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## ART & CULTURE

# London art auction showcases diversity of Mideast talent

DENISE MARRAY | **Published** — Friday 3 February 2017



The third Konooz Fine Art Auction and Exhibition in London buzzed with creative energy as artists from across the Middle East presented a rich diversity of art forms including bronzes and ceramics.

The event, held under the patronage of Emirati artist Sheikha Alyazia bint Nahyan Al-Nahyan, was organized by Zainab Al-Farhan Al-Imam, founder and director of the Women's Growth and Success Foundation in London.

Arab News spoke to several of the artists, who described their work and their own personal journeys.

The internationally famous Iraqi artist Faisal Laibi Sahi paints captivating, peaceful scenes he remembers from his beloved country that has suffered so much from war and oppression.

"I haven't sepatricia perezen my country since 1978, but I returned last year. It's very hard to talk about it; I felt so sad. When I left my country it was a good place with a good future, but now it is so sad. These pictures are my memories – they are nostalgic," he said.

As he spoke we looked at Sahi's painting "Baghdad Café." He explained his love of depicting scenes of everyday life in the city. His paintings have a beautiful composition with the figures commanding attention in an atmosphere at once alive but imbued with stillness.

He commented: "The café for me is like a theater; all the classes and races of Iraqi people meet in the café. There is a mosaic of races – Arab, Turkmen, Kurd, Assyrian and Circassian. I want to show that we are one people who love each other and can cooperate with each other to build our country."

Sahi spoke about the trend today for abstract art and his preference for the figurative.

“My work shows local life in my country, Iraq. I want to reflect this subject to others. Today Iraqi artists are ignoring these subjects. There is a lot of focus on the abstract in modern art. There is no possibility to reflect your personal emotions about your society. So I prefer the figurative style and the local subjects of my country,” he said.

In the auction, Sahi’s painting “The Baghdadi Barber” sold for £40,000 (\$50,000).

Giles Peppiatt, a director at Bonhams, commented: “It is a wonderful work. Representational art like this is perhaps not currently fashionable, but if you are technically good enough it is very valid.”

Nima Sagharchi, head of sales for modern Middle Eastern art at Bonhams, observed: “A lot of what modern Iraqi art reflects is no longer there; a lot of the cities have been destroyed. A lot of the historical elements you see in the work are things people no longer have ready access to – they can’t go home.”

## **A tribute to Iraq**

Ceramic pieces by the Iraqi artist Mahmood Hassan were likewise made in tribute to his country.

His work “Childhood Spells” showed the charms used to protect against negative influences, while a work depicting traditional doors was based on his memories of home.

“My house was like this with this type of door – all of my neighbors had similar doors. At the time I took these for granted. Today, I can see a love of heritage with a desire to incorporate old traditional doors into contemporary buildings. This is for me to remember. I lived in Baghdad – my city has seen terrible things but what can we do?”

Bonhams fine art auction house supported the event, which was held in the luxurious Lanesborough Hotel; its expert auctioneers kept up a good momentum during the bidding.

Peppiatt noted: “Having a packed space like this gives a much more exciting atmosphere. I have taken auctions in cavernous rooms and the atmosphere can feel quite flat.”

## **From art to charity**

Five paintings were sold at the auction to benefit the charities in attendance. These were WellChild, SOS Children’s Villages, World Wide Welfare, Iraqi Welfare Association and The Women’s Council. Two of the paintings sold to benefit the charities were bought by Sulaiman Hamid Al-Mazroui, UAE ambassador to the UK, who attended with his wife Alya.

The ambassador commented: “We are very happy to participate – we bought pieces to support the auction.”

Proceeds from the sale of a painting by Spanish artist Patricia Perez benefitted SOS Children’s Villages. The charity’s CEO, Simon Etherington, spoke about its humanitarian work. “Our village in Aleppo has had to be evacuated twice, but we are going back in and we are in the process of building a brand new village on the outskirts of Damascus working with local people.

“We also have a Mayday fund which we will draw on when a crisis happens. It is vital when a crisis happens to be able to mobilize quickly and offer immediate assistance – that is why the Mayday fund is so important,” he said.

The Women’s Council benefitted from the proceeds of the sale of a painting by Ahmed Kadhum. Its president, Lady Butterworth of Warwick, explained that the charity promoted the teaching of skills to work with disabled children.

“We send people from the ASEAN countries to study in Mumbai in our specialized center. The people who undertake the training already work in the fields of medicine, social work or education but they are not used to dealing with disabled children – so this is a very specialized training. I have been out to see it and I was very impressed. They bring the skills back and there is a beneficial ripple effect”, she said.

### **Inspiration from Mesopotamia, Dubai and Qatar**

A striking glass artwork that caught the eye was Iraqi artist Lujain Razouki’s “The Sumerians.”

Razouki, who studied at Central Saint Martins art college, explained that the piece had been inspired by “The Standard of Ur” artefact, which dates back to 2500 BCE. It depicts two contrasting scenes of a king of Ur – images of peace and war. Ur, in ancient Mesopotamia, was one of the earliest cities in the world.

Razouki has created a modern interpretation of this piece using a novel technique that has been patented in the UK.

She explained: “I saw the original piece in the British Museum. I was really inspired by it, especially as it is one of the pieces from my civilization. I love antiques and glass. This work is contemporary but it also has a look of being ancient. It is quite difficult to achieve this result as glass is so fragile to work with. The entire work is made in glass and the color is from glass powder.”

Qatari artist Amal Al-Aathem exhibited her work “Face Moon,” which sold for £3,800 at the

auction. The work depicts the face of a woman within the moon.

Al-Aathem commented: "This painting shows the relationship between women and the moon. Our calendar is governed by the moon. I chose to demonstrate the empowerment of Arab women. The women of Qatar are strong. We have a powerful culture and education."

She added: "It means a lot to participate today. I like to collaborate with artists from the East and West. Art is such a positive connection and everyone can relate to it."

Paintings that captured the mesmerizing shades of the Arabian Gulf and golden hues of the desert were on show by the architect and artist Aber Al-Farhan.

She said: "These colors are very close to my heart. I was born and raised in Dubai where I spent all my childhood and I regard the UAE as home."

Speaking about her participation, she said: "One of my paintings is in the charity auction and it is an honor to be associated with a humanitarian cause. It means a lot to participate in events like this; we are celebrating the work of so many different artists each with their unique style."

Zainab Al-Farhan Al-Imam is well known for her work in promoting women in their business and creative enterprises.

She observed: "I know what the businesswoman is facing. She works really hard but often doesn't have the time to market herself. So this is my role. It is to try and market their names and activities. I was one of the pioneer businesswomen in Dubai and I know how it is when you are really busy with your work and you don't have time to go out and you need someone to pull you! Also, you need a safe environment. We all know each other and we can work together."

The artworks for the exhibition and auction were selected by Ihsan Al-Khatib, founder and director of the Inter Craft Gallery in Sharjah.

He explained it had taken him about four months to select the works by artists from Iraq, the UAE, Turkey, Spain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen. "I had to turn down a lot of artists. This is a relatively small room – so we have about 65 artworks. This auction is all about art – it is not commercial," he said.

A painting by Saudi artist Almaha Al-Kulabi entitled "Hope and Beauty" was sold in the charity auction, with the proceeds going to the Iraqi Welfare Association. She was not present at the event but her work went to a good cause.

Ghasaq Fadhil, project manager and activity officer at the Iraqi Welfare Association, explained that the charity is supporting a project to build accommodation for orphans and widows in

Samawah, southern Iraq.

“I visited the place last month and we saw that they are doing a wonderful job and we decided to support them. The project is run completely by volunteers and in the future we will hopefully also have a school.”

There was also a literary element to the event with the promotion of author Sheikha Sabha Al-Kheely’s book “Wein Al-Taroush.”

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