Iconographies of Pain
in Mahmoud Sabri’s Work

by

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Abstract:
Out of Iraq’s most noteworthy modernist artists, Mahmoud Sabri was perhaps the most attuned to human suffering. Subjects of political martyrdom, social injustice, and the plight of the dispossessed permeate his work throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The period of Iraq’s rapid modernization and chaotic political transition from a monarchical regime to a republic in 1958, followed by a Ba’ath military coup in 1963, left the artist with no shortage of tragic events to reflect upon and respond to in his work. His Communist beliefs and a sensitivity to social and economic inequality guided his artistic vision, presenting the world through a lens of human pain caused by political repression.

This thesis argues that Sabri’s practice in the 1950s and 1960s combined an abhorrence of discrimination with a constant desire to reach the people, especially the working-class, through his art. In light of this, his engagement with Iraqi heritage was not conceived around a formalist or a historicized line of inquiry, but around an exploration of the deep roots of a national identity through popular practices and vernacular customs. As an active contributor to modernist experiments in Baghdad’s artistic milieu, Sabri drew from local traditions associated with the notion of martyrdom in the 1950s, which was bolstered by his turning to international iconographies of pain and oppression in the 1960s, to create realist images that condemned injustice exercised by the country’s ruling elite. A paradoxical figure in many ways, Sabri combined in his work an interest in the local and the universal, the religious and the secular, in Iraq’s past and its political present. Being both a man of the people and a member of the intelligentsia, an Iraqi and a long-time exile, an outspoken supporter of realism and a later convert to abstractionism, Sabri was no stranger to contradiction and internal conflict. What remained consistent in his early practice, however, was a political drive and a heightened sensitivity to the plight of the oppressed, which was layered with a belief that an answer to the predicaments of the disadvantaged could lie in Communism.

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Image Courtesy: Christie's Auction House.
1. Introduction

1.1 Scope of the Project

The present study of Mahmoud Sabri’s oeuvre is intended to shed light on one of the key contributors to Baghdad’s modern art scene in the 1950s, who has largely gone unnoticed in the writing of the region’s art history. Having been absent from Iraq since the year 1960,† Sabri has built much of his artistic career in Prague, where he relocated following his studies in Moscow. He exhibited work in Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s,‡ while continuing to write and publish articles in Arabic-language journals until at least the late 1990s.

The aim of this research is to construct an understanding of his biography, his political views and affiliations, and ways in which both informed his artistic practice. In this endeavour, I have relied on sparse published material, in-person interviews with those who knew him during his lifetime, video recordings, and the artist’s own reading lists, to piece together information on Sabri’s life and practice. With an understanding that some findings could benefit from further nuance and verification through primary and archival

† Visiting only once in 1973.
‡ In places like Czechoslovakia and Germany.
research, my objective is to reconstruct a narrative that locates Sabri within Baghdad’s and Moscow’s art milieus, and positions him as a figure driven by an unwavering political commitment, one whose early work was consistently influenced and informed by the turbulent political and socio-economic developments in Iraq.

An important part of this research was assembling a database of images of Sabri’s work (presented in the Appendix of this thesis), which enabled a study and an analysis of the different phases of his practice, and an inquiry into several recurrent themes in his oeuvre, such as martyrdom, motherhood, and intense suffering. I hope this thesis serves as a foundation for future layers of research, adding further nuance to current findings and analysis.
1.2 Literature Review

Having left Iraq in 1960, Mahmoud Sabri was to a large degree omitted from the writing of the region’s modern art history, until his work recently came onto the radar of art collectors, researchers, and institutions through a posthumous retrospective exhibition in London in 2013, and subsequent wider exposure afforded by the Christie’s auction houses in Dubai and London.\(^1\) Although he is present in the writings of Shakir Hassan Al Said and other contemporaneous figures in Iraq, and his work *Massacre in Algeria* has always been considered iconic, Sabri seldom appears in retrospective studies of the region’s artistic

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\(^1\) Mahmoud Sabri’s retrospective exhibition was organized by the artist’s late daughter Yasmin Sabri and Satta Hashem in La Galleria Pall Mall in London, and was on view between 25 May – 6 June 2013.

Mahmoud Sabri’s work was sold by the Christie’s Auction House for the first time in 2014 in Dubai (roughly two years after the artist’s death). His paintings were then offered in four subsequent auctions in Dubai and in London:

milieu. Published material on his work includes mentions in exhibition review texts from the 1950s and 1960s, occasional references to him in Soviet sources in the 1970s, as well as articles he himself had authored in Arabic between the 1950s and 1990s. While there are more recent short texts and online entries that have addressed Sabri’s artistic production, a published scholarly study of the artist’s work is at present non-existent.

Primary texts authored by Mahmoud Sabri, which I have found most useful to my research include a 1956 article in Al-Adab, titled *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art* (مشكلة الرسم العراقي المعاصر), and his 1959 article in Al-Thaqafah Al-Jadeedah titled *Iraqi Art Between Two Eras* (الفن العراقي بين عهدين). Both provide an insight into the artist’s political inclinations, his influences, and his views on the role of art and artists in society. In the 1956 article, Sabri asserts his Marxian world-view, framing art as being the direct result of its maker’s economic background and class affiliations. Artists, he says, are representatives of their social classes and their work therefore serves as a mirror for the conditions and concerns of the communities they belong to. Sabri notes that art practices and audiences in mid-twentieth century Iraq are rapidly changing, as are lifestyles, economic conditions, and industry. He offers a critique of the country’s previous lack of cultural infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, which has led to a sharp divide between the educated few and the largely uncultured masses. In this article, Sabri also outlines a distinction between art’s form and content, which was one of the key points of contention for Iraq’s modern artists and art groups in the 1950s, and ponders the sources of inspiration available to local art makers, including Babylonian and Sumerian heritage, Islamic artefacts, and Western art.

In his 1959 article, written a year after the 14 July Revolution of 1958, Sabri is harshly critical of Iraq’s recently toppled monarchy and the exploitative colonial government that preceded it. He writes with a revolutionary spirit, making numerous lists and emphasizing the importance of democratizing culture and the social role of art, as
well as addressing the significance of and the complexities created by the art market. He dedicates a section of the article to the discussion of Realism, denouncing formalism and the concept of ‘art for art’s sake’ as a bourgeois notion. He echoes his earlier article in outlining the prevalent routes modern Iraqi artists pursued after the 1958 Revolution, touching upon the formal explorations of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, which looked to Iraq’s Islamic, Babylonian and Sumerian heritage, and the socially-oriented art of The Pioneers group, which he himself belonged to. While the two collectives had different approaches and objectives, he says, they both as well as other local art groups, were influenced by Western art movements and learned from European technical expertise. In this article, Sabri also presents a telling overview of his reading interests and Marxist influences, quoting the following texts and individuals in the body of his text:

Curt Sachs’s *The History of Musical Instruments* (1940)
Herbert Read’s *Art and Society* (1937)
Sidney Walter Finkelstein’s *How Music Expresses Ideas* (1952)
Elie Siegmeister’s *The Music and Society* (1938)
Francis Klingender’s *Marxism and Modern Art* (1945)
Louis Harap’s *Social Roots of the Arts* (1949)
Marx and Engles’ *The German Ideology* (1932)
Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov
Vladimir Lenin
Abdel Karim Qasem

In my research, I have also relied on contemporaneously-published exhibition reviews, which made references to Sabri’s work. A review of the 1958 show of The Pioneers authored by Jaleel Kamaluddeen for Al-Adab, titled *Reflections...On the*
Exhibition of The Pioneers, presents a praise for the group’s Realist approach to painting and gives Mahmoud Sabri the spotlight, dedicating nearly half of the article’s length to a discussion of his work, and commending him as a skilled muralist whose work is worthy of Iraq’s National Museum. The article features an image of Sabri’s 1957 painting Massacre in Algeria, presenting him as a figure whose concern with social injustice extended beyond the borders of Iraq. Journalist and critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s 1961 article Iraqi Art Today also makes a mention of Sabri’s work, claiming that his approach towards forging an authentically national art was by addressing social and political injustices in Iraq through representations of local scenes and everyday life.

A monographic volume compiled by Dr. Hamdi Touqmachi—a close friend of Mahmoud Sabri’s—in 2013, presents a collection of texts on the many dimensions of Sabri’s artistic work and political engagements, positioning him as a dedicated Communist and a figure committed to battling oppression and injustice in all facets of his life. The book’s first section features a number of texts authored by Mahmoud Sabri himself between 1956 and 1997 on a variety of subjects—ranging from politics, to the social role of art, to a discussion of the development of modern art in Iraq. The following titles are part of this section:

The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art (1956)
The Problem of an Iraqi Artist: Factors that Shape and Direct His Production (1958)
Iraqi Art Between Two Eras (1959)
Aflaq-ism and the Question of the Coup (1964)
Quantum Realism: The Art of the Scientific Human (1972)
A Commentary on the Role of Art in Critical Arab Affairs (1973)
Heritage and Modernity in Art (1973)
The Social Role of Art (1976)
Subsequent sections of the book feature texts by over 40 cultural practitioners who knew and interacted with Sabri during his lifetime, typically offering personal narratives of their encounters with the artist. The monograph contains the largest number of image plates with reproductions of the artist’s work than any other published book or catalogue. It also makes available a number of personal photographs from the artist’s family archive and excerpts of several letters he wrote to friends. While the volume has been produced without adequate editorial and publishing expertise, allowing for typos, pixelated images, and occasional factual errors to appear in the finished product, it nevertheless presents an unprecedented consolidated pool of information and primary documents on the artist’s life and work for researchers to draw from.

More recently, Christie’s sales catalogues have become a source of high-quality images and information on select paintings from Mahmoud Sabri’s ouvre. While they present a useful reference for factual data on individual works, the format of a lot essay only allows for a limited discussion of the historical context and the artist’s motivations, and usually results in embellished, narrative texts rather than analytical studies.

Several video interviews with the artist are available online, most of which have been produced by filmmaker Bahjat Sabri Bedan, and released between 1985 and 2011. These serve as a primary source, and are helpful in gaining an understanding of the artist’s views on political events, historical figures, and on a number of his peers. Additionally, they include images of artworks that are not documented in other sources.

Upon the advice of Satta Hashem—the co-curator of Sabri’s retrospective exhibition in 2013—I have also referred to David Siqueiros’ *Open Letter to the Painters, Sculptors*
1. Introduction

and Engravers of the Soviet Union, which was read out loud to the Soviet Academy of Art in 1955, and more recently published in the book Art in Theory 1900-2000; An Anthology of Changing Ideas in 1998, to gain an understanding of the differences Mahmoud Sabri had with his Soviet instructors and classmates while in Moscow. A dedicated Communist and a long-time member of the Mexican Communist Party, the author of the letter offers a critique of the USSR’s stagnant and outdated approach to art-making, and to realism in particular. While commending the work of Soviet artists as being dedicated to “the service of a social movement,” Siqueiros points out that it has become too steeped in “formalistic academism” and “mechanical realism,” making it outmoded, impersonal, and de-nationalized. Sabri resonated with this sentiment, feeling unsatisfied by the limited expressive capacity that rigid academism afforded him.²


For Iraq’s modern history, Hanna Batatu’s book The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq published in 1978, provides a detailed account of the country’s political climate in the 1950s and 1960s, outlining the events of the July 1958 Revolution and the February 1963 Ba’ath coup, which were key to Sabri’s work.

In writing this thesis, I have also relied significantly on interviews with individuals who have known the artist during his lifetime. Further information on the artist is held in the archives of the Surikov Institute of Art and possibly other archives in Moscow. The artist also left behind notebooks and sketchbooks, which are currently in the possession of his family in London.³ Research presented here does not include a first-hand study of these archival documents.

² Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 7 Mar. 2018.
³ Touqmatici, Hamdi. Email interview. 7 Dec. 2017.
1.3 Biographical Timeline

14 July 1927    Born in al-Mahdiya district of Baghdad.¹

1930s, early   Attended al-Haydariya Elementary School in al-Mahdiya District.⁷
1940s        Moved with family to al-Fadl Area in Baghdad.³
               Attended the Central High School in Baghdad’s al-Fadl Area (الإعدادية المركزية).⁴

1945        Graduated from high school with honors.⁵
               Joined the Iraqi Communist Party.⁶

1945–1949    Began his university studies on a government scholarship in Egypt. In
               1946 transferred to Loughborough University in the UK, where he majored
               in Social Sciences. Pursued evening art classes.⁷

4 April 1949  Participated in first art exhibition held at the Iraqi Embassy in London.⁸

1949        Returned to Baghdad, Iraq from Loughborough, UK.⁹
               Began working at the Ministry of Economy as a translator.¹⁰
               Joined Société Primitive (established by Faiq Hassan), renamed the Pioneers
               Group in 1950.¹¹

1950        Participated in an exhibition of the Pioneers Group, which was held at Dr.
               Khalid al-Qassab’s home in Baghdad.¹²

1951        Began working at al-Rafidain Bank in Baghdad, eventually rising in ranks
               to become the bank’s deputy head at age 32.¹³

1953        Contributed to the founding of the monthly periodical Al-Thaqafah al-
               Jadeedah, issued by the Iraqi Communist Party.¹⁴
1956 Published an article in Al-Adab Journal, Jan. 1956, #1. Title: “The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art” 
مشكلة الرسم العراقي المعاصر

1958 Published an article titled “The Problem of an Iraqi Artist: Factors that Shape and Direct His Production” 
مشكلة الفنان العراقي: العوامل التي تكيف وتوجه إنتاجه

1959 Resigned from al-Rafidain Bank. Headed the establishment of Iraq’s Exhibitions Department, with the headquarters in al-Mansour. Produced two exhibitions at the department. In this capacity, set up the first international exhibition in Baghdad in 1960. 
Published an article in Al-Thaqafah al-Jadeedah, July 1959 #7. Title: “Iraqi Art Between Two Eras”

1960 Moved to Moscow, Russia. Enrolled in the Surikov Art Institute, where he studied in the mural painting department under the mentorship of Aleksandr Deyneka.


1964 Published an article titled “Aflaq-ism and the Question of the Coup”

mid-1960s Exhibited his work Watani in Karlovy Vary in Czechoslovakia. Around the same time, exhibited in Berlin.

1971 Published “A Manifesto of the New Art of Quantum Realism”
1972
Published an article titled “Quantum Realism: The Art of the Scientific Human”

1973
Returned to Iraq for one month, to attend the Conference of Arab Artists, organized by Iraq’s Ministry of Information. Met Kadhim Haidar, Dia Azzawi, Raffa Nassiri, and possibly others.
Published an article titled “A Commentary on the Role of Art in Critical Arab Affairs”
Published an article titled “Heritage and Modernity in Art”

1976
Published an article titled “The Social Role of Art”

1978
Published an article titled “Quantum Realism and Bertolt Brecht”

March 1991
Spoke at the first national Iraqi opposition congress in Beirut, Lebanon.

1993
Published an article titled “Statement of the New Iraqi Intellectual”

June 1995
Participated in a cultural forum in SOAS, London, UK.
Title of presentation: “Modern Marxism: Crisis, Transformation, Prospects”

1997
Published an article in Al-Tareeq Journal, July 1997.
Title: “On the Material Concept of History”

2010
Moved to London, UK from Prague, Czechoslovakia.

13 April 2012
Passed away in Maidenhead (outside London), UK.
Sources of Biographical Information:

3. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
15. Ibid. p. 22.
16. Ibid. p. 28.
21. Ibid. p. 34.
23. Ibid.
28 Ibid. p. 52.
29 Ibid. p. 62.
30 Ibid. p. 86.
31 Ibid. p. 308.
32 Ibid. p. 132.
33 Ibid. p. 263.
34 Ibid. p. 193.
35 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 6 May 2018.
36 Ibid.
Fig. 1. Mahmoud Sabri, 2008 (still from video)

2. Sabri’s Worldview
Political Climate in Iraq and Sabri’s Communist Beginnings

2.1 Childhood and Adolescence in Baghdad:

“My first social engagement, one could say, was in the year 1944. With a group of highschool boys, we went to the Head of Exhibitions in Baghdad, and asked him if he could give us the school building over the summer vacation, so we could turn it into a place of combatting illiteracy in the community. And a large number of people joined us, I remember a few names, for example, Muhammad Salih Al-Aballi, Hafez Touqmach, Youssef al-Ani, Adeeb George, Kamel Mohammad Ali [...]”

In a 2008 interview held in Prague, Mahmoud Sabri, aged 81, recollects a memory of his 17-year-old self engaging in community work in his native Baghdad. Born into a middle-class household of a vendor and a homemaker, he began to exhibit an acute proclivity for justice and a sensitivity towards the condition of the underprivileged and marginalized very

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1 In another source, Sabri says it was the Ministry of Education.
early on. He volunteered his time towards launching social initiatives, and as a teenager, grew increasingly interested in Socialist and Communist ideologies—particularly during WWII when looking to the West he, along with many others in the Arab World, viewed the Soviet Union as the leading force in countering Fascism and its discriminatory tactics in Europe.4

The summer school for illiterate adults, which he organized with a group of friends in 1944, was attended by dozens of low-skilled workers, and served not only as a venue for learning how to read and write, but as a space for lectures and discussion groups on issues concerning freedom, democracy and independence, as well as on the rights of workers and women. It is this political inclination of the curriculum that eventually led to the forced shutting down of the initiative.5

The following year, inspired by book stands on Gazi Street in Baghdad6—a part of town that was frequented by leftist intelligentsia—Sabri, along with a group of friends, participated in organizing a street library of their own, which instead of supplying fiction and Arabic stories that other similar street stands typically did, provided books with nationalist, leftist, and revolutionary content. Due to its political nature, and partly owing to the printing and distribution of an Arabic translation of Howard Fast’s *Freedom Road* (1944), the library too was eventually shut down.7

As an ideology, Communism resonated well with Sabri’s heartfelt concern for fairness and equality for all, and his yearning for a more even distribution of wealth

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4 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 25 Nov. 2017.
6 Later renamed Al-Kifah Street.
and higher standards of living for the society's most disadvantaged. After the war had ended in a triumph for The Allies in 1945—a year that coincided with Sabri's graduation from highschool—he became an official member of the Iraqi Communist Party and an activist in the Party's various offshoots in Baghdad. This was not an uncommon trajectory for young men in Baghdad at this time. In fact, it was during the 1940s that the Communist Party gained significant political power in Iraq under the leadership of its charismatic first secretary Yusuf Salman Yusuf, also known as Comrade Fahd.

At this time, the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, although no longer an official British mandate, was still very much under British political influence. The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930—signed by the High Commissioner Francis Humphrys on behalf of the United Kingdom and by Prime Minister Nuri al-Said on behalf of Iraq—afforded Britain the right to freely move troops across Iraqi territory, and significantly influenced Iraq's positions on the global political arena. While the Iraqi Communist Party's critical stance towards the ruling Iraqi monarchy did not align with British interests, in the early 1940s, as the Second World War unraveled Europe, the English "turned a blind eye to the activites of the Communists because they were fiercely anti-Nazi." Following the Anglo-Iraqi War of 1941—in which the British restored to power a briefly ousted pro-British government and carried out a military invasion of Iraq that would last until 1947—there was also a wave of mass deportations and jailings of Arab nationalists, creating a vacuum in Iraq's intellectual and political scenes, which the Communists were quick to fill. Cheap editions of communist literature were readily available in the markets, and as WWII drew to a close, Communism was also becoming increasingly more "fashionable" among middle-class Arabs,

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8 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 25 Nov. 2017.
because of a string of Soviet victories.\textsuperscript{10} All of these circumstances contributed to the relatively easy enlisting of supporters from the ranks of students and the working class.

Sabri’s interest in politics was primed by an early exposure to magazines and books on history, particularly on early Islamic conquests, which he avidly read as a young boy.\textsuperscript{11} His first experience with art was also formed around an engagement with magazines, from which he copied images of paintings, citing Pablo Picasso as one of the artists whose work he reproduced and enlarged as a means of practice. As a teenager, he participated in school art exhibitions, and served as an illustrator for his school newspaper.\textsuperscript{12}

\section*{2.2 Study in the UK:}

Following Sabri’s graduation from highschool in 1945, he received a government scholarship to study in Egypt, and in the following year, transferred to the Loughborough University in the UK. Guided by his interest in socio-political issues and a concern for social justice, he opted for a degree in Sociology. While in the UK, he connected and engaged with left-wing activists,\textsuperscript{13} and as a budding artist, pursued painting classes in the evenings, where he met and befriended Zaid Salih—another young Iraqi, who would go on to become an artist. It was in the UK, Sabri says, that he was first exposed to the work of world-class painters, and himself began painting with oil colors.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 25 Nov. 2017.
The emergence of a political inclination in his work as an artist, according to Sabri, in part owes its beginnings to an experience he took part in as a student at Loughborough. In 1948, he went on a university-organized trip to Yugoslavia with a group of students from the UK, to assist with the construction of a highway between Zagreb and Belgrade. It was one of several construction projects the Yugoslavian government undertook between 1946 and 1952 that were largely built through volunteer efforts. This particular road was named the Fraternity-Unity Highway by President Josip Broz Tito, after the motto of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. On the trip, several students of different nationalities were commissioned to paint murals on the construction site, and the section that Sabri worked on was dedicated to politically-

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oriented imagery. The trip itself had pronounced leftist political undertones, typical of similar initiatives organized in countries of the Eastern Bloc, aimed at fostering kinship, solidarity, and international cooperation—values that were intrinsic to the practical implementation of Socialism, and also to constructing a credible public image of the same.

The following year, in 1949, Sabri participated in the first art exhibition held at the Iraqi Embassy in London, making his debut as not only a socially and politically-driven artist, but as a dedicated Communist, contributing a painting of the ongoing Chinese Communist Revolution to the group show. It was on this occasion that Sabri first came into contact with other young Iraqi artists in the UK, who would later go on to become leading figures in the field of modern art in Baghdad and contributors to a vibrant, experimental art scene. This cohort included Jewad Selim, Atta Sabri, Hafidh Droubi, Khaled Al-Bassam, and Fahrelnissa Zeid, among others.

2.3 Return to Iraq Following the Al-Wathba Uprising:

Sabri returned to Iraq in 1949, roughly a year after the popular uprising known as al-Wathba had erupted on the streets of Baghdad. The mass urban unrest (a three-day strike and numerous demonstrations) broke out in January of 1948 to protest the signing of the

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Return to Iraq Following the al-Wathba Uprising

Fig. 3. Al-Wathba Uprising in Iraq, 1948
Image Source: Still from Youtube Video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtSyl20ill]

Portsmouth Treaty between Iraq and the British government. It was seen by the Iraqi people as a mere renewal of the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, which would place the country under British political, economic, and military domination for another 15 years. While the uprising had been orchestrated by members of several opposition groups, including Iraqi nationalists and pan-Arabists, the Iraqi Communist Party—being the largest grassroots organization in the country—led the coordination of protests and was instrumental in mobilizing large numbers of workers and students. The uprising was met with opposition from the Iraqi police, who

shot and killed several hundred protesters from rooftops. Following the uprising, strikes continued to erupt across the country for several months, in which workers demanded “bread and clothes”, “democratic rights”, “higher wages and improved social benefits.”

Its involvement in staging the al-Wathba, placed the Communist Party in a precarious position vis-a-vis the increasingly less popular monarchy, who held the ICP entirely at fault for the civil unrest. This position was further exacerbated by the defeat of Iraqi (and other Arab) troops in Palestine later that year, which further compromised the Iraqi government’s prestige. In December 1948, Prime Minister Nuri al-Said ordered hundreds of Communists to be arrested and executed, including the secretary of the Party, Ysusf Salman Yusuf, aka Comrade Fahd, who was hanged in February 1949. As a result, the Iraqi Communist Party went “deep underground” for nearly a decade, and worked in secret to advance an anti-monarchical, revolutionary agenda.

Sabri returned to Iraq in 1949, just in time to witness the backlash against Communists, and the incarceration and execution of many members of the Party, particularly those from its leadership. The tragic events unfolding before his eyes found expression in painting. The death of one particular comrade—Nu’man Mohammad Saleh—had an especially profound impact on Sabri, and the public funeral that was held in his honor in 1951 set Sabri off on a series titled *Funeral of the Martyr*, which he would continue to explore for over a decade.

Shortly after his return, Sabri met and befriended the revolutionary poet Muhammad

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 More on this series in Chapter 2.
Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, 28 years his senior.\(^{27}\) Al-Jawahiri—himself a Communist—had played an active role in speaking out at the riots of 1948 and instigating public action. Losing his own brother in the protests, Al-Jawahiri composed an impassioned eulogy entitled *My Brother Jafar*, which came to be recognized as an etalon of modern Iraqi poetry, and which glorified “martyrdom, freedom and patriotism.”\(^{28}\) A line from the poem, likening the wounds of political victims to mouths that scream of their misfortunes (أتقلبَ أم أنَّ تقلبُ بأنّ جراحَ الضحايا فَمُ), became particularly well known, and its sentiment was echoed in Sabri’s subsequent depictions of agony-ridden figures, frozen in mid-screams as they lament their loved ones and the country’s tragedies at large. The impact Al-Jawahiri’s friendship and poetry had on the artist at this time was remarkable, and decades later, in a 2011 interview (only a year before his own death at the age of 85) Sabri recollected from memory, albeit with minor errors, the lines from his poem *Keys to the Future*, which was released around the time of Sabri’s return to Baghdad, and a section of which he had turned into a painting.\(^{29}\) (Reference to these verses is also evident in some of Sabri’s later work, eg. refer to image #56 of the Appendix).

سلام على منقل بالحديد، ويضمخ كالأقاق الإطار
كان القيد على مصمم، مصباح مستقبل زاهر
Greetings to the one burdened with metal, who stands tall like a victorious leader
As if the handcuffs on his wrists are lanterns illuminating a bright future


With unmistakable revolutionary overtones, Al-Jawahiri’s poetry not only spoke directly to the exploited and persecuted of Iraq’s masses, but valorised revolutionary figures and martyrs, and kindled the spirit of insurgency in the public. This perspective aligned with Sabri’s outlook towards the political situation in Iraq and his opposition to the ruling monarchy, the policies of which he criticized in harsh terms in his writing. At this time, Sabri befriended a number of revolutionaries, and volunteered his house for secret meetings not only for Communists, but for other opposition parties as well. Sabri’s friendship with Al-Jawahiri lasted for many years and extended to their lives in exile, when both of them joined the Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People in Prague in 1963.

As part of his politically driven cultural efforts in the early 1950s, Sabri contributed to the founding of the monthly periodical Al-Thaqafah Al-Jadeedah (The New Culture) in 1953, which was produced by the Iraqi Communist Party and published in Damascus, Syria. Apart from aiding in a logistical and organizational capacity, Sabri also contributed several articles to the publication. Although in current research, I was unable to locate the texts he authored in the early 1950s (i.e. prior to the 1958 Revolution), there is an article that appeared in the journal in 1959, titled *Iraqi Art Between Two Eras*, which is very revealing of Sabri’s political opinions and his outlook towards the recently overthrown monarchy. In this text, Sabri—although never making a direct reference to Communism—clearly voiced his leftist leaning, and in strong terms denounced Iraq’s toppled regime, writing:

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30 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 25 Nov. 2017.
The ruling class desires to rule all arenas. It seeks to mock the hammer and sickle, the pen and the brush, to serve its own agendas. However, its stupidity, barbarity, and ignorance make it impossible for it to win the battle.

His reference to “the hammer and the sickle,” however, and the figures he chooses to quote in this article (Marx, Engles, Lenin, Plekhanov), are very telling of his political affiliations and influences. Sabri draws on the words of Louis Harap, Francis Klingender, Sidney Walter Finkelstein, and other Marxist thinkers, pulling from and building upon these authors’ clearly ideologically-framed understanding and definition of art and culture. Prior to any other considerations—formal or aesthetic—it was a moral and political dimension that guided Sabri’s interest in painting at this time, and dictated his choice of subject, composition, and visual language of Social Realism. Being a life-long political activist, and a genuine believer in Communism, he was resolved to use his art to serve socially-oriented goals, rejecting the concept of art for art’s sake at this time. 33

In the late 1940s and early 1950s in Baghdad, Sabri’s artistic work showed a deep concern with the working class, and with the subject of exploitation in particular. For a few years, he concentrated his efforts on addressing the plight of Iraq’s poor and dispossessed, reflecting the country’s ongoing civil strife and political unrest. The figures he painted at this time were slender, almost underweight, with faces somber and stern (Fig.4). Even when appearing in groups, they looked estranged from one another, reflecting the general condition of alienation experienced by migrant rural workers in the country’s urban centers, and the struggle for survival in impoverished villages. This was a time of rapid modernization in Iraq, aided by wealth from oil industry revenues, and spurred by a desire to establish itself as progressive young nation on the world arena. Investment was being

poured into the construction and development of urban infrastructure in major cities like Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, with Western consultants and architects being brought in to work on the design of large-scale projects. The increasingly unpopular government, in an attempt to assert political stability in the country, appointed the Iraq Development Board to supervise the construction of “dams, irrigation and drainage systems, bridges, roads, factories, power plants, housing, schools, hospitals, and public buildings.”34 This drove masses of workers from rural areas into the urban centers, to look for low-skilled jobs. Many ended up in slums, living in poverty and often in overpopulated quarters, infested with diseases. The situation for the working masses in rural areas was not much better.

Agricultural production in the early 1950s was still run under an outdated feudal system of land ownership, where peasants had no tenure over the fields they worked in, and were exploited by their masters. These circumstances served as the basis for recurring peasant uprisings. Sabri, along with a number of other Iraqi artists and intellectuals practicing in Baghdad at this time, showed deep concern with the predicaments of the exploited and underpaid workers—both in cities, and in Iraq’s countryside—and responded through producing art and text condemning the ill-treatment of labourers by the country’s ruling elite.

Alongside poverty and destitution, the subject of death caused by political repression soon began to dominate Sabri’s work, triggered not only by targeted killings of members of the Iraqi Communist Party, but also by other devastating political events across the region. One of the most notable and critically-acclaimed works Sabri produced during this period was Massacre in Algeria, 1957 (Fig.5, 6), painted in response to the bloodshed of the Algerian War of Independence, fought over the course of eight years by the Algerian National Liberation Front against the French. This work (as well as his work on the Chinese revolution) can be read as pointing to Sabri’s concern with the oppressed internationally, not only within the borders of Iraq, and as indicative of a universalist inclination in his thought and worldview. As historian Andrew Hemingway writes, “Socialism is in principle an internationalizing tendency,” and this comes across in Sabri’s expression of empathy towards people of different communities and nations through his work as an artist.

Massacre in Algeria was exhibited in a group show of The Pioneers art collective (known in Arabic as al-Ruwwad), held at Khalid al-Qassab’s house in


2. Sabri’s Worldview

Fig. 5. Massacre in Algeria, mid-1950s (likely 1957)

Fig. 6. Mahmoud Sabri in his studio in Baghdad in 1957, in front of his painting Massacre in Algeria. Photo by Nadhum Ramzi.
Baghdad in 1958. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq, Fadhel al-Jamali, purchased it at the exhibition for 30 Iraqi Dinars—a significant sum of money for the period's standards. He had the work displayed in the reception of the ministry, as Iraq's token of solidarity with the people of Algeria. In the midst of political upheavals of the 1960s, the painting was looted twice, and its current whereabouts are unknown.³⁷

Mahmoud Sabri's social and political drive continued to influence his work as a painter well into the late 1960s. During this period, he adhered to (and in writing advocated for) the use of Realism in representing the actuality of lived conditions, and in highlighting social issues that in his view urgently needed addressing. Aligning with the vision of Socialist artists globally, Sabri intended for art to speak to the concerns of the masses, to expose injustices that permeate contemporary society, and to serve as a political commentary—ends that he believed could be best met with a deployment of realist modes of representation.

³⁷ All details of the account on the work Massacre in Algeria are based on an email interview with Hashem, Satta. 25 Nov. 2017.
3. Funerary Processions
Confluence of Realism and Local Symbolism

3.1 Realism in the Work of Mahmoud Sabri:

"...a good Communist is first of all a Communist, and only secondarily a technician, artist, and so on. [...] all knowledge and skills are tools placed in the service of the class struggle." 38

Published in Berlin in 1924, the Red Group Manifesto foregrounds the primacy of political commitment to any creative endeavor taken up by a dedicated Communist. It is with the purpose of unmasking power inequity, ideologically unifying the masses, and kindling a revolutionary spirit in the proletariat that a Communist artist is expected to perform their work.

This section presents an overview of Marxist writing on Realism—some of which Sabri has cited in his own texts, and some that I have referred to by extension, due to its contemporaneous publishing and circulation, and its relevance in presenting a continuity of ideas and formulations of what constitutes a socially-engaged art and

Realism in particular—in order to construct an understanding of the larger theoretic frameworks that could have informed the work of someone like Sabri—a Communist artist, operating in the 1950s in a context where poverty and oppression are widespread, and where he holds an opposing political stance to the ruling monarchy.

Sabri’s artistic practice in the 1950s and 1960s was dedicated to, above all, exposing socio-political injustice through his painting. In fact, it was a conviction that extended to his efforts in all other areas, be it anti-imperialist writing, community work, or underground political engagements with Iraq’s opposition parties. Well-read in Western Marxist thought on art and culture, Sabri’s work echoed several tenets expressed by 20th century European and American authors on the social and revolutionary role of art. For instance, the proclamation articulated in the John Reed Club of New York’s 1932 manifesto, that an artist must become a militant one, serving “a moral ideal, subordinating his own individuality to collective work” can be applied to Sabri’s

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40 Some of the figures and texts Sabri has quoted in his early published writing, include:
- Curt Sachs’s *The History of Musical Instruments* (1940)
- Herbert Read’s *The Meaning of Art* (1931)
- Herbert Read’s *Art and Society* (1937)
- Herbert Read’s *The Philosophy of Modern Art* (1952)
- Sidney Walter Finkelstein’s *Realism in Art* (1943)
- Sidney Walter Finkelstein’s *How Music Expresses Ideas* (1952)
- Elie Siegmeister’s *The Music and Society* (1938)
- Bertolt Brecht’s *Brecht On Theatre* (1956-1918)
- Francis Klingender’s *Marxism and Modern Art* (1945)
- Louis Harap’s *Social Roots of the Arts* (1949)
- Ernst Fischer’s *The Necessity of Art* (1963)
- Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology* (1932)
- Friedrich Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* (1925)
- Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852)
- Karl Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)
- Vladimir Lenin’s *The Tasks of the Youth Leagues* (1920)
- Vladimir Lenin’s *Karl Marx and his Teachings* (1915)
- Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov

paintings of political executions and of collective suffering. In these works, the artist has articulated oppression and unequal power distribution, presenting a critique of the government’s policies and the state’s dysfunctional socio-economic frameworks, thus foregrounding collective hardships over personal concerns. A similar notion was expressed in the List of Immediate Tasks of The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia in 1924, which declared that the artist of today “must be both a master of the brush, and a revolutionary, fighting for the future of mankind.” In line with these ideas, Sabri made his individual character and subjective expression in painting subservient to cultivating intelligibility to the masses and subtly embodying oppositionary undertones—first directed at Iraq’s monarchy, and later at the nominal republic’s repressive Ba’ath regime.

Resonating with the approaches of Communist artists globally, Sabri afforded a clear preference to Realism as a mode of representation most capable of communicating to a wide audience, and hence suitable for “shaping and organizing the psychology of the generations to come.” Realism is defined in Marxist writing as not only a technique rooted in the mastery of traditional academic skills of painting, but also one that is meant to cultivate the mindfulness of its viewers, raising their awareness of prevailing socio-economic disparity, and planting seeds of a revolutionary spirit necessary for the commencement of a class struggle. In other words, it was an artistic trope framed not merely as a “theory of formal naturalism” or an effort to solely express the “actual conditions of life,” but as a movement geared towards operating as a revolutionary agent. It was an art with an

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43 Ibid.


immediate goal of serving the public—in not only representing the circumstances of their present existence, but in acting as a catalyst for the transformation of these circumstances.

'Socialist Realism' was a doctrine taken a step further from conceiving art as merely a tool for precipitating a revolutionary reaction. Coined by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1932, it was proclaimed as the only art appropriate for the building of Communism, and called for the essential portrayal of qualities like enthusiasm, optimism, and "the spirit of heroic deeds" in order to raise the morale of the proletariat and cultivate confidence in their ability to rise and thrive as a class. Rather than presenting social, political, and economic adversities as irreversibly weighing down on the working masses, Socialist Realism aimed to show the masses audaciously overcoming hardships, and to "depict reality in its revolutionary development." It was no longer a call for change, but a bold representation of change in action. This was a movement that declared artists as "engineers of the human soul," and called for replacing Romanticism with revolutionary romanticism, creating images of valiant heroes that persevered against all odds and acted as role models for their viewers. This development is perhaps not unexpected in a context where a Socialist revolution had already succeeded 15 years ago, and the immediate objective was no longer to instigate insurgence but to keep the momentum of a Socialist progress alive. While the definition of Socialist Realism originally applied to literature, it was formally extended to other creative fields in the USSR in the years that followed, and found an expression in music, film, and the visual arts.46 Foregrounding conceptions of emancipation and equal rights, this art celebrated personages fearlessly working towards a Communist utopia, overcoming hurdles along the way.

Although Sabri had admired a number of Soviet artists working in this mode, and himself deliberately opted for studying art at the Surikov Art Institute in Moscow in 1960, the uncompromising necessity of depicting positive achievements and valiant heroism in art was a trait of Socialist Realism that visibly diverged from his own artistic vision and treatment of revolutionary themes. Sabri’s practice since the late 1940s has centered around poverty, political oppression, and in the 1950s also began to deeply address the subject of martyrdom. His resolve to depict tragedy rather than positive imaginaries, combined with a desire to experiment and push the envelope of what Realism as a method of representation could become—moving it away from the rigid academicism that the Soviet curriculum still maintained—ultimately grew into a source of disagreement between Sabri and his Russian mentors.

From Marxist definitions of Realism and the Soviet definition of Socialist Realism, bleeds out a natural connection between realism and public art, as discussed by Bertolt Brecht in his text *Popularity and Realism* in 1938. In defining the term popular, Brecht wrote:

“Popular means: **intelligible to the broad masses**, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well / relating to traditions and developing them / communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation.”

Making art popular—or in other words accessible, representative of the broad masses, and rooted in recognizable local traditions—was a necessary component in the educational and

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47 In a 2008 interview with Bahjat Sabri Bedan, Mahmoud Sabri says, “I went to the Soviet Union; it was something that I myself wanted.”
revolutionary mission that Realism assumed. Although in the little material that currently exists on Sabri, he is typically framed as a secularist due to his political affiliations with Communism and also his strong advocacy for science and empirical thought,\(^{50}\) I would like to put forward the idea that in his work in the 1950s, he employed elements of Iraq's popular traditions and vernacular practices associated with a religiously-framed notion of martyrdom, including those of ‘Ashura processions and shabbehat plays, in order to create imagery that resonated with the general public, and pronounced the feelings and sentiments of the masses that were familiar with these traditions. His use of local symbols and customs is further discussed in section 3.2 of this thesis.

An acknowledgement of the role of popularity in democratizing culture served as an impetus for the increased espousal of monumental art over easel painting by Communist artists around the world, recognizing in it the potential to overcome cultural elitism and in a literal sense make art public property. Monumentality, apart from placing art in the public sphere, also naturally lent itself to the depiction of heroic, larger-than-life protagonists, whereby their Herculean scale imbued the illustrated scenes with a formidable character. On the international arena, mural painting with social and political content was championed by “the big three”—Mexican artists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, all of whom Sabri cites as his influences.\(^{51}\) Their approach evidently resonated with Sabri, and in his pursuit of an art education in Moscow, he enrolled in the Mural Painting department where he


Funerary Processions

created a blueprint for a six-meter mosaic mural in Baghdad called *Watani (My Homeland).* The mural, due to unfavorable political developments was never realized.

The aspiration of Realism towards unifying form with content, and of subsequently popularizing art and placing it in the public domain, contrasted starkly with concurrently developing avant-garde movements like post-impressionism, cubism, and abstraction, which were deemed as decadent and bourgeois by Marxist artists and thinkers, including Sabri in the early stages of his artistic career. Proponents of Realism saw these pursuits as a flight from content, which would inevitably lead to the destruction of form as well—for which Malevich’s white on white compositions were taken as a representative example—thus leading to a complete disintegration of art in society. The French school in particular was a subject of active critique in Marxist writing on art for not only spearheading some of the most eccentric modern art movements of the twentieth century, but also for its preeminence in influencing and serving as a source of inspiration/imitation for artists around the world, thus competing for primacy with revolutionary, Socialist art.

Fig. 7. *Watani (My Country)*, late 1950s–1960s, pastel on paper, 90 x 500 cm

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52 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 25 Nov. 2017.
Fig. 8. Sabri in his studio in Prague, with the work Watani (in white and blue).

It is interesting to note the degree to which Sabri’s own writing on art reflected the Marxist authors he read. Referring to his published articles as part of this research, has revealed close similarities in terminology and articulated ideas with texts on art and culture authored by certain European writers. To illustrate some of these parallels, below are several excerpts from Francis D. Klingender's *Content and Form in Art* (1935) presented alongside Mahmoud Sabri's *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art* (1956).

“"The development of modern art from impressionism to abstract form has the following two-fold significance: in the first place it embodies the ever more frantic flight from content, i.e. from social reality, from all reality whatever, of the retrogressive capitalist class…”” – Klingender, Francis D. *Content and Form in Art*, 1935.

“"Abstractionist and surrealist trends in art reflect the existence of favorable physical and intellectual conditions to foster a preoccupation with form void of content, and the fleeing from reality of certain classes of society.”” – Sabri, Mahmoud. *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art*, 1956.

“"If we were to analyze art, we must thus commence by analyzing the social group whose art it is. The character of any given phase of social reality is objectively determined first by its technical equipment for the struggle with nature, by its productive resources, and secondly by the specific manner in which its individual members co-operate with one another in applying their technique to the tasks of production.”” – Klingender, Francis D. *Content and Form in Art*, 1935.

“"Art, as any other human activity is influenced by a number of factors, which arise from the make-up of the society it is produced in. The prevalent production methods, and the types of relationships that connect individuals and groups within a society, all determine the nature and the direction of art that can grow and develop [in a given context].”” – Sabri, Mahmoud. *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art*, 1956.
“The content of art is an expression of the peculiar emotional and intellectual response of a given social group to the material conditions of its existence...”
– Klingender, Francis D. *Content and Form in Art*, 1935.

“... when discussing the art movement in Iraq, one must give special attention to the kind of society it grows and develops in, particularly to the relationship between material exchanges and intellectual exchanges that exist within it, and the applicability of the latter on the former.” – Sabri, Mahmoud. *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art*, 1956. – Sabri, Mahmoud. *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art*, 1956.

“Content and form are thus the inseparable poles of a greater unity...” – Klingender, Francis D. *Content and Form in Art*, 1935.

“There is a link between form and content, where each derives its entity from the other in a way that cannot be separated.” – Sabri, Mahmoud. *The Problem of Modern Iraqi Art*, 1956.

هناك ارتباطاً بين الشكل والمضمون يشتق خلاله كل منهما كيانه من الآخر بشكل لا يمكن فيه الفصل بينهما.
In his published articles, Sabri was also fond of enumerating ideas in itemized lists, echoing revolutionary Marxist writing that called for action and change, frequently offering plans and strategies, or criticizing the current state of affairs in an easily-intelligible, bullet-point format—including the Red Group’s *Manifesto* (1924), Vladimir Illyich Lenin’s *On Proletarian Culture* (1926), the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party’s *Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations* (1932), among others. The approach of presenting information as a finite inventory of ideas serves both, an educational role and a revolutionary function. It is a concise and well-organized configuration, suitable for instructing and organizing the masses, and steering them in the direction of desired action. In some ways similar to the conception of Realism in art, a bullet-point format in writing was utilized for its capacity to break down complex ideas into a comprehensible form, and communicate them to the broad public.

Although lacking concrete evidence and examples in present research, it appears that Western Marxist thinkers and writers continued to influence the direction of Sabri’s thought and artistic development throughout his career, including a later phase when he shifted into a non-representational mode of operation. Sabri’s development of Quantum Realism (manifesto published in 1971), and his growing desire for art to be rooted in scientific truths was very likely influenced by David A. Siqueiros’ text *Towards a Transformation of the Plastic Arts* (1934) where he wrote, “Our art must have a real scientific basis. [...] For the first time in history, we shall find scientific truths which can be proved, either physically, chemically, or psychologically. In this way, we will be able to forge a strong connection between art and science.”

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53 Sabri defined Quantum Realism as an “application of the scientific method in the field of art.”
painting that may be perceived as pure abstraction, Sabri’s practice continued to be guided by Marxist ideals and continued to search for avenues to unite form with content, albeit now through an indexed codification of reality rather than its pictorial re-presentation.

3.2 Local Symbolism:

While Sabri’s first brushes with martyrdom occurred through the government’s backlash against Communists following the events of al-Wathba in 1949, it was in 1951 that he experienced an episode so moving, that it set him off on a series called Janazet al-Shaheed (Funeral of the Martyr), which he would continue to explore through various avenues for over a decade—until the year 1962 to be exact. It took place on December 3, 1951, when an incarcerated member of the Iraqi Communist Party Nu’man Muhammad Saleh lost his life during a hunger strike. For a number of days, state authorities held his body in the forensic department forbidding his burial, until a member of the Central Committee of the ICP, Muhammad Salih al-Aballi (the very same al-Aballi who participated in setting up a summer school for the illiterate together with Sabri in 1944), helped to sneak his body out of forensics and organized a processional funeral. The funeral was attended
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by thousands of people and turned into a demonstration denouncing the current regime and speaking out for the rights of the working classes. Al-Abali was later executed by the Ba’ath regime on July 21, 1963, along with a number of other members of the Communist Party. Nu’man Muhammad Saleh was proclaimed a martyr by the Iraqi Communists, and following the heated march held in honor of his death, Sabri’s canvases began to embody the spirit of intense grief, depicting funerary processions and impassioned lamenting figures.

Collective sorrow and lament are sentiments that came to hold a historically symbolic importance for the people of Iraq. The land's long association and engagement with themes of ruination, bloodshed, and ensuing desolation extends from the country's roots in Sumerian culture, and its numerous pensive works of art and literary texts (with poetic dirges like Lamentation Over the City of Ur, Lamentation Over the Destruction of Nippur, and Lamentation Over the Destruction of Akkad, c.2000 BCE), and later cultural con-structions, including various embodiments of the narrative of the martyrdom of Imam Hu-sayn in the Battle of Karbala, which merits a brief historic account.

In 680 AD, a battle took place in the desert of Karbala, in what is now Iraq. This is where Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, along with his band of seventy-two followers, were attacked and overtaken by the Umayyad caliph Yazeed and his army, over the question of succession. Husayn was beheaded in a bloody battle, which also took the lives of members of his family, notably of his 6-month old son, Ali al-Asghar. This

took place on ‘Ashura, meaning “the tenth day” of the month of Muharram. Shi’a Muslims congregate each year on this day, to commemorate the death of the Imam, and to perform lamentation rituals, grieving his loss. Typically, this day is characterized by large processions of people, who walk through the streets, often holding portable banners, depicting Imam Husayn and the scenes of the battle. They chant and cry, and may ceremonially inflict physical pain on themselves through flagellation to express sorrow, and to symbolically emulate the suffering that Husayn had experienced on this day in history. ‘Ashura days have also grown to incorporate a performative dimension, in what is known as shabeehat, or Passion Plays, in which people reenact the events of the battle, and Husayn’s martyrdom.

When conducting a formal analysis of the paintings from Mahmoud Sabri’s Funeral of the Martyr series (1951-1962), one notes that in many cases they appear to be translations of these popular practices into painted images. Building on this, I suggest that Sabri used elements of ‘Ashura processions as metaphors for contemporary tragic events that were unfolding in Iraq, intending for the reference to tradition and to local customs to resonate with the Iraqi public. It was his interest in a shared identity, in a practiced identity that the broad society takes part in—whether as active participants or as witnesses, that informed his turning towards popular (i.e. widespread and collective) rituals, and using them to reflect upon the state’s current political issues.

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63 Ibid. p. 101.
64 Ibid. p. 100.
Echoing elements of ‘Ashura marches and shabeehat plays, Sabri’s paintings from the *Funeral of the Martyr* series generally depict a body of the deceased being carried through the crowd, a group of mourners bewailing the loss of a life, and occasionally, a congregation moving through the streets of a city holding portable banners. Fig.9, presenting one of the earliest works from the series, provides an example of these motifs. Sabri’s depictions of a dead body also often include an image of doves perched upon the deceased’s torso (Fig. 10), which recalls a theatrical ritual that is sometimes played out in public as part of the observances. An account of the events of a ‘Ashura celebration, written by Salmons and van Goch in 1737, describes a performative act, in which a male person would embrace the role of the dead Husayn and, covered with a fabric shroud, would be carried through the procession as a spectacle. The authors say, “Several living doves sit on his body [...]. After a while, the men under the cover release their bonds, two at a time, so that they can “fly to Medina” to announce Husayn’s death to his sister.” Elements of Sabri’s paintings resemble the description of this ritual very closely, pointing to a likely experience of similar rites performed on the streets of Baghdad.

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65 Salmons and van Goch, *Die heutige Historic und Geographic: oder der gegenwartige Staat vom Konigreich Persien* (Flensburg and Altona, 1739), pp. 249
Fig. 9. *Funeral of the Martyr*, 1950s, 80 x 190 cm

Fig. 10. *Funeral of the Martyr*, 1950s, studies
3. Funerary Processions

Fig. 11. *Funeral of the Martyr*, 1961, oil on canvas, 100 x 140cm

Fig. 12. *'Ashura* procession in Al-Mahdiya District of Baghdad, 2014
Image Source: Video Still https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8GdX4o_d54
Another recurrent detail that suggests a connection with Shi’a rituals and ‘Ashura marches in Sabri’s work from this period is the repeated portrayal of men beating hand-held drums at the forefront of a procession (Fig. 11). The rhythmic sound of this instrument is widely used both as an ordering mechanism for people walking in unison, and a means to signal solemnity and ceremonial formality during a procession. On ‘Ashura days, it is also a common custom for mourners to congregate for sorrowful, poetic recitations performed in memory of the martyr, collectively grieving to the tune of beating drums and chants of “Ya Husayn.”

After Sabri moved to Moscow in 1960 and received technical training in drafting and painting, the execution of figures and forms in his work became more nuanced and precise (this evolution can be traced in the Appendix of this thesis). This is when the drums in his paintings acquired a distinctive shape—one with a clear articulation of the object’s multifaceted sides—closely resembling the images of octagonal drums that are used in these rituals in Iraq (Fig. 12). The ample swing of the arm that Sabri endows his drummers with is also reminiscent of the paced and ceremonial manner in which drummers of ‘Ashura processions sway their arms up and down, not only setting a rhythm for the movement and the chanting of the crowd through sound, but using their bodies as well to echo the pulsating motion of the procession.
In Russia, the formal composition of Sabri's paintings from the *Funeral of the Martyr* series began to morph, and from the limited examples available in secondary sources, appears to more prominently foreground the tradition of carrying processional banners (Fig. 13), possibly influenced by commonplace images of red flags, and the exalted position afforded to a revolutionary *znamya* in the USSR—a flag or banner that also carries symbolic significance or embodies a uniting guiding principle. The portrayal does, nevertheless, resemble the carrying of banners with religious figures, battle scenes, or text by a congregation in Iraq as it makes its way from shrine to shrine on the day of ‘Ashura. Fig. 14 shows a photographic image from the 1930s, portraying a procession carrying a banner in a similar fashion through the al-Fadl district of Baghdad, which is an area where Sabri grew up and attended high school. Doves and drums make a reappearance in this piece as well (Fig. 15).

Impassioned lamenting figures that appear in several paintings from this series, too, were likely a sight witnessed by Sabri as part of the ceremonial processions. Entering a mental space of sorrow and suffering, often accompanied by self-inflicted physical pain, is described in some accounts as a form of worship imbued with spirituality and mysticism, leading one to transcend their worldly body and connect with that which is ethereal. This transcendental experience readily comes to mind when reading a passage that a contemporary critic, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, wrote of Sabri’s work in the 1960s, saying “…the agony dissolved gradually into lyricism, until Sabri’s hell-tormented men and women began to emerge as though in a trance of joy.”

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Fig. 13. Left: *Funeral of the Martyr*, 1960s.
Right: 'Ashura procession in the al-Fadl district of Baghdad, 1930s.


Fig. 14.
3.3 Mahmoud Sabri and the Baghdad Modern Art Scene:

Often called a golden age of Iraqi culture, the 1950s did not only mark an upswing in cultural projects and artistic innovation, but was also a time of “raised political and social consciousness.”\(^67\) At this time, with the second generation of modern artists coming onto the scene, a number of artist groups and collectives emerged, most notably, the Société Primitive established by Faiq Hassan, renamed the Pioneers Group in 1950—to which Mahmoud Sabri belonged, and the Baghdad Group for Modern Art established by Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said in 1951. At a time of defining nationhood in the Arab World and a “rise of national movements that opposed Western domination,”\(^68\) regional artists—including those in Iraq—dedicated their time to cultivating distinct forms of expression and methods of representation that were reflective of their locality, and of their belonging to a particular nation. This often meant going back to their indigenous histories, reviving and reinventing elements from Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Islamic sources, and utilizing them in novel ways. In its 1951 manifesto, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art writes, “[…] we will honor the stronghold of the Iraqi art of painting that collapsed after the school of Yahya al-Wasiti, the Mesopotamian school of the thirteenth century AD. And in this way we will reconnect the continuity that has been broken since the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols.”\(^69\) The manifesto describes the requirements of forging a unique personality in the arts as, on the one hand, being “aware of the current styles” i.e. Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, and Abstractionism, and on the other


\(^{68}\) Ibid.

hand, having an “awareness of local character.” In this way, its members conducted experiments with form and composition, attempting to bridge the historic local with a modern international. A movement called *istilham al-turath*, championed by Jewad Selim, who had worked at the Directorate of Antiquities in Baghdad between 1940 and 1945, involved a search for inspiration from heritage (in the case of Selim, it was typically Iraq’s *material* heritage, i.e. ancient Mesopotamian art objects), and finding a method to reinvent elements of the old to create a new, modern, authentically Iraqi visual language. It was a return to the past with an intention to formulate a contemporary, that is rooted in the local.

While Mahmoud Sabri too, was concerned with cultivating a modern, national character in art, and exhibited alongside the Bagdad Group for Modern Art in 1951, I argue that he took a different route toward defining what embodies the foundation of an Iraqi identity. His engagement with heritage was not conceived around a formalist or a historicized line of inquiry, but around an exploration of the deep roots of a national character through popular practices and vernacular customs, thus shifting the lens, and looking at the past through a shared *lived* present. With his primary concern being to represent the injustice and socio-economic inequality that marked Iraqi society in the 1950s (when he resided in Baghdad), Sabri turned to imagery and symbolism that he believed was familiar to his audience, and hence capable of stirring and touching the viewer. The notion of martyrdom in particular, due to its loaded connotations in Iraqi society, became central to his work. Like Communist artists elsewhere, Sabri saw painting as a tool for “national awakening,” and therefore opted for a popular art, which drew from Iraqi culture, and simultaneously

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70 Ibid.
Funerary Processions

contributed to shaping it and to cultivating a national mentality.\(^{72}\) This aspiration is also evident in some of the titles Sabri gave his works, including *Watani (My Homeland)*, and *The Hero*—both pointing to an expression of patriotism and allegiance to a country. While maintaining a connection to Iraqi heritage through referencing its customs and vernacular practices, Sabri did allow a diversity of international visual sources to influence his work as well, be it through drawing on the formal elements of the work of Mexican muralists, or European painters, or later, Russian Orthodox church icons. Having begun his training with copying European art from magazines, Sabri continued to borrow formal references from international, rather than specifically Mesopotamian sources. In a 2008 interview, Sabri spoke on the eclecticism which permeated his practice, and pointed out the difference in approach, as he perceived it, with some of his contemporaries.

"The Baghdad Group for Modern Art formed a year later. I mean Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan's collective, which focused on heritage. In The Pioneers, our fundamental principle was that all world heritage is our heritage. You see, this is the difference. While they concentrated on Iraqi Islamic and pre-Islamic history, we thought that all world heritage is ours to benefit from as artists."\(^{73}\)

This openness to global influences is, of course, typical of a Communist worldview, but it also allowed Sabri to explore a different dimension of the Iraqi character, that is not necessarily contained within *form* per se, but rather within *content*. Using a generic language of Realism, Sabri imbued the content of his work with a deep-rooted, profoundly Iraqi character. The differences in his approach and that of the members of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, can be attributed to Sabri’s work being consistently driven by an overriding political commitment, above an interest in formal experiments.


Perhaps this is also an indication of them consciously producing art for consumption by different layers/classes of the society, where Sabri was painting for the broad masses, and some of his contemporaries were producing work for a more discerning elite.
4. Multifarious Martyrs 1963 - late 1960s:
International Sources and Shifting Aesthetics

4.1 Move to Moscow

In April 1960, the governments of Iraq and the USSR signed ‘The Working Plan of Cultural Agreement,’ which intended to increase the number of Iraqi students in the USSR from 300 to 400, and “provided for expanding the exchange for scientists, artists, students, athletes and tourists.” On the wave of the increasingly friendly relationship between the two states, Mahmoud Sabri left Baghdad for Moscow in 1960 to continue his art training, albeit through a special arrangement, separate from the contract mentioned above. He was not sent as an ordinary student, but received a scholarship through his long-time involvement with the Iraqi Communist Party and a close-knit friendship with the Party’s secretary Salam Adel, as well as his contact with Abd al-Karim Qasim’s government as the head of Iraq’s Exhibitions Department—a post he held between 1958 and 1960. Upon

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74 INA, 31 March, 21 April, Sovremeniy Vostok, July.
75 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 17 Mar. 2018.
his arrival in Moscow, Sabri did not move into student accommodation, but was given an apartment by the Soviet Government, as was the custom for all high ranking, political guests. 76

As the academic year commenced, Sabri began his training in the Mural Workshop of the Surikov Art Institute under the mentorship of the Socialist Realist painter Aleksandr Deyneka, whom Sabri had admired for over a decade, since coming across his work in an album of Soviet Art during his undergraduate studies in the UK. 77 At the Surikov, Sabri eagerly plunged into studio work, looking to improve his painting technique, as he had previously only been an amateur member of the Pioneers art collective in Baghdad, having never received a formal art degree. 78 Soon, Sabri became an apprentice in Deyneka’s studio, where he remained for two and a half years, 79 producing a large number of studies, studio paintings of models, and a major work called Watani, created as a blueprint for a public mosaic in Baghdad (can be seen in the Appendix of this thesis). In Aleksandr Deyneka’s workshop, Sabri’s classmates were Dmitry Zhilinsky and Pyotr Ossovsky, who became his close friends, and with whom he maintained contact for decades to come. 80 Both went on to become accomplished painters in Russia, working in the tradition of Realism, as well as engaging with religious iconographic painting. In 1985, Dmitry Zhilinsky conducted an interview with Sabri in Russian, which aired on a Soviet TV channel.

In the USSR, Sabri gradually grew discontent with the framing of art that Socialist Realism offered, feeling on the one hand that it was too steeped in strict academicism, and on the other hand, that with its uncompromising stress on positive, optimistic narratives, it

76 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
contradicted his own worldview and long-time preoccupation with notions of oppression and martyrdom. This criticism was not unique to Sabri, and was voiced by a number of artists worldwide, most notably, the Mexican Communist artist David Siqueiros, who wrote an *Open Letter to the Painters, Sculptors and Engravers of the Soviet Union*, which was read out loud to the Soviet Academy of Art in 1955. Deyneka, being a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and a member of the USSR Academy of Arts (the institution which was responsible for enforcing the Party line in art education, and which functioned as an art advisor to the Communist Party) had to defend Socialist Realism against its critics, Sabri being one of them. Deyneka, as well as some other professors at the Surikov Art Institute, complained that Sabri was “corrupting” their students by voicing his opinions, and by exposing them to albums with the works of Picasso, Braque, Léger, and other artists whose type of practice was discouraged by the Soviet academy.

While pursuing his art training in Russia, Sabri’s plan was to return to Baghdad upon the completion of his degree, but in 1963, a Ba’ath-led military coup d’etat took place in Iraq, overthrowing Abd al-Karim Qasim’s government, and initiating a purge on members of the Iraqi Communist Party, many of whom Sabri knew personally. This naturally dissolved his intention to comeback, and he remained in effective exile for the rest of his life—first in Moscow, and later in Prague, where he joined the Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People.

The persecution of Communists that ensued in Iraq following the coup had an
immense impact on Sabri and his work, manifesting in numerous grief-laden compositions, and an album of twelve drawings dedicated to executed Party members. While martyrs continued to dominate Sabri’s canvases, this period marked a shift from his work on the Janazat al-Shaheed series. He moved away from representations of processional funerals, and now painted martyrs using different compositional arrangements, drawing on international and cross-temporal sources (Russian, Sumerian, etc.), in addition to scenes reflective of Iraq’s tradition of annual ‘Ashura processions and collective mourning. The following section spotlights one of the works Sabri produced in the aftermath of the coup, and discusses ways in which it assimilated references from diverse sources, while proposing a possible connection in its compositional organization to Francisco de Goya’s well-known representation of Spanish rebels being executed by the French army on The Third of May 1808.

4.2 Case Study: The Hero, 1963

Sabri’s work The Hero (Fig. 16) was painted shortly after the Ba’ath coup d’état took place in 1963. It portrays the moment before the execution of the secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party, Husayn Ahmad al-Radi, also known by his Party name Salam Adel.85 This ‘hero’—who had been sent to the gallows—is an ill-fated protagonist who instead of conquering, is standing at the brink of his own demise. This painting was not only a tribute to a political leader, but also an homage to a dear friend. Sabri spoke warmly of Adel as a figure with whom he shared long conversations on philosophy and art, and who himself had been an

85 Husayn Ahmad al-Radi was in office between June 1955 and February 1963.
Fig. 16. Mahmoud Sabri, *The Hero*, 1963.
Image Courtesy: Barjeel Art Foundation
amateur artist. Adel maintained a close relationship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and frequently stayed with Sabri on his official visits to Moscow. (Upon Salam Adel’s death in 1963, a street was named after him in Moscow, and another one in Baku, Fig. XX).

A formal analysis of The Hero reveals curious analogies with Francisco de Goya’s The Third of May 1808, painted in 1814-15 (Fig. 17). Being one of the most celebrated romantic painters in Marxist literature, and a figure who has been referred to as the “artistic conscience of the tragedy of the Spanish Enlightenment,” Goya has had a major influence on art globally in the 19th and 20th centuries, and his oeuvre served as reference for numerous writers, thinkers, and artists grappling with subjects of persecution and horrors of political brutality. Several painters have paid homage to his famous rendition of the aftermath of the Spanish popular resistance to Napoleon’s armies, with some of the most frequently cited examples being Édouard Manet’s Execution of Emperor Maximilian, 1867-69, Otto Dix’s Street Fight, 1927, and Pablo Picasso’s Massacre in Korea, 1951. Although in documented sources, Sabri does not mention Goya as one of his influences, the compositional parallels that exist between the two works cannot go unnoticed, as cannot pass unacknowledged the comparable set of political circumstances that underpin both artworks, and the shared positions both painters held vis-à-vis political oppression and injustice.

Both paintings, documenting the moment before the execution, are charged with horror and trepidation. The target, unarmed and submissive, serves as the focal

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87 I would like to thank the art conservator Elena Romero Neila and her colleague Aisha Kayali, who worked on restoring The Hero, for bringing to my attention the compositional parallels between Mahmoud Sabri’s and Francisco de Goya’s work. January 2018, Dubai.

4. Multifarious Martyrs

Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May 1808* (1814-15)
Image Courtesy: Museo Nacional del Prado

Fig. 17.
Left: Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May 1808* (1814-15), detail
Right: Mahmoud Sabri, *The Hero* (1963)
point in both scenes, and garbed in white clothing, stands in stark contrast to the rest of the composition. In both renditions, he represents a member of the opposition to the dominant political force of his time, and bears distant resemblance to portrayals of Christ—both formally and symbolically—as a figure submitted to death for ideology. In Goya's depiction, the man's outstretched arms evoke an image of Christ's body drawn out on the cross, and a close reading of his right palm shows a mark similar to stigmata, serving as a sign of crucifixion. In Sabri's composition, the lean central figure positioned against the dark gallows resembles the slender body of Christ before an upright post of a cross. The reference to Christian iconography in *The Hero* is further augmented by the lamenting figures on the left, lending it a semblance to Stabat Mater compositions.

On the left-hand side of Sabri's composition is a distressed woman covering her face with the palms of her hands to block out the view of the act of brutality about to take place before her. Her pose and position on the canvas correspond to a male figure in Goya's work, who in all likelihood is terrified at the eminent unfolding of his own fate, being the next in line for execution. In Sabri's rendition, the female character appears to carry a symbolic significance, alluding to the pain of all mothers losing their sons in a time of political repression. Her identity deliberately remains ambiguous to allow for a broader metaphoric reading.

Mirroring the lifeless, bleeding man in the foreground of Goya's painting, Sabri depicts a beheaded silhouette, crawling on the ground before the execution scene. He is dressed in white fabric smeared with red stains, evoking an image of spilled blood. The position on the canvas and the gruesome detail with which the representation of the slain body is executed very much echo Goya's macabre depiction. However, the articulation of the posture of the headless figure in Sabri's composition is in fact drawn from an ancient Sumerian cylindrical seal dating to circa the third millennium BCE (Fig.18),
thus casting a connection to Iraq’s historical roots. The oscillation between the local and the international has been a recurrent trend in Sabri’s work in the 1950s and the 1960s, reflecting—albeit in an idiosyncratic manner—the broader preoccupation of Baghdad’s modern art scene with forging a distinctly national artistic identity through a synthesis of modern styles with local heritage.\(^8\) In this particular case, however, it appears that Sabri was interested not only in the object’s links to Iraq’s history, but also in the political content of the scenes it embodied, reflecting the ever-present political drive that motivated his early work. In 2008, Sabri aged 81, mentioned the seal in an interview, saying:

“I liked it very much, because it [...] encapsulated ideas of both domination and subordination. [...] In one of my paintings, I included the headless figure next to an image of a child to denote the persistence of life, the persistence of struggle. It was a symbolic gesture, motivating one to not only lament the beheadings, but to acknowledge the presence of young life that does grow in the aftermath. In essence, the figure was derived from an ancient Sumerian image, representing social struggle that manifests in beheadings and in the murder of people, which we continue to witness today.”\(^9\)

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In contrast to Goya’s depiction of a rebel who had been executed a moment earlier, Sabri’s representation of a beheaded body carries symbolic undercurrents of destruction and massacre at large, rather than signifying the death of a particular person. In current research, reproductions of this particular seal seem to appear only in Russian and other post-Soviet sources, indicating that Sabri, in all likelihood, encountered it only after his departure from Iraq and arrival in Moscow in 1960. This presents an interesting evolution in his practice, as back in Baghdad, Sabri’s engagement with Iraqi heritage had not been framed around a formalist or a historicized line of inquiry, but rather around an exploration of a national character through popular practices and vernacular customs, as well as incorporeal notions—like martyrdom—that carry significance for Iraq’s broad masses. At the time, he did not examine Mesopotamian artefacts with the intention of extracting formal elements to be used in his own work. However now, away from home, references to Mesopotamian history began to make their way into his practice, eventually leading to a series entitled *Sumeriyat/Turathiyat* (derivatives of the words ‘Sumerian’ and ‘heritage’) in the late 1960s.

It also merits mention that while the posture of the beheaded man was borrowed from a Sumerian source, its painterly execution appears to be very much influenced by his training in the USSR. The stylization of figures, the angularity of transitions, and the triangulations in the crafting of fabric and skin are all techniques that Sabri’s work begins to display only after 1960, and are reminiscent of his mentor’s style. The sharp articulation of anatomic detail in the depiction of human figures is also a skill Sabri acquired as a result of his formal study at the Surikov Art Institute, contrasting acutely with his earlier treatment of figures as almost schematic representations of human bodies.

While both artists construct anti-heroes through their central characters—a pair of condemned martyrs-to-be—there is a contrast in their approach to storytelling. While Goya
paints an unidentified rebel that is representative of the Spanish opposition movement at large, Sabri depicts a specific figure from Iraq’s modern political history. Salam Adel was incarcerated by the newly-established Ba’ath government on February 20, 1963, and executed by hanging four days later, allegedly following a period of torture. His elevation to the status of a martyr almost paralleling that of a theological figure in Sabri’s work is not only reflective of the historic significance martyrdom carries for an Iraqi context, but is also representative of the Communist mourning culture, which aimed at glorifying martyrs, so that the memory of the deceased could “be invoked to fortify the living.”

Sabri’s ability to be candid about the identity of the man at the gallows in his painting stemmed directly from the privilege of producing his work outside the borders of Iraq. When compared with the work of those practicing from within Baghdad at this time, one notes that a reflection on the 1963 coup and on the state of affairs under the Ba’ath regime often happened through cryptic means, taking artists into the realms of abstraction and symbolism.

The contrast in Sabri’s and Goya’s approach is also evident in the treatment of the figures around the central martyr. In Goya’s rendition, the group behind the man in white, as well as the file of people stretching out into the background of the canvas all seem to be in for the same fate—execution. In Sabri’s case, however, they are not direct participants in the act, but each is painted with an aim to encapsulate a distinct sentiment, ranging from lamentation over the death of a political leader, to referencing mass slaughter, to the cognizance of the desolation of mothers, and the position and role of young lives in unknotting this complex political situation. Rather than producing a factual representation of the event, Sabri uses the execution scene allegorically, to highlight the

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92 Eg. Refer to Kadhim Haidar’s series *Epic of the Martyr [Malhamat ash-Shaheed]*.
symbolic meaning he believes Salam Adel and his death penalty held for the nation of Iraq. Assimilating references from a myriad of sources that are separated by time and geography, Sabri interlaces documentation with fictitious and symbolic constructions in this work.

*The Hero*, although bearing several compositional semblances to Goya’s work, is distinct from earlier tributes to *The Third of May 1808* in transcending a straightforward emulation of the famous execution scene on the Príncipe Pío hill. More than an homage per se, Sabri’s interest in drawing on Goya’s work appears to be founded in the latter’s deep and powerful engagement with themes of brutality, abuse of power, and degradation of human dignity—i.e. subjects that had for a long time preoccupied Sabri as an artist as well. He references the striking rendition of horror and pain, but applies it to an Iraqi context, to a Communist context, re-working and re-imagining the composition in distinctive ways. Based on available documentation, we can deduce that Sabri had not seen *The Third of May 1808* in person prior to painting *The Hero*. There are no records of him going to Spain before 1963, and Goya’s painting only left the country between 1937 and 1939, during the Spanish Civil War. Sabri likely encountered reproductions of it in art history books, and since copying art in museums for practice had been an essential part of the curriculum in Russia, he was also likely exposed to Goya’s other work in the collection of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow.

Goya’s critical stance vis-a-vis early capitalist and colonialist powers had resonated with many in the 19th century and beyond, particularly those on the political left, and likely found a reverberation in Sabri’s Communist worldview. Like Goya, Sabri witnessed the execution and exile of friends, and reflected upon disastrous political episodes in his own country, and like the Spanish “painter of pain,” allowed violent, sinister atrocities to guide his artistic vision, presenting the world through a lens of human suffering caused by political repression.
5. Conclusion:

After 1963, increasingly looking toward international sources embodying martyrdom, grief, and pain, Sabri turned to Russian Orthodox church icons, the aesthetic and the tragic subject matter of which became translated in over a dozen of his works. Copying icons for practice as part of the curriculum at the Surikov Art Institute, it was not uncommon for Soviet artists to continue drawing on the visual and symbolic elements of religious art in their own work. In fact, one of Sabri’s favorite Soviet artists was Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, who had also heavily relied on theological metaphors and church art to address secular themes. For instance, he painted the tragedies of WWI using the formal language of Orthodox icon painters, all the while being a committed Bolshevik. Sabri echoed Petrov-Vodkin’s approach, and transcending the icons’ purely religious content, viewed them as universal metaphors fit for modern-day sentiments. The suffering that permeates the Christian narrative of crucifixion resonated well with the suffering related to political martyrdom that Sabri’s practice largely centered around since 1951. It also presented a parallel with the popular (i.e. familiar to the masses) dimension of martyrdom-related traditions that the artist had explored through his earlier work in Baghdad.

Drawing upon a wider, more diverse range of references to pain and martyrdom, and an oscillation between Sumerian and Christian iconographies in the 1960s can be read as being indicative of Sabri’s shifting relationship to the local and the vernacular. Like ‘Ashura processions had presented him with an opportunity to engage with popular customs in Iraq, now living in Russia, icons began to represent for him a new local.

93 Hashem, Satta. Email interview. 7 Dec. 2017.
Sabri’s early practice reveals a consistency in drawing upon religious heritage and iconography to reflect upon political themes. Yet, with a changing relationship to home, to nation as a concept, and an awareness (perhaps even a disillusionment stemming from) being alienated from Iraq, Sabri’s attitude towards what images and what traditions could represent suffering and oppression begins to change.

Much remains to be answered in relation to Sabri’s prolonged preoccupation with martyrdom and his changing approaches towards painting, particularly when his practice is considered in light of his several significant relocations, from Baghdad, to Loughborough, to Moscow, to Prague, and the influences that each of these moves and contexts had on him as a person and an artist. What remained consistent in his early practice, however, was a political commitment, and an unwavering belief in justice and equality that drove his activity in all areas of life, and most notably underpinned his work as a painter.

Image Courtesy: Christie’s Auction House.
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**Texts:**


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Appendix

The author has made every effort to secure permission to use the material included in the appendix, where possible. If you believe the inclusion of any of the images violates your copyright, please contact the author on suheyla.takesh@gmail.com.
6. Appendix

All images on this list have been extracted from secondary sources. This includes printed matter, online publications, and documentary videos. The poor quality of some of the images and the incomplete information on a number of works is due to faulty reproductions and the scarcity of published data. The artist's complete body of work is larger than this list suggests, and requires documentation. Note: This list does not include Quantum Realism.

1

Builders
1955 or early 1950s (discrepancy in sources)
ink on paper
30 x 35 cm or 32 x 34 cm (discrepancy in sources)
Painted in Baghdad

Current location:
Hamdi Touqmachhi’s collection

Sources:

2

Builders
early 1950s
Painted in Baghdad

Source:
List of Mahmoud Sabri’s published work

Peasant Family
1948 or 1950s (discrepancy in sources)
Painted in Baghdad

Sources:


Hunger in the Village
1950s (likely 1952)
charcoal

Sources:


Design
1950s

Compare with image #8.

Source:
No information available
Likely painted in the 1950s

Source:

Peasant Family
1950s
watercolors
Painted in Baghdad

Sources:
Богданов, Анатолий. Современное искусство Ирака. Искусство, Ленинградское Отделение, 1982, c. 85.


Peasant Dabkeh
35 x 25 cm

I believe the date and place of production stated in Hamdi Touqmachi’s book (1960s, Prague) are incorrect. It looks like this was made in Baghdad in the 1950s, along with the two pieces above (#6 and #7). All three works appear as a triptych in a 1985 video titled Longing for Freedom: Mahmoud Sabri.

Sources:


Women Carriers?  
1950s  
oil on canvas  
Painted in Baghdad  

Sources:

Peasant Family or Reaping the Harvest  
(discrepancy in sources)  
1955  
oil on canvas  
Painted in Baghdad  

Current location:  
Hamdi Touqmachi’s collection  

Sources:
List of Mahmoud Sabri’s published work

No information available
Looks like it may have been painted in the 1950s

Source:

Untitled
C. 1950s
Oil and acrylic on canvas
92.5 x 137 cm

Christie’s sale of 21 October 2014, Dubai
Provenance: Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner.
Pre-lot text: A selection of Iraqi art from the private collection of the late Dr. Khalid Al-Qassab.
Price realized: USD 425,000
(Estimate: USD 25,000 - USD 30,000)

Source:
Appendix

13

*Untitled*

c. 1950s
gouache on paper
67 x 49cm

Christie's sale of 19 March 2014, Dubai
Provenance: Dr. Qutaiba Sheikh Nori Collection
(a gift from the artist).
Orfali Art Gallery, Baghdad
(acquired from the above by the present owner).
Pre-lot Text: A selection of Iraqi paintings from the
private collection of Maath Alousi.
Price realized: USD 25,000
(Estimate: USD 12,000 - USD 18,000)

Source:

"Mahmoud Sabri (Iraqi, 1927-2012), Untitled." Christie's
*Auction House*, Modern & Contemporary Arab, Iranian & Turkish Art
Including Masterpieces from The Pharoas Art Collection & From The
lotfinder/paintings/mahmoud-%20sabri-untitled-5779781-details.aspx-
?from=searchresults&intObjectID=5779781%20&sid=69e8413b-36df-

14

*Iraq*

1953
Painted in Baghdad

Source:

*Mahmoud Sabri: His Life, Art and Thoughts.* Edited by
**List of Mahmoud Sabri’s published work**

15

**Turnip Seller #3**  
c. 1950  
oil on canvas  
90 x 72 cm  

Current location: Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE. Acquired on January 7, 2016 from Meem Art Gallery, Dubai, UAE.  

Source:  

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16

**Women in Waiting**  
50 x 60 cm  
1951  
Painted in Baghdad  

Source:  

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17

**Study for Women in Waiting**  
 Likely done in Baghdad in the early 1950s  

Sources:  


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Massacre in Algeria
mid-1950s (likely 1956)
Painted in Baghdad

Current location: “In the 1950s it was part of the Foreign Ministry collection and then went to the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art. It was declared missing after the invasion in 2003, and the destruction of the Museum.” (Satta Hashim, 2013)

Sources:


Mrs. Basima Daoud Al-Bahrani
(the wife of Hamdi Touqmachi)
1955
oil on canvas
95 x 75 cm
Painted in Baghdad

Source:
Mahmoud Sabri: His Life, Art and Thoughts. Edited by Dr. Hamdi Touqmachi, Adib Books, Amman, 2013, p. 27.

Brisia Hussein Fawzi Al-Khayyal (Sabri’s wife)
1955
oil on canvas
90 x 74 cm
Painted in Baghdad

Sources:
Mahmoud Sabri: His Life, Art and Thoughts. Edited by Dr. Hamdi Touqmachi, Adib Books, Amman, 2013, p. 27.
Maternity
early 1950s
90 x 70 cm
Painted in Baghdad

(The date and place of production stated in Hamdi Touqmachis book may be incorrect. It looks like this may have been painted in the early 1960s in Moscow.)

Source:

Mother and Child
1962
oil on canvas
100 x 70 cm or 92 x 72 cm (discrepancy in sources)
Painted in Moscow

Sources:
Nina, **Russian Woman**  
1962  
oil on canvas  
100 x 70 cm  
Painted in Moscow  

**Source:**  

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**Russian Woman**  
1962  
oil on canvas  
100 x 70 cm  
Painted in Moscow  

**Sources:**  
25

No information available
Likely drawn in Moscow in the early 1960s

Sources:


This image also likely appeared on RT (Russia Today) as indicated by the logo in the lower right corner.

26

Ms. Lamees Al-Ammari
late 1970s
oil on canvas
80 x 60 cm
Painted in Prague

Source:

No information available

Source:

Nudes
1962
Painted in Moscow

Source:

Children and Snow
1961
Painted in Moscow

Source:
Study
No information available

Source:

Study
No information available

Source:

Study
No information available

Source:
List of Mahmoud Sabri’s published work

Study
No information available

Source:

Study
No information available

Source:

Study
No information available

Source:
Peasant Family
1955
pencil and charcoal on paper
59 x 44 cm or 70 x 50 cm (discrepancy in sources)
Painted in Baghdad
Current location: Mr & Mrs Shukri's Collection

Sources:
Mahmoud Sabri: His Life, Art and Thoughts. Edited by
Hashem, Satta, and Yasmin Sabri. Mahmoud Sabri (1927–
Death of a Child
1950s
oil on canvas
Painted in Baghdad

Sources:

Богданов, Анатолий. Современное искусство Ирака. Искусство, Ленинградское Отделение, 1982, c. 88.

Study for Death of a Child
1950s

Sources:


This image also likely appeared on RT (Russia Today) as indicated by the logo in the lower right corner.

Compare compositions #36, #37, #38 and #39 with images #4 and #7 on this list (p. 83 and 84).
Peasant Family  
1960s
50 x 80 cm
Painted in Prague

Source:

Death of a Child  
1962

Sources:


Workers or Rural Family (discrepancy in sources)  
early 1960s
oil on canvas
70x100 cm or 74x104 cm (discrepancy in sources)

Sources:

No information available

Source:

No information available

This work was part of Sabri’s retrospective in La Galleria Pall Mall in 2013. It appears in one of the installation photographs.

Source:
Watani (My Country)
late 1950s–1960s
pastel on paper
90 x 500 cm
Began in Baghdad, continued in Moscow and Prague

This work was “planned to be a mosaic in the center of Baghdad. Due to the 1963 coup it was never realized.” (Satta Hashim, 2013).

In Sabri’s retrospective in La Galleria Pall Mall in 2013, only a section of the work was displayed due to its fragile nature (encircled). The horizontal work below it is a scaled-down reproduction of the full piece.

Sources:
This photograph shows Sabri in his studio, with the work Watani (in white and blue).

In his article, Abdallah Habbah states that this work is part of Watani, however it is incorrect. This was either a study, or a different work.

Source:
The death and funeral of Numan Muhammad Saleh also had a profound effect on Sabri. He speaks of it in a 2011 video, titled *Mahmoud Sabri on the Current Situation in Iraq*, saying “One incident in the beginning of the 1950s, the death of a political activist impacted me in a big way, and I painted this subject for more than 10 years in different ways, even when I traveled outside of Iraq.”

Sources:


No information available

Source:

No information available

Source:

No information available

Source:

No information available

Source:
Funeral of the Martyr
1961 or 1963 (discrepancy in sources)
oil on canvas
110 x 140 cm or 100 x 140 cm or 75 x 120 cm
Painted in Moscow or Prague

Christie’s sale of 18 March 2015, Dubai
Provenance: The artist’s estate
Price realized: USD 317,000
(Estimate: USD 100,000 - USD 150,000)

Sources:

1963
oily on canvas
100 x 70 cm
Painted in Prague

Source:
This painting is broken up into two sections and mistakenly presented as two individual works in Hamdi Touqmachi’s book (p. 73 and 159). In a 1985 video of Mahmoud Sabri entitled *Longing for Freedom*, they appear as part of one painting.

Sources:

*Mahmoud Sabri: His Life, Art and Thoughts.* Edited by Dr. Hamdi Touqmachi, Adib Books, Amman, 2013, p. 73, 159.


Information on p. 73:
Detail of *Funeral of the Martyr*
early 1950s
Painted in Baghdad

Information on p. 159:
Detail of *The Mural* (presumably *Watanī*)
1960s
Painted in Prague
The Hero
1963
oil on canvas
197.5 x 139.5 cm
Painted in Moscow or Prague
Current location: Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

Christie’s sale of 8 March 2017, Dubai
Provenance: The artist’s estate
Price realized: USD 547,500
(Estimate: USD 150,000 - USD 200,000)

Excerpt from the Lot Essay:
“Depicting Hussain Al-Radi (or Salam Adel as he was more commonly known), Sabri chooses to capture the exact moment in which the leader of the Communist party in Iraq was hung following the Ramadan Revolution by the Baathist party in 1963. Al-Radi was captured on 20 February and executed soon afterwards.”

Sources:

No information available.

Source:

Contemporary Martyr
1967
Painted in Prague

This painting was a turning point, after which Sabri’s work started containing more blue and purple hues, and he started painting machinery imbued with life.

Source:
No information available.
Likely painted in Moscow.

Source:

1963
Painted in Prague

Source:
Mahmoud Sabri: His Life, Art and Thoughts. Edited by Dr. Hamdi Touqamachi, Adib Books, Amman, 2013, p. 171

No information available.
Likely painted in Moscow.

Source:
No information available.
Likely painted in Moscow.

Source:

No information available.
Likely painted in Moscow.

Source:

Mother of the Martyr
1960s
Painted in Moscow

Source:

The Martyr
1960s
Painted in Moscow

Source:
Grief
1960s
oil on canvas laid down on board
128.5 x 98 cm

Provenance: The artist's estate.
Price realized: GBP 668,750
(Estimate: GBP 40,000 - GBP 60,000)

Sources:


No information available.

Source:
List of Mahmoud Sabri's published work

No information available.

Source:

70 x 100 cm
Painted in Prague

Source:

Figures and a Horse or Mother of the National Hero (discrepancy in sources)
1967
oil on canvas
80 x 95.3 cm
Painted in Prague
Current Location: Private collection

Sources:

 Jamal Al-Haidary and Muhammad Salih Al-Aballi (members of the political office of the Iraqi Communist Party, both killed by Baath in 1963)
1960s
Painted in Moscow

Source:

Fahd Yousef Salman
1960s
Painted in Moscow

"Fahd Yousef Salman was the founder and the secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party. He was executed with his comrades Hazem and Sarem in 1949."

Source:
The February Tragedy
1963

Source:

Martyrs of the Iraqi Communist Party in the 1960s, after the February Tragedy
1963

Source:
The February Tragedy
1963

Source:


(A drawing from the album)
1963

Source:

List of Mahmoud Sabri's published work

The Arm of a Worker
1963
35 x 28 cm
(A drawing from the album)

Source:

A Mother’s Scream
1963

Source:
Muhammad Salih Al-Aballi
(member of the political office of the Iraqi Communist Party, executed in 1963)
1960s

Source:

Muhammad Salih Al-Aballi
1960s

Source:

(A drawing from the album)
1963

Source:
No information available.

Source:

No information available.

Source:
Salam Adel
(Secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party, killed during the Baath coup in 1963)
1960s

Source:

Salam Adel
(Secretary of the Iraqi Communist Party, killed during the Baath coup in 1963)
1963

Source:
No information available.

Source:


Woman’s Head
1963
50 x 30 cm
Drawn in Prague

Source:

Study for **Oppression and Tyranny / Sumeriyat / Turathiyat**
late 1960s
90 x 110 cm
Painted in Prague


**Oppression (Turathiyat)**
late 1960s
oil on canvas
92 x 112 cm
Painted in Prague


**Sumeriyat**
late 1960s
oil on canvas
90 x 100 cm
Painted in Prague

List of Mahmoud Sabri’s published works

90

*Sumeriyat*
late 1960s
oil on canvas
90 x 110 cm
Painted in Prague

Sources:


91

*Oppression / Sumeriyat /Turathiyat*
late 1960s or 1970 (discrepancy in sources)
oil on canvas
93 x 114 cm or 89 x 110 cm or 90 x 110 cm
Painted in Prague

Christie’s sale of 18 March 2015, Dubai
Provenance: The artist’s estate
Price realized: USD 62,500
(Estimate: USD 50,000 - USD 70,000)

Sources:


The Bearer of the Cross (The Road to Golgotha)
1967 or late 1970s (discrepancy in sources)
oil on canvas
75 x 85 cm
Painted in Prague

This work, and work #92 are based on Hieronymus Bosch’s painting Carrying the Cross (1515-1516).

Sources:

The Bearer of the Cross
1976
oil on canvas
130 x 130 cm
Painted in Prague

Sources:
List of Mahmoud Sabri's published work

Chile's Tragedy
1969
Painted in Prague

Source:

Four Faces
early 1970s
oil on canvas
90 x 110 cm
Painted in Prague

Sources:

Five Standing Persons
1970s
oil on canvas
75 x 85 cm
Painted in Prague

Source:
97

Study
No information available

Source:

98

Study
No information available

Source:

99

Study
No information available

Source:

100

No information available

Source:
Iron People (early study for Tal Al-Za’tar)
1970s
40 x 30 cm
Painted in Prague

Source:

Poster
1985
70 x 90 cm

Sabri designed this for the Iraqi Women’s Association, who presented it to the UN’s Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi.

Slogan reads:
Fight for democracy for Iraq, equality for women, happiness for children.

Sources: