

The logo for Whitechapel Gallery, consisting of two stacked blue rectangles. The top rectangle contains the text "Whitechapel Gallery" in white, and the bottom rectangle is empty.

Whitechapel
Gallery

Barjeel Art Foundation Collection: Imperfect Chronology – Debating Modernism I

8 September – 6 December 2015

Large print labels and interpretation

Gallery 7

Barjeel Art Foundation Collection: Imperfect Chronology

An exhibition in four parts: 8 Sept 2015 – 8 Jan 2017

Part of the Whitechapel Gallery's programme opening up rarely seen art collections from around the world, a series of four chronological displays highlights works from the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection of Arab art. The theme of an 'imperfect chronology' is the series' starting point: how do we narrate the history of Arab art through the lens of one collection? Over 100 works of art by 60 artists from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day are brought together here to tell this story.

The Barjeel Art Foundation is based in the United Arab Emirates and was founded by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi in 2010. It holds one of the most extensive collections of art from the Arab world and its diaspora – a region that extends across North Africa and southwestern Asia encompassing the 22 countries of the Arab League.

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With a population of over 350 million of various ethnic and religious identities, Arabic (in its various dialects) is the dominant language of expression.

Barjeel Art Foundation collection: Debating Modernism I

8 September – 6 December 2015

The first display takes an expansive historical approach and explores the emergence and subsequent development of Arab art through drawings and paintings from the early twentieth century to 1967–68, an important historical period in the region, with landmark works by Munira Al-Kazi, Da Azzawi, Inji Efflatoun, Kadhim Hayder and Hamed Ewais.

Barjeel Art Foundation collection: Debating Modernism II

15 December 2015 – 17 April 2016

The second display focuses on the relationship between abstract and figurative art produced between 1968 and 1987, focusing on pioneering figures including Kamal Boullata, Huguette Caland, Marwan and Abdul Qader Al Rais.

Barjeel Art Foundation collection: Mapping the Contemporary I

26 April – 14 August 2016

The third presentation includes photography and video made between 1990–2000. Focusing on the theme of mapping, Yto Barrada, Mohammed Kazem, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari amongst others explore territory and borders, utilising both documentary and performative techniques.

Barjeel Art Foundation collection: Mapping the Contemporary II

23 August 2016 – 8 January 2017

The final display explores how artists using various media engage with urban transformation and architecture in landscapes where they either live or work. These artists include Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Etel Adnan, Marwa Arsanios, GCC and Iman Issa.

Imperfect Chronology: Debating Modernism I

Works from Barjeel Art Foundation Collection:

8 Sept – 6 Dec 2015

A colourful gathering of tightly assembled artworks evoking the early artist salons in the region opens this four-part exhibition. This first display seeks to map the emergence and development of an Arab art history by tracing a genealogy that runs from the early twentieth century to 1967–68. In this period, the Arab world underwent radical social and political transformation with the end of European rule and the emergence of new independent states. The end of the colonial period in the 1950s led to a Pan-Arab cultural renaissance or *Nahda*, which was later thwarted by political turmoil in the region in 1967, a period that is often referred to as the *Naksa* (or the great loss).

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This first display traces this complex historical period through painting and drawing, beginning with what is believed to be the earliest work in the exhibition, a portrait painting of a young woman in profile by Armenian-Egyptian artist **Ervand Demirdjian** (c. 1901–1910) titled *Nubian Girl* – an academic study illustrative of the European tradition of portraiture, which influenced many artists locally. This sits alongside landscape paintings by early proponents of Egypt’s modernist movement **Youssef Kamel** and **Mahmoud Said**.

Legendary author and artist **Khalil Gibran**’s rarely seen works on paper are presented alongside early pieces by **Dia Azzawi** who is recognised as Iraq’s most influential living artist. Also from Iraq is **Kadhim Hayder**, whose painting of white horses symbolises the martyrdom and mourning of Al Husayn Ibn Ali at the Battle of Karbala, and is illustrative of the use of allegory and metaphor in early Arab painting; **Shakir Hassan Al Said**, co-founder of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950s, is represented with an oil on plasterboard that appropriates Arabic script, in an attempt by the artist to form a uniquely Arab aesthetic that rejects European tradition.

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The exhibition includes rare surrealist works by Inji Efflatoun, activist for women's rights and member of Egypt's revolutionary Art and Freedom Group as well as a painting by Kuwaiti-based artist Munira Al-Kazi in which she evokes Christian iconography, a theme also explored in Lebanese-Armenian artist Paul Guiragossian's painting of highly stylised figures. Two characteristic portraits by Marwan from the early 1960s are also included; originally from Syria, he painted these on his arrival in Germany, where he became part of the New Figuration movement. The display is completed by Hamed Ewais's *Le Gardien de la Vie* (1967–8), a large-scale oil painting that depicts a fighter, weapon in hand, while underneath him everyday events unfold, suggesting the possibility of societal renewal after the collapse of the Pan-Arab ideal in 1967.

Artwork's labels: From Left, clockwise.

Shafic Abboud
(Lebanon, 1926–2004)
Untitled
1966
Oil on canvas

Please find map on next page.

1. Effat Nagi (Egypt, 1905-1994)

The High Dam

1966

Acrylic on wood

Born into an aristocratic Egyptian family, Effat Nagi studied at the Egyptian Academy in Rome and became an influential figure in the modern Egyptian art movement.

In 1963 Nagi was invited by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture to join a group of artists to record the sites of Ancient Nubia before the region was flooded to create the Aswan High Dam. This painting is one of a series of seven depicting the High Dam's construction through vertiginous angular lines, recalling geometric modernism, set against warmer tones which evoke the landscape of the Nile Valley and the Aswan Hills . Whilst the construction of the Upper Dam was viewed as a feat of engineering and industrial progress it also displaced many local villages and attendant traditions. Throughout the rest of her career, Nagi focused on recording traditional Egyptian folklore and culture in the face of modernisation and upheaval following the unification of Egypt in 1952.

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8. Hamed Ewais (Egypt, 1919-2011)

Le Gardien de la Vie (The Protector of Life) 1967-8

Oil on canvas

Ewais studied at Cairo's School of Fine Arts in the 1940s and was co-founder of the Group of Modern Art who committed themselves to the modernisation of Egyptian society and to making art accessible to the masses. One of Egypt's leading social realist painters, Ewais highlighted the struggles of the country's working classes. He admired the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros and was influenced by their monumental works depicting factory workers and peasants as heroic figures informed by socialist principles.

Completed in 1968 after the defeat of the United Arab Republic of Egypt, Jordan and Syria by Israel, the figure of a muscular Upper Egyptian fighter is centred against a backdrop of multiple scenes representing everyday domestic events in contemporary Egypt and activities from agriculture and construction to the city and industry. The barren landscape towards which the figure is looking is often interpreted as the Sinai peninsular lost during the 1967 War to Israel but still considered part of the motherland which the fighter, representing the Egyptian people, is poised to protect.

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7. Khadim Hayder (Iraq, 1932-1985)

Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing (The Martyrs Epic), 1965

Oil on canvas

Khadim Hayder studied art at the Institute for Fine Arts in Baghdad, followed by theatre design in London from 1961-2. When he returned to Baghdad in 1963 he joined the famous group of Iraqi avant-garde artists known as The Pioneers. Infused with a sense of pan-Arab identity he began a series of paintings based on the popular mourning rites (*taziya*) that commemorate the death of Al Husayn Ibn Ali in the 8th century. The grandson of the prophet Muhammed, he was killed in battle at Karbala leading to the schism between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

Influenced by poetic traditions retelling this cataclysmic event, Hayder re-imagines the melancholy of these annual mourning rituals with luminous weeping white horses and a single horse painted green, the colour of Islam. Set against a bleak background that suggests a stage set this is a world in which the natural order is reversed and the sun has been turned red.

Marwan

(Syria, 1934)

Der Gemahl (The Husband)

1966

Oil on canvas

Dia Azzawi
(Iraq, 1939)
Mask of the Pretenders
1966
Oil on canvas

Please return this large print to the gallery assistant.

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