

A piece of art that symbolises hope for the people of troubled Iraq and the woman who helped to create it



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MERE months after completing his masterpiece and at the peak of his powers, the man known as 'father of modern Arab art' Jewad Selim, suffered a sudden and fatal heart attack, leaving his wife, fellow artist, Lorna Selim to supervise the mounting of the world famous July 14 Liberty Monument in Baghdad's Tahrir Square.

The monument is renowned as the greatest and largest sculpture created by an Iraqi artist in more than 2,600 years and still stands today as a testament to the pioneering work of Jewad.

Some 50 years on Chronicle reporter TIM BUTTERS met up with 82 year-old Lorna Selim, who now lives in Llanover, to discover more about her life with Jewad and how a young girl from Sheffield ended up living in Iraq to become an integral part of a spontaneous flowering of painting and sculpture that took the country by storm.

"When we discussed whether Jewad should undertake such a huge work like the Liberty Monument after his first heart attack, he said it was the chance of a lifetime for a sculptor to undertake such a commission and told me he didn't want to spend the rest of his life as an invalid.

"Was it worth it? I'm still not sure," mused Lorna Selim recalling her late husband's insistence on forsaking his health in the name of his art.

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Born in Iraq in 1919, soon after the country's creation, Selim was a student of both painting and sculpture.

Scholarships to Paris and Rome in 1938 and 1939 respectively helped to broaden his artistic palette and after spending the duration of the Second World War in Baghdad he continued his studies in the Slade School of Art in London where he met the girl and fellow artist who would be the love of his life.

"Music, rather than art is what brought us together originally," Lorna reminisced with a smile.

"He played the guitar and I played the violin."

Jewad was in fact a member of the London guitarists society and was invited to draw some of the world's top guitarists including a 13-year-old Julian Bream, who he used to baby sit, and Segovia.

Lorna added, "He also had a friend in college who was keen on a girl I was friends with, so what with one thing and another we ended up as a couple.

"I was a youngster of 17 when I first came to the Slade to study painting and design and Jewad was 27 when I first met him,

"He had come on a scholarship to study sculpture and knew exactly what he wanted from his stay in London," recalled Lorna.

"Originally, he had been sent to the Chelsea School of Art, but he disliked the tight regime there and persuaded the Iraqi embassy to find him a more inspiring institution, which turned out to be the Slade school.

"Even then, everyone could see he had an obvious talent."



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Lorna was awarded the Slade Diploma in 1948 (painting and design) and in 1949, after a further year of study, received her Art Teachers Diploma from the London Institute of Education.

Selim returned to Baghdad in 1949 and after teaching art in England for a year, she joined him there.

They were married in Baghdad in September 1950.

Lorna told the Chronicle, "I wasn't allowed to marry as a student but after graduation, Jewad, who believed in doing things properly, visited my father and asked for my hand in marriage.

"My father was astounded when he first met Jewad, because he had never met anyone quite like him before, but he became very fond of Jewad and both my parents were very happy for us."

After marrying Jewad, Lorna was to spend the next 21 years of her life in Iraq, but it must have been strange for a young woman from Sheffield upon first entering a foreign and remote country she knew little about.

"I remember when we first arrived, thinking the city was nothing like the romantic Baghdad we used to imagine from the stories and the Hollywood films," admitted Lorna.

"We arrived by plane at the beginning of September, at the end of what had been, even by local standards, the hottest summer for years.

"It never rains during summer in Iraq, and I recall looking down from the plane, and everything, including the palm trees were coated in a beige-coloured dust.

"At that time there wasn't any air-conditioning and people started work very early and went home at two in the afternoon for a siesta. So when we arrived the city was deserted and everything felt very surreal."

Yet, in next to no time Lorna felt quite at home in her husband's homeland and explained, "Iraq then was a very different country to what it is now.

"Jewad would have been horrified to see what has happened to it because he loved the land where he was born dearly.

"Back then there seemed to be a lot more tolerance and freedom. I was made to feel very welcome and everyone was very friendly towards me. I left in 1970 so I didn't experience Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule but I can only speak of the Iraq I know, and it was wonderful place where I felt both at home and happy."

During his time in London, Jewad was very impressed by the creation of what he saw as a national art in the contemporary work of Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer and Henry Moore.

Selim had once been employed by the national museum of Iraq to work on the reconstruction of Sumerian and

Assyrian sculpture, a role which he said made him feel as though he was stretching his hands out across the centuries. By using this website, you agree that we and our partners may set cookies for purposes such as customising content and advertising. [I Understand](#)

This early work proved an obvious influence on the young artists and Jewad once said about his later work, which married his European training with Oriental themes, "You have to know where you come from to know where you are going.

The lines, forms and softly muted colours I use were favoured by artists as long ago as 2000 BC when the ancient cities of Babylon and the even older Sumer in the Euphrates Valley were the centers of art, learning and fabulous beauty."

Until the beginning of World War II, Iraq had been isolated from the artistic currents of Europe, whereas, Egypt and Lebanon had been more exposed to them. Jewad carried some of these currents across the desert, across centuries of sterility, to Baghdad.

He was aided and abetted in this by his wife and companion Lorna, about which one Iraqi critic said, "Lorna came to our country and found beauty where none of the rest of us had noticed it before. Other artists began to study the rich artistic tradition which had been under their noses all along. She had a profound influence."

The Selims were also key figures in establishing the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, which was made up of painters, sculptors and architects.

Yet Jewad's crowning achievement was to be the Liberty Monument which he was commissioned to design in 1959 after the Iraq monarchy was replaced in 1958 by the regime of Abd al-Karim Qasim.

Although it in effect killed him, the monument would stand as Jewad's defining work in which he embodied his true love for Iraq.

Lorna said, "Originally Jewad was asked at the beginning of 1959 to go to Florence in Italy and design the



monument in just one week.

"Obviously he said that was impossible and we ended up staying in Italy for over a year.

"I wasn't supposed to go with him, but just before he left there had been a massacre of Christians in Iraq, and he said, 'There is no way I am leaving you here'. So we just went."

Lorna admitted, "Because of his first heart attack there was a lot of debate between Jewad and I if he should undertake such a large work, but he was determined to seize the opportunity, because except for the central figure of a soldier in uniform, Jewad was free to create what he wanted for the monument."

Although it's creator saw his finished work laid out on the ground, Jewad never saw them towering and imposing in the heavens, as he had intended and where they remain to this day.

Lorna explained, "Although Jewad saw the figure of liberty go up the rest remained on the ground. One of his students said on the day he suffered his fatal heart-attack, Jewad climbed the scaffolding to see all the pieces from up above.

"Later that day he collapsed right in front of the monument and died in hospital ten days later."

Before his death, Jewad had persuaded his wife to take a supervisory role in regard to the monument, something into which Lorna threw herself until the work was complete.

"It was very emotional to stand in front of the monument when it was finally finished months later," said Lorna.

In 2004, the interim government instigated the restoration of Selim's most famous work.

Public works minister Nisrin Mustafa al-Barwari used the occasion to connect the new post-Saddam era with Baghdad's best known artists, saying that, "Only through culture can we help people return back to their humanist roots which were destroyed by Saddam Hussein and his dictatorship"

The minister then paid tribute to the artist himself, saying that he was recalled with 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".

For his widow the tribute was especially moving.

"I knew how pleased Jewad would have been that the Liberty Monument has stood the test of time.

"Despite all the terrible bombings and warfare his country has suffered, his monument to freedom which embodies his love for Iraq still stands proud," she said.

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