

ART & DESIGN

Iraq's Modern Art Collection, Waiting to Re-emerge

By STEVEN LEE MYERS JULY 13, 2010

BAGHDAD — What's left of Saddam Hussein's showcase collection of 20th-century Iraqi art is crammed into three dingy galleries of a formerly grand museum on Haifa Street here. The rest of the building once known as the Center for Contemporary Art has become a warren of offices and cubicles fortified by bricks, barbed wire and sandbags and closed to the public.

Hundreds of works are packed away in a hot, dusty storeroom, tended to by a doting but frustrated staff. Many of the paintings there are damaged. All are withering from dangerous conditions and haphazard storage, from the heat and Iraq's official indifference to an important if lesser-known part of its artistic heritage.

Such is the state of Iraq's modern art collection, renamed the National Museum of Modern Art in 2006 yet still an institution that exists mostly as an idea. That it exists at all is owed largely to the efforts of a group of officials, curators and artists who have struggled through years of war to rebuild what was even under dictatorship a record of an artistic awakening that produced a century's worth of painting and sculpture in modernist styles, borrowed from international

movements but filtered through Iraqi and Arabic sensibilities.

“This is not only part of our history,” said Taha Wahaib, a sculptor who joined an unofficial “people’s committee of artists” that devoted time and money to restoring the museum’s collection after the calamitous events of April 2003. “This is part of humanity.”

The museum, like Iraq’s far more famous National Museum, was looted and its building ransacked after Mr. Hussein’s regime collapsed. Unlike the National Museum, reopened by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki with fanfare last year, it has received scant attention and financial support from the country’s struggling new government and from international donors.

“We’re always looking at theirs as an ancient past,” said Nada Shabout, an Iraqi-American professor of art history at the University of North Texas who has written extensively on Iraqi art, “something that is dead, as opposed to something living.”

Seven years after war engulfed Iraq, Iraq’s legacy of what Professor Shabout calls living art remains neglected and largely forgotten. An institution that once organized biennials of Arabic artists has become a shell of a museum, ignored by a government that struggles to provide basic services like electricity, let alone security.

Of the museum’s 8,000 paintings and sculptures, some 7,000 were looted in three chaotic days. Even now, Mr. Wahaib, the sculptor, tears up when he recalls what happened.

“When you see your culture, your history, devastated in this manner — whether it’s intentional or not. ...” he said, stopping, his voice cracking. “What we saw on the street, it was heartbreaking.”

In the months that followed, the museum’s artwork began appearing on the streets, in markets, up for sale by Iraqis desperate for cash. “They had no idea what they took,” Hassan Qusay, one of the museum’s managers, said.

Nor the value of the works. The people's committee of artists — some members' works hung in the museum — began buying what it could.

Mr. Wahaib paid the equivalent of \$100 for a wooden statue by Jawad Salim, one of Iraq's most prominent modernists, who died in 1961. It is called "Motherhood," a stylized figure holding a heart above her head, only the heart is now missing.

Mr. Wahaib hid the sculpture for years — in a location he declined to specify — until he decided it was safe to return it, which he did last year.

The artists have over the years managed to find and collect more than 400 works, but the open-air bazaar of loot that once filled Baghdad's streets eventually dried up or went underground.

Some works remain in the hands of leading artists and collectors, including Ahmad Chalabi, the prominent Shiite politician, who bought at least three that hang in his home. He has not returned them because of his doubts about the museum's fate. "I hope they succeed," he said, "but they need more effort."

Qasim Sabti, an artist and, as owner of the Hewan Gallery, a patron, paid \$8,650 to collect 34 looted paintings and 2 sculptures. With more money, he said, he could quietly find and buy back more, but the Ministry of Culture has declined to provide any.

He returned the works he had to the museum last year, but after learning that one sculpture was placed in a hallway near a bathroom, seemed to be having second thoughts. "Dear," he said, "we lost our country. We've lost our culture."

Last week the police, acting on a tip from the museum, found 12 paintings in an apartment nearby, including works by Jawad Salim's wife, Lorna; his sister, Neziha; and Turki Abdul Amir. The apartment's residents insisted that they did not know that they belonged to the museum and did not protest their return. The paintings appeared to be in better condition than many of the museum's works.

Many more works have been smuggled out of the country and sold, sometimes openly. “We have confirmed information that works that were taken from our museum are now with princes and sheiks in the region,” the deputy culture minister, Taher Hamoud, said, without elaborating.

The director of Iraq’s Interpol office, Salahudin al-Tahi, noted that records of the museum’s inventory were destroyed during the looting, complicating efforts to identify looted works abroad and make a legal case for their repatriation.

“These pieces aren’t stamped,” he said. (In fact, many are, with an M and an S, for markaz Saddam, or Saddam Center.) “They are undated. There’s no name of the artist, no title, when it entered the collection. It’s very, very difficult for us.”

But Mr. Tahi also acknowledged that the international hunt for loot has been focused almost exclusively on the antiquities from the National Museum and from sites around Iraq that are being pillaged today.

Even as the Museum of Modern Art opened with its new name, the Ministry of Culture moved into its five-story building and filled its former gallery spaces with offices. Mr. Hamoud said the ministry hoped to find its own permanent home and restore the building as a museum, but with Iraq still struggling with insurgents and political paralysis, “I cannot say it will be soon.”

Meanwhile, the museum’s staff displays 200 of the 1,500 of the original works it still has in galleries that no ordinary Iraqis come to see. Even with so much missing, the rump collection illustrates the arc of modernism in Iraq — from the early-20th-century academic paintings of Abdul Qadir al-Rassam through the innovations of the avant-garde artists known as the Pioneers in the 1940s and 1950s, like Faiq Hassan, Akram Shukri and Hafidh al-Droubi.

Understandably perhaps, the restoration of an art museum might rank low as a priority, given Iraq’s myriad problems, but the museum’s director, Salam Atta Sabri, 57, recalled an era in Iraq when arts and culture flourished. Without an appreciation of them, he said, the country will never be whole, even with democracy and freedom. “We haven’t developed the new Iraq yet,” he said.

Mr. Sabri, an artist himself, became the museum's director in 2009 after returning from exile in Jordan. His connection to the museum is personal. His father, Atta Sabri, was one of the Pioneers. In the sweltering storage room he showed one of his father's paintings that had been found, badly damaged.

"I feel sad — not only as an artist," he said. "I feel bad for the heritage of those Pioneer artists. This belongs to our history. This belongs to our people. My heart is bleeding."

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