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Iraq Modernism leads Middle East's auction sales this season

► Christie's and Bonhams offer works by Iraqi artists this autumn



Jewad Selim's 'Good and Evil, An Abstraction' (1951) was a study for a mural for the headquarters of the Iraqi Red Crescent, designed by Ellen Jawdat. The mural was never made. Photo: Bonhams



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Feedback



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Iraqi Modernism continues to lead the Middle East auctions, with Christie's and Bonhams offering works from family collections assembled in Baghdad in the

1960s.

Works by Jewad Selim, Faeq Hassan, Kadhim Hayder and Dia Azzawi dominate the two auction houses' autumn offerings.

Sotheby's Middle Eastern sale draws on Lebanese and Iranian work, with notable paintings by Huguette Caland and Etel Adnan.

Bonhams' Baghdadiyat sale

Bonhams puts up the second instalment of its three-part Baghdadiyat sale, which it began in June last year with works from [the Madhloom and Makiya collections](#).



This especially richly coloured and detailed canvas from Kadhim Hayder's 'The Epic of the Martyr (How He Wandered with the Heart of a Martyr)', from 1963, comes from the Madhloom collection. Photo: Bonhams

Their current sale, on Wednesday, November 17 in London, introduces work from the collection of architects Nizar and Ellen Jawdat, who had been friends with the Madhlooms and moved in the same art and architecture circles.

Syrian-born Nizar Jawdat grew up in Iraq, where his father was one of the first prime ministers of the country.

He met his American wife at the Harvard School of Architecture and they returned to Baghdad, where they contributed to the development of Modernism in the city.

They were exiled twice, and in 1968 left Iraq for good, moving to Italy, London and finally Washington, DC.

The couple's four sons are selling the collection after the recent death of their parents.

It has been consigned to Bonhams in three stages, says Nima Sagharchi, the house's director of Middle Eastern, Islamic and South Asian Art.

Most of the high-value pieces will be in this sale, then an online-only auction in February of works on paper, and the second part of the main collection in the final Baghdadiyat sale next June.



Ellen Jawdat, right, with Frank Lloyd Wright, left. Photo: Bonhams

The Jawdat offerings here, of 18 works, include two stunning paintings by Jewad Selim. *Good and Evil*, *An Abstraction* dates from 1951, the year that Selim and [Shakir Hassan Al Said](#) founded the Baghdad Group of Modern Art.

It was a study for a tile mural planned for the Iraqi Red Crescent headquarters in Baghdad, which Ellen Jawdat designed.

The mural was never made, but the study for the public work foreshadows Selim's most important project, *Freedom Monument*, which he started in Tahrir Square seven years later.

Bonhams are giving the estimate for the study at £120,000 to £250,000 (\$165,000-\$345,000).

Another Selim, *Man and Horse* (1956), of a sinuous horse and a man rendered in the artist's recognisable, archetypal style, is offered at £100,000 to £200,000, and a moody, introspective Dia Azzawi painting, aptly titled *Sorrowful Visions* (1967), is offered at £50,000 to £80,000.

This second Baghdadiyat is also selling further lots of the Madhloom collection, put together by architect Said Ali Madhloom, who ran Al Wasiti Gallery with Mohamed Makiya and Henry Svoboda during the 1960s.

The auction house successfully offered the first tranche of the sale in June, making more than £3 million with 75 per cent sold by lot. A number of the works went to collectors in the UAE.

Madhloom works here include three tawny landscape paintings by Lorna Selim and a more colourful character-filled work of geometric figures by the same artist, Jewad Selim's wife, titled *Window* and priced at £3,000 to £5,000, as well as work by Ghazi Al Saudi and others.

Orin and Rita Parker for Christie's

Christie's offers 21 works from the collection of Orin and Rita Parker, an American couple who lived in Baghdad from 1960 to 1965.

The sale is running [online](#) until Wednesday, November 3. Orin led the American Friends of the Middle East, which advocated for cultural dialogue between the US and Arab nations.

One of his first assignments in Baghdad was to help secure the release of a number of Jewad Selim's paintings that had been stuck in customs after Selim's 1954 US touring show.

Orin befriended Selim and was introduced to the circle around him, collecting work by Selim, Lorna, Hassan, Hayder and others – which are now put up for sale with Christie's.

The relationship, although brief, was evidently profound: Orin served as one of the pallbearers for Selim when he died in 1961.

The Parkers have also received an unexpected artistic afterlife, as they are featured in Iraqi photographer [Latif Al Ani's](#) images of tourists at the Ctesiphon arch.



Famed Iraqi photographer Latif Al Ani captured Orin and Rita Parker in front of the Arch of Ctesiphon in 1964. Photo: Latif Al Ani Collection; Arab Image Foundation

The star of the collection is Hayder's *He is Destroyed that he may Return* (1963), part of the 35-cycle *Martyr's Epic* that allegorised the Battle of Karbala.

This canvas offers a freer rendering than many of the controlled, steady canvases in the series, with its visible, almost agitated brushstrokes. Christie's has estimated it at £40,000 to 60,000, a relatively low estimate that probably reflects the smaller scale of the work.

The collection also includes three works from the Basra School, whose painters are lesser-known but of historical importance to scholarship in this area.

One of the non-commercial boons of the Parker bequest is the couple's detailed notes and archives. These have been donated to Brigham Young University in Utah, their alma mater.

"My mother was a great chronicler of our lives overseas in the Middle East, and she kept what we called 'family logs,' like a ship's log," says David Parker, the youngest of their children and now an architect in California.

"It was like a journal and almost every day she would write in it and include photos, invitations to parties or artwork of her children. My father loved to write as well and he compiled an informal memoir of his time in Baghdad, where his life revolved around the art."



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This work from the Martyr's Epic cycle has more agitated, rougher brushstrokes. Christie's is selling the Kadhim Hayder work in its upcoming Middle East sale. Photo: Christie's

While the Parker holdings are not on the scale of the Madhloom or even the Jawdat collections, they remain significant.

Many of the collections that remained in Iraq, and the state collection of the National Museum of Modern Art, were dispersed, either destroyed or looted in the Iraq War.

This has made works with established provenances all the more sought after. It is notable here, for example, that all these collections have resided outside of Iraq since the 1960s and 1970s.

A new collector base

There have been staff changes over the past few years at both Christie's and Sotheby's Middle Eastern departments, and Christie's has gone down from two sales to one a year.

This has created an opening for Bonhams, which has done particularly well over the past year, and in terms of supply are slightly leading the league tables.

Bonhams's sale offers 92 lots this October, with a total estimate of £1.1m to £1.8m, similar to Sotheby's sale at 78 lots, with an estimate of £1.3m to £1.8m.

Christie's sale of 56 lots carries a low estimate of £1.1m and high of £1.5m.

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Suzy Sikorski, associate specialist at Christie's Middle Eastern department, says the auction house is now integrating the region's top lots into the main modern and contemporary day and evening sales, to expose these artists to a new collector base.

Sotheby's has not indicated any such policy, although they recently had substantial success with an untitled Etel Adnan painting from circa 1973 in their October 14 contemporary evening auction. It sold for £352,800, from an estimate of £60,000 to £80,000.

Although prices for Adnan's work have been climbing in line with her increased critical and popular appreciation, the price (a record for the artist) is substantially higher than her recent results in Middle East auctions – although a May 2020 offering in a non-Middle Eastern contemporary sale at Sotheby's failed to achieve the same jump.

In their next sale, this Tuesday in London, Sotheby's are offering an Adnan watercolour from 1990 (estimate £15,000 to £20,000) and a rather trippy Caland acrylic from 2003 when she was living in Venice, California (estimate £30,000 to £40,000), and a number of Iranian lots and an early, phantasmagoric [Fahrelnissa Zeid](#) painting from the 1950s (estimate £60,000 to £80,000).

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