



Arts & Culture

Remembering Lorna Selim: the British-Iraqi artist who cherished Baghdad

Curator and scholar Amin Alsaden chats to Myrna Ayad about his meetings with the late painter, who had to leave Iraq for Wales. This account, part of our Remembering the Artist series, is based on their interviews

Myrna Ayad
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Well, I was utterly fascinated. Still am. For more than a decade, I was eager to know what drove creatives in the Baghdad of the early 1950s through to the 1960s. I discovered that the work of modern Iraqi architects was heavily informed by Iraqi artists, who in turn, were influenced by the city's architectural heritage. How incredible that Baghdad itself brought artists and architects together in a way unlike any other city in the region.

I scoured for material, and with every morsel of information that I came across, I felt teleported to this magnificent city and to the potent creativity bursting from those glorious decades in the Iraqi capital, my home town.

When you're trained as a historian at western institutions, which tend to privilege archives and documentary evidence, you overlook oral histories. Given the loss and destruction that Iraq endured, I had to come up with alternative sources of information, so I started interviewing artists and architects operating in Baghdad in those celebrated decades, finding them even in exile, and delving into their private archives. And so, I embarked on an epic journey, and that is how I came to meet the inimitable Lorna Selim.



Of course, I knew of her and her integral role in shaping the intellectual and artistic culture of mid-20th century Baghdadi Modernism. Her work was deeply influential in the decades after

the 1950s, in Iraq and regionally. She was a founding member of the leading collective known as The Baghdad Modern Art Group, along with her husband [Jewad Selim](#), and her early work exemplified the ideas advocated by the collective's manifesto, namely, to produce art committed to global modernism while being informed by local culture.

In 2015, I took a train from London to Abergavenny, Wales, to meet Lorna for the first of our meetings. I was giddy with excitement at the thought that I was about to encounter a living legend from this fabled period in modern Iraq.

I recall the absurd postcard beauty of the setting — her country house surrounded by rolling green hills dotted with white sheep. We sat in her studio, and she spoke softly with a Welsh accent peppered with Iraqi words when she reminisced about the eventful life she had in Baghdad.

Lorna had such a mellow demeanour and remembered things in detail, sometimes relying on numerous mementos to refresh her memory, including photographs, sketches and newspaper clippings. For hours, she told me stories about Baghdad, and it felt as though she had just left the city — it was astounding that she retained these memories for decades, almost as though they were preserved in a Baghdadi time capsule.



I was curious to know how an English woman came to meet and marry an Iraqi man while they were both students at the Slade School of Fine Art in the late 1940s, and then relocate to Baghdad in 1950. She confessed that her preconceived images of Baghdad were coloured by the fantasies of the *Arabian Nights*, so it was a disappointment when she first saw the city with its characteristic beige vernacular buildings. Soon enough, Lorna and Jewad saw Baghdad with new eyes and a real sense of

excitement and discovery took over as they identified what made the city culturally and aesthetically distinct.

Lorna's early paintings, like some of Jewad's, captured a fascination with locals, especially peasants with their colourful clothes, painting scenes from their lives in stylised brushstrokes. The first works she produced in Baghdad still bore the mark of the European modern artists she was exposed to during her time at the Slade, but gradually, she abstracted the shapes and patterns and created her own aesthetic.

She was obsessed with traditional Baghdadi houses and, dismayed by the destruction of the city's vernacular architecture due to rapid oil-funded modernisation, took it upon herself to paint these neighbourhoods before they were erased from living memory.

I believe that the yellowish-sepia tones she employed in the 1960s were meant to render this architecture in an antiquated and ghostly light, a warning that these were already relics of a bygone era. It's fair to say that she immortalised a Baghdad that is all but forgotten.



She spoke very highly of Jewad, with much love and admiration for his talent, to the extent that her praise, I felt, was self-effacing. I always appreciated her giving credit where credit was due, but I also realised that we do not talk enough about women

artists and their role in shaping the Modernism of Baghdad (and other parts of the region). I've often been curious to know what Jewad would have said about Lorna.

In 1961, 11 years after Lorna arrived in Baghdad, Jewad died suddenly of a heart attack. He had been working on a major sculpture, *Nasb Al Hurriyah* (Freedom Monument), located in the city's centre in Tahrir Square and which was commissioned to celebrate Iraq's independence in 1958. Jewad was keen on the *July 14th Monument*, as it was originally called, to reflect the people's stance against British colonialism and its tyranny while paying tribute to Iraq's rich history and future potential.



Lorna undertook completion of the monument and shared stories about the experience. Again, in typical Lorna fashion, she gave most of the credit to Jewad, and saw her role as someone entrusted with executing his vision. I think that her involvement was crucial: there was immense respect for Jewad, and tremendous shock and sadness brought about by his sudden death, and the fact that his wife continued the work might have prevented meddling that could have changed the monument as we know it today.

She went on to teach at the Girls College as well as at Baghdad University's new department of architecture, where she took students on field trips to document the city's traditional architecture. During this time, Lorna produced a series of distinctive paintings, which came to inspire architects keen on fusing traditional Iraqi and modern western designs. A decade after Jewad's death, Lorna left Iraq and died in Wales in 2021. I think that her work has been barely studied because of the long

shadow cast by Jewad and his undoubtedly brilliant work, but I hope this will be remedied by scholars.

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Perhaps the lasting impression I have of her is this contagious generosity of spirit so characteristic of that generation, and the immense love they had for Baghdad. The indirect lesson I learnt from her is how to overcome the sense of pity and sorrow we have for Iraq — Lorna and her peers witnessed another Baghdad and seeing the city through her eyes made me realise the immense potential of this country, which had better days.

All the same, I could hear a melancholia in her voice — it was the tone of someone who lost something very dear to them, and who had spent much of their time remembering that thing. Lorna might have left Baghdad a long time ago, but Baghdad never left Lorna.

Remembering the Artist is our series that features artists from the region

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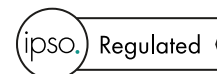
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