

The Lebanese Genius (1) Gebran Tarazi within the Context of the Baghdad Modern Art Group اللبناني جبران طرزي في سياق جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث

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Summary

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This study centers on a comparative analysis between the Baghdad Modern Art Group in Iraq and the Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi in terms of their respective approaches to art and their artistic and stylistic compositions. Both are grounded in geometric abstraction, seeking to bridge heritage and Western modernism, and to return to local art. **The study examines** the unexplored intellectual and aesthetic intersections between the Baghdad Modern Art Group and Gebran Tarazi as regards heritage, identity and modernism, thus addressing a gap in comparative scholarship and **uses a comparative, analytical, qualitative and interpretative methodology** based on their writings, manifestos, art-historical sources and select artworks.

The Baghdad Modern Art Group draws inspiration from the distinctive Baghdadi cultural fabric and the broader scope of Mesopotamian art. Gebran Tarazi similarly seeks to sustain the bond between Arab and Levantine heritage on one hand, and modernism on the other. Tarazi's approach resonates with that of the Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al-Said especially in the way he treated geometric

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شاعر وناقد فني عراقي. عمل في بسلك الصحافة والإعلام المرئي والمقروء محررًا. عمل مديراً لبرامج تلفزيونية. في جعبته كثير من الإصدارات في الفن التشكيلي.

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مترجمة لبنانية كندية متعدّدة اللغات، محرّرة، روائية، وكاتبة إعلانات ومقالات. لها أكثر 26 سنة من الخبرة في مجالها.

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أستاذة اللغة الفرنسية وآدابها والعلوم الثقافية في الجامعة اللبنانية. باحثة في الدراسات الإبراهيمية والدراسات العابرة للمناهج.

shapes with a Sufi perspective. Although **previous studies** have separately examined the Baghdad Modern Art Group and Gebran Tarazi, little scholarly attention has been devoted to comparing their shared artistic, philosophical and spiritual foundations, **this study aims to** identify those common grounds and conceptual principles underlying their artistic practices orientations.

The study hypothesizes that despite differences in national context,

artistic medium and individual expression, the artwork of both the Baghdad Modern Art Group and Gebran Tarazi derives its merit from their preservation of oriental art values and artistic singularity and the integration of modernist approaches within an indigenous framework.

Keywords: Gebran Tarazi, Baghdad Group, art, heritage, local, modernism, geometric abstraction, Mesopotamian art including Akkadian, Sumerian art, Sufism.

الملخص

يتمحور هذا البحث حول المقارنة فيما بين جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث في العراق، والفنان اللبناني جبران طرزي في مقارنة الفن والتراكيب الفنية والأسلوبية: هما يرتكزان على التجريد الهندسي وعلى مبدأ بناء جسر تواصل فيما بين التراث والحداثة الغربية كما ولهما نزعة العودة إلى الفن المحلي. وتتناول هذه الدراسة البحثية التقاطعات الفكرية والجمالية غير المطروقة بين جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث وجبران طرزي لناحية انشغالهما بالتراث والهوية والحداثة، ممّا يسدّ فجوة في الدراسات المقارنة بشأنهما. كما تعتمد الدراسة منهجية مقارنة تحليلية نوعية تأويلية بالاستناد إلى الكتابات التي جاء كل منهما بها، وبياناته الفنية، بالإضافة

إلى مصادر تاريخية فنية ومختارات من إبداعاتها الفنية.

تنفرد مجموعة بغداد للفن الحديث بالعودة إلى الخصوصية البغدادية كما وإلى الفن السومري والفن الأكادي. وفي السياق ذاته، اجتهد جبران طرزي في نسج صلة فيما بين التراث الفني المشرقي والعربي والحداثة، ويتلاقى منهجه مع منهج الفنان العراقي شاكّر حسن آل سعيد في استخدام الأشكال الهندسية في سياق صوفي.

على الرغم من وجود دراسات سابقة تناولت كلاً من جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث وجبران طرزي في سياق منفصل، إلا أن الاهتمام بدراستهما بشكل مقارن ما يزال شحيحاً من حيث مقارنة الأسس الفنية والفلسفية والروحانية التي يشتركان بها. وبالتالي، يهدف هذا البحث إلى رصد تلك

على الرغم من اختلاف السياق الوطني الذي انبثقت منه تجربتهما والوسائط الفنية التي اعتمداها والتعبير الفني الذي تفرّد كلّ منهما به.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جبران طرزي، جماعة بغداد، الفن، التراث، المحلي، الحداثة، التجريد الهندسي، الفن الأكادي، الفن السومري، التصوف

Introduction

This study offers a comparative analysis of the Baghdad Modern Art Group and the Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi², drawing on available resources and data that adequately substantiate the relevance and significance of the grounds that underly this comparison. Rather than attempting to uncover the hidden aspects of modernist discourse, trace the concepts of artistic styles and their impact on both Iraqi and Lebanese arts, this study seeks to identify the shared conceptual foundations that shaped the vision of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950s, alongside the artist Gebran Tarazi's own propositions, momentum³, and efforts to reconcile Arabic heritage with the transformations of Western art and the expansion of modernist discourse⁴.

Problem Statement

While the Baghdad Modern Art

الأرضيات المشتركة والمبادئ المفهومية التي قامت عليها سيرتهما الفنية وتوجّهاتهما. وتفترض هذه الدراسة أنّ التجربة الفنية لدى جماعة بغداد للفن الحديث وجبران طرزي تستمدّ ميزتها من سعيهما إلى صون قيم الفن الشرقي والتميّز الفني وتوظيف المقاربات الحداثيّة في إطار متجذّر في الهوية المحليّة وأصالتها وذلك

Group and Gebran Tarazi have each earned distinct scholarly acclaim, the deeper visual and intellectual ties between them remain largely unexplored. **This comparative research study addresses** this oversight and maps the conceptual symmetry between the Group's modernism and Tarazi's structural creations, and the central tension both grappled with, yet from different geographic, cultural and individual artistic positions, revealing a unified struggle to define identity within the context of heritage and modern Arab art.

This research question finds roots in a cognitive sovereignty grounded in Tarazi's geometric abstraction. Over the course of his practice, the artist produced dozens of works that integrate the elements of the Damascene⁵ *diwan* tradition and Arabesque ornamentation into architectural surfaces, like

walls and ceilings. Through this refined artistic craftsmanship, Tarazi developed aesthetic⁶ compositions that reflect a distinctive Levantine identity. The insights gained from this Lebanese artist's mature experience, shaped by years of conflict⁷, and sustained intellectual and reflective inquiry into the essence of art, have gradually crystallized into a clear artistic conceptual foundation.⁸

Tarazi's artistic discourse unfolds through a series of artistic motifs, positioning his work within modernism while remaining anchored in the multilayered heritage of Arab art, whether through oriental artisanship or forms of collective emotional expression. Crucially, any meaningful discussion of artistic modernism in Iraq and the Arab World is inseparable from the rise of art groups. This paradigm shifts our focus toward understanding art itself, its cultural discourse, its agility in pacing novelty, and its immersive reclamation of origins. In other words, this represents a return to historical and traditional touchstones, and to the concept and manifestations of identity.

Methodology of the Study

The study adopts a comparative, analytical, qualitative and interpretative methodology anchored

in primary sources (manifestos, artists' writings) and secondary art historical analyses. It thematically aligns the Baghdad Modern Art Group's stated positions with Tarazi's geometric abstraction practice, supported by formal analysis of selected artworks. A historical approach situates both projects within the period from 1950s to 1970s.

Previous Studies

The Baghdad Modern Art Group has been extensively examined in Iraqi modernism scholarship through Dia Al-Azzawi, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Shakir Hassan Al-Said and others. Gebran Tarazi's philosophy is well documented in his own writings (*Geometric Variations* book and *The Need for the Orient* manifesto). Yet, these studies have addressed each separately, leaving limited comparative analysis of the artistic and intellectual intersections between Baghdad Group and Tarazi. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Almost all historians of modern Iraqi art turn to the founding generations of the 1950s and 1960s when examining specific periods of Iraqi art. Among the most significant of these movements is the Baghdad Modern Art Group, founded in 1951 by Jawad Saleem (Jewad Selim), Shakir Hassan Al-Said

and Mohammed Al-Hassani⁽⁹⁾. The Group maintained a resolute stance on the return to history and tradition; it deliberately kept pace with currents of Western modernism to build enduring conduits between them and tradition⁽¹⁰⁾. Identity, as Dia Al-Azzawi emphatically noted, “posed a dilemma for the pioneer generations, especially the Baghdad Modern Art Group. Influenced by the Arab nationalist thinker and Director of Antiquities Sati’ Al-Husri, Jawad Saleem turned toward ancient Sumerian and Islamic civilizations as sources for perfecting his artistic practice, while Shakir Hassan Al-Said drew inspiration from culture and folklore⁽¹¹⁾”. Art, thus, acquired its own distinctive character, interweaving modernism and local heritage.

This Group emerged a year after the Pioneers Group (Al-Ruwad), founded by Faeq Hassan. According to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in his book *Iraqi Art Today*, the Pioneers Group pursued a primitivist approach to art, both in form and color. By contrast, the Baghdad Modern Art Group sought a closer alignment with civilization itself as Shakir Hassan Al-Said stated in his article published in *Afaq Arabiya* magazine (issue no. 2, 1978), in which he called for “the expression of the local character in art through a return to heritage” as previously noted.

In this sense, the Baghdad Modern Art Group focused on revitalizing artistic discourse by drawing inspiration from heritage and returning to foundational principles to affirm the Arab artistic identity. Modernism, however, did not imply detachment from contemporary influences that experimented with new artistic styles at the time. The Group believed that no achievement could flourish without support. It highlighted the broader sense of belonging to the Arab and Levantine identity, even more so amidst the proliferation of Western schools of thought and philosophical currents that marked that period and their influence on artists. Thus, while the return to heritage is an inherent trait of the Baghdad Group, it maintained ties to modernist discourse that emerged in the 1960s.

The Objectives of the Study

This research study seeks to identify the shared conceptual foundations linking Gebran Tarazi and the Baghdad Modern Art Group, critically examining their respective engagements with heritage as a source of artistic renewal. It also aims to analyze their perspective of identity and how it can be sustained by staying rooted in tradition while being open to modernism. Furthermore, the study

intends to examine the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of their work and to situate their endeavors within the broader discourse of Arab modernism.

Heritage, Contemporaneity, and Artistic Practice

Heritage and contemporaneity are particularly subtle concepts, especially when discussed in relation to easel painting. Given the artist's role in simulating reality, conveying knowledge and elevating the painting through cultural and aesthetic considerations shaped by each artist's stylistic approach, it is appropriate to compare the propositions of the Baghdad Modern Art Group and the works of the Lebanese artist Gebran Trazi (1944-2010-) produced over years of his geometric abstraction practice.

Trazi's *Geometric Variations*⁽¹²⁾ book highlights this matter, and other important issues. "It is legitimate to grasp the Holy through artwork, yet it is excessive to sanctify abstract art as holy⁽¹³⁾," Trazi writes. Such a vision⁽¹⁴⁾ positioned him firmly at the intersection where originality and contemporaneity⁽¹⁵⁾ meet. Unlike his other family members, Trazi had no political affiliations and deliberately distanced himself from all political events that affected the region⁽¹⁶⁾.

His drive, most refined and solemn, was embodied in his intellectual and aesthetic orientation and in his dedication to a consciousness that embraced modernism and its manifestations. For this reason, he spent a lifetime probing the discourse of heritage and contemporaneity, much like the Baghdad Modern Art Group before him. Both shed light on heritage and Islamic expression. Shakir Hassan Al-Said found his natural environment in the heart of Sufi Orders thought while Jawad Saleem meticulously employed elements and visual signs that are symbolic of Islamic tradition, like crescents, doors, arches, folkloric ornamentation, and everyday Baghdadi life. To this, the imposing presence of Sumerian and Mesopotamian art in general profoundly influenced most of his works, both sculptures and paintings. Saleem realized that genuine artistic mastery could be manifested in any new artistic innovation only if rooted in ancient Iraqi history, local identity, and Arab heritage. Iraqi art "represents the façade of an unbroken connection to roots and multifaceted discourse: legendary, traditional, ideological, and folkloric," as emphasized by Dr. Assem Abdel Amir⁽¹⁷⁾.

Engraved in the mind of the viewer, this orientation was translated into

aesthetic and stylistic expressions marked by a flair of modernism, without severing ties to roots and origins. Heritage-oriented tendencies heavily defined Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Jawad Saleem through awareness and inspiration, whereby artistic form was bound to the essence of its traditional subject, as in the Baghdadiyat.

As to the comparison with the Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi, enough evidence strongly supports the notion of his endeavor to revive Levantine⁽¹⁸⁾ art. This invites us to re-examine his works and reflect upon his famous manifesto *The Need for the Orient*. "When I design ornamentation, I feel like an absolute Sultan ruling over his subjects⁽¹⁹⁾," Tarazi states. His ornamentation style resonates with the Islamic ornament which deeply influenced Jawad Saleem and Shakir Hassan Al-Said. Governed by the significance of compositional logic, the power of visual metaphor in ornamentation lies in integrating its elements into sensory perception and formal construction. The traditional composition in the Qayem-Nayem dodecalogy in Tarazi's *Geometric Variations* book, executed in metal plates, wood, and mixed media techniques affirms that he found in "geometric abstraction [a] perfect framework to embody [his] passion for the Orient⁽²⁰⁾."

Tarazi and the Baghdad Modern Art Group meet in their incessant pursuit to shape an intellectual vision through modern art means that attune to human creativity within a multilayered Arab and Levantine heritage context.

It is also worth noting that the stylistic diversity evident in the works of Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Jawad Saleem, and the later productions of Gebran Tarazi following his Levantine period- his earliest endeavor with a Levantine touch- featured refined mastery in geometric abstraction, characterized by varied shapes and philosophical depth. This recalls the Dutch artist M.C. Escher's saying, "The ideas that are basic to my work often bear witness to my amazement and wonder at the laws of nature which operate in the world around us⁽²¹⁾."

If we dive deeper into understanding this cognitive orientation, the comparison between the path taken by Shakir Hassan Al-Said- one of the founders of the Baghdad Modern Art Group- and that followed by Tarazi, reveals a shared centrality: the exploration of the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of art.

Shakir Hassan Al-Said directed his work toward conceptions and a sense of the Absolute, where the purity of artistic orientation and discourse reside. Gebran Tarazi's position, as

per his manifesto *The Need for the Orient*, is summed up in his statement, "I do not agree with those who are reserved about the term 'roots'⁽²²⁾". This proposition alone, with the use of the decisive negation "Not", offers a clearer understanding of the value of his work and his broader vision, which he asserts in this other statement: "The quest for meaning, absolute love and self-giving- that is the better way⁽²³⁾."

This point of fusion between the artist and the return to roots assumed a cognitive orientation that marked the pioneers of Baghdad Modern Art Group, the Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi⁽²⁴⁾ and the founders of the Moroccan Casablanca Art School⁽²⁵⁾- who resisted Western colonialism orientations- as key elements in preserving heritage values and key architects of directions that aimed at reviving the enchanting Orient and the truths that reflect its historical moment. It is a calling to reengage in the discourse of heritage and pause at historical momentum. This stance aligns with established artistic patterns and styles especially on the local⁽²⁶⁾ art level, given its oriental traits and identity. It empowers Arab artists while maintaining the aesthetic taste, judgement, and intellectual rigor that preserve both the truths and the beauty of the Orient. Through

artistic intervention, the visible and the imaginary merge into an irreplaceable feature for those who pursue this authentic project and its outcomes.

Hypothesis of the Study

The study advances the hypothesis that despite differences in national context, artistic medium, and individual stylistic expression, Gebran Tarazi and the Baghdad Modern Art Group share a common intellectual and aesthetic orientation grounded in the affirmation of cultural identity and the integration of modernist artistic approaches within an indigenous framework.

Orientation and Practice

The artistic directions and styles that were adopted by the Baghdad Modern Art Group yielded tangible results. Their priority was to seek an artistic identity worthy of all, by returning to historical and civilizational patrimony, or to local folklore resources. At the same time, the Group took into consideration individual stylistic differences shaped by the nature of diversity inherent in change through metaphorical approaches in artistic form. This aligned with their achieved works and viewpoints, affirming the hypothesis of diversity in painted forms.

In the context of comparing the Group and Tarazi, the latter's geometric abstraction reveals a spiritual Sufi⁽²⁷⁾ tendency with a mathematical-geometric⁽²⁸⁾ dimension.

Tarazi's primary concern was to invest in the energy of oriental art after having linked it to abstraction as a pure form of art. The importance of connections in balanced mathematical calculations of the square, rectangle, circle and even the line, lies in finding the objective unit that simulates the Absolute. "In the end, a creative craftsman is better than a replicator artist", as Tarazi clearly put it in his *Geometric Variations*⁽²⁹⁾ book. Before Tarazi, Shakir Hassan Al-Said tapped into that territory through his abstract artwork, combinatorics, Sufi-inclined spirituality, and the sacred dimension. Despite differences in artistic forms and applications³⁰, their approaches converge: Tarazi tends to introduce his Levantine identity through a knowledge-based framework without severing ties with Western modernism. His artworks are not simply ornamental; they carry a semantic and cultural dimension.

From the viewer's perspective, transcending simulation toward individuality strikes us as a distinctive feature of his work, and that was exactly the context within which the

Baghdad Group operated, especially Shakir Hassan Al-Said, who pursued overinterpretation in his work, unlike his colleague Jawad Saleem, who simulated reality with expressionism and everyday life approaches in order to draw art from the Baghdadi reality. The same applies to the sculptor Mohammed Al-Hassani (b. 1925, Baghdad) and one of the founders of the Baghdad Group, whose sculptures combine abstraction with a figurative sensibility that reveals a perfectionist tendency.

Accordingly, it becomes obvious that the works of both the Baghdad Group and Gebran Tarazi are based on multiple cognitive, social and aesthetic characteristics. This leads to the conviction that all this artwork does not forfeit "significance" even if it leaned toward pure abstraction. As I have previously noted, Gebran Tarazi's paintings tempt the viewer as they carry his thoughts on their surfaces. His relationship with art is interpretive, unfolding a sequence of spiritual and Levantine thoughts that emerge or recede through cultural and symbolic processes and metaphorical structures. He asserted, "For a long time, I believed that to glorify the Orient, one had to return to the sources: Melkite icon, Arabesque, Arabic and Chinese calligraphy, Persian miniature

and Japanese print⁽³¹⁾.” On this basis, it would be hard to analyze his work without first identifying his orientation and discursive framework. This holds true across the various ranges of his works (wood boxes, mirrors, geometric abstraction paintings) in which his practice intrigues temptation to uncover layers of meaning. How, then, could we perceive the significance of motifs in such works that are so densely full of codes rooted in the culture of the ancient East? This question prompts us to reflect on the statement of the critic Khaled Hussein, “the semiotic significance of the visual text is a constellation of signs⁽³²⁾.” That same practice was central to the Baghdad Group. Jawad Saleem rushed to employ the Baghdadi locality, Islamic ornamentation and crescent motifs in most of his paintings- a context that Shakir Hassan Al-Said continued to assert well into the 1990s.

This convergence confirms that the Group and Tarazi both employed philosophy at different levels according to a specific current, based on experimentation coupled with experience in artistic production: “Experience strips art from its utilitarian and functional character while the human experience is endowed with an aesthetic quality⁽³³⁾,” for, every artwork seen

by the naked eye, is founded on philosophical or aesthetic hypotheses where formal processes differ from one artist to another.

Ultimately, what truly matters is the controversy of communication and the prevailing ideas to convey. For this reason, some art groups voice their viewpoints and statements to maximize the use and implementation of ideas that match their environment and society. Such a pursuit requires commitment to a certain cause and a relevant viewpoint.

Conclusion

Both the Baghdad Modern Art Group and Gebran Tarazi embraced the question of identity as a cause founded on their artistic practice. A return to origins and a call to draw inspiration from the history of the Arab region lay at the core of their endeavor. Gebran Tarazi masterfully showed this pursuit in his geometric abstraction art⁽³⁴⁾ while the Baghdad Group relied on Mesopotamian history and Iraqi folklore. At the same time, they both upheld the modernist discourse that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. This position formed a part of a broader openness project toward the Western “other”, grounded in the belief that the message of art should remain purely human away from

political influences. The action and impact of modernism was marked by singularity and dynamism when it was viewed as a set of cultural concepts rather than as a hegemonic force to be rejected. Perseverance in research and experimentation that shaped these artistic experiences stands out through formal and aesthetic formations that avoided replicating the experiences of others. This was evident in the Group's exhibitions across multiple venues, and in the presence of the Lebanese artist Gebran Tarazi's works in Arab and international museums including the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar in 2015, and other prominent international museums in 2023. Tarazi's works were also exhibited in Paris in 2016 alongside of the international artist Vasarely, in recognition of Tarazi's significant contribution to modern Arab art and affirming its authenticity.

Another point of convergence between Jawad Saleem and Gebran Tarazi lies in their engagement with mathematical intellect. As Shaker Hassan Al-Said observes in his book *Jawad Saleem and the Others*, published by the Dar Al-Shou'n Al-Thaqafiya, he states: "Jawad Saleem's conception of the universe in his art is connected to the Sumerian mathematical mind."

When comparing the Baghdad Group with the Tarazi's vision, one notes that both drew inspiration from the oriental cultural cachet while employing modern Western artistic methods as a means of reviving collective memory-what Edward Said defined as "a structured tool that frames the cultural, geographic, and popular content that defied all attempts at mumification." This can be understood as a form of intellectual confrontation between the oriental artist and colonial orientations-an approach adopted by the Moroccan Casablanca School as a cognitive discourse forming a way of resistance to colonial hegemony in the arts.

To remain aligned with the central focus of this study, one must recall that the manifestos of the Baghdad Modern Art Group clearly chartered its orientation and shaped its vision. The Group assumed the vital task of creating a relationship between European art styles within the parallel aesthetic and artistic revival of Arab heritage³⁵. What Gebran Tarazi revealed in his own conceptually rich manifesto is his profound immersion in oriental heritage, explicitly stating: "When the artist is driven by the pursuit of formal beauty, he is very likely to veer toward ornamentation. He turns toward works of the past in search of models to follow⁽³⁶⁾."

Endnotes

- 1 -The author of the study did not use the term “genius”. It was introduced in the translated versions to convey the tone, nuance and expressive force of the original wording.
 - 2 -Gebran Tarazi is rooted in a family of artisans and antiquarians whose origins date back to 18th-century Turkey. In 1793, the head of the family settled in Damascus, where he practiced the craft of embroidery and tailoring. Over the centuries, the Tarazi Family became known for practicing other arts: silk manufacturing and the publishing of postcards of the Near East. Gebran Tarazi’s great-grandfather, Dimitri Tarazi, settled in Beirut where he practiced antiquary. In 1946, the family expanded its trade and settled in Morocco until the country’s independence in 1956. Their stay in Morocco was a turning point in the multidisciplinary formation of the young Gebran Tarazi. His family returned to Lebanon yet maintained ties with the Sharifian Kingdom. Gebran Tarazi went to school at the International College in Beirut, where he obtained his Literature and Humanities/Philosophy baccalaureate (secondary school diploma) in 1962. He then attended the Université Saint Joseph de Beyrouth, where he completed his university studies in 1965, and graduated the following year, in 1966, with a law degree. Passionate about art and culture, he travelled in search of the new, the human and the different. In 1973, the Italian Cultural Center awarded him a scholarship to the Tuscan town of Urbino in recognition of his artistic talent. From a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective, his multilayered body of work constitutes an inexhaustible subject of study, reflecting a complex, authentic and singular existential gift. As a distinguished artist, his exceptional talent continues to be recognized to this day throughout the world through museum exhibitions; academic, artistic, cultural and literary studies and publications; and media interest, celebrating his talent and his valuable contribution to the Arab and the Francophone Worlds.
 - 3 - From 1966 to 1975, his talent as a writer and modern artist evolved in several directions which led him to launch his artisanship and antiquary business in 1962. He became entirely consumed by art, French literature, and archaeological research.
 - 4 - The Baghdad Group and Gebran Tarazi share a fundamental common denominator rooted in the very innate nature of the artist: Every artist seeks to reinvent the primordial sense of wonder. Arabesque art, enchanting as it is through repetitive motifs, seems to be ill-equipped to satisfy this pursuit of original astonishment. It impels artists toward a continuous renewal of artistic styles while remaining anchored in their heritage.
 - 5 It is worth noting that the Levantine character of Gebran Tarazi’s artistic compositions stems mainly from his innate artistic disposition, his family heritage and his stay in Morocco. It is important as well to recall that Gebran Tarazi was responsible for the painting department within his family’s workshop, which specialized in producing Damascene-style painted woodwork.
 - 6 -Gebran Tarazi diversified his aesthetic body of work in a series of art exhibitions beginning in 1987, featuring a line of wood boxes and painted mirrors. His first exhibition comprised 45 works and was titled “36 Views of the Square”. It was held in 1993 at Galerie L’amateur d’art in Hamra, Beirut; the second exhibition featured 29 works and was titled “Square Sea”. It was held in 1997 at 50x70 art gallery in Ras Beirut. A highly skilled and accomplished artist, he took part in a competition in 1997 aimed at decorating the walls of Mar Mitr tunnel in Beirut with ceramic tiling, in collaboration with MMAP in Beirut.
 - 7 -Gebran Tarazi was utterly shattered by the 1970s war in Beirut and the Mountain War in 1982 in Lebanon. He indulged in art and culture as an ultimate sanctuary to find meaning in humanity.
 - 8 -Gebran Tarazi’s main concern was to reexamine the survival and future of a centuries-old craft tradition. He thought over, synthesized and reconceptualized the Orient through an incessant interaction between the traditional and the modern- an interplay capable of ensuring a historical continuity between his journey as a traditional craftsman and a modern artist.
- The conceptual foundation of his geometric art stems from his desire to break away from the classical symmetry that marks traditional Islamic art: “I initially wanted, from a formal viewpoint, to break free from this static balance, this symmetry, typical of classical Islamic art. I was searching for movement, for a new expressivity.” From an interview with journalist Ahmad Bazzoun, p. 313, under Gebran Tarazi, *The Twelve Seasons*, a monograph published by Zaman Books, France, 2017. It is essential to add that this monographic work is directed by the art his-

torian Morad Montazami. It brings together analyses by artists of Tarazi's work, writings, his correspondence with European artistic and literary circles, essays, interviews with him, and his artwork, from paintings and drawings to graphic works. This stands as a major reference for the fans of Tarazi's art and literature. Crucially, the year 1987 proved decisive and a turning point in Gebran Tarazi's career and art theory. The shutdown of the family business foreshadowed a different path for Tarazi who dedicated himself to painting in his art studio through both research and practice. He thus devised a principle of geometric abstraction that he dubbed Qayem-Nayem based on the arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines. For years, these core pictorial principles would resonate globally, and appear in exhibitions, competitions, correspondence, art criticism and interviews with illustrious figures.

9 - The Baghdad Modern Art Group was founded in April 1951, spearheaded by Jawad Saleem, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, and Mohammed Al-Hassani. Their first exhibition featured works by Jawad Saleem, Lorna Saleem, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, Mohammed Al-Hassani, Qahtan Awni, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Nizar Ali Jawdat, Richard Gnadeh, and Mahmoud Sabri. Al-Said wrote the Group's first manifesto. A year later, the Group was joined by: Naziha Saleem, Rasoul Alwan, Hafez Al-Droubi, Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, and Henry Lewis. In 1953, the Group held its second exhibition for which Jabra Ibrahim Jabra authored the manifesto. By 1957, the Group had grown to include more than 16 artists including painters and sculptors.

10 - In this same context of the dual indigenous and Western inspiration, which was a major concern for both the Baghdad Group and Gebran Tarazi, the author Khudhair al-Zaidi asserts that "the Baghdad Group, founded in 1951 by Jawad Saleem, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, and Mohammed Al-Hassani adopted this direction and yielded to this allure well beyond the formal level and its cognitive and structural significance. Both the inaugural address and the following manifestos- delivered by Shakir Hassan Al-Said at the Group's founding and later presented by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra at an exhibition- suggest an invitation to entertain the possibility of self-expression and to cultivate an awareness of the delicate relationship between the system of modernism and its Western expression. The Group assumed the mission of seeking out the features of true creativity, one that revives collective memory, stands

up for the local, and commits to the standards of social consciousness, all without severing ties with the styles and approaches of European art." This stance "anchors the national identity and embeds the principle of heritage more powerfully in the minds of those viewing the works of the Baghdad Group", states the author in his Arabic-language article titled "I Forged a Relationship between Modern Art and Iraqi Heritage: the Baghdad Modern Art Group and Anchoring National Identity", published in La Culturelle de Charjah, February 2026, no. 112, p. 1.

- 11 - See Khudhair Al-Zaidi (ed.) *Walking in His Vision: Dialogues with Dia Al-Azzawi*, Dar Al-Adeeb, Jordan, 2018.
- 12 - In his book *Geometric Variations* (French and Arabic versions, by Dar El Founoun Al Jamila, Lebanon, 2007), Tarazi presents an objective study and analysis of the compositional possibilities of the vertical and horizontal forms under the Qayem-Nayem principle. The book offers a distinctive series of the artist's multiple artworks in formal (visual) and traditional terminology. The book contains his cognitive manifesto *The Need for the Orient* about art's nature and identity, cultural dominance, and definition of the link between modernism and heritage.
- 13 - *The Need for the Orient*, p. IV.
- 14 - Gebran Tarazi's talent is manifested in his "need for abstraction", *The Need for the Orient*, p. II, *Geometric Variations*. It finds expression in the need for the "immaterial" inherent to Arabesque art, to the Orient itself: "For a long time, I believed that glorifying the Orient, one had to return to the sources: [Arabesque, Arabic and Chinese calligraphy]," *Geometric Variations*, Foreword, p. 10.
- 15 - The manifesto is structured as a net of fragmented thoughts. It abounds with artistic, literary and philosophical references that serve as a theoretical framework for the artist's own artistic and literary creations. Each fragment contains the essence of profound reflection and broad cultural perspective that merit to be deeply examined given its dual artistic and critical purpose. Aren't great artists inherently thinkers and art critics? Where else could the possibility of innovative creation come from, if not from a cultured, critical eye capable of bridging cultural heritage to artistic sensibility? These questions are raised to explore another dimension of our current inquiry demonstrating that any artist who mines the depths of both tradition and modernism to innovate artistic styles is un-

- doubtedly a scholarly criticism. In this light, it is valuable directing the reader to Khudhair Al-Zaidi's perspective of the complete art critic. Al Zaidi writes: "The mission of the art critic is not confined to the mere study of visual arts. It is meant to encompass other vital fields such as dance, theater, cinema, television, photography and digital art... Even folk arts require the perspective of a specialist versed in the colorful forms of textiles and their artistic and aesthetic treatment. The true art critic must fully master other arts, work methodologies, the composition of an artwork, the fundamental principles underlying creation and visual execution without ever losing sight of their semantic and aesthetic weight." See article titled "How to be an Art Critic?", published in the daily newspaper Al-Sabah, 13/04/2022, <https://alsabaah.iq/63214-.html>. For further readings, it is recommended to refer to another article by Khudhair Al-Zaidi, titled "What Are the Flaws of Art Critique?", in the daily newspaper Al-Sabah, 13/07/2022, <https://alsabaah.iq/27615-.html>.
- 16 -Gebran Tarazi suggested that, during the war, art and culture embodied his ultimate refuge: "Upon returning home [to Lebanon] in the early 1960s, I discovered a homeland fractured into sectarian communities and a State consumed by the merchants of the temple. In this battered society, my future had already been mapped out for me. After completing my law studies, I was expected to represent the 4th generation of antiquarians and artisans [...]. I no longer have any reason to regret having practiced artisanship." *Geometric Variations*, Foreword, p. 9.
- 17 -See Dr. Assem Abdel Amir, *Jawad Saleem: The Wings of Impact - Pioneership or Multiple Pioneerships*, The Iraqi Visual Artists Association, 2019.
- 18 -An overwhelming existential quest is at the core of Gebran Tarazi's inclination to distinguish himself from his predecessors. He is, undeniably, a thinker revolting against intellectual stagnation; a critical researcher resisting both social and familiar archetypes; and an artist relentlessly moved by a multifaceted inquiry of culture, history, politics, and literature. This inquiry ultimately culminated in the search for identity. Between 1988 and 2003, he advocated for a modern geometric art conceived as both an expression of vivacity and a form of resistance against all that impeded the renewal of artistic talent. From the very beginning, including his artisanal period, Tarazi displayed remarkable cultural breadth, inventive-
- ness and creativity: He transposed the motifs of Caucasian carpets onto chests and cabinets, painted the legendary lovers Abla and Antara on wardrobes, and continuously experimented with chromatic possibilities.
- 19 -P. III. It is worth recalling that a true artist is moved by the quest for truth that goes beyond the simple quest of form: "The truly creative artist," affirms Tarazi, "has no use for formal beauty. What drives him is the quest for truth." Ibid. He invokes a Kleeian context that matches his own understanding of truth in art. Paul Klee, was among the painters whose work profoundly shaped his artistic vision: "When art loses its expressive force," he observes, "it becomes mere decoration." This implies that art is an act of creation rather than imitation. Creating demands surpassing one's own limits and awakening an inner power that turns the artist into a sovereign. In this context, Tarazi also recalls the observation of an art critic: "The artist is a craftsman who ventures beyond the limits of his own know-how." Ibid, p. II.
- 20 - Subtly put, Tarazi notes that the Orient is: "our Orient, the Near, the Middle, the Far", *Geometric Variations*, Foreword, p. 9.
- 21 -See *Binary Oppositions*, a study of terminology and meaning by the researcher Samir Al-Dayoub as part of the *Contemporary Terminology* series, The Islamic Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017.
- 22 - P. VI. For Tarazi, art carries identity and channels the sense of belonging to civilization: "To understand a civilization, I need to know its roots...", ibid.
- 23 - Ibid.
- 24 -The hierarchy of dominance (dominant/subordinate) remains a persistent concern for Gebran Tarazi: "Free nations create, while subjugated nations consume." Ibid, p. VI.
- Tarazi believes in an art liberated from any hierarchical ranking of civilizations, an art that unifies without homogenizing: "If only all the intellectuals and artists of the Mashreq and the Maghreb could come together to proclaim the birth of the new Andalusia...", ibid.
- 25 -Refers to the "Casablanca School" of Morocco, an artistic movement that emerged in Morocco during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The founders aimed at resisting colonial cultural dominance. The movement adopted a clear discourse that integrates Moroccan heritage and living traditional practices with contemporary art and culture. Farid Belkahlia was one of its renowned icons.

26 - Gebran Tarazi is an advocate of indigenous art that strengthens ties with public spaces, ones whose value exists only when placed in a universal context: "There's no salvation outside an indigenous culture, firmly committed to the pursuit of the universal." (op., cit., p. II).

To clarify his point of view, he elaborates his notion of "local art" and invites the reader to rethink local culture in India. He cites the famous Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who believed that Man cannot exist outside their own intimate milieu, as long as they remain connected to the larger totality of humankind. In fact, indigenous art frees Man from cultural colonization and nurtures a more altruistic attitude toward others; Tarazi puts a particular emphasis on what the Orient, in his opinion, so urgently needs: "Across his thirty-six films, filmmaker Satyajit Ray affirms that there is no salvation outside an indigenous culture that is firmly committed to the pursuit of the universal," Tarazi writes. "In his quest, [he] reinvents [...] the music and literature of India. He frees himself, he frees us, from cultural hegemony and erosion of cultures. He reclaims the Orient and its messenger, the message and its recipient," ibid, p VI. In this sense, Tarazi refers to Gauguin: "In truth, the word "indigenous" is charged with meaning. Long before me, Gauguin had already said it." Ibid.

27 - Tarazi studied oriental decorative arts in Morocco. In an interview with Ahmad Bazzoun, "Gebran Tarazi: From Artisanry to Modern Art", op. cit. p. 312, the artist reveals his fascination with orchestrating colors and drawing geometric forms. It was this Arab-Islamic art that most deeply captivated him, giving rise to a problematic question within his abstract painting practice: "Can we succeed in creating a modern art that remains authentically Arab?" ibid.

He elaborates his answer by putting his artistic practice into perspective. His practice was initially grounded in the formation of the square where vertical and horizontal lines intersect in the visual articulation of the Qayem-Nayem principle. It is essential to note that this principle originates in a spiritual pursuit: "For my part, I started from a fundamental idea that lies at the heart of Islamic art, the form of the square, [which] symbolizes the apparent movement of the sun [...] It was the Sufis who invented this form; they perceived it in relation to the circular movement that leads to union with the Creator," ibid, p.313.

28 - Obsessed with the square, Gebran Tarazi produced a

highly original painting with a surrealist title, "Square Sea", that inevitably commands the viewer's attention. He used the same title for his 1997 exhibition in Beirut. As an art historian, Morad Montazami comments on how the choice of title connects to the canvas itself: "The painting in question is organized as a vast square comprising a multitude of smaller squares, which are themselves subdivided into micro-squares and rectangles (the latter, according to the law of Qayem-Nayem, resolving *de facto* into squares)," ibid. p. 273.

Alog these same lines, art critic Joseph Tarrab comments on the choice of the square form, drawing out its implicit meaning, namely the spiritual abstract geometric talent of Gebran Tarazi: "A Geometrician's Dream: Squaring the Universe. Gebran Tarazi settles for squaring the "Mediterranean Sea", the "Olive Grove", "Paradise", the "Counterpoint", and the "Fugue"," ibid, p. 318.

He explains that this is a metaphorical expression of the Qayem-Nayem law: "The mathematical process is sublimated into an artistic process," ibid.

29 -Foreword, p. 9. According to Tarazi, a good artist exercises creativity: "Art and artisanship are inseparable when the need to break new ground asserts itself." Ibid.

30 - In series 1B of the Qayem-Nayem, Gebran Tarazi specifies that: "In nine paintings, the study of the internal lines and colors' structure of 16 classical themes takes precedence over combinatorics, giving that each of the 4 compartments that are separated by a cross contains only a single junction point between 4 themes." Ibid, p. 15.

31 -Ibid, Foreword, p. 10.

32 - See Khaled Hussein, *Semiotic Affairs*, Dar Al-Takween, 2008.

33 - See Zakaria Ibrahim, *The Problem of Art*, Maktabat Misr, Cairo, as part of the series *Contemporary Philosophical Problems*, 2000.

34 - It is a must to introduce the reader to Gebran Tarazi the novelist, the *genius*, as signaled in the title of this study. An intellectual and an art critic, he authored *Journal 1970-1980*; *The Olive Press* novel, written in 1978 and published in 1996 by L'Harmattan; the unpublished 1982 essay *Jumhuriyat Lubnan al-Mashreq* (Lebanese Republic of the Levant); and the *Geometric Variations* book, which contains the manifesto *The Need for the Orient*.

Gebran Tarazi maintains that he was consumed by his passion for literary and artistic reinvention: "When I dedi-

cated myself to writing in French, I was always seeking to reinvent poetic form. This naturally led me to seek new forms and colorations in my artistic practice, away from any repetitive imitation.” Gebran Tarazi, *The Twelve Seasons*, op. cit. p. 312.

His abstraction orientation first appeared in his writing, in the context of literary modernism. His novel, *The Olive Press*, stands out within Lebanese Francophone literature: Gebran Tarazi disrupts narrative conventions during an era marked by dismantling linear storytelling, an era in which identity itself was elusive, reflecting his own existential quest.

Aligned with the Nouveau Roman movement, this narrative novel functions as a form of literary abstraction that parallels his artistic geometric abstraction, underscoring the interaction between literature and painting. He repeatedly invoked both his literary calling and his inclination to abstraction as the foundational principle of artistic and literary creation: “[...] This need for abstraction in painting proved to be the natural culmination of a need for abstraction in literature. Literary abstraction refers to a writing style where words serve as the raw materials of the immaterial,” he affirms in *The Need for the Orient*, p. III.

A truly avant-garde talent, Gebran Tarazi has been included in the curriculum of the Department of French Language and Literature at the Lebanese University in Beirut since 2023.

We may therefore conclude that Tarazi places the reader at the crossroads of the artist-novelist-critic. He exemplifies the complete spectrum of artistic talent, a true artist

capable of rendering critical judgment in both art and literature. Is this perhaps the destiny of the art critic in the Arab world?

Such is the case with Khudhair Al-Zaidi, a comprehensive critic driven in equal measure by artistic and literary sensibilities. One need only read a few of his reflections on Iraqi and other artists to observe that art criticism is fueled by cultural depth. By way of example, two references here, among many, reflect the critic’s mission:

“The Duality of Painting and Poetry: The Energy of Beauty and the Materials of the Spirit”. *Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper*, 8 June 2023, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/>

“History and its Chronicles in the Novel *The Admiral Does Not like Tea*,”

Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper, 23 February 2023, <https://www.alquds.co.uk>

35 -The international interest in the Baghdad Group is well worth noting. The reader may consult the following references, selected from numerous media reports and critical studies about the Group’s enduring presence:

“Iraqis Rediscover their Contemporary Art”, *Le Figaro with AFP*, 23 April 2022 11:17 AM, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/les-irakiens-a-la-redecouverte-de-leur-art-contemporain-20220423>

“When Iraqi Art Defied Oblivion and Oppression”, *L’Orient-Le Jour*, Sylviane ZEHIL, New York, 5 August 2025, 12:00 AM, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1472220/quand-lart-irakien-defiait-loubli-et-loppression.html>

36 - Ibid., p. III.

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- 2- Gebran Tarazi, *Geometric Variations*, Dar Al-Funun Al-Jamila, Lebanon, 2007.
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- 4- Khudhair Al-Zaidi, *Walking in His Vision: Dialogues with Dia Al-Azzawi*, Dar Al-Adeeb, Jordan, 2018.
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- 8- Samir Al-Dayoub, *Binary Oppositions*, a study of terminology and meaning as part of the *Contemporary Terminology* series, The Islamic Centre for Strategic Studies., 2017.
- 9- Interview by Ahmad Bazzoun, *Gebran Tarazi: From Artisanship to Modern Art*, op. cit. p. 312, As-Safir Newspaper, May 6, 1993.

- 10- Khaled Hussein, *Semiotic Affairs*, Dar Al-Takween, 2008.
- 11- Zakaria Ibrahim, *The Problem of Art*, Maktabat Misr, Cairo, as part of the series *Contemporary Philosophical Problems*, 2000.
- 12- Khudhair Al-Zaidi, *The Duality of Painting and Poetry: The Energy of Beauty and the Materials of the Spirit*, an article published in Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper, 8 June 2023, <https://www.alquds.co.uk>
- 13- Khudhair Al-Zaidi, *History and its Chronicles in the Novel The Admiral Does Not like Tea*, an article published in Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper, 23 February 2023 <https://www.alquds.co.uk>
- 14- Le Figaro with AFP, *Iraqis Rediscover their Contemporary Art*, 23 April 2022 11:17 AM, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/les-irakiens-a-la-redecouverte-de-leur-art-contemporain-20220423>
- 15- Sylviane Zehil, *When Iraqi Art Defied Oblivion and Oppression*, an article published in L'Orient-Le Jour, New York, 5 August 2025, 12:00 AM, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1472220/quand-l-art-irakien-defiait-loubli-et-l-oppression.html>