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Four Women: The E. Cassirer's Theory and Its Analytical Potential for Understanding Iraqi Symbolic Painting by J. Saleem

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Abstract:

Based on the theoretical ideas of E. Cassirer, a methodology is developed and an analysis of the painting work by J. Saleem, a representative of modern Iraqi painting, is carried out. While comparing the artistic programme of J. Saleem and the views of E. Cassirer, the methodological potential of the theory of the symbol for the art criticism analysis of the regional painting is clarified. Comparative analysis with the inclusion of the works of B. Buffet, B. Turetsky, J. Miro helps to see the multiple meanings of the same cultural symbol in thematically similar works of different years, created in different socio-cultural circumstances. The article shows that for regions with a shorter history (France, Russia, Spain, etc.), which have lost direct connection with the original myths in the process of civilization development, E. Cassirer's methodology can be applied only with significant amendments.

Keywords: Symbolism, modern Iraqi painting, J. Saleem, E. Cassirer.

Introduction

The relevance of the study is due to the limited degree of knowledge about the Current state of modern Iraqi painting and the inadequate development of the methodological basis for its study. Emerging from the ancient layers of civilization, the Iraqi painting at all development stages reproduces a high level of symbolism, which cannot be merely recorded or described. Since symbolism has a direct and strong influence on the culture and art of the Middle East, it is necessary to find such a research position that will make symbolism the key to interpreting the works of Iraqi artists in the 20th century who actively employed this approach. In order to do this, one needs to choose the most adequate theory of the symbol to the task from a variety of those of and test its application in art history discourse. For our research, the Iraqi artist J. Saleem and German theorist E. Cassirer served as he basis for for investigating this direction.

Certain difficulties arose along the way. "The fact is that in different periods, M. M. K. Abdelsalam, M. Salih and N. M. Kalashnikova, A. A. Khalaf, N. Shabout" (Bystrova & Al-Chalabi,2022). etc., studied the Iraqi art. But the works are mainly related to other art forms, while painting remains in the background. N. Shabout even speaks of the art historical invisibility of Arab Modern Art, referring to the incomplete separation of Arabic painting as a separate subject of study and linking this state with the non-delimitation of Arab and Islamic art of the region (Shabout, 2005/2006). In our opinion, it makes one pay special attention not so much to the classification or periodization of Iraqi painting as to its fundamental features,

one of which is precisely **symbolism**. And twenty years later she confirms this fact when she writes for the 2022 Dubai Contemporary Arabic Art Exhibition, noting that 'most of the works exhibited here defy a simple stylistic classification and instead flow between the allocated different spaces.' (Shabout, 2022).

The specificity of Iraqi artistic symbolism is conditioned by historical duration and semantic saturation of the 'symbolic universe' in which an art creator is located. Since the 1930s Iraqi artists have got to know European schools and concepts, and their artistic traditions without dissolving into them. This played a decisive role in the transition of Iraqi painting to a new stage, the main quality of which experts call 'the search for a civilized personality', accompanied by a meditative immersion in the experience of the current moment and the spontaneous use of artistic means. In the difficult political circumstances of the mid-20th century, including the formation of the Arab nations after the region's struggle for independence, artists sought to develop a specific visual language capable of expressing their new identity. With the dominance of 'unconscious vision', the artist still strives to complete the work, reflecting on the intermediate stages of its creation and supplementing it until they achieve the desired effect (Bystrova & Al-Chalabi). This process, even in a way imperceptible for the artist, actualizes many symbols of the traditional culture of the region and, at the same time, fills them with new shades of meaning.

By 'contemporary Iraqi painting' we mean the body of artwork and ideas that emerged between 1950 and 2020. The choice of time limits is explained by the fact that this is the time of the creation of various artistic groups by Iraqi artists-pioneers in contemporary art. The European academic school had a great influence on the formation of modern painting in Iraq. Thus, the founder of modern Iraqi painting, Abdul Qadir Al Rassam (1882–1952), was influenced by it. One of the leaders of the 1960–1970s, Hafidh Al Droubi (1914–1991), mainly relied on the achievements of European impressionism while creating the national landscape. The transfer of European symbolist experience to the Iraqi world receives only a partial response among Iraqi artists, acquiring features of Middle Eastern wisdom and restraint ("Iraq," 2022).

The features of modern painting in Iraq were clearly manifested in the work of the painter Mahoud Ahmed, who graduated from the Art Institute named after V. I. Surikov in Moscow in 1967. The paintings of Mahoud Ahmed (1940–2021) are characterized by realism and expressionism. In his works, he depicts the 'state' in which the woman is and the symbolic role that she is assigned in Iraqi society. For a more accurate identification of the woman's place in the environment and culture, the artist places her surrounded by household items, shows the social status of the woman, depicting her next to her husband, 'looking' women, animals.

A significant part of the artistic movement in Iraq in the middle of the 20th century is connected with the past, which is represented in the art of the pre-literate era in the art of Sumer, Akkad and Assyria. In Iraqi painting, a unique culture of using the symbol is traced, which consists in a special reverent attitude to nature, traditions, and the sensuality of the female body. The attraction of Iraqi artists works arose due to the influence of ancient civilizations, which left their mark on regional art, creating an atmosphere of some mysteriousness. Using stylization and a variety of expressive means, drawing inspiration from the rich heritage of Arabic art, the artists sought to form a new national identity, which included an appeal to the past in search of cultural authenticity.

In the 1950s there were several artistic groups, which was headed by an outstanding Iraqi artist and, to one degree or another, solved the question of attitude to the historical artistic heritage, and hence, the question of the meaning of symbols.

Thus, Shakir Hasan Al Said (1925–2004), considered to be a key figure in the Iraqi modern art movement, interpreted art as a path to the work of the spirit. He developed the artistic philosophy of *Istilham al-Turath* ('Searching for inspiration in tradition'), which was seen as the main starting point for achieving a vision of culture through modern styles. These artists were inspired by the 13th century Baghdad school, the works of calligraphers such as Yahya al-Wasiti (Baghdad, 1230s). (Al-Dulaimi, 2019). They believed that the Mongol invasion of 1258 represented 'a break in the chain of Iraqi fine arts' and wanted to restore lost traditions. Al Said was actively looking for a relationship between time and space, and for a visual language that would link the deep artistic traditions of Iraq with the contemporary art methods and materials. An important aspect was the incorporation of calligraphic letters into painting. The writing became part of Al Said's transition from figurative to abstract art, and strengthened the symbolic component of his works.

Crucial to their vision of contemporary art was experimentation with artistic traditions and techniques. The visual continuity of the present in relation to the past, thanks to them, became part of an innovative vision that was inspired by traditions. Works created within the framework of such complex artistic aspirations lack analytics that reduce them to any single aspect: the infinity of the artistic image, the role of the perceiver in changing the content of the picture, the influence of external circumstances on interpretation, etc.

Iraqi pictorial symbolism of the second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries since its inception has sought to unite the historical, household, and traditional beginnings of regional culture and at the same time go beyond art alone, become an artistic and philosophical concept of a person's relationship to history, and rethink the foundations of artistic creativity. Its study is even more relevant because 'a new generation of untrained amateur Iraqi artists, who exist outside the context of Iraqi art history, is developing a new Iraqi visual culture reflective of this art historical void' (Shabot, 2012).

Methodology

The analysis of symbolism in the diverse and new for the region works of Iraqi artists is possible only through an already established concept. In our study, the methodology for studying the symbol of E. Cassirer was chosen. He considers symbols to be 'organs of reality', language, or the highest values of human culture. The symbol conveys the meaning of sensual manifestations in an abstract form.

In full accordance with the subject of our study – contemporary painting by Iraqi artists who sought to continue the original, traditional art of the region – E. Cassirer speaks of the mythological space as a world of binary oppositions, occupying 'the middle position between the sensual space of perception and the space of pure cognition' (Cassirer, 2002). It is diverse, qualitatively heterogeneous, material, and has a pronounced centre and periphery. According to Cassirer, mythological consciousness, does not know time, and the empirically experienced present is separated from the origins, setting the boundaries of this chronotope. This time structure leads to the sacralization of the past, what is able to repeat itself in the present, for example, through a ritual or some kind of action.

Via simple fixation of formal characteristics in one particular symbol a complete understanding of the semantic content is impossible. Taken from the side of its figurative component, it acquires concrete historical and individual features and endless semantic variability, which can be comprehended only by 'getting used' to it (Averintsev, 1971). Then, it becomes justified and even necessary to turn to related branches – the philosophy of culture or aesthetics – for its scientific analysis. In our research this theory was the concept of E. Cassirer, who speaks of the origin of the main forms of spiritual culture, including art, from the mythological and symbolic consciousness. The artistic language of any period, according to this approach, is inseparable from the myth and, at the same time, every time it manifests

itself in a specific historical period, interacting with other cultural structures of this period. The myth not only has its own symbolic reality, but also sets various manifestations of a person, including their 'fate'.

According to E. Cassirer, who develops G. Cohen's idea of 'initial origin', the artist's thought originates in their experience, which is rooted in culture. It acquires its final form due to colour, chiaroscuro, and material. The elucidation of the semantic depth of a symbol in a piece of art, including painting, is not speculative, but based on its specific details. The image-meaning unity leads away from the priority of both formal and hermeneutic approaches to their synthesis. This removes another long-standing methodological question about the autonomy or closeness of art, that is, finding the main determinants inside the work or outside it (at one time, the Russian scientist A. G. Gabrichevsky called these approaches 'formalistic' and 'expressionist' (Gabrichevsky, 2002).

Concreteness of the image details, transmitting specific historical and personal meaning shades, becomes even more perceptible when compared with the works of other artists. Their primary selection is necessary, since not all artistic programs of the masters of the 20th century led to the formation of a symbolic reality that meets Cassirer's parameters. As an example of 'unstructured' reality, the article cites the work of the Spanish artist J. Miro (1893–1983), who gravitated towards surrealism.

Using the theory of E. Cassirer as the basis for the interpretation of the symbol in painting, it is advisable to outline the following stages of art history analysis:

1. Perception of a picture in terms of composition and figurativeness: colour, shapes, sizes, textures, details, materials used, the connection between individual elements.
2. Identification of the structural elements of the mythological space of the picture and the symbolic artistic reality in their relationship with the original pra-symbol, if any.
3. Observing the links between the socio-cultural context and the semantic content of the work. Identification of figurative and semantic transformations of the symbol under the influence of socio-cultural circumstances.
4. Comparison with works of a similar orientation and structure, made by other artists, to clarify the specifics of regional symbolism in J. Saleem.

Of course, this way of analysis has its limitations, and below it is shown how the destruction of the structure of myth reduces or transforms the symbolic content of painting. However, at the level of a hypothesis, we say that the historical and cultural prerequisites of modern Iraqi art are such that in it the mechanisms derived by E. Cassirer make themselves felt in full. The proof of this is just beginning with the material of this article.

The main part

'Woman Selling Material'

According to the concept of E. Cassirer, it is important not only 'what' we see, but what cultural circumstances lead the artist to use certain symbols in their specific form.

The painting by J. Saleem (1919–1961) 'Woman Selling Material' (Saleem, Figure/picture 1). has a planar composition, tending towards abstract geometricism, but remaining figurative. This technique testifies to the openness of J. Saleem to various influences and the dynamic interaction of different visual traditions. At the same time, abstraction meets one of the trends of Arabic art of the period, allowing the artist to focus on the form. And it is not 'complete', as if combining various possibilities, different languages of art.

In 1938–39 J. Saleem received a scholarship to study sculpture in Paris, where his studies were interrupted by the war. He moved to Rome (1939-1940), where he too was overtaken by the war, forcing him to return to Baghdad. Returning to Europe at the end of World War II, he entered the Slade School, London (1946–1948). He was influenced by Western artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henry Moore. (Lassikova, 2009).

Saleem is said to have been the first Iraqi artist to use cultural heritage motifs in his work and to guide local artists towards a distinctly Iraqi artistic language ("Jawad Saleem," 2021).

In 'Woman Selling Material', brown is used predominantly. This colour, one of the main colours of the landscape of the region, symbolizes earthliness, soil, closeness to nature and traditions, embodies simplicity and belonging to the village life. Facial identification is due to two black dots and a hijab in a black circle, implying the head of a girl who makes a wave of a crescent-shaped canvas. Semi-circular shapes give the impression of airiness and convey the movement of the fabric. The crescent shape repeats the forms of the arches and windows of Baghdad, its narrow-curved lanes; the artist gives a sense of the city through the appearance of a woman. It also connects the heroine with Islamic culture and female symbols.

While maintaining a number of quite traditional elements at the border between figurativeness and abstraction (triangle, circles, semicircles), the image of a woman is filled with a different, other than the original, semantic content associated with activity and dynamics. It is not closed on the topic of gender, but is brought into a generalized social space, where a woman acts as a point for connection and movement. Muted, deliberately 'grounded' tones show her new purpose and changing status. At the same time, the style of the lines and the structural 'framework' of the painting confirm the invariance of the original meanings of the woman as the guardian and generative principle.

Helping interpretation Cassirer's idea is that the myth and the symbol define the structural ordering in cultural reality, which, realizing or not realizing it, is created by a person (in our case, an artist) at each new stage in history. The Iraqi regional female symbols, like many other early civilizations, are based on the theme of preservation (circle) and bringing out (triangle). Historically, they often have hypertrophied primary sexual characteristics, indicating the main purpose of a woman.

J. Saleem, of course, is aware that he relies on a long tradition of depicting a woman. His wife, Lorna Saleem, noted that he was fascinated by ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian sculptures. 'His goal was to create an artistic language unique to Iraq, based on the great art of its past civilizations, Sumer, Babylon, Assyria and of course Islam, but in the language of the 20th century,' she wrote ("Jawad Saleem," 2021).

Just as it was in ancient times, the world in the east again consists of female elements. In such a picture (and view of the world), the depicted woman is the centre, and therefore opposes the implied chaos that is outside the canvas. This figurative structure is reproduced by the artist with a number of 'deviations' dictated, according to E. Cassirer, by new circumstances. Thus, the head of the woman depicted by him is small and 'faceless', but emphasized by several concentric circles, riveting the attention of the perceiver to the eyes. The triangle of the body is rhythmically repeated here, placing an additional compositional emphasis on the upper part of the figure. The breast is drawn flat and rather conventionally, while the spiral lines around the face and the expanding V-shaped body configuration give dynamics to the image. Light triangle ornaments in different parts can be considered to be archaic, but they are made without the slightest hint of stylization. They set a small scale, which in the products of traditional culture is performed by a protective ornament. Nothing indicates the sacred function of the amulet, but due to the presence of elements of different scales, the composition looks more harmonious.

Despite the expressive restraint, it is due the symbolism that J. Saleem manages to tell a lot about his vision of a contemporary woman. The presence of a hijab does not reduce her external resemblance to the progenitor of gods, whose image dates from the Khalaf period, V millennium BC (Goff, 1963) (Iraq, Figure/ picture 2). Her dynamically raised hands testify to an openness that has not been seen before, but also to a timeless connection with heaven. The rhythm of her clothes echoes the city, and this is doubly symbolic precisely in Iraq, where the earliest cities arose: this woman is inseparable from her cultural topos.

Mythological time is non-linear, so there is no exact time indication in J. Saleem's work. Details by which we could identify it are almost non-existent. In cyclic time, the goddess and the woman selling material are simultaneous.

Accurately built by J. Saleem symbolic structures do not contain references to Hellenism, whose influence is quite strong in the region at the turn of the 1st millennium BC – 1st millennium AD, or Western European art of the 20th century, the influence of which was felt by Iraqi artists who left to study in Europe. This thesis can be given additional evidence by comparing the work of J. Saleem in its structural and symbolic aspect and thematically similar works of a number of authors from other countries that do not have an internal connection with those layers of history and culture that the Iraqi artist reaches. The selection was made on the basis of the generality of the topic and the relative temporal proximity of the date of work creation.

Comparative analysis of female images in their connection with artistic mythology

Unlike the saleswoman depicted by the French artist Bernard Buffet (1928–1999) in the same years and, at first glance, in similar geometry (Buffet, Figure/ picture 3). Saleem's 'Woman Selling Material' does not look flat and one-dimensional. J. Saleem does not use perspective, but colour contrasts give rise to a sense of depth.

Without discussing the artistic style of B. Buffet, who was incredibly famous and lost his fame during his lifetime under the influence of non-objective painting, we note that he too 'builds' his heroine from rounded and triangular forms. But the dense yellow-brown background leaves no place for air and movement, and the echo of the triangular folds of the apron with the dead slope and crosshairs of the cold metal fence gives rise to a gloomy and ironic metaphor of 'as cold as fish', incorporeal and barren woman, reduced to function only.

B. Buffet's statements about the world that surrounds him are full of misanthropy, and the gloom looks not only really experienced, but also mythologically constructed. The most recognized French artist of the 1960s along with Pablo Picasso, 'celebrity', the hero of newspaper chronicles, he consistently exaggerates colours and emotions. But his personal myth has no reference to the 'big' story, leading the perceiver to a fairly simple metaphor. The mechanical uniformity of the angles, which echoes the patterns of the steel lattice, does not enliven the space, but, on the contrary, makes it flat and empty.



Figure 1. Woman Selling Material, 1953, by J. Saleem. 53.5 x 43.5 cm. oil on canvas, Barjeel Art Foundation at the Sharjah Museum of Art.



Figure 2. Female Figurine from the Halaf Period, Tepe Gawra, Iraq [Photograph]. (n.d.). Penn Museum. Retrieved May 7, 2023, from <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/405798>



Figure 3. In a Fish Shop, 1911, by Buffet, B. 170x240 cm, oil on Canvas, State Hermitage, St. Petersburg.



Figure 4. Saleswoman in Variegated Stockings, 1966, by Turetskiy B. 201x123 cm. Paper, gouache, Private collection.

Depicted by the nonconformist artist of the period of Soviet 'stagnation' B. Turetsky (1928–1997), the saleswoman looks akin to a robot (Turetsky, Figure/ picture 4). This large-scale figurative work in gouache, like a number of others, was painted at the moment of the artist's short departure from abstractionist searches, which he wrote about in his 'Autobiography from a third person' in the late 1980s: 'It seems to me that Boris Turetsky feels especially the negative side in a person's life. Sadness is exalted in his things, heaviness, oppression, one might say, is exalted. This is a monumental expression of narrowness, limitation, oppression' (turetskiy, 2013).

Recognizing that he is immersed in himself and mentally is cutting off from the existing reality, the artist does not live in the Soviet mythological space, created, among other things, by works in the style of socialist realism. However, the one-dimensionality of Soviet reality makes itself felt even contrary to the artist's attitudes: the saleswoman face is devoid of purely feminine features (the 'Soviet man' construct did not imply them); in space there are no visual or semantic dominants that point to the top and bottom, giving at least some kind of guidance. It is different, but at the same time homogeneous in its fragmentation. There is no historical sense here, except perhaps for the formal parallel between pattern of bright stockings and clowns and harlequins costumes from different countries. The figure of a woman is locked in a space without geographical and cultural certainty. B. Turetsky, like B. Buffet, comes to the image of the interior of the store (in this case, art supplies), where the action takes place, in an ornamental way. Many lines and planes form an abstract space resembling a closet. But this allusion does not lead to the strengthening of any symbolic meanings, especially as far as the woman herself is concerned.

The paradox of the work lies in the fact that the grotesque figure, composed of separate, roughly moulded parts, repels the viewer, while finely crafted colour modulations attract the eye. At some point, we no longer see the woman herself, carried away by the consideration of picturesque details, that is, the image does not 'grow' to the symbolic, since its details turn out to be more interesting than the whole. It dissolves in the purely artistic components of the painting. It is no accident, that in 1958 the artist writes: 'For me, everything is plastic. I don't see plastic anywhere and therefore I see it everywhere' (Turetskiy, 2013). If we return to the formulations of A. Gabrichevsky and E. Cassirer, we can say that a subjective immersion 'inside' art does not allow the 'external' symbolic reality to fully affect.

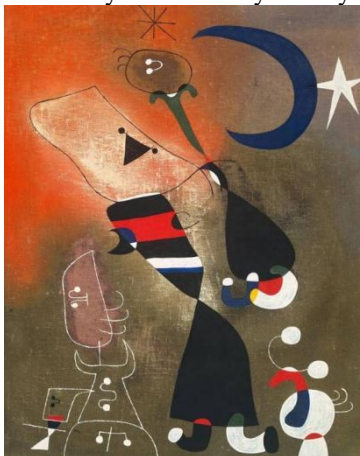


Figure 5. The woman, the bird and the moonlight, 1949, by Miro, J. 81.3x66 cm. Canvas, oil, Tate Modern, London.

Joan Miro began a series of works with stars in 1937, at the time of the Spanish Civil War. In an interview in 1948, he said about this time that he 'felt a passionate desire to escape' and 'deliberately went into his shell': 'Night, music and stars began to play a major role, serving as a source of inspiration' (Mink, 2003). Let us note that the artist connects not only the theme, but also his mood with the elements of nature, as if taking himself beyond the limits of culture. (Miro, Figure/ picture 5). The surrealism practices some extent allow this to be done.

As a result, we see a fluid and loosely structured reality. Moving away from the linear patterns and connections of points (stars, planets) of earlier works of the 1940s, Miro, as the stories of people who knew him at that time testify, assigns a decisive role to the imagination of the viewer, endowing his images with meanings. Thus, in 1947, the American artist K. Holty, standing in front of Miro's unfinished work, says that he sees a fish, 'and Miro answered somewhat irritably, «It seemed to me that it was a woman»' (Mink, 2003). The same artist is surprised at Miro's lack of interest in any artistic or visual effects, which are described above in connection with the B. Turetsky's work. He emphasizes with surprise that Miro finished the working day at the same time, remaining indifferent to the changes in shades on his canvases (Turetsky, 2013).

It seems that in this case there is no need to involve the Cassirer method of analysis, since the creative process is extremely subjective on the part of both the author and the perceiver. Even if the viewer discovers the symbolic connection between the woman and the moon, it turns out to be not so important for the experience of the work.

Conclusion

The conclusion is made about the productivity of using the methodology of E. Cassirer for the analysis of works of art, the authors of which consciously strive for a dialogue with traditional culture and art.

The method of art history analysis based on the interpretation of a work of art as part of the symbolic universe of a certain culture has been derived from E. Cassirer's symbol theory and tested.

A comparative analysis of the painting by J. Selim 'Woman Selling Material' with the works of the same period by B. Buffet (France), B. Turetsky (Soviet Union), J. Miro (Spain) showed the limits of the application of the Cassirer method in the interpretation of the works of art of the authors, not setting the task of finding a connection with the cultural past of their region.

Since the religion in the Arab world does not allow the use of the human image, the coding can be seen as a means of avoiding the expression of the religiously forbidden, while at the same time satisfying the artist's need for artistic practice. Instead of depictions of living creatures, which were forbidden to depict, decorative and geometric units were used (Siham). Often art as a whole is a certain fundamental idea, depicted in symbolic forms, so the image can be a spiritual modification embodied through the intention of the artist (Haidari, 1984).

The symbol is the key to human nature, writes E. Cassirer. Art is a language that expresses inner revelation. A work of art is a symbolic language that is transmitted directly to the perceiver (Amara, 2010). The richness of the content of art is expressed through a set of symbols that are representative symbols of a particular culture.

To study symbolism in the art of a particular region, it is important to consider the plasticity and variability of the myth and its symbolic elements (Stavitsky, 2019), which, in turn, leads to an understanding of the possibility of supplementing the universal art criticism method of their analysis with a more specific one. In this regard, the approach we use is adequate to the creative attitudes of the Iraqi artists of the mid-20th century, who consciously strove for their roots and used certain cultural symbols for this, moreover, in their regional

version. But it does not help to comprehend the works of authors who went into subjective depths or into the study of purely artistic effects.

One of the answers to N. Shabout's question 'What makes a work of art Iraqi?' – even though the borders of the state were marked relatively recently, – may be an indication of the specific symbolism of the works of Iraqi artists shown in this text. In the future, we plan to continue identifying the symbolism that proves the ethno-cultural originality of painting in the works of other contemporary artists of Iraq. The same symbolism, as if anticipating the tragedies of the next decades and the loss of many works of the past, conveys to us the structural and semantic 'monads' of the artistic culture of the region.

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