

## CRITICAL ANALYZING STUDY FOR SAADI AL KAABI'S WORKS.

*By the Artist and critics Jamil Hammodi*

During spring 1986, I enjoyed communicating with a huge mural depicted by Saadi Al-Kaabi, whom I have known from three decades. This mural "Babylon", displayed at Babylon hotel in Baghdad not only showed his skill but also made me appreciate the high standing he has achieved as a prominent painter.

My admiration for this artist and his competence made me visit him at his atelier in Al-Waziriya residential district in Baghdad. The several visits I have paid to Al-Kaabi not only emphasized my appreciation but also enabled me to further understand and become acquainted with the stages of development he has gone through over the past twenty years of continuous creativity. I stress that Al-Kaabi has reached such a competence which makes him a perfect representative of the contemporary art movement in Iraq.

The mural which led me to this profound study of Al-Kaabi, depicts the ancient civilizations of Iraq, with a focus on the ancient Babylonian civilizations. Though the site of Babylon includes nothing but remains of this great ancient civilization (2000 – 1000 B.C) Al-Kaabi has excelled in depicting his artistic vision of the Babylonian glory. This work, which is certainly highly demanding, must have exhausted the artist in carrying out a profound study of all relative details to produce such an artistic documentary painting. This mural forced me to become involved in a profound study of its theme, style, technique, composition and other details. The study made me reach the following analysis.

I) In this mural Al-Kaabi realized a mature standard in depicting the space value through a highly artistic and expressive style. Here, the viewer immediately notices the negative and positive elements. A perfect harmony was also achieved between the various masses and spaces, which strike an admired balance.

II) This mural highlights Al-Kaabi's style. It also highlights his skill in developing, forming and reorganizing his images. A more profound study of the details reflects the artist's skill in depicting his figures, all of which have reached perfection. Any possible future change or modification on these figures would certainly mean a radical change in the artist's style and vision.

III) The mural points out the inner struggle through which the painter must have gone regarding his choice of the colors to be employed. However, the prevalent colors have become the tones of brown and earth – color, which have become typical of Al-Kaabi. Yet there are reflections of other colors in the mural. The colors he employed make his work rich with a romantic and mysterious effect.

IV) The viewer immediately realizes that the painter is beyond the usual trends of some techniques, which reflect complexity and repetition. Al-Kaabi seems to excel in criticism, which makes his paintings faultless.

V) The three – dimensional effect is clear in this mural, which has been highlighted by projection of shapes and

figures. He has further enriched the texture of his mural by adding light and shadow effect as well as protrusions. This work is closer to bas-relief, which includes the characteristics of painting and sculpture. The colors employed by al-kaabi further highlight the projection, which in turn emphasizes the impressionistic effect.

VI) A further study of the composition design in the mural shows that the artist has excelled in departing from traditional restrictions and has rebelled against the conventional deception of the central theme, which is usually situated in the center of the painting. Instead al-kaabi chose to adopt a brevity and simplicity in design, composition and details. He aimed at covering the whole canvas with his central theme, highlighting the perceptual form.

These are some of the points I have formed while analyzing the mural of Saadi al-kaabi "Babylon", which is truly a work of pure creativity. Many Iraqi artists have earlier depicted the same theme, including Hameed al-Attar, who inspired his works from the ancient Iraqi civilization, such as the Sumerian, Babylonian and the Assyrian. Yet Al-Kaabi has dealt with his theme differently. He has employed the cultural purports to support his own style and artistic vision. Moreover he borrowed the essential cultural characteristics only to pinpoint the historical and documentary effects.

These facts lead us to an established fact, which explains the nature and looks of some of the human figures and other details, all which form together a true harmony and balance. Accordingly, the mural has a true depiction of the Mesopotamia civilization. The artist's style is genuinely creative, thus highlights the artist's contemporary and distinguished stylistic peculiarity.

The artist distributed the human figures, geometrical and other shapes evenly to create harmony of design and proportion. In order to emphasize his elements he outlined them with projected strokes, a technique that added to the mural the effect of antiquity. Meanwhile, the faces of his figures express ambiguity and peculiarity. Thus, Al-Kaabi attracts the viewers to his work, yet offers them a world of secrecy and mystery. However, the world this artist offers is particularly rich with taste, air of romance and expressionism.

In order to further understand the artist's skill of Al-kaabi, I believe that we should deal with the contemporary art movement in Iraq. This will explain further facts related to the role played by the Iraqi artist in developing the art movement in Iraq to reach the best of the world standards.

Among the Iraqi artists who highly contributed to the development of the art movement in Iraq are the late famous painter and sculpture Jwad Selim, the late painters Atta Sabri and Akram Shukri, and the competent contemporary painters Fa'iq Hassan, Hafidh al-Duroubi, Issa Hammoudi, all of whom are pioneer artists known for their creativity.

These pioneers have called in the early 1940s for forming an intellectual public who will have the good taste in evaluating modern arts and appreciating its sophisticated aesthetics and concepts. At the time these artists enjoyed no official support, yet have been determined to offer their very best and organize continuous art exhibitions and activities. They were the founders of the "art friends society" through which they organized frequent art exhibitions. In the early forties there were no actual art movement in Iraq. Instead the true artist such as Jwad Selim and Fa'iq Hassan, practiced and advocated arts individually. These two competent artists were impressionists at the time influenced by the Polish impressionist artist who fled Poland to Iraq during the second world war, who in turn was a student of Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947). Atta Sabri and Hafidh Al-Duroubi have adopted the academic style, while art students. Other artists adopted styles reigning between expressionism and conventional art, while still others preferred to adhere to the Islamic style, Arabic calligraphy and arabesque.

Later, the Iraqi artistes decided to found their own school of art, which would reflect Iraqi characteristics, far away from any foreign influences. Among the devoted artists who highly contributed to this end, aiming to establish an artistic identity, is Saadi Al-kaabi leading Iraqi artists, recognized both on the national and international planes.

Here, I should point out a meeting held between Al-Kaabi, Isma'il Fattah Al-turk and myself, upon their return to Iraq from Italy, where they supervised the Iraqi contributions to the Venice biennial.

During that meeting the three of us were involved in a highly interesting discussion on contemporary art styles, trends and schools we also discussed the contemporary art exhibition and the standards and styles of exhibits of various forms of art, including sculpture, painting and ceramics. It was then that I pinpointed some of Al-kaabi's worries related to two points.

First, how to further develop his experience in painting.

Second, how to develop the art movement in Iraq and bring it up to the international standards.

The two artists firmly believed that the works of Iraqi artists were competent enough to compete with the works of the best of world artists. Also, at that meeting I discovered that Al-Kaabi, one of the most zealous and high-aspiring Iraqi artists, has over the years not only proved himself to be one of the most competent artists on the national plane but also one of the Iraqi artists who most won international awards. Currently, he is also arts director at the arts department at the Iraqi ministry of information and culture.

In fact, the contemporary art movement in Iraq could never have reached such a distinctive status had it not been for the competence and enthusiasm of many of the Iraqi artists. The established Iraqi artists have spared no effort to explore new dimensions, characteristics, elements and trends to allow the movement to depart from the traditional concepts borrowed from the west. These efforts have played a major role in founding an identity for the art movement in Iraq, stylistically and thematically speaking. Many of the established artists have been singled out for their distinctive styles and techniques. Moreover many of the art groupings in Iraq have introduced various additions to the movement. As a matter of fact, many of the Iraqi's artistic research works and experiments have been adopted in the Arab world as well as in Europe and USA. These influences include the modern form of the Arabic calligraphy and the employment of Arabic letters in art works.

Currently, the art movement in Iraq is enjoying official care as well as the public's appreciation. Recently, the Saddam arts of rebellion and revolt. However, having become well acquainted with all relevant details I have discovered that one could hardly set aside his private life from his art to deal with each separately. Al-kaabi, the highly active artist never rests. He is always preoccupied in his incessant struggling to achieve his aims in art and make his dreams come true. I imagine him as if struggling to reach a certain point and as soon as he actually reaches it he spots another one and goes further, and so on.

I was introduced to Al-kaabi in the mid 1960s. since I regarded him as a very active, zealous and enthusiastic painter. Later, it was by chance that I decided to study the developments in the Iraqi art movement, which allowed me to become further acquainted with the works of art of Al-kaabi. His paintings reflect clear talent and vivid creativity, which gave me the feeling that this particular Iraqi painter will be a success. Having had the opportunity to visit one of his one-man painting exhibitions, held in Baghdad at Al-Alwiya club, I pinpointed two facts. At that exhibition, his paintings depicted natural sceneries from Iraqi rural areas:

- a) Al-kaabi has focused on the mode of life in the marsh-land and concentrated on depicting animals in general and buffaloes in particular.
- b) He has introduced a new technique in which he depicted his shapes against misty backgrounds to make them

seem projected and even protruded.

This added extra dynamics to his works and enriched his shapes with a suspended movement. It also enriched his paintings with a rich texture, light and shadow effect as well as gave the shapes a three- dimensional effect.

Since my admiration to that art exhibition. Al-kaabi attracted my attention. This made me follow up his work through the eye of an art critic. I must admit that I am glad to have been offered the opportunity of expressing here my heartfelt appreciation to painter.

I believe that a few words on Al-kaabi, the artist, could explain a lot. He is full of ideas, dreams and plans, which sometimes seem to be a burden to him. Yet, he never ceases from searching for new means for self- expression through painting. He never resorts to the ordinary, instead searches for distinctive means and style to reflect his artistic visions. He always involves himself in profound study of human concepts and values to express genuine artistic potential. His non-stop artistic stimulation provides an established proof on his genuine interaction with art.

In studying the stages of development through which Al-Kaabi went as an artist, one should consider the style he has adopted. He contributed to the impressionists' art exhibitions when he was at his earliest stylistic stages.

The impressionist group was founded in Iraq by Hafidh Al- Duroubi, the famous painter. I have here to criticise that.

Though several artists joined this group, many of them were not impressionists. Instead the majority of the members adopted cubism. Soon, many decided to shift to various famous styles.

At that stage. Al-kaabi exhibited paintings which reflect an interlined of romanticism and tragedy. His paintings were dark and mysterious, enriched with such colorful strokes, which provide a link between masses and spaces. The themes he used to depict, then, were inspired from the society and nature. His paintings were skillfully abridged which enabled him to depart from traditional restrictions, academic anatomy and realistic perspective, in the 1950s – 1960s the style he adopted ranged between expressionism, cubism and abstract art, with a constant employment of symbolism. This style affected the perceptual form of his paintings rather than his themes, which were mostly inspired from nature.

Generally speaking, the themes depicted by Al-kaabi are more often than not inspired from the village and the human relations there. However, the process of simplification – ton and abridgement which he adopts often leads to the required concentration of the concept. This allows the idea and turns any possible ambiguity into logic. Such a technique adds to the paintings a special extra richness in concept and perceptual form. The works of Al-kaabi are always rich with symbolism, flexibility, harmony of elements and colors and special ornamentation. They also include semi- translucent geometrical and symmetrical values. Such an interlined always results in a special balance in his works. In a nutshell, this is the impression I have got while studying the paintings of Al- Kaabi at a particular stage of his artistic development. This artist has never ceased to add new additions, symbols and elements over the years. Accordingly, his technique, style and theme have become even more competent over the years. His more recent works have not only become more expressive, skilful and creative but also more abstract and less rebellious. Al-Kaabi has achieved in his technique such a contradiction which is almost always tasteful and meaningful on the level of contemporary aesthetic concepts.

Al- kaabi has succeeded in achieving two particular points of innovation in his work, even at a time of hesitation and uneasiness.

First, he totally departed from the conventional realism by adopting symbolism, skilful composition and extremely

successful harmony of colors.

Second, he has managed to create perfect balance through the distribution of his masses, which he links to each other by color toner, lines and strokes.

Despite his success, Al-kaabi seems to always be preoccupied in his search for a particular artistic identity. He searches for a special style, which would reflect his artistic vision, in such a way, which would be rather unique. This undoubtedly stresses his aspiration for singular creativity. This serious and restless artist undergoes an inner struggle every time comes to painting. His profound search for the best seems to be everlasting.

A study of Al-kaabi's paintings according to a chronological order illustrates that he has adopted the abstract art in such a way, which could have remote, him from reality, yet it did not. At a particular stage such remoteness was possible, when he left in his paintings geometrical spaces, often irregular. Soon, he began to add to his painting vitality by adding abstract figures, always featureless and mysterious. These figures add an ambiguous human touch to express the artist's inner struggle. The figures, though abstract, have lessened the dryness of the geometrical shapes, sometimes the figures seem to interlined or even seem to be hidden behind circular shapes full with symbols. The projected strokes which add texture to the paintings, and are often semi translucent, always link between the figures and the other elements. These strokes often reflect effective color influence.

The abstract figures did not quite satisfy Al-kaabi's artistic aspiration, simply because he was strongly attached to more important live elements. This made him consider a return to a realistic evocation. However, he never actually shifted to realism, the style which he regarded as quite remote from his favorite style. Accordingly, he departed from painting for quite some time. The period of contemplation resulted in the desert theme, the now source of inspiration for Al-Kaabi.

The desert in the Arab peninsula, where he had earlier spent few years, has enabled the artist to profoundly contemplate and understand the nature and aura of the desert. This now theme forms reality for which the artist sought for long, a reality full of echoes which reflect the agony suffered by men. However, in these paintings, Al-Kaabi seems to be determined to depict the agony as clear and clean as he wishes it to be. This time again, he adopted simplicity of style and technique, highlighting the characteristics of the Arab culture.

Since, Al-Kaabi has been depicting the desert, each time differently, which resulted in a variety of pieces of art. All dealing with the very same central theme.

A study of this set of Al-Kaabi's paintings makes the viewer feel thirst, which makes one search for the closest oasis and shadow.

The colors of the desert, the sand-cooler and its tones, have become characteristic of his paintings of this set include the Bedouin tents, sand, Bedouins and rich tones of the sand color. His paintings no further include the flat strokes nor the colorful lines of the 1960s. His paintings perfectly reflect the quietness and tranquility of the Arab desert.

The period of contemplation has made Al-Kaabi inspire his time from the desert, yet the desert he paints is something special, not the ordinary. His desert is never gloomy, but rather full of vitality, yet tranquil. Even his painting "Irs fi al-Ahwar" (A wedding Ceremony in the Marshland), which reminds the viewer of the Assyrian relief, makes the viewer think of and feel thirst and dryness, the feel of desert.

The desert set has brought new elements to the style and technique of Al-Kaabi. This set is characterized by skilful composition, connected masses, expressive lines and an indirect style based on cubism. His colors became highly harmonious and very balanced, which reflect balance on the whole work. Moreover, his human figures became more impotent in the paintings. In the desert set the composition became more central, due to the masses of tents which form a basic element in the paintings.

The masses become rather independent, yet together from a harmonious whole.. through the masses become more abstract. The lines become richer and more effective. The colors grow more profound, Effectual and expressive. Furthermore, the light and shadow effect becomes different. The light brighter.

Al-Kaabi did not reach this stage of his artistic development by chance. In fact it is rather a logical result of the stage of development his style and artistic vision have undergone. A study artist's earlier works illustrate that he often depicted animals (mostly cows and buffaloes), rural areas of the south of Iraq and the marshes.

Throughout his stage of development, Al-kaabi has always produced three- dimensional subject matters.

Al- Kaabi, the sensitive and human artist has become known in the contemporary art movement in Iraq as a committed artist and a reliable person. He has not only reached the artistic identity he strive for but also has established certain artistic basic rules and foundations, which reflect his long and fruitful experience.

The paintings of Al-Kaabi have become so well known that a viewer would immediately identify them. However, his more recent paintings provide the viewers with two options. Either deeply contemplate to understand what he means to express, thus communicate, or just simply enjoy the depiction without getting involved, thus be superficial.

I believe that this stage of Al-Kaabi's artistic development reflects true maturity, integrity and vitality. In fact. I not only believe in Al-Kaabi's competence but also expect more of his skill and productivity. After all, none of the successes achieved during his long artistic experience has managed to cease his search for further achievements. For example, Al-Kaabi has enriched many of his works with Arabic letters and calligraphy, a trend which forms one of his inexhaustible sources of inspiration. This trend has been gradually added to his paintings, used as ornamentation unites to add further value and aesthetic element to his work. The Arabic letters and calligraphy gradually grew more effective quantitatively speaking, to such an extent that it intercrossed the canvases both vertically and horizontally. Later, they were depicted within variable geometrical formations, inter linked in such a unique way which is typical of Al-Kaabi's skill. Still later, the Arabic letters served in the artist's self expression, when he resorted to Abstraction.

I should point out that Al-Kaabi never employed the Arabic letters and calligraphy merely to fill up or to decorate his painting. Nor did he employ these elements to strike balance in his paintings on the account of content or expressive aesthetic value. On the contrary, he has added further value to the beauty and meaning of the Arabic writing. Al-Kaabi has employed the Arabic writing in his painting in such a way that he has added beauty as well as meaning fullness to his work. In this skill, he totally differs from my own experience in this respect. For decades now I have been enriching my Own paintings with Arabic writing personally, I have transferred the letters from my Own experience in this respect. For decades now I have been enriching my Own paintings with Arabic writing personally, I have transferred the letters from their phonetic value to a pure artistic element, thus a letter or a word does not necessarily have to indicate its linguistic meaning.

As far as Al-Kaabi is concerned, he makes the Arabic writing define his human figures and other shapes, which sometime even seem closer in their formulations to the shapes of Arabic letters. Moreover, he writes down the meaning of his visions, a style though which he has added poeticism, rhythm and melody to his works. These

elements make the viewer enjoy the inter blend and harmony achieved between the many elements, including the human figures, geometrical shapes, architectural forms and the nature of desert. This illustrates how much Al-Kaabi is deeply committed to meanings and expressions, which appear in his paintings in the form of symbols. These symbols. Create balance between intellectual, logical, sensual and emotional values. They also often serve as a substitute for direct details, which could overload the composition. He achieves this by modification of the shapes of letters adding suitable colors here and there. His most recent paintings have transformed the Arabic writing into something like a reflection of the geometrical shapes and human figure .....etc. the reflection, though simple, seems to always be a positive element in achieving further balance between the spiritual and symbolic values (which enrich the content and intensify the indications), and the pure artistic values. The variations powerful in the pieces of art of Al-Kaabi. The viewers could always easily grasp the dramatic build up based on an Arab folkloric and cultural aura.

This is clear in his earlier paintings, such as "Mughtada" (Angry) as well as in his recent desert set and evening his most recent murals displayed at the premises of the Arab Ba'th socialist party, the VIPs guest palace, Saddam inter- national Airport and Baghdad hotel, all in Baghdad.

The human figures have become the central theme in the latest works. Man is an essential and vital creature in our world. He depict man in his everyday life and man suffering contradictions. His works point out the importance of adopting a stance or an attitude, which forms a vital part of the life of contemporary artistic, economics and culture. Such attitudes define the artists skill in choosing style and becoming creative. After all, creativity is always subjected to whether or not one is committed. Saadi Al-Kaabi certainly is a committed artist, his commitment is a combination of a stylistic, technical, social. Political, national and religious beliefs enable an artist to be committed to his own art and thus results in creativity based on harmonious elements.

Al-Kaabi was born 1937 in Al-Najaf (central Iraq), where he was brought up amid of various contradictions. However, the boy grew up to become a competent painter responsible for the Gallery – goers. He has become one of the prominent Iraqi artists who through the art of painting is adding to the Iraqi culture.

Jamil Hammoudi

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