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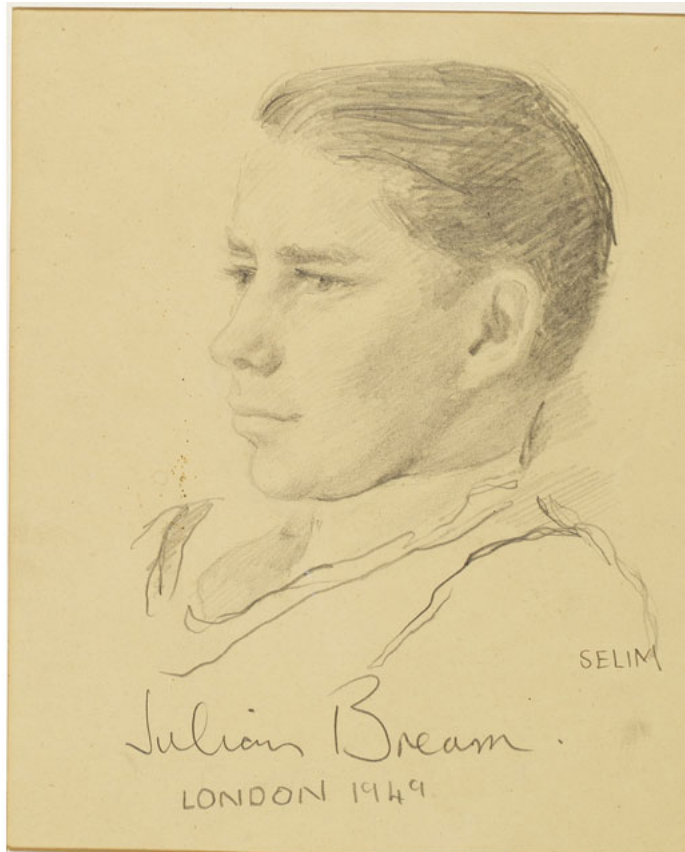
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- Home
- Last Week
- Artists
- Galleries
- Museums
- Photographers
- Games
- Subscribe
- Comments
- Search
- Contact
-  RSS

Important collection of works by Jewad Selim, father of modern Iraqi art, for sale at Bonhams



Jewad Selim Julian Bream. Photo: Bonhams.





LONDON.- Bonhams is offering by private treaty sale an important body of work by Jewad Selim (1920-61), the father of modern Iraqi art. The collection includes a well-known oil portrait of his wife Lorna, the artist's sketchbook from his time in Rome and a variety of other material, covering the short, yet pivotal career of a young man whose life was cut short at the age of just forty-one.

Works by Jewad Selim are rarely seen nowadays, so the surviving works of a man, whose influence was to inspire generations to follow, are extremely important to the history of modern art of the Middle East.

The pieces, from Jewad's personal collection, are offered together as one lot for private sale by the artist's family.

It is impossible to understand the modern art movement in Iraq without taking into account the works of this pioneer sculptor and painter, who was undoubtedly the most influential artist in that movement. To him, art was a tool to reassert national self-esteem and help build a distinctive Iraqi identity. He tried to formulate an intellectual definition for contemporary Iraqi art. In charting his country's contemporary social and political realities, he was committed to combining the indigenous historical and folkloric art forms with contemporary Western trends. He was fascinated with ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian sculptures, the reliefs of Babylon and Assyria which he helped restore in Baghdad and that he saw at the British Museum and the miniatures of the 13th Century painter Yahya al-Wasiti, which he discovered in the Louvre in Paris. On the other hand, he admired the work of the French sculptor Maillol and the British sculpture Henry Moore who was a visiting teacher during his time at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. He was also very interested in African carving that he frequented at the Horniman Museum. During his student days he studied the great masters, Impressionist techniques and the works of Post-**impressionists** and tried painting in the style of Cezanne, Miro and Bonnard, for whom he had a special feeling. He also studied the great post-war Picasso-Matisse Exhibition, which left a profound impression on him. Nasb al- Hurriya (Monument for Freedom), which is a visual narrative of Iraq's 1958 revolution (still standing in the centre of Baghdad) marked the culmination of Jewad Selim's artistic career which ended prematurely with his death in 1961.

Born in Ankara, Turkey in 1919 to Iraqi parents who moved to Baghdad in 1921, Jewad Selim came from a strongly artistic family: his father was an accomplished amateur painter, whose work was influenced by the European old masters. His brother Nizar and sister Neziha were also well-known painters.

Jewad was sent to Europe on government scholarships to further his art education, first to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris (1938-39) and then to the Academia di Belli Arte in Rome (1939-40). The hostilities of World War II resulted in Jewad cutting short his studies and returning to Baghdad, where he began part-time work restoring Sumerian and Assyrian reliefs in the Department of Archaeology at the Baghdad Museum of Antiquities. He also taught at the Institute of Fine Arts, where he founded the sculpture department.

During this wartime period in Baghdad, Jewad and a group of Iraqi artists became acquainted with several Polish officers who were painters, two of whom had studied with Pierre Bonnard. The Polish artists introduced the young Iraqis to the latest European styles and concepts, leading Jewad to comment in his diary that, after discussion with the Poles, he understood the importance of colour and its application; and only then was he able to fully understand the works of European artists such as Rembrandt, Goya and Cezanne.

In 1946, Jewad was able to resume his studies abroad and ended up at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. At the Slade, he met his future wife and fellow art student, Lorna. He returned to Baghdad in 1949, now fluent in English, French and Italian, to become Head of the Department of Sculpture at the Institute of Fine Arts, a post he held until his death. Here he taught his students to draw on the heritage of their country to create a distinctive Iraqi style and artistic identity, which would become the ethos of an influential art movement just a few years later. In 1950 Lorna joined Jewad in Baghdad, where they were married.

In 1951, Jewad Selim formed The Baghdad Modern Art Group, stating in their proclamation that: "A new trend in painting will solve the identity problem in our contemporary awakening by following the footsteps of the thirteenth century Mesopotamian painter Al-Wasiti. The new generation of artists finds the beginning of a guiding light in the early legacy of their forefathers". Other members included Shaker Hassan al- Said, Khalid al-Rahhal, Qahtan 'Awni, Faraj 'Abu, Mohammad al-Husni, Khalil al-Ward, Abdul Rahman Gailani, Rasul 'Alwan, Fadiil Abbas, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, as well as Selim's wife Lorna, his brother Nizar and sister Neziha. Modern Iraqi art began with the first exhibition of the Baghdad Group where they announced the birth of a new school of art that would "serve local and international culture".

In 1953 Jewad submitted a sculpture for the The Unknown Political Prisoner international competition held in London. Of the two thousand entries, just forty were short-listed and exhibited at the Tate Gallery. Jewad was the only artist from the Middle East to be short-listed and win an award.

At this same time, he held three teaching posts: at the Queen Alia College for Women in the mornings; the Higher Teachers' Training College in the afternoons; and the Institute of Fine Arts in the evenings. Despite this full schedule, he still found time for his daily guitar practice, maintaining a keen interest throughout his life, and his own sculpture and painting. The working

arrangement suited the young couple with Lorna, who would become a renowned artist in her own right, working in the day and Jewad working late into the night. At home, they converted the traditional Iraqi "guest's room" into their shared studio. They had little money and art works produced were often sold from home as soon as they could be created.

In addition to these commitments, Jewad was working towards a one-man exhibition tour of the United States, sponsored by the American Friends of the Middle East. The 1954 exhibition caused great excitement and attracted critical acclaim across the country, with large numbers of Americans coming to see Jewad's semi-abstract, intriguingly symbolic and forceful creations. Whilst Jewad's exhibition was on show in New York at Middle East House, one art critic was heard to exclaim: "They are so modern". He looked very confused when the artist shook his head and said: "No, they are traditionally Oriental". Jewad explained that he had taken his art training in Europe and agreed that undoubtedly his work did reflect European influence; however the colour and forms he used were familiar in the ancient art of Babylonia and the even older Sumerian culture. The American press referred to Jewad as: "Artist-Diplomat" and declared that he was a "wonderful ambassador of the new Middle East that is slowly emerging out of the ruins of the old". The tour made him the first Arab artist to receive such international recognition, a recognition which ironically preceded any amongst the general population of Iraq.

The following year, 1955, Jewad was meant to participate in an exhibition of Iraqi art to be held in India and sponsored by the respective governments. A heavy smoker, Jewad suffered a heart-attack, but fellow artists took his work and also his father's for the show. He recovered fully from the attack and went to Germany for an exhibition tour the following in year.

During the 1950s Jewad produced a large volume of works in his mature style and in a variety of media including sculpture, oil painting, illustration, metalwork, greeting cards and posters. In 1959, in the wake of the 1958 revolution of the 14th of July, Jewad was commissioned to create his most ambitious work, the large bronze reliefs for Nasb al-Hurriya or Monument for Freedom in Tahrir Square in Baghdad, which was completed in 1961. The largest monument built in Iraq in 2500 years, it was a collaboration between Jewad and the architect Rifat Chadirji, with Jewad making the bronzes in Florence and Chadirji designing the wall on which the figures were hung.

Commissioned by the new government of Abd al-Karim Qasim following the fall of the monarchy in 1958, the project resulted in an argument between Jewad and the President who wanted his image depicted in the monument. Jewad had no political allegiances and felt strongly that art should represent the people rather than political events. Amongst the figures on the monument was a soldier, who was the compromise Jewad arrived at and which he referred to as "the people's fighter for freedom from oppression". The time frame presented by the President was unrealistic and the project did not run smoothly. The first figure to be completed and hung was, ironically, Freedom. Immense pressure was put on Jewad to finish the work in record time and he suffered his second heart-attack the monument was fully installed. On the day of his collapse, one of his students said that Jewad had climbed the scaffolding to see the remaining figures laid out on the ground. He died one week later on 23rd January 1961 at the age of just forty-one, leaving his wife Lorna and their two young daughters. Lorna, upon Jewad's request, supervised the remaining installation of the monument, which still stands today.

Jewad's early death in 1961 was a shock to the artistic community of Iraq, but his spirit remained and was reignited by a new wave of young artists returning from their studies abroad, who picked up his mantle of extending Iraqi art into the rest of the Arab world and internationally. In 2004, the Iraqi Minister for Public Works, Nisrin Mustafa al-Barwari, paid tribute to Jewad, saying that the artist was remembered with great affection because "he reminds us of the good part of Iraqi history, the potential for Iraqis, and the wealth of art and culture that exists in Iraq".



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