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The Death of Ismail Fattah al-Turk

By Michael Penn

On July 22, 2004, the great Iraqi artist, Ismail Fattah al-Turk, felt that he was soon to lose his battle with cancer. He had been in Abu Dhabi receiving treatment, but his one great wish was to die in Baghdad. His family was able to arrange a chartered flight, and he in fact returned home. About one hour later he died. He thus achieved his final wish to die in Baghdad, a city whose modern face he himself had helped to shape.

Ismail Fattah al-Turk was born in Basra in 1938, but soon migrated to Baghdad for his higher education. He enrolled in Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts and received his degrees in Painting in 1956 and in Sculpture in 1958. Thereafter, he moved to Italy to continue his education, receiving his degree in Sculpture from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome in 1963. By the time he returned to Baghdad that same year, he was already among the most prominent of young Iraqi artists, having received prizes for his work in It.

Throughout his career, Ismail Fattah divided his efforts between painting and sculpture. However, it is probably fair to say that it is his sculpture that established his public reputation. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he received commissions to make statues of prominent Iraqi cultural figures in various public squares in Baghdad. Among these works were his statues of Al-Rasafi, Al-Kadhimi, Al-Wasiti, and Abu Nuwas. His style in these early works tended toward Realism.

Buland al-Haidari, the late Iraqi poet, praised Ismail Fattah's early work noting that "the motion in al-Wasiti's statue is the outcome of a scrupulous study and shows the great expression and execution ability of the sculptor which came out very early in the transparency he has endowed the statue with, such as the foldings of the dress and the dangling of the book."

Furthermore, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the late Palestinian art critic and novelist, remarked that "his beautiful statue of the great Abbasid poet Abu Nuwas may look like a Gothic Christ, but he knows it. He knows his bronzes owe more to modern sculpture than to Sumer or Assyria. To him this is a

technical point which is no cause for worry as long as he can express his Iraqi themes in a manner related to the present. If his style, which has its emphatic qualities, derives from contemporary sculpture, his confidence may lie in the fact that sculpture in our time derives from a vast mixture of cultures mostly medieval or ancient, and especially Middle Eastern anyway."

Although Ismail Fattah's early statues have adorned several squares in Baghdad, the work he will probably always be best known for is the magnificent Martyrs' Monument of 1983:

<http://www.travel-images.com/iraq2.jpg>

(Picture of the Martyrs' Monument)

Building the Martyrs' Monument is said to have cost the Iraqi treasury about \$250 million, even while the Iran-Iraq War was in its early stages. The construction itself was carried out by Japan's Mitsubishi Corporation, working closely with the artist and many other consultants. In terms of its design, UR Magazine noted in 1981 that "its forms and proportions are adopted from the Iraqi domes, and the partition and the aperture reflect the open and spiritual link with the Divine."

During his long reign, Saddam Husain spent a great deal of time and money on building huge monuments, as is well known. However, it is probably a fact that among these great monuments, the Martyrs' Monument is the one destined to be regarded as a work of art that far transcended the purposes of the regime to become a broadly Iraqi national achievement. The English sculptor Kenneth Armitage was famously said to have hugged Ismail Fattah in a fit of enthusiasm when he first laid eyes on the Monument. "Art in America" magazine deemed it the most beautiful design in the Middle East in 1986. Now that the former regime has fallen, it is likely to be reinterpreted and continue to be honored as an Iraqi national treasure.

While as a sculptor Ismail Fattah was known for Realism, especially in his early work, his painting could be quite abstract. As a painter, he mainly dealt with human figures, often a man and a woman, that imparted a sense of fragmentation and isolation.

<http://www.middleeastuk.com/culture/art/sothebys/gallery32.htm>

(A 1988 "Man and Woman" Painting by Ismail Fattah)

Viewing his paintings in London in 1988, the late British art critic Max Wykes-Joyce wrote about Ismail Fattah as follows:

"Altogether too many Arab artists, well-known and well-considered in their own countries, allow their Arabism to overcome their individual ways of

seeing and knowing. While others, who have studied art in some other land, end up as pallid imitators of their foreign teachers but his figurations have an authority and an international imagery peculiarly his own."

The death of Ismail Fattah al-Turk is certainly a blow to the Iraqi art world, especially as it follows so soon upon the death of Shakir Hasan al-Said, a major Iraqi painter, in March of this year. Nevertheless, it is certain that future generations of artists will draw inspiration from Ismail Fattah's achievement, because his beloved Baghdad will forever be a different place that he lived.

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July 28, 2004