

Artist of lost painting that came to symbolise Palestinian struggle unveils new version

By Sami Aboudi

DUBAI (Reuters) - A newly painted version of a picture that for Palestinians has come to symbolise their struggle for statehood has been unveiled in Dubai many years after the original was believed to have been destroyed in a U.S. air strike on Libya.

"Jamal Al-Mahamel" (Camel of Burdens), a 1973 painting depicting an elderly porter struggling to balance Jerusalem on his back, is seen as a representation of the Palestinian aspiration to establish a state with Arab East Jerusalem, which Israel captured in the 1967 war, as its capital.

"I was not thinking of making an icon when I painted it," artist Suleiman Mansour, who painted the original and the duplicate, told Reuters before the UAE Culture Minister, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak al-Nahayan, unveiled the work on Wednesday.

"But now, with so much Arab and Palestinian focus on this painting, of course it has become even more famous than me. I am identified by it," the 67-year-old art teacher said.

Mansour said the Libyan ambassador in London had told him that the original 100 by 70 cm (40 by 28 inch) painting was most likely destroyed by U.S. air strikes on Tripoli in 1986, attacks which Washington said were conducted in reprisal for the bombing of a Berlin nightclub for which Libya was blamed.

Before that, countless copies of the grey-and-blue artwork painted by Mansour, a Jerusalem resident whose family originally comes from the West Bank university town of Bir Zeit, had found their way into Palestinian homes since it was reproduced as a poster in 1975.

Mansour, who teaches at the Palestinian al-Quds University in Jerusalem, told Reuters the new painting, dubbed "Jamal al-Mahamel II", fixes some factual errors in the original.

He said porters in Jerusalem often had stopped him to point out that unlike the round rope he had painted in the original, which can cause a load to slip and fall, they use a flat rope which gives more grip.

Mansour said he also made crosses on the Old City's skyline more visible to show the religious diversity of the city holy to Muslims, Christians and Jews.

"Many ordinary Palestinians see their fathers or grandfathers in this painting, in the dimaya (traditional Palestinian men's robe) worn by the porter, and see their heritage and culture in the image of Jerusalem on his back," Mansour said.

He said the new painting, which is set in a larger frame of 160 by 100 cm, had incorporated all the changes he thought necessary, but kept the main features of the original.

"Jamal Al-Mahamel II" is due to be auctioned at the end of the one-week long festival in Dubai and some of the proceeds will be used to support an arts initiative in the occupied Palestinian territory and future generations of Palestinian artists.

(Editing by Michael Roddy and Raissa Kasolowsky)