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Forbes
US | Online
June 20, 2025
UMV: 66,000,000

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Baghdad Modern Art Group On View In America For First Time

“All Manner of Experiments” at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College’s Hessel Museum of Art, presents an examination of the Baghdad Modern Art Group.

Chadd Scott

Shakir Hassan Al Said, 'Letters,' 1961. Oil, gesso, cotton, linen canvas, 94.2 cm x 82 cm x 2.5 cm.

Mathaf: Arab Museum of modern Ar

At first glance, it would be difficult to discern this artwork as coming from Arab origins, and not Spain or France or America or Mexico. It’s Modern art. Bold colors. Distorted figures. Abstraction. Experimentation. A close inspection reveals distinctions. Arabic script. Prominent crescents.

This art is modern. It’s Arab. It’s Iraqi.

“All Manner of Experiments: Legacies of the Baghdad Modern Art Group,” opening June 21, 2025, at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College’s Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY presents the first in-depth examination of this essential chapter in Arab modern and

contemporary art.

The group was founded in 1951 after a dynamic period of accelerated change and growth in Iraq following the nation's liberation from British rule in 1932. During the 1930s and 40s, amid ongoing political turbulence, artists began a crucial negotiation between an emerging postcolonial national consciousness and a burgeoning modernism. It remained a creative force through the early 1970s.

"The artists of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art thought of themselves as international citizens carving contributions in an inclusive modern history through forging unique artistic identities," Nada Shabout, a leading expert in modern Arab art and exhibition curator, said when announcing the show.

The exhibition invites audiences to learn about modernism from the vantage point of Iraq–a vibrant site of exchange and influence across West Asia, North Africa, and Europe–reframing Iraqi art and global modernism.

"The timeline that (Americans) understand in art history, when modernism was in Europe and in the US, is not necessarily global," Shabout, who graduated from high school in Baghdad, told Forbes.com. "That's not what was happening elsewhere in the world. This (exhibition) helps us correct that timeline. Our idea of what modernism and post-modernism are are not applicable everywhere because of the different dynamics of why things evolved and the way they evolved."

Consider this: mid-century modernism in Iraq was heavily interested in Impressionism, despite European artists largely having worked through and worked on from Impressionism decades earlier. Were Iraqi artists behind?

Or, in fact, were Iraqi and Arab artists ahead?

"Europe in the late 19th century, early 20th century, with colonialism and Orientalism, (artists) were able to see examples of work that were completely different than what they were developing from the Renaissance on and made them completely abandoned naturalism and adopt abstraction," Shabout said. "For Iraqis, as well as many others in the so-called post-colonial world, abstraction was in their heritage, so that naturalism and Impressionism, those styles were the new things that they experimented with."

"Modern" is in the eye of the beholder and the maker.

Henri Matisse visited Morocco in the nineteen-teens. He was fascinated. The colors. The light. The textile patterns. He brought all of it into his artwork that was in every way considered Modern. It wouldn't look so modern to Arab audiences familiar with those colors, and that light, and those patterns for centuries.

Get it?

Was Matisse modern or was the Arab culture in Morocco that influenced him modern?

Same goes for Picasso, the other north star of Modernism. Western modernism, anyway.

Perhaps his most famous painting, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), the painting that shook the (Western) modern art world, borrowed heavily from African masks. Again, who was the modernist, Picasso, or the mask makers?

The “radical” modern art being made by Picasso and Matisse was not exclusively European, it doesn’t look traditionally Celtic or Roman, they were drawing on other cultures. African cultures. Arab cultures. Asian cultures.

Bringing it closer to home for American audiences, look at Navajo textiles, Pueblo pottery designs, or Plains parfleche bags from the 19th century and much earlier. The graphic design. The line. The color. The abstraction. They look like Wassily Kandinsky or Joseph Albers.

Who was the modernist?

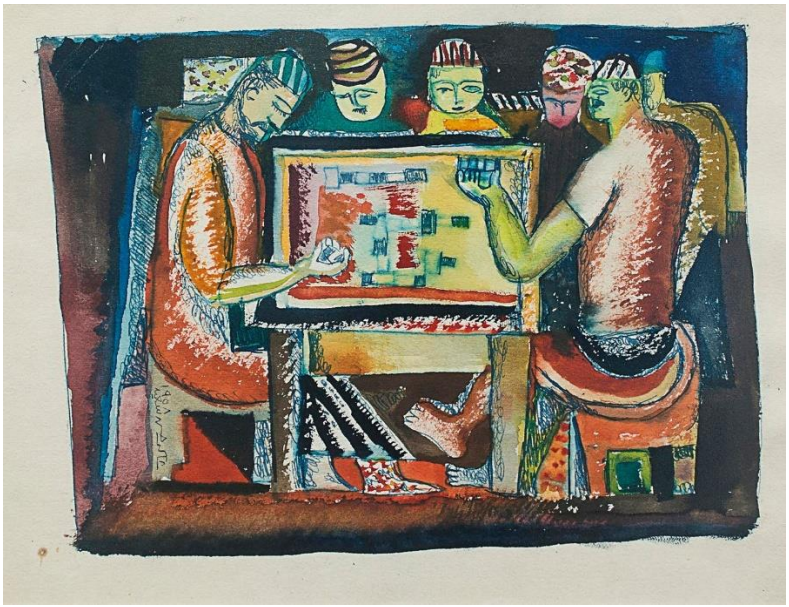
Art history, not surprisingly, says it was the white man working in the European tradition.

That’s the way Shabout learned it.

“I came to the US to study architecture, but taking art history classes realized that what I grew up seeing was not included. That's how I decided to switch from architecture to art history,” she remembers. “The absence of this work that's in this exhibition that I grew up seeing and appreciating and thinking highly of, it was a surprise. I knew Picasso and Matisse, but I wondered why the people here who know Picasso and Matisse do not know Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan.”

Selim and Hassan were the Baghdad Group for Modern Art’s founders. Both have work on view in the show along with other Iraqi artists from the era. Loans come from eminent collections including the Barjeel Art Foundation (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates), Dalloul Art Foundation (Beirut, Lebanon), Ibrahimi Collection (Amman, Jordan and Baghdad, Iraq), and Qatar Museums / Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Doha, Qatar), as well as from artists and estates. Many artworks have not been seen since their initial exhibition.

Colonialism’s Impact On Modernism



Shakir Hassan Al Said, 'The Café,' 1958.

Ibrahimi Collection Baghdad, Iraq - Amman, Jordan

Colonialism killed hundreds of millions of people worldwide. It stole land, wealth, and natural resources. It also stole cultural patrimony, depriving the colonized of their artistic heritage, their roots, the foundations on which to base their modern art.

This also shapes mainstream, Western understandings of Modern art.

“Colonial ruling in the Arab world and in many of the other parts of the world prohibited (colonized) artists from seeing their heritage that (artists from colonizing countries) then were able to see in museums in Europe,” Shabout explained. “In this exhibition there is reference to the Hariri assembly, the 13th century illustrated book (Iraqi artists) only saw images of in a French journal in 1940s. The whole book, which is at the National Library in Paris, was only accessible 20 years ago to most of us. Now, it's online, and you can see all the pages, but for the Iraqi artists of the 1950s, they were only able to see those four images that were published in a journal in France. But it's their own heritage. People forget that because of colonialism, artifacts were being transported out of countries and not accessible to the people.”

Beyond that, the artists of the Baghdad Group–and the country at large–was dealing with abrupt and dramatic transitions from rule by the Ottomans, then the British, and then nationhood, with heavy British influence.

“They're told, ‘Now you have a country with a flag and a constitution,’ so it needs its own identity,” Shabout said. “The 1950s leading to the 1958 revolution, it was a decade of turbulence, oppressive political moments, but also a lot of hope for the Iraqi generation thinking that they need to build their own visual identity. The group came together to allow for that to happen, moving beyond just gathering artists to actually formulate specific aesthetics.”

Selim and Hassan landed on “*Istilham al turath*” as a unifying motif. That translates to seeking inspiration and motivation from artistic heritage through innovative methods. Amid the broader sociopolitical tensions and rising revolutionary fervor, the Group synthesized the concerns of a vast swathe of artists by interpreting the abstraction of Western modernism through aesthetics drawn from Islamic and Mesopotamian cultures into various styles.

“They distinguish themselves by rooting their modernism in their history and heritage… an aesthetic that was being developed specifically rooted in Iraqi history, culture, and visual memory,” Shabout explained.

Modern. Iraqi.

Two notions not in opposition, in unique harmony.

“Unlike today, (Baghdad Group artists) were not told in Europe that they were outsider, lesser, as the (art history) canon was not fully formed. They did feel that they had no specific presence that they could feel in Europe, and so it was important for them to not just show the presence, but prove internally that they didn't just go to Europe to learn and copy; that language was not yet dominating as it did later in the 70s in evaluating art that was (from) Iraq or the rest of the Arab world as lesser or imitative,” Shabout said. “For them, it was important to participate in Modernism, and prove that their modernism is particular and specific to them.”

Baghdad Then And Now

Jewad Selim, 'Children's Games,' 1953. Oil, linen, wood, 90.5 cm x 71 cm x 1.5 cm.

Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha

War with Iran in the 1980s. Dictatorship. Saddam Hussein. Invading Kuwait. Bombing by America in retaliation. Global sanctions. Rogue status. More dictatorship. Phony claims of weapons of mass destruction. More bombing by America. Invasion. Occupation. Devastation.

About a decade after the Baghdad Group for Modern Art dissolved, the city began a long, continuous, 40-plus-year slide from hopeful to horrendous. Along with artwork, "All Manner of Experiments" shares remarkable ephemera–newsreel footage, photographs, exhibition posters, artist-designed brochures–revealing a Baghdad vastly different from the one known today.

"I'm hoping that people are immediately struck by the images that we have of Baghdad, that this is not the Baghdad that they've been seeing in the news for the last two decades," Shabout said. "It's not a country of destruction, but rather a country that lived its potential for so long and had artists who were thinking in terms that we can all understand. They were speaking to the international modernism of the time, but wanting to also resist and create their own specific examples of works of arts that are beautiful and should be appreciated and accepted within the canon of art history, within our understanding of Modernism, and on their own value without comparison."

The exhibition can be seen through October 19, 2025.