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Ismail Shammout

**Beginning of the Tragedy**

1953

Oil on canvas

**MENU**

*Private Collection - © Shammout Family*

Ismail Shammout's canvases have become emblematic of the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe), the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from Palestine after the declaration of the Israeli state in 1948. In the aftermath of dispossession, Palestinian artists and intellectuals adopted national identity as a cultural imperative. Art was mobilized to serve post-Nakba agendas of cultural and societal preservation, and Shammout responded, creating clear and emotive representations of the harsh conditions of exile, of which he had firsthand experience. In the early 1950s, Shammout's iconic paintings of Palestinian refugees bore an intentional directness, transforming the visceral memories of 1948 into a national rallying point and demanding the attention of international communities.

Shammout's *Beginning of the Tragedy* and *A Sip of Water*, both from 1953, are two such paintings. Their provocative titles lend meaning to the scenes depicted, leaving little room for stray interpretations. Thick, fevered brush strokes heighten the drama, placing masses of bodies against a harsh landscape. *Beginning of the Tragedy* represents the initial stages of exodus where men, women, and children carry their meager belongings into an unknown future. In the lower right-hand corner, an empty pail has been upended, foreshadowing the thirst to come. In *A Sip of Water*, the barefoot, tattered refugees appear desperate for the last remnants of sustenance. As one man strains to hold back the thirsty crowd, a woman gulps from the container while children surround her, reaching for a sip. This scenario, fraught with displacement and doubt, still resonates today with new diasporic crises.

Tiffany Floyd

## **Biography of Ismail Shammout**

*Born 1930 in Lydda, Mandatory Palestine*

*Died 2006 in Amman, Jordan*

Ismail Shammout was a Palestinian artist and art historian. Born in Lydda, he and his family were expelled from the city on July 12, 1948 by Israeli forces. His family settled in a refugee camp in Gaza. Shammout enrolled in the College of Fine Arts Cairo in 1950, returning to Gaza in 1953. That year Shammout held, with his brother Jamil, the first exhibition by a contemporary Palestinian artist in Palestine. The exhibition included *Where to?* (1953), a sobering oil-on-canvas depiction of a family in exodus. A year later, Shammout was part of the Palestine Exhibition of 1954 in Cairo, inaugurated by president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Shammout incorporated Palestinian traditions in his realist painting, which commented on the plight of Palestinians since 1948. In 1954, he enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. He moved to Beirut in 1956, where he married fellow artist Tamam al-Alkal. Shammout became the Director of Arts and National Culture for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1965. In 1983, following the Israeli attack against the PLO in Lebanon, Shammout moved from Beirut to Kuwait, then Germany, and finally to Jordan.

## **More artworks by Ismail Shammout in the exhibition**



Ismail Shammout  
A Sip of Water, 1953  
Private Collection

### Opening hours

Monday – Sunday 10 am – 8 pm

Thursday 10 am – 10 pm

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