powerful psychological effect. Figures often make direct, provocative eye contact with the viewer. This display shows how Syrian artists have created introspective, semi-autobiographical work, in order to explore the human condition as a whole.

FATEH AL-MOUDARRRES (1922–99)

Fateh Al-Mouddarres studied fine art at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome (1954–60) and later at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1969–72). He was a prolific artist with a distinctive and influential style and he taught at the University of Damascus for many years, inspiring and supporting generations of younger artists.

These two paintings are typical of Moudarres' work, influenced by icon painting and inspired by ordinary people from rural Syrian life. One of the human figures (below left) is wrapped up, and set against a lush green background, reminiscent of the fertile countryside of Northern Syria, where Moudarres grew up. The other face (below right) is rendered in negative and peeps out of a narrow opening in the background, underneath the opening words of Chapter 108 of the Qur'an, *Al-Kawthar* ('Abundance'): 'Surely we have given thee abundance'.



Fateh Moudarres, two gouaches on wooden board (1960s), 19.5 x 15.7 cm. 2005,0708.0.1–0.2. Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



*Marwan, Marionette 2 (2007), gouache on paper, 21 x 30.2 cm 2011,6020.2.
Purchased through the Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art acquisition group.
Reproduced by permission of the artist.*

MARWAN (born in 1934)

Marwan (Kassab Bachi) was born in Damascus, Syria, and he first studied literature at the University of Damascus. He then moved to Berlin, Germany, in 1957, to study painting with Professor Hans Trier. He has remained in Berlin since, where he has studied, practised and taught art for over five decades. Marwan is dually inspired by Arab heritage and by the German Modernist art movements of the second half of the 20th century. Marwan mostly works in oils and uses recurring themes, such as the the head and the marionette, to explore different human emotions.

The head (opposite) has been Marwan's most prevalent motif since the 1970s. Each one has a subtly different, limited palette and facial expression. Here, it is melancholy and downcast.

The marionette (above) lies prone on the floor, as if without strings to represent the helplessness of humanity.



*Marwan, Head (7 Feb 2008), gouache on paper, 42 x 29.5 cm 2011,6020.1.
Purchased through the Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art acquisition group.
Reproduced by permission of the artist.*

YOUSSEF ABDELKÉ (born in 1951)

Youssef Abdelké was born in al-Qamishli, on Syria's north-eastern border, and studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. Later, he studied in Paris, achieving a doctorate in fine arts from the University of Paris VIII, where he has lived since the 1980s.

From the late 1960s, Abdelké worked on political art, such as posters and caricatures, and produced work in a variety of media, including painting, pastels and etching.

The multimedia works shown here are characteristic of Abdelké's recurring composition of three juxtaposed, standing figures. The central figure, a menacing patriarchal character, is flanked on each side by two people, representing those of inferior social status, who are often blurred and obscured beyond the point of recognition.

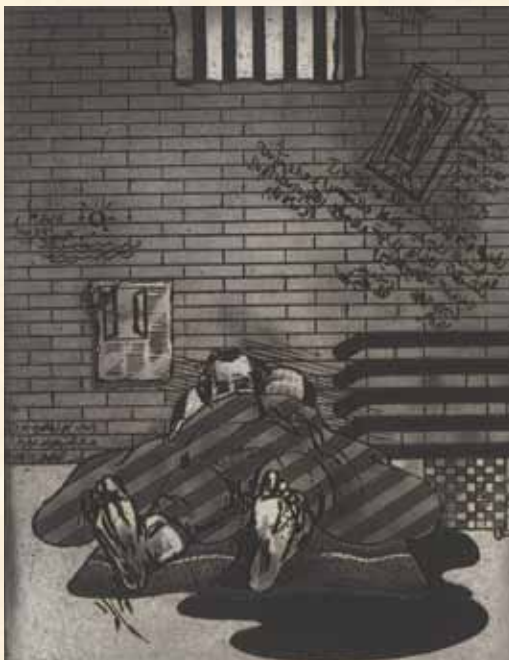


Youssef Abdelké, Figure (Nos1 & 2) (1991–3). Two collages with pastel on paper, 145 x 105 cm. 2011, 6002. 1–2. Detail (above) and front cover image. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Youssef Abdelké, Untitled (1992). Pastel and collage on paper (1992), 41 x 32 cm. 1993,0301.0.1. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

This work is one of Abdelké's characteristic three-figured compositions, a style seen in the larger works. Behind the man to the left is a shadowy individual with downcast eyes, as if in fear. On the right is a third person who is so obscured that he nearly fades into the background.



Youssef Abdelké, Oh Ali (1985). Aquatint on paper, 65 x 50 cm. Edition 9/15. 1993,0301.0.2. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

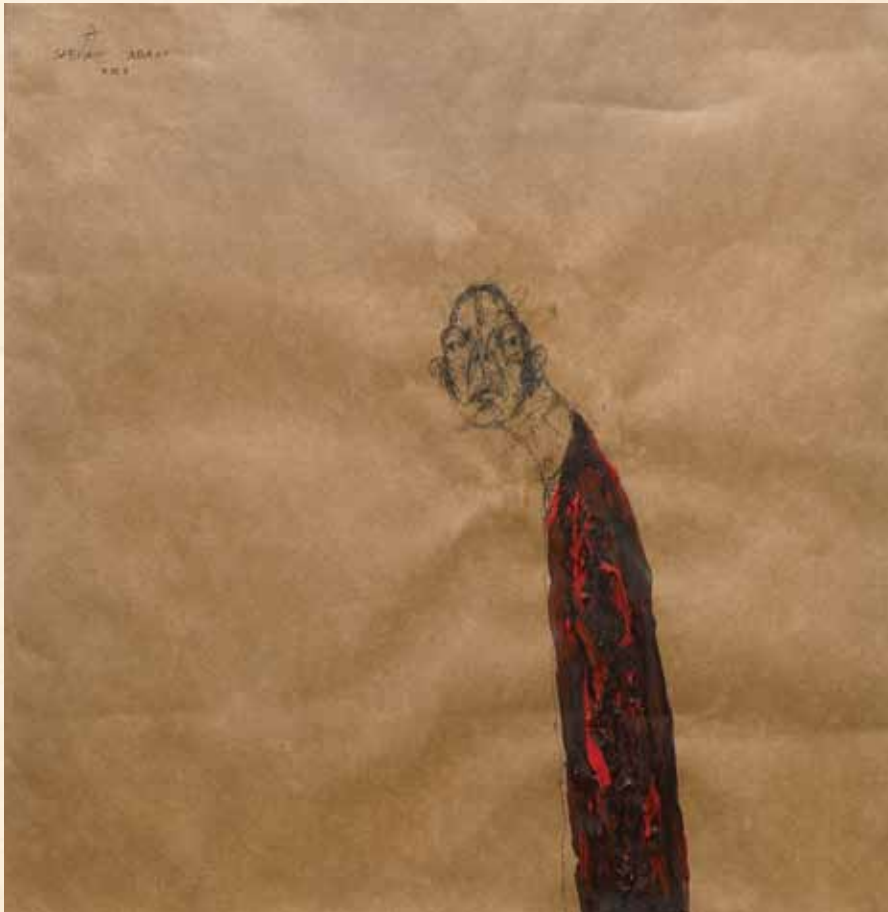
This etching depicts a man in prison, sitting next to a chess-board in front of a graffiti-covered brick wall. The strong vertical stripes of the bars are echoed horizontally, and diagonally, on the man's blanket, which covers all but his eyes and feet. This is a similar effect to that seen in Abdelké's pastel works, where features are obscured by erased pigment.

SABHAN ADAM (born in 1972)

Sabhan Adam was brought up in al-Hasaka, in north-eastern Syria. He is an entirely self-taught artist, who began painting on discarded cardboard boxes – he frequently uses brown paper to this day. Adam's works are autobiographical and introspective. Intricately drawn human heads, based on the artist himself, are placed on misshapen, nightmarish bodies, which are often brightly coloured.



These works by Sabhan Adam depict anthropomorphic creatures. The human heads, based on self-portraits, are intricately rendered in Adam's characteristic drawing style, and make direct eye contact with the viewer. These complex, expressive heads extend from grotesque and indistinct bodies of red and yellow.



Sabhan Adam, untitled diptych (2009), two drawings, graphite and acrylic on brown paper, 50 x 50 cm. 2010, 6005. 1–2. Gift from the Saeb Eigner family. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

ISSAM KOURBAJ (born in 1963)

Issam Kourbaj is a painter, sculptor, installation artist and theatre designer based in Cambridge. He studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, under Fateh Moudarres, before completing his training in St Petersburg and London. Kourbaj now teaches at Cambridge University, where he is an artist-in-residence at Christ's College.

Sound Palimpsest (below and right) is a mixed media work, created in reaction to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, starting with the notion of human fragility during wartime. Numerous fragments, including graffiti, x-rays, books and Arabic songs, make up the multi-layered work.





Issam Kourbaj, Sound Palimpsest (2003), multimedia work on second hand book fragments. 2008,6018.1. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

ADONIS ('ALI AHMAD SAID ASBAR) (born in 1930)

Adonis is the pen name of 'Ali Ahmad Said Asbar, the Syrian Modernist poet, who was born in al-Qassabin, a mountain village near Latakia, in north-western Syria. He founded several literary magazines in Syria and Lebanon, and also lectured in universities worldwide (holding teaching posts in Damascus, Beirut and Paris). Adonis' poetry became popular during the second half of the 20th century, as it touched upon Pan-Arab nationalistic ideals. Moreover, he is an erudite and knowledgeable scholar, who is well-versed in classical Arabic poetry and Sufism. He often uses traditional literary elements in his work, and greatly contributed to the Neo-Sufi trend in modern Arabic poetry during the 1970s. After the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, Adonis went to Paris, where he still lives and works.

The three works by Adonis (right) are based on sections of poetry, which are handwritten in black ink on white paper. Collaged layers of coarse fabric and found objects, like the stones and rose petals, add colour and texture. Adonis' artworks, like his poetry, represent a blend of traditional and contemporary influences. The poetry used in these pieces includes works by celebrated Classical poets, including the 11th century vizier Abu Nasr Ibn Jahir and the early poet 'Umar b. Abi Rabia (7th/8th century).



Adonis, three collages with applied fabric, stones, rose petal, Arabic inscriptions (2004). 2007,6012.3.a-c. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

ARTISTS' BOOKS INSPIRED BY THE POETRY OF ADONIS

Adonis created artworks using handwritten poetry and his writing has inspired fellow artists. In the British Museum collection alone, there are artists' books by Shafiq Abboud, Mohammed Omar Khalil, Dia al-Azzawi and Kamal Boullata, directly based upon and featuring his poetry. Many other artists, like the sculptor Mona Saudi, use Adonis' work in their own, often identifying with the feelings of exile which are prevalent throughout his work. Adonis' epic, narrative poem *Qabr min ajl New York* (*A Grave for New York*), published in 1971, is particularly influential and well known for its criticism of American society during the Vietnam War. It features in two of the works shown here.

Beginnings is a book by the Palestinian artist, Kamal Boulatta (born 1942). This collection includes eight poems by Adonis, transcribed in Arabic and translated into English by Kamal Boulatta and Mirène Ghossein. The poems are accompanied by brightly coloured motifs, such as *Awal al-Kalam* (*Beginning of Words*), pictured below.



Kamal Boullata, *Beginnings* (1992), hand-made book, 21.5 x 23 cm. Edition 27/40. 1997,0716.01. Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



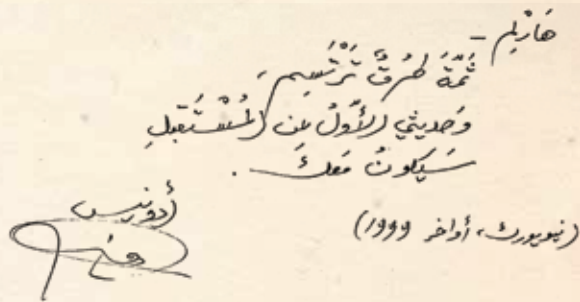
(detail) Mohammed Omar Khalil, *Harlem* (1999), five etchings (softground, aquatint, sugarlift, spitbite) with accompanying texts, 58 x 49 cm. Edition 17/20. 2007,6012.4. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Harlem is by Sudanese artist Mohammed Omar Khalil (born in 1936). It is inspired by verses describing Harlem in the narrative poem *A Grave for New York*, by Adonis, whom Khalil first met in the 1980s. This edition even includes the poem in Adonis' own handwriting and a translation into English by Mirène Ghossein and Ibrahim Elfadel (see the last verse below).

*Harlem—
Where roads for the future are
being sketched*

*Harlem:
My first encounter with Tomorrow*

Adonis
(*New York, the end of 1999*)



Dia al-Azzawi, Adonis (1990), hand coloured lithographs, 39 x 109.5 cm. Edition 1/6. 1990, 1123, 0.1. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Adonis (left) is a collection of five poems, chosen by London-based, Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi (born in 1939). This particular lithograph, with a face and abstracted shapes, incorporates verses from *A Grave for New York*, including those about Harlem, as used by Mohammed Omar Khalil (previous page).



Shafiq Abboud, Maraya li zaman al-inhiyar (1978), hand-made loose-leaf book (1978), 29.5 x 48 cm. Edition 10/15. 2007, 6012.2 (detail). Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Maraya li zaman al-inhiyar (Mirrors for the time of collapse) by Lebanese artist Shafiq Abboud (1926–2004) is a collection of ten monochrome lithographs, overwritten with texts that are based upon Adonis' poetry.