

Suffering for Their Art

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Women artists, marginalised under the previous regime, get boost with opening of new gallery dedicated to exhibiting their work.

Malak Jamil considers herself neither single nor married. Her husband, an Iraqi soldier, went missing twenty years ago. Painting has helped Jamil to relive memories of their short time together, and inspired her to open a new gallery for female artists in Baghdad.

"Few women had the opportunity to participate in art exhibitions and cultural activities during the last regime. It is high time that women contributed to the scene along with the men, after all, we have many female artists in Iraq," she said.

Jamil has brought together a group of well-known Baghdad artists to form a society associated with the Kahramaneh gallery. One of the main aims of the society is to raise funds in support of female artists in Iraq.

Despite the hardships of life in Baghdad, women artists are determined to confront the challenges they face - their work is an expression of their hopes and struggles, and a potential source of income.

"Women will be encouraged to earn a living by painting, knitting, designing clothes and even pottery," said Jamil. "The society's collected revenues may be able to help a woman furnish her house when she gets married."

Jamil's own artwork focuses on the meeting of Shehrazad and Shahrayar, a bride and groom. In one painting, the bride is carrying a gold pot full of smouldering herbs, a traditional method of warding off evil. Shehrazad is portrayed as an Iraqi woman counting her few moments of happiness, because she is afraid of what will come next. This painting is a commentary on marriage in Iraq.

Iraq's painful past has left many women alone. Hundreds of thousands of men were killed or disappeared during Saddam's regime, and many of their wives have been left to live with poverty or isolation.

Widad Al-Orfali is exhibiting two of her paintings at Kahramaneh. One of them, called "Steadfastness", depicts a large letter N filled with a collection of helmets in bright colours interwoven with leaves. It tells of the struggle between life and death. The addition of a date palm serves as a symbol of the patience of Iraqis. "No matter how they oppress us, we continue to survive," said Al-Orfali. "The long struggle of ten years of sanctions has struck me, and I think, why did we have to suffer so many wars?"

Ishtar Jamil Hamoudi uses legend in her work to comment on the status of women. The name Ishtar is taken from the goddess of Sumerian culture. Hamoudi painted Ishtar as a Sumerian queen descending from heaven, igniting the earth with fire. In this work, female suffering and bravery is depicted through surrealism and metaphor.

Kahramaneh provides a moving insight into the experiences of Iraqi women. As well as offering them financial support and a form of therapy, the gallery also documents an important point in the country's history. These women reconcile a painful past with the hope of an Iraq at peace.

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