Identity Status in the Works of Iraqi Contemporary Artists

ABSTRACT

This research paper evaluates Iraqi art and craft by drawing lessons from the revolution period and noting the nation's identity in the art that continues to evolve and pass on to contemporary artists. However, explores the evolution of contemporary Iraqi art and seeks to determine cultural and artistic continuation in current Iraqi paintings by analyzing and describing a sample of artwork by contemporary Iraqi artists. It examines various artists and their artworks, seeking to grasp the motivation, predominant themes, and artistic styles that define Iraqi art. One significant trend in contemporary Iraqi art that the paper identifies is the revival of the "return to the roots." This trend has been discernible in Iraq since the early 1950s, when the first wave of modern painters saw "culture continuity" as the primary substance of their artistic work and passed this approach on to the next generation of artists. According to research findings collected from historical methodologies, modern Iraqi artists used four factors: pre-Islamic or Mesopotamian, Islamic, modern source, and folk tale source to establish works of art that were both contemporary and Iraqi at the same time, and it could be classified as modern Iraqi art. Despite the minimal documentation of this topic, this paper confirms that art plays a huge role in imparting societal values and, in the process, creating an Iraqi's art identity.

Moreover, this research paper examines the role of art in expressing social and political concerns, cultural preservation, and creating an Iraqi's art identity. It finds that Iraqi artists have used their work to reflect on the nation's history and culture, promote cultural continuity, and challenge dominant narratives. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context of Iraq to understand the evolution of contemporary Iraqi art. Eventually, the paper concludes that contemporary Iraqi art is a continuation of cultural and artistic themes that have been present in Iraqi art throughout history, reflecting the nation's identity in the art that continues to evolve and is passed on to contemporary artists.

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تقييم الورقة البحثية الفن العراقي من خلال استخلاص دروس الرسم منذ فترة الثورة ومحاترة هوية الأمة في الفن الذي يستمر في التطور وينقل إلى الفنانين المعاصرين. كان إحياء "العودة إلى الجذور" اتجاهاً واضحاً في العراق منذ أوائل الخمسينيات من القرن الماضي، والتي ميزت الفترة التكوينية للفن العراقي المعاصر. تم تمحيص العديد من الفنانين وأعمالهم الفنية لفهم الدوافع والمواضيع الفنية السائدة في تلك الفترة. الأنواع التي تحدد الفن العراقي. رأى الموجة الأولى من الرسامين المعاصرين مثل شاكر حسن السعيد وجودًا سالم أن "استمرارية الثقافة" هي المادة الأساسية لعملهم الفني حيث قاموا بنقل هذا النهج إلى الأجيال القادمة. هذا البحث يستكشف تطور الفن العراقي المعاصر ويسعى إلى تحديد الاستمرارية الثقافية والفنية في اللوحات العراقية المحالة من خلال تحليل ووصف عينة من الأعمال الفنية لفنانين عراقيين معاصرين. نتيجة لذلك، يتم فحص الفرضية باستخدام نهج روبرتوثو. على الرغم من أن تصميم الحركة الفنية وإنتاجها موضوعي متأصل إلا أن واثنو يدعي أن عوامل مثل "الأفق الاجتماعي" و"سياق الخطاب الحاقي" و"المستواة الثقافية" تؤثر على المحتوى الفني وطريقة الحركة. وفقًا لنتائج البحث التي تم جمعها من المنهجيات التاريخية، استخدم الفنانون العراقيون المعاصرين أربعة عوامل: ما قبل الإسلام أو بلاد ما بين النهرين، ومشاريع إسلامية، ومصادر حديثة، ومصادر الحكايات الشعبية لإنشاء أعمال فنية معاصرة وعراقية. يشير النص إلى أن الفن يلعب دورًا كبيرًا في نقل القيم المجتمعية، خاصةً في نقل التكوين الثقافي للشعوب، خاصةً الشعوب العربية، فالفن مثلى جزءًا هامًا من الثقافة والهوية الوطنية. تبين الورقة أن" العودة إلى الجذور" كان اتجاهاً واضحاً في العراق منذ أوائل الخمسينيات من القرن الماضي، والتي ميزت الفترة التكوينية للفن العراقي المعاصر. يتم تحصيل العديد من الفنانين وأعمالهم الفنية لفهم الدوافع والمواضيع الفنية السائدة في تلك الفترة، وتحديد الأنماط التي تحدد الفن العراقي. رأى الموجة الأولى من الرسامين المعاصرين مثل شاكر حسن السعيد وجودًا سالم أن "استمرارية الثقافة" هي المادة الأساسية لعملهم الفني حيث قاموا بنقل هذا النهج إلى الأجيال القادمة. يشير النص إلى أن الفن العراقي المعاصر يتميز بتوجهه وتعديه أساسيه، وأن الفنانين المعاصرون يستوحون أفكارهم وتصميمهم من مصادر مختلفة تشمل التاريخ والتراث العراقي، والحكايات الشعبية، والمصادر الإسلامية، والمصادر الحديثة. ويتم اعتبار هذه المصادر بمثابة الجذور الثقافية للفنانين، الذين يقومون بتطوير أعمالهم الفنية الحديثة والعصرية.
Introduction

The term ‘contemporary art’ refers to the artistic works and ideas that belong to present-day artists. Notably, contemporary artists dwell on dynamic ideas, symbols, colours, and materials, which aid in presenting individual concerns or narratives through artwork (Baggozzi, 2021, pp.244-246). As such, these elements bring about the identity status of a given artist. Political conflict has pushed Iraq’s rich art heritage to the lowest level in the past. However, influential individuals like Nada Shabout and Zaha Hadid continue to advocate for Iraqi art as the region gradually reclaims its importance on the global art scene. Iraqi artistic creation has been widely recognized positively by the public and academic field. In his journal, Baggozzi (2021) affirms that the country’s contemporary and modern art has eventually gained the interest of Western historians and artists. Their recognition and passion have resulted in Iraqi artists performing several shows in England, the United States, and Germany, a trend that has positively influenced the identity status of contemporary art in Iraq.

An effective and comprehensive discussion on Iraqi artists’ identity status entails a look at the craft’s background and the artists’ experience over time. Uniformity and cooperation among artists grew in the 1940s, following the establishment of the Art Lovers Association (Sharifian et al., 2017, p 45). Iraqi art became more active from that point forward, with several groups such as the Pioneer Art Group established in 1950 by Faiq Hassan, the Baghdad Modern Art Group established in 1951 by Jewad Salim, and the impressionist’s organization, led by Hafez Al Daroubi, springing up in rapid succession. Iraq’s succeeding administrations have concentrated their focus on the discourse of their collective identity ever since. Iraqi artists identify and represent Iraqi culture while being modern and internationally recognized. As a result, they concentrated on their rich creative past and research into their tradition. Therefore, a group of works by modern Iraqi painters from the 1950s to the 2000s were selected to highlight this identity status.
Environmental factors can play a significant role in the formation of new artistic and cultural movements. Disruptions to society's morality, such as political and economic upheavals, social and cultural changes, and environmental crises, can lead to new ideas, expressions, and perspectives emerging in art and culture. For example, the rise of street art in the 1970s and 1980s was in part a response to the social and economic upheavals of the time. The disenfranchised youth of urban areas used graffiti and street art as a means of expressing their social and political concerns. However, the emergence of new artistic movements is not only dependent on environmental factors, but also on the availability of resources and intermediaries. Intermediaries are individuals or organizations that facilitate the creation and dissemination of art and culture, such as art dealers, galleries, curators, and critics. They play an essential role in providing the necessary resources for artists to create, produce, and exhibit their work. These resources include funding, exhibition spaces, and publicity.

In the contemporary art world, funding is often provided by corporate sponsors, private collectors, and government agencies. Art dealers and galleries provide exhibition spaces and help artists gain visibility in the art world. Critics and curators play an essential role in shaping the discourse around art and identifying emerging artists and movements. The role of intermediaries in the creation and dissemination of art and culture has been the subject of debate. Some argue that intermediaries can stifle creativity and limit access to the art world by privileging certain styles and perspectives over others. Others see intermediaries as essential gatekeepers who help artists navigate the complex and competitive art world.

**Research Background**

Before the American invasion in the early 21st century, there were minimal works in the sphere of contemporary Iraqi art in the research literature. Previously written articles on this topic largely describe the artists and their artworks; for example, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's Modern Iraqi Art. Most previous studies pay little emphasis on identity status and the relationship between contemporary and pre-modern art traditions. To fill this void, this paper aims to study the historical cultural-artistic continuity of contemporary Iraqi painting. This research differs from prior studies in that it examines contemporary Iraqi artists' cultural capital and areas of interest to determine if
their pieces of art are adaptations of contemporary western art or abstractions of Iraqi culture and art.

Due to the past Iraqi invasions, political turmoil, and exile of artists, there has been a significant loss of identity in the past for Iraqi artists. Indeed, scholars and curators tend to overlook this topic as a result of the aforementioned crisis in the nation. This finding lays the ground for this research paper’s rationale to attempt and fill the gap present in the literature concerning the identity status of the current generation of Iraqi artists. This research aims to pinpoint the specific style that Iraqi artists can identify with their art, regardless of whether they are local artists or based in the diaspora. Moreover, the study sets out to establish the correlation between Iraqi art and the culture of its nationals.

**Methodology**

In this study of Iraqi art, a comparative approach between the craft and Iraqi’s societal or cultural identity is implemented. This quantitative method helps to highlight the impact that art has on culture as well as how society shapes art’s identity status. The artworks of modern Iraqi artists were investigated to realize the study objective. Furthermore, after characterizing the aesthetic features of their artworks according to the latest research and artist descriptions, their pieces of art and inspiration sources and their link to Iraqi cultural identity were analyzed. Modernism in Iraq, a unique survey of the work of multiple generations of Iraqi artists from the mid-twentieth century to the present, is on view at the Art Gallery paintings, sculptures, videos, and by artists. The investigation involved obtaining information from the art gallery.

**Literature Review**

Thorough research on Iraqi art proves that scholars rarely document this topic; thus, a large part of this art is unknown to the outside world. This under-representation can be attributed to the recent invasions, destruction of Iraqi art during the revolution era, and the subsequent exile of notable artists. In as much as a large part of Iraqi’s identity status in art was lost, artists such as Zena Assi and Naim Ismail present artistic ideas that seek to re-establish a common identity for Iraqi artists. Al-Yahyai et al., (2019, p 89) examine the growth of Western-style creative arts in
Iraq and present art organizations and individuals as well as their artworks. Ruyin Pakbaz's "Iraq contemporary art" is one of the rare studies by Iranian academics on modern art in Iraq. It covers modern art history in Iraq as well as Iraqi artists. Most previous studies pay very little emphasis to continuity and the relationship between current and pre-modern art traditions (Nathel, 2020, pp. 128-165). Currently, a new generation of Iraqi artists abroad is earning well-deserved global recognition. Jananne Al-Ani, Adel Abidin, Wafaa Bilal, Halim Al-Karim, and Nedim Kufi are some of the creators whose work can be viewed in significant institutions throughout North America, Europe, and the Middle East. Two major themes underpin art in Iraq currently. The first is Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's impact on the study of contemporary Iraqi art. The importance of Jabra's essays becomes obvious because of the scarcity of contemporary Iraqi art resources (Tamplin, 2020, pp.97-104). Aside from his essays and the work of a few others, most notably Nada Shabout's Modern Iraq Archive (MAIA),11 there is little credible source material related to Iraq's contemporary art history.

Iraqi art dates back to the early Mesopotamia art and architecture era. However, Iraqi has failed to keep its art identity intact due to the numerous invasions that were characteristic of the destruction and looting of Baghdad’s art. Although the Iraqi lost part of their heritage during the invasions, several contemporary artists draw their inspiration from these occurrences. They incorporate themes of war in their art as part of the protest towards the rampant social unrest in this region.

Modern Iraqi Art Evolution

- The advent of new generation

(Sanaa Mohsin, 2021, pp.191-197) note that artistic identity in Iraq covers the previous as well as the fresh insights on works of art both at an individual artist’s level and as a collective culture across the nation. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Ministry of Culture sent the first painters to Europe to learn the art. These painters introduced modern European styles to Iraq, which served as a foundation for the development of modern Iraqi art. Despite their familiarity with European art, those painters sought to create a new style that blended modern and Iraqi styles. Following their arrival from abroad, these artists started teaching their contemporary style and sharing their knowledge of art with learners and professionals at the Painting Academy of Fine Arts. Contemporary Iraqi painters evoked the return to the root’s movement and influence from heritage to build contemporary Iraqi art discussion in the early 1950s (Sharifian et al., 2017, pp.39-48).
The majority of Iraqi artwork serves as a reminder of the country’s history and heritage. In an attempt to preserve the deep Iraqi heritage, contemporary artists incorporate modern Western art into their expressionist art. For instance, current poets or painters in Iraq integrate modern art in their work and perform it at the city’s theatre to preserve their identity whilst adapting to the modern era. Contemporary artists such as Mohammed Said, who is famous for his exemplary technique in modern painting, fuses modern styles of art and Iraqi history. In so doing, this breed of artists attempts to preserve the initial identity of an Iraqi artist. Hanaa Malallah is one of the modern Iraq artists who studied with her fellow artist Shakir Hassan AlSaid for over twenty years. Shakir Hassan is one of the contemporary artists whose art seeks to uphold the culture of the Iraqi people. Through his spectacular paintings, Hassan has been credited to bridge the gap between modernity and Iraqi heritage.

Malallah, who is now based in London, is nonetheless inspired by the style and iconography of historical Mesopotamia.

Malallah's topic has changed over time, as the dynamic of her home Iraq has changed, witnessing both demolition and reconstruction. The global art community has recognized her considerable abilities as one of Iraq's finest modern female painters.

Because of the marginalization of Iraqi female artists following the war in Iraq, many Iraqi women were required to conform to traditional gender roles and were barred from engaging in activities such as painting (Pires, 2019, pp 7-8). Even though much of Hanaa's art is inspired by the

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“My Country Map”
Artist name: Hanaa Malallah
Date: 2008
Material: Layers of burnt canvas and oil on canvas
Size: 200 × 200 cm
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invasion's turmoil, she has declined to gender her works. A common type of art among Iraqi artists is the Islamic calligraphy, which serves as one of the nation’s cultural heritage. Several Iraqi artists associate their artwork with this Arabic calligraphy as they hope to pass it on to future generations of upcoming artists in the region. For instance, Mohammed Ehsai and Farhad Moshiri design letters in a calligraphic manner to express their nation’s heritage as a part of their identity status.

Hayv Kahraman is another Iraqi contemporary artist who has managed to gain status in art. Kahraman, who was born in Baghdad and schooled in Europe, is a modern artist whose emphasis on the aesthetics of beauty has propelled her into the spotlight. Kahraman denies the visual her viewer understands by using formal appearance standards and rather uses her canvases to express ideas regarding current themes. Kahraman's work reflects her wandering life, spanning Islamic art, Italian Renaissance styles, or even Japanese art. Kahraman's background in Iraq has always impacted her art.
The influence of immigration

Naef (2018) credits contemporary artists' newly developed links with the West to the creation of a modern style in Iraq. However, as several exhibitions demonstrate, members of the so-called "sixties generation" used their Western education to research their history. Following this period, there were decades of war. Artists were barred from going abroad from the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 until the US-Led Invasion attack in 2003. State support ceased during the sanctions, art resources were sparse or absent, and artists were forced to innovate. Modernism and Iraq is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to learn about the impact of cultural isolation on the development of contemporary Iraqi aesthetics. Nowadays, Iraqi artists create artworks that influence their fellow countrymen to heed and return to their ancient traditions, particularly Islamic law. These artists seek to come up with pieces of art that serve as a symbol of national unity.

Theoretical Basis

For some time, studies and research focused on the relationship between art and societal factors impacted by the traditional heritage theories of cultural adaptation. This perspective, which was derived from Durkheim's imitational perspective of culture, art, and concepts and Marx's image of the superstructure, depicts a contradiction between the social system and art (Kurakin, 2020, pp. 63-89). On the other hand, studies reveal a definite and continual relationship between
the two elements. As such, the study of the linkage between art and the social system is critical in addressing the most fundamental questions of what or who relates the social hierarchy to art. All in all, art is a valuable tool that plays an imperative role in the preservation of cultural and historical records through works such as paintings or sculptures (Adams, 2019, pp.57-63). Additionally, it influences individuals to shape and change opinions; hence, gaining beneficial values in the process.

Another supposition that explains the way cultural-artistic trends, among other social practices, originated is relative deprivation (Power, Madsen & Morton, 2020, pp.120-122). According to this hypothesis, cultural-artistic movements arise in response to the mental welfare of individuals living in "social pressure" situations such as poverty trap, class mobility decline, upward class mobility failure, solitude, illness, disability, natural disasters, and alienation. Such beliefs are founded on the simple premise that "necessity is the mother of invention." Because social structural development and artistic processes are independent and autonomous, with each necessarily describing the other, historical milestones should exist to represent cultural-artistic innovation. After discussing such themes, Wuthnow feels that the link between art and the social environment must be explored within a paradigm that analyzes their identity (Keshavarz Afshar & Rouzbahani, 2019, pp. 5-8).

Environmental factors create the ideal conditions for the creation of new artistic movements by disrupting society's morality. They contribute to the formation of culture and art by giving the necessary resources for new artistic and cultural movements to arise. In any case, certain intermediaries drive funds into the artistic and cultural creation process.

**Results and Discussion**

**Aesthetic in Contemporary Iraqi Painting**

It is easy to identify an Iraqi artwork given that the region’s artists produce art with recurring themes of war, restoration, and expressionism. Also, most of their paintings symbolize the Islamic history coupled with desert backgrounds. Iraqi artists led the transition from tradition to build contemporary Iraqi art discourses in the early 1950s (Sharifian et al., 2017, pp.39-48). Since then, every artist is impacted by a component of this discursive context, which is their cultural capital.
about their life experience. Iraqi artists have been influenced by their society's current discursive setting and have reaped the benefits of current cultural riches in proportion to their share of advanced concepts. As a result, as we have seen, the "return to heritage" painting trend was born out of Iraqi artists' traditional cultural capital combined with the aesthetic values (content and form) of contemporary Iraqi artworks. As a result, "heritage" refers to the art forms that have survived since the Mesopotamian civilizations until the Islamic period, particularly under the influences of Wasiti painting (Mahmoud et al., 2022, pp.20-45). Several Iraqi paintings portray the Islamic history among other cultures that are prevalent in this society. Indeed, Baghdad plays a pivotal role in preserving Iraqi heritage. The city serves as the cultural center of the Arab world given its deep artistic traditions.

Furthermore, popular culture is a significant source of artists' attachment to their homeland, social obligation, and close connection to the public and the current time. Artists regard indigenous people's practices and beliefs, like, tattoos, spells, amulets, nomads’ ceremonies, as an important part of Iraq's artistic heritage. Another factor contributing to artists' interest in popular culture is the widespread acceptance of communist and socialist beliefs among Iraqi intellectuals at the time. Furthermore, using art components originating from the masses was another approach to include the society's banned class in the sublime culture. Since the lower classes were less affected by Western civilization, they were often seen as the ideal candidates for the return to roots movement. Evidently, each of the painters developed their style and aesthetic in response to the heritage.

Letters, according to Shakir Hassan Al Said, are the moment of passage into the magnificent value of line in art and are a crucial feature in Baghdad artwork (Al-Bahloly, 2021, pp.135-149). In addition to using letters, his works lay a strong emphasis on location, which primarily highlights Yahya bin Mahmoud Wasiti's artistic abilities. The notions of common and Muslim culture are expressed in Salim Al Dabbagh's artworks through the use of forms and colourss (Farhan, 2021, pp.15-30). The artwork's contents embody Islamic and folklore albeit the forms do not appear to be inspired by mythology or Islamic art at first glance.

In relation to existing European artworks, there is a sense of focus on "location" in the paintings of Iraqi artists. This depiction implies that the artist portrays the walls of abandoned houses in Baghdad areas with identifying components such as Mesopotamia distinctive palm trees, diamond-shaped magnified eyes, Arabic letters Calligraphy. Although location, space, and time are the
primary resources and instruments for establishing and maintaining identity, the place presents the most suitable depiction and identity. As previously stated, this trend can be traced back to Iraqi painting history. Ultimately, contemporary Iraqi artists were able to succeed in establishing an advanced Iraqi art discourse by incorporating Iraqi heritage aesthetics, like the application of Islamic concepts such as decoration, repetition, geometry, calligraphy aesthetics, and Islamic symbolism, with the validity of Iraq folkloric art.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The first wave of modern Iraqi artists received education in Europe and was well-versed in contemporary art forms. Faiq Hassan, Jewad Salim, and Shakir Hassan Al Said were the most prominent figures among such artists, through whom other artists were either explicitly or implicitly trained. To build modern Iraqi art, those artists attempted to mix modern art aesthetics, which shun direct reference to natural forms, within Iraqi heritage, namely Mesopotamia, Mesopotamian, Islamic, and Popular culture. As a result, in comparison to European artworks, current Iraqi paintings contain aspects that indicate their uniqueness.

The return to roots and cultural continuity was considered the most important idea in this artistic movement from the start, and each artist had their strategy to demonstrate the artistic-cultural continuity. Some used form, stoichiometry, colours palette, symbols, and others used elements and material of the artwork to prove the artistic-cultural continuity and identity status. Heritage is sometimes represented through the application of themes such as pyramids, and Sumerian eyes, and other times it is reflected simply by the implications that the artwork tackles. The artist's perception of his work might greatly guide the addressees in the latter situation.

Albeit the Western influence on Iraqi art, several contemporary artists come up with art that resonates with the nation’s long history and heritage. Notably, these artists have blended their work with the modern culture, making it easy to identify their artwork as Iraqi. This trend is visible in the unique Iraqi style, such as the Arabic calligraphy, as well as the themes that are characteristic of the Iraqi culture. It is quite remarkable that even the exiled artists compose Iraqi art, which is among the collective efforts to preserve Iraqi culture and pass it on to the next generation.
Bibliography

Book

Journal


**Doctoral dissertation**