



SUAD
AL-ATTAR

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Recent Paintings

September 6th–October 8th

1983

Cover: Paradise Garden Oil on Canvas 39½×47 ins

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Flower Hunters I Oil on Canvas 20 × 24 ins



Flower Hunters II Oil on Canvas 16 × 20 ins

Extracts from Reviews

'Where the dividing line ceases to be clear-cut, where paradise and desire begin to interchange, where the leafy bird-laden trees may turn into pillars of fire: such is the work of Suad Al-Attar. Her once-artificial gardens have been touched by a wilful hand into something complex, crystal. There is a primordial garden just before a fiery sword puts an end to the irresponsible joy. In Suad's visions one is caught in a moment of intensity, where reality may or may not lie at the other end of fantasy.'

Jabra I Jabra

'Suad Al-Attar has a well established status amongst Contemporary Iraqi artists – Her work reminds one – to a certain extent – of the surrealist painters; but... her symbols... are inspired by her Mesopotamian heritage and by her geographical surroundings... Her paintings remind us of Rousseau, in the sense that both artists portray forests with details of every leaf and branch. But... Rousseau's forms have a dream like unity with a sort of naive and primitive realism while the forms in Suad's works impose a dramatic individuality which stirs a mental image'...

Buland Al-Haidari

It is very rare for a child to make, at the age of six, such a daring decision as to be a painter; but Suad Al-Attar did exactly that... she (is)... the most committed woman in Iraq to the art of the pallet and brush...

K Kishtainy

The true artist can act on the mind of the spectator as a real inspiration, so that fantasies, recognised, become suddenly tangible. The paintings of Suad Al-Attar... achieve this miracle...

The woman and the tree appear to be central themes in her work. Indeed, the same subject recurs from picture to picture. Woman is like a tree, rooted in the earth (her everyday routine) and she strives, as a tree which strains its branches towards the indifferent sky, to break free from her servitude. When her trees are not bare and gaunt, Suad Al-Attar smothers them in forests of a contrasting luxuriance, full of elegant, poisonous flowers of an exotic and deadly beauty. This is all symbolism – but how powerful it is...

Genevieve Moll

Introduction

Suad Al-Attar was born in Baghdad. She has exhibited widely in Iraq and in the rest of the Arab world. This exhibition includes a substantial group of new works, made in London, where the artist now lives.

Since the 1960s Suad Al-Attar has looked consistently to the artistic traditions of her own country as sources of imagery. There are echoes in her garden landscapes of the stylised forms in Assyrian reliefs, and of Medieval Baghdadi painting. A recurrent image in her paintings is the silhouette of palm trees against the sky. The palm tree, the peacock and the horseman, persistent motifs in Suad Al-Attar's work, refer to a range of associations, particularly within the context of Arab poetry and Iraqi folklore.

The recent works fall into two linked kinds – those paintings which draw on formalised and intensely coloured pattern, and pictures where a use is made of a more naturalistic, if illusory, sense of light and space. Her central theme, that of a dream-like paradise garden scattered with brightly plumed birds, lends itself to both treatments. In the garden paintings here there is a correspondence of patterns and lines, in the veins of a single leaf, in the web

of twigs and branches which are a tree, in the configuration of lines, shapes and colours which makes up the surface of her canvasses. She frequently uses fine brushes, applying layers of colour. Sometimes linear pattern is scraped into the surface. The picture space appears full of incident – here a brilliant bird, there blossom, or a caparisoned horse, or a patterned border – but her concern with minute detail is balanced by a delicate sense of overall pictorial design. Look at the bird forms for instance. They are a favourite device. They are not scattered randomly. They define the rhythm of the compositions. The eye is led always inwards, towards the heart of the picture.

Like the hunters in Suad Al-Attar's paintings, we become searchers within the imagined spaces of her pictures, pursuing something which is just beyond our reach. It may be of happiness that the birds sing. These are ambiguous paintings. Perhaps most haunting are the moonlight and twilight landscapes. They suggest places on the borders of dream and reality, happiness and sorrow – places inside the mind, where memory and observation connect.

Caroline Collier



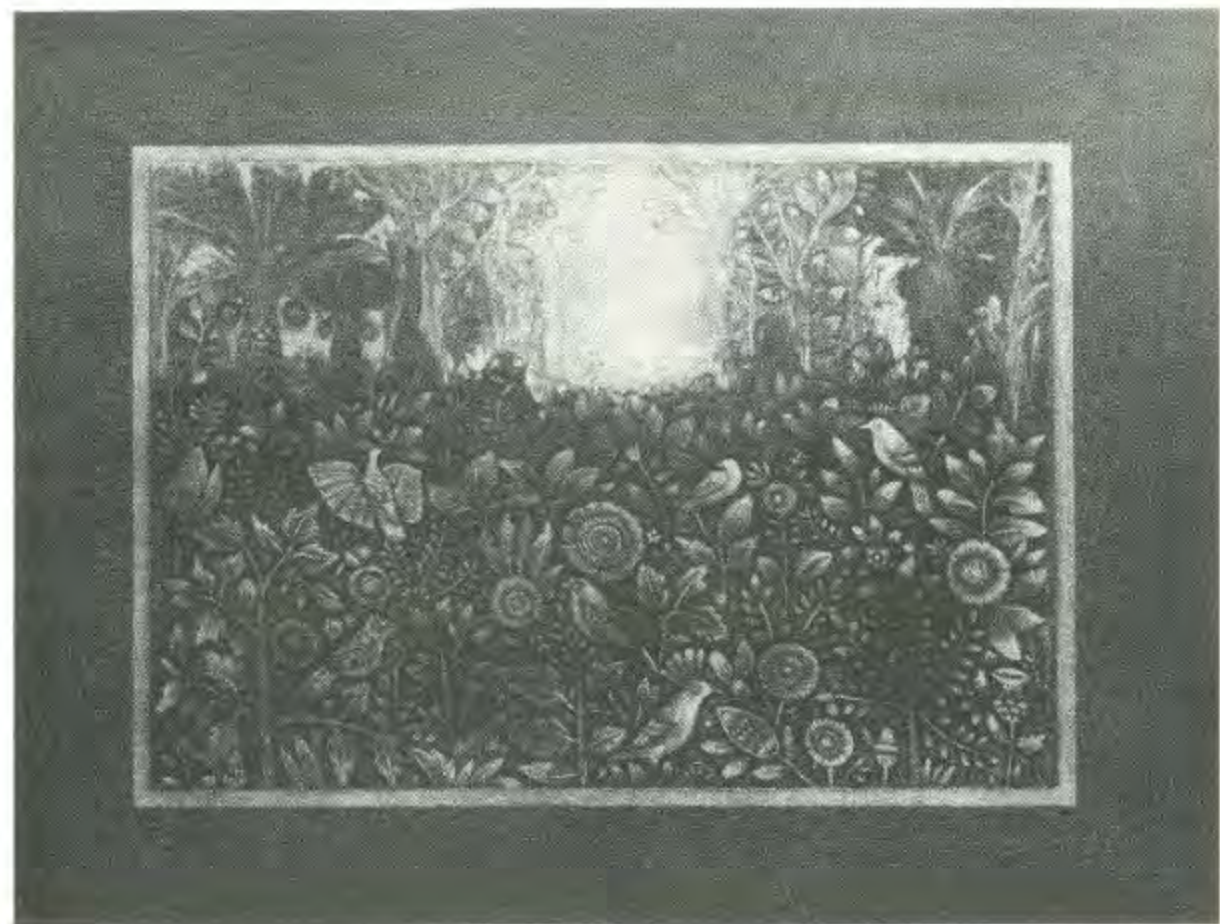
Twilight Palm Tree Garden Oil on Canvas 20×24 ins



Garden of Birds Oil on Canvas 14×18 ins



Paradise I Etching $13\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{1}{2}$ ins



Paradise II Etching $13\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{1}{2}$ ins



Baghdadi Tale Oil on Canvas 14×18 ins



Blue Sunset Birds Oil on Canvas 16×20 ins



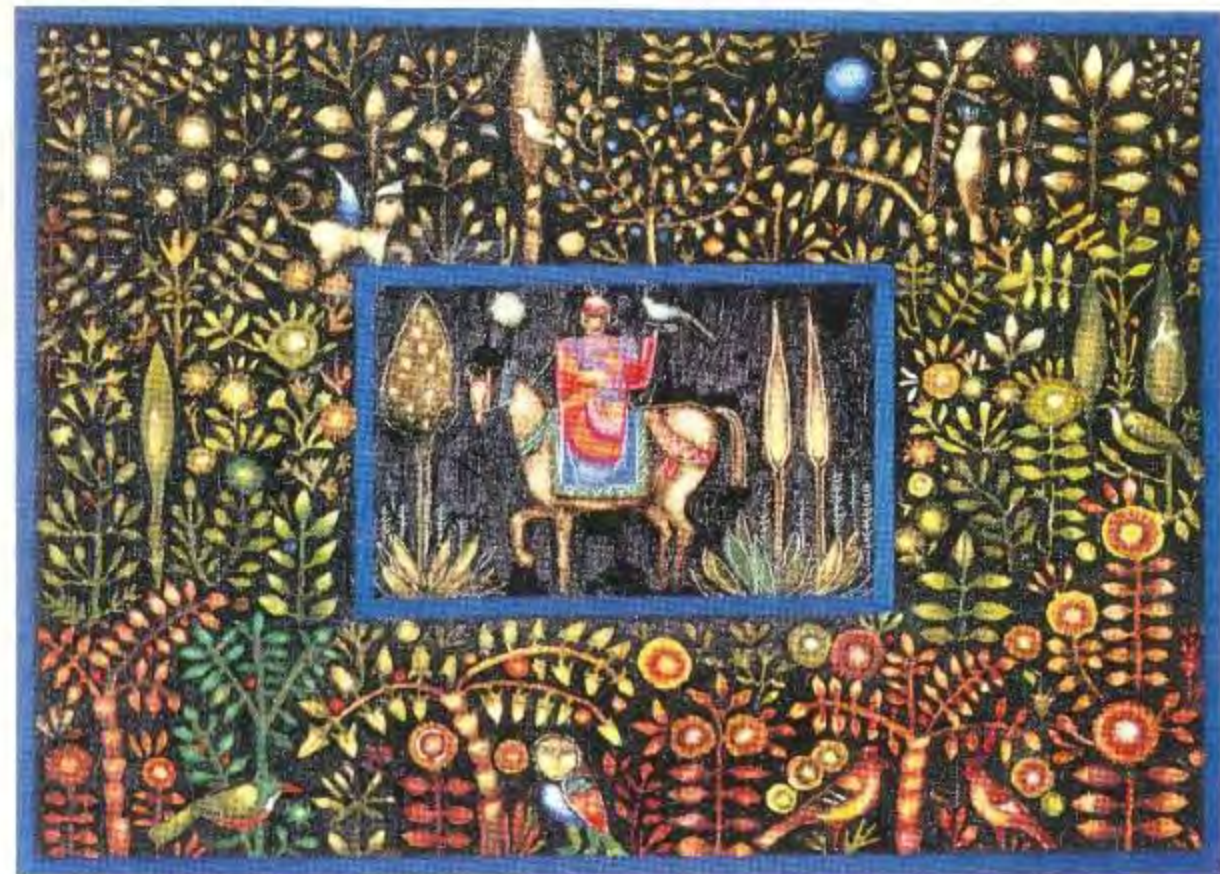
Bustaan Oil on Canvas 16×24 ins



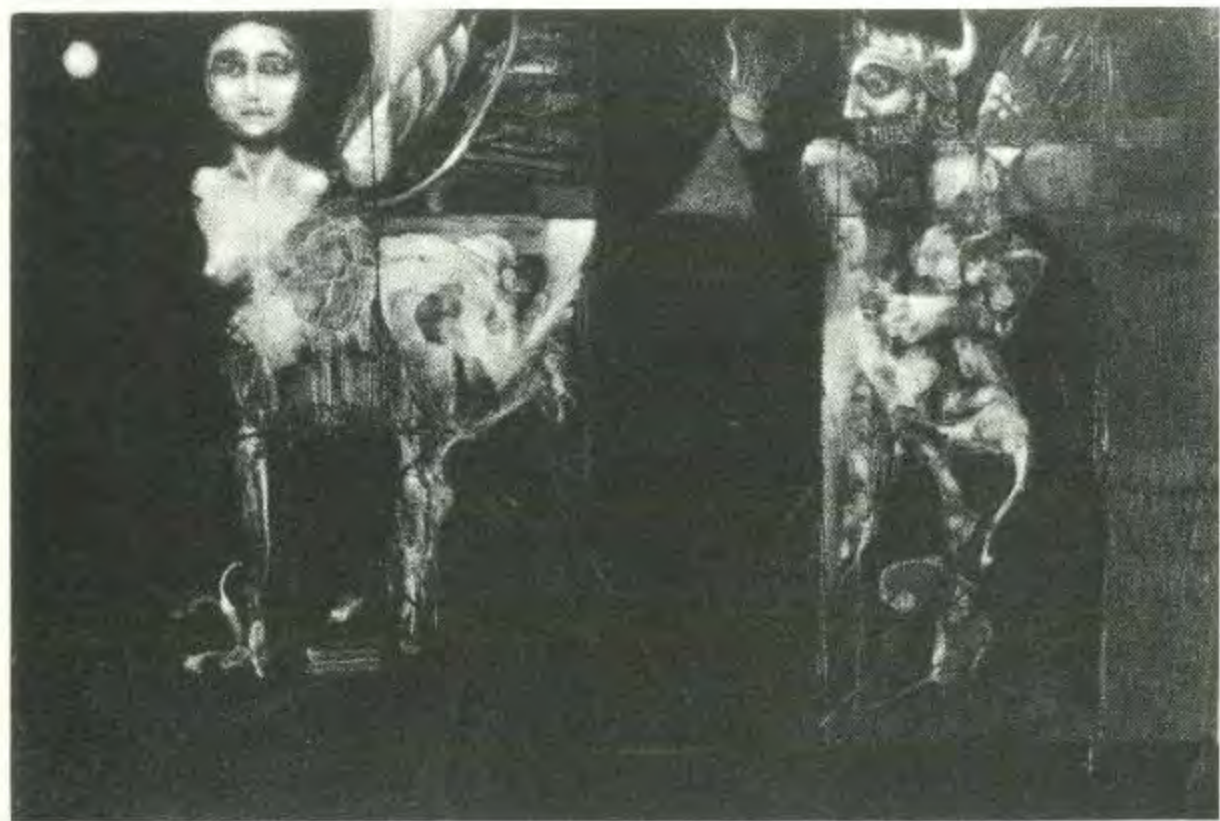
Oriental Garden Oil on Canvas



Gates of Paradise Oil on Canvas 16×20 ins



The Bustaan Guardian Oil on Canvas 14×18 ins



Legend Oil on Canvas 25×30 ins



The Wandering Knight Oil on Canvas 20×24 ins



Moonlight Birds Oil on Canvas 16×20 ins



Mystery of a Sunset Oil on Canvas 20×24 ins

Biography

Born in Baghdad, Diploma in Fine Art from the University of California, B.A. in Fine Art from Baghdad University, Postgraduate Diploma in Printmaking from Wimbledon School of Art, Postgraduate work in Printmaking from Central School of Art & Design.

One Woman Shows:

- 1964 Red Crescent Hall, Baghdad
- 1965 Al-Wasiti Gallery, Baghdad
- 1967 Gallery One, Beirut
- 1968 Friends of the Middle East Gallery, Baghdad
- 1970 Gallery Alwiyah Club, Baghdad
- 1972 Gallery One, Beirut
- 1973 The National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad
- 1973 Centre d'Accueil du Proche Orient, Paris
- 1979 Al-Riwaq Gallery, Baghdad
- 1981 Annexe Gallery, London, Graphics

Group Exhibitions

- 1965 Gallery One, Beirut, Contemporary Iraqi Art I, Rome, Vienna, Madrid, London and Beirut.
- 1967 Arab Art Exhibition, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Kuwait, London.
- 1970 Iraqi Art, Moscow.

- 1973 First Arab Art Biennale, Baghdad.
- 1974 Triennale of International Art, New Delhi.
- 1975 The International Cagnes-Sur-Mer Exhibition, France.
- 1976 The Second Arab Art Biennale, Rabat, Morocco.
- 1977 The Stowells US Trophy Exhibition - The Royal Academy, London.
- 1979 Exhibition of Contemporary Arab Artists II, London.
- 1980 The First Arab Woman Exhibition, Madrid, Rome, Vienna.
- 1982 The Sixth Norwegian International Print Biennale, Fredrikstad
- 1983 Contemporary Arab Artists III, Iraqi Cultural Centre, London.

Collections

National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad.
Museum of Modern Art, Damascus.
Gulbenkian Collection, Barcelona.
Mrs. Indira Gandhi, India.
UNICEF, New York.
National Museum of Modern Art, Jordan.
Government of Qatar.

Private Collections in:

Iraq, Lebanon, Sweden, Austria, USA, USSR, United Kingdom, Denmark, Greece, Belgium.



Suad Al-Attar

Photograph by Ban



سعاد العطار

GILGAMESH

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The Changing Forest of Suad al-Attar

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra

Suad al-Attar showed a talent for painting ever since she was a 13 year old school girl. By the time she was just a little over twenty she had secured a strong and visible presence on the artistic scene in Baghdad. The artistic scene in Baghdad, as everybody knows, is vast and overcrowded: many painters fail to make names for themselves there and they got lost. Suad al-Attar, however, was able to find a foot-hold and stand out among this jostling crowd.

At thirteen, a girl would paint motivated by the urge of a spontaneous talent, much of which may not last till maturity. The important thing is that it should outlive maturity. It should continue in its development and perfection towards a distinct style. And this is exactly what Suad has achieved. It is a certain state of mind which starts with talent but must develop through experience. To be creative, a painter must be able to digest the experience and go beyond it; which is what happened in the rapid artistic development of

Suad al-Attar. From the start, her visions persisted with her. She had seemed to possess that had to be articulated. The accumulating experience were the primary elements which have enable her to attain an absolute magical world.

In her art, one finds that very attempt which characterizes the work of any artist worthy of the name: to say something and reiterate it time after time, because the artist is not quite satisfied with it yet. The artist's work is the product of his relentless conflict with what rankles with him. It is his constant argument with his own works. Each subsequent poem for any poet is a repetition, a refinement and an expansion of what he wanted to say in previous poems. Similarly, every new painting for an artist is a revision, an amendment and elaboration of his previous visions.

It is thus that Suad al-Attar's works should be seen, even when much of her serious work was hardly ten



Ascending to Dreamland, Oil on Canvas, 92cm x 76cm

years old. In her works she not only put a lot of technical skill, coupled with her observations of life and its miseries, joys and passions. She also made her art a searching process, an exploration, a visual and psychological discovery. Yet, no sooner she reached a certain stage than she looked forward to the next, in rapid succession. There may be no illogical leaps in her artistic course but, invariably, there is in her work a noticeable tension between the within and the without, between the self and the object, what she intends to say and the form she intends to use for it. This ten-

sion confirms one's guess that her work will take a turn into unpredictable paths, no matter how consistent its development may seem. Anyone who has been observing her works in the last few years would notice the beginnings of this ramification in her expressive powers.

As for style, Suad al-Attar adopted a method which was a dominant artistic trend in Iraq since the early fifties. It is a trend which aims at joining a consciousness of heritage i.e. consciousness of time with the modern consciousness of place. Whether she made



Islamic Motif, Oil on Canvas, 30cm x 40cm

use of folk forms and symbols, as she did in the mid 1960s, or Abbasid forms and symbols as in her paintings since the late 1960s, her sense of linear modulation, so basic in Arab art, found expression in her last paintings — but it served another purpose. Most of her paintings, then seemed to proceed from those remote Arab roots strongly suggested to the viewer, without becoming senseless imitations. For her works were going through other intensities, intensities entirely of her own experience of her own times. She employed fresh harmonies whose lines the viewer could detect in some of her paintings as they go straight, wind, curve, ascend, bend, and intercross in a musical counter-point. Sometimes she would use a long narrow canvas to emphasize what has come to resemble a musical time dimension, latent in her visual spatial consciousness.

In this manner, Suad has been able to go beyond the early influences which put her, in the first place, in the centre of Arab art movement, to attain her expressive goal which is, in the end, a measure of her success as an original painter. Like many other artists, she could have found an easy way through the ab-

stract styles prevailing in the world. But she is still wary of doing that. Due to a kind of romanticism the artist seems to have been characterized with ever since childhood, expressing lyricism in line and colour has been one of her endeavours, although she pursues it in order to express her distinctive vision, in her own way. It is a vision marked with flights of fantasy together with much of the agony of reality. Even in her portraits of many young women, fantasy merges with reality so that these paintings become more than mere portraits of particular people. They are all projections of the artist's own self and as such they are charged with her personality, humanism and emotions — which lend them a value superior to their value as simply portraits.

Before Suad al-Attar's recent paintings one cannot be sure if reality does or does not exist on the other side of dream and fantasy. It is where the line is no longer clear, where dreams of innocence mix with those of experience, where paradise and desire overlap and where trees, heavy with birds, may turn into pillars of fire. Even the gardens she used to paint pre-



Baghdadi Houses, Oil on Canvas, 60cm x 90cm

viously have been deliberately touched and transformed into a garden of Eden with dense foliage. The suffering women of yesterday, who haunted her early paintings, have turned into phantoms of youth without a past. For there is here something that suggests a primordial paradise, before man's joy was cut short by the angel's flaming sword.

Although the outward appearance of her later paintings is closely related to the paintings of past years — because some of her main motifs, like children, sparrows and inter-twined arches are constantly repeated — there is a major turn towards this paradisaical theme laden with contradictions. It comes to us through a style which draws on Abbasid miniatures (in particular with regards to trees, flowers and birds with women's faces) and Assyrian bas reliefs.

I have often thought that Suad tries to express, through fantasy, man's primal innocence when it confronts, all of a sudden, a passion that breaks out like a fire in a virgin forest, as one may see in a painting of hers entitled "The Trees One Evening"

If her characters lose their physical reality in her last paintings, it comes down upon them suddenly as a burning impact. And if they seem to lose consciousness the painter cannot decide whether they will awake to this reality or to a new state of dream. Eden

in her paintings suddenly changes into a dense forest, among whose lofty trunks, entwined branches and big leaves woman almost disappears — or is she perhaps hiding? For she is now only seen as a small figure among them. After a while, the leaves of this forest will fall and its branches will be bare, and women will no more exist in this cruel leafless not all red — though once or twice the bare branches catch a hot blazing sun.

One suspects that the clear decorative element in Suad al-Attar's paintings detracts from her efforts and diverts the viewer's attention from the main theme to what is of secondary importance. Many people are fascinated by this secondary aspect of her art. But the artist is struggling hard even with this decorative quality, which is actually part of her crisis, trying to give it an opposite direction, where the bird of paradise might transform into a woman and the woman might turn into an earthly passion. One should remember that women in Suad's previous works were burdened by their sufferings, which the artist sees no need to dwell on now. Hence the transformation will be interesting to those who follow the course of her progress towards the unknown — the unknown which will gradually reveal itself in her forthcoming paintings. ♦

*Translated by Suad Abid Ali
from "Yanab'ee al-Ru'ya' (The Fountains of Vision)*

Ascending to Dreamland, Oil on Canvas, 92cm x 76cm —

Suad al-Attar's Secret Garden

Farouq Yousif

In her attitude towards aesthetics, painter Su'ad al-Attar is very much distinguished on both intellectual level (vision, inspiration and imagination) and the technical level (style and the use of different materials). This made people interested in painting focus their attention on her work as a vital sphere of creative expression. Throughout years of hard work and faithful exploration of aesthetic values, al-Attar has managed to create her own world with its defined characteristics. In fact, she has quickly managed to go beyond women's achievements in painting, which, for a long time, has been simply considered a hobby practised in order to spend one's own time. Al-Attar has managed to take women painting to a new stage in which a new attitude towards aesthetic condition can be seen.

Al-Attar's achievement represents a certain stage of plastic art practices. We ought to examine this stage closely in order to know its various elements not because this is a woman's achievement only, but also a new addition within the framework of looking for new outlets to broaden aesthetic competence of our present time people.

Based on her vision, the artist's achievement was in compliance with the spirit of Iraqi artistic search during this stage. It is well-known that each artistic stage has its own preoccupations and aesthetic interests. (It is also well-known that each artist has his own preoccupations). The stage al-Attar has lived through is closely linked with the search for identity which sums up the subjective and cultural impetus amid cultural accumulations that were either of the past or representing the spirit of Western cultural invasion. This preoccupation is an unforgettable virtue of the 1960s generation, to which al-Attar belongs. It confidently invoked the spirit of artistic modernity by achieving a balance between the genuine elements of character, environment, national aesthetic discourse on the one hand, and the spirit of change, which is the essence of artistic modernity represented by products of Western achievements in the twentieth century, on the other hand. Those products are understood to have presented a clear picture of the conflict between man and material, the spiritual structure and man's loss when facing the decline of values and break up of societies. The painters of the 1960s took the risk of

→ From *A Thousand and One Nights*, Oil on Canvas, 76cm x 61cm



The Horseman and the Khatoon, Oil on Canvas, 86cm x 97cm

confronting such a conflict because the complexity of work demands an unlimited knowledge of man's living terms and his aesthetic treatment of his subjects.

As for al-Attar, her aesthetic exploration started with her contact with nature. That moment turned into a starting point in the dialogue the painter conducted with the world. For her, nature formed a suitable moment to wander in, mix with it and become acquainted with its sensitive areas.

This does not mean that al-Attar looks at nature as an external subject. In fact, she is always in constant struggle with nature's forces in order to catch the most sensitive element that could best express her aesthetic vision of nature.

Naturally, people differ in the way they expose aes-

thetic elements as they stand by nature. Some cannot forget the outer elements, so their aesthetic consciousness remains linked with the attractive scenery and fascinating picturesque. Others are not satisfied unless they catch the hidden element of beauty which is deeply rooted in the natural scene. Al-Attar is of the second group and she tries to possess nature poetically and to explore the mysteries of the aesthetic.

Al-Attar's relation with nature does not only lead to the recognition of the pleasure of natural aesthetics. In fact it is an open path towards man's heart. She aims at making a contact between man and nature in order to come up with a final visual scene. Therefore, exploring nature is not achieved through a natural detached approach, but through man's total collabora-



The Boustan Guardian, Oil on Canvas, 86cm x 97cm

tion. This is quite clear in her paintings 'Birth of a Man,' 'The Dream's Tree' and a series of paintings she called 'Myth.' Thus, nature finds its depth only in and through man himself.

As I have mentioned earlier in this article, al-Attar does not adopt the natural approach in examining nature. This attitude throws its shadows at the artist's relation with reality. Her recognition of reality is not achieved by means of its visual existence but by contact with its inner surface.

The dream in this process is the criteria for the artist's occupation in receiving realities. It is also the filter that blocks the way between the artist and reality. Through it, al-Attar can recognize the imaginative aspect of reality, which forms the outcome of the

meeting between the artist's imagination and the general imagination.

On this point art critic Adil Kamil says:

"The dream in al-Attar's work is only an expression of the depths that are linked to nature, heritage and man."

Here lies the artist's choice in directing her aesthetic exploration to a special course that she had already planned for. Therefore, there is no coincidence. Selecting the dream as a means for reaching reality forces the artist to conduct several researches in order to make her recognition of nature quite certain, true and genuine.

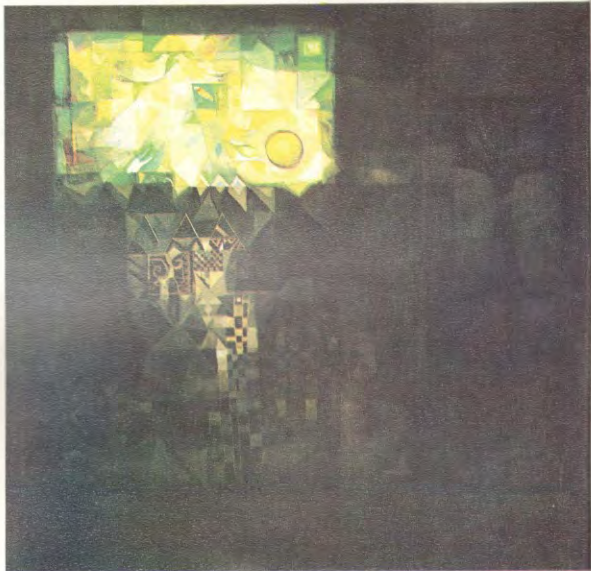
By achieving a reasonable balance in this process, al-Attar was able to create her own reality with which

she conducted a dialogue that can be considered the starting point in her acquaintance with the inner reality.

In the exhibition al-Attar held in Baghdad in 1979 and which contained graphic works, a certain trend appeared in her work mainly distinguished by depth and firmness. The artist was able to produce works that meant an important event in the history of her stylistic and intellectual development. In fact, that was a special turn in a new stylistic treatment in the

history of Iraqi art.

If we go back to the work al-Attar produced in the mid 1960s, we find that she dealt with the real magic in terms of a woman. Therefore, there was a clear passion in those works. The environment was a sphere which exhausted her suppressed emotions. Those work almost led al-Attar to the art of decoration which is void of ideas and which does not deal with events as a conflict directed by certain means but as a small part of visual scene.



Islamic Motif, Oil on Canvas, 80cm x 80cm