

Art and Politics in Iraq: Examining the Freedom Monument in Baghdad

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Abstract

The Iraqi *Freedom Monument* by Jawad Salim in Baghdad is an example of an artistic achievement that came into existence as a result of a clear political decision. This unique monument was designed after the changes that occurred in Iraq in 1958, the same year the Republic of Iraq was established. For this reason, one cannot extricate the idea of the *Freedom Monument* from the political reality in Iraq in the middle of the twentieth century.

This paper explores the following questions: What is the relationship between the creation of the *Freedom Monument* and the politics in Iraq during its installation? What are the factors and influences that led Jawad Salim to design this distinctive monument? What are the reasons for the special emotional relationship between the Iraqi people and the *Freedom Monument*, since many monuments and statues now exist in Baghdad?

Keywords: Freedom Monument, Jawad Salim, Baghdad

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Introduction

Since its establishment in the early 1960s to now, the *Freedom Monument* by Jawad Salim has been a symbol of the city of Baghdad. In the news, in newspapers and magazines, and in documentaries this monument and Baghdad are constantly represented together. When one speaks of Baghdad, the image of the *Freedom Monument* will often come to mind. It may be difficult to understand this emotional relationship between the Iraqis (especially, the residents of Baghdad) and the *Freedom Monument*, especially since many monuments and statues now exist in Baghdad. Is it because this monument represents the narration of the Iraqi march, which is filled with much pain and suffering from the dawn of civilizations? Is it because every Iraqi can find him or herself and his or her history somehow in this monument? Is it because this monument is associated with the memory of the Iraqi people during the period of the fifties, a period full of hopes and ambitions? Is it because this monument is associated in a manner inextricably bound to the Revolution of July 14, which for many Iraqis represents a dream that was never completed? It is important to consider all of these questions in order to examine why and how the *Freedom Monument* occupies this distinctive and unique position in the memory and conscience of the Iraqi people.

My interest in the *Freedom Monument* stems from two reasons: First of all, my long private interest with the works of Jawad Salim in general and the *Freedom Monument*, is of course the most prominent. The second is my interest in the cultural and political period of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Iraq. It was a period of prosperity; the spread of leftist and progressive political ideas in Iraq that led to the occurrence of the 14 July revolution.

Methodology

The main object of study chosen for this paper focuses on the latest and the most prominent work created by an Iraqi sculptor and painter Jawad Salim – the Freedom Monument, and its relationship to the political events in Iraq on the one hand and the artistic achievements of the civilizations of Mesopotamia on the other. Seven main books and articles were employed in this paper. These books include: *Jawad Salim and the Freedom Monument* (1974), *Iraqi Art Today* (1972), *The Monument - Art, Vulgarly in Saddam Hussein's Iraq* (2004), *Modernism and the Middle East - Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (2008). Additionally, the following articles were reviewed: "Iraqis - 50 Year Anniversary of the Death of Jawad Salim." in *ALMADA Newspaper*, "Iraqis - Rifat Al-Jadirji." in *ALMADA Newspaper*, and "Faiq Hassan Fresco." In *Alarabi Aljadid*.

Two of these books were written by someone close to Jawad Salim, the translator and artist Jabra I. Jabra. His writings provide some of the most important sources because it was the first book dedicated to Jawad Salim and continues to be one the few sources that dealt with the life and works of Jawad Salim. The book by Makiya deals with the concept of art and its relationship to politics in Iraq, which informs the examination of the role of the *Freedom Monument* to serve political purposes. Other sources include

articles published in a supplement of the Iraqi newspaper *ALMADA*, dedicated to the life and works of Jawad Salim and Rifat Al- Jadirji. These sources demonstrate the gaps in literature on the work of Jawad Salim and his important piece, the *Freedom Monument*, as well as inform my analysis of reading the monument as a symbol of Iraqi identity.

The importance of this monument comes not only from being the most important artistic edifice in Baghdad since its inauguration in the early sixties until now, its importance also originates from being the first major work of art created by an Iraqi artist since the era of the Assyrian civilization and its huge sculptures. Jabra I. Jabra in his book, *Jawad Salim and the Freedom Monument* and Kanan Makiya in his book *The Monument – Art, Vulgarity in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq* both refer to this point in the design of the *Freedom Monument* (Jabra, 1974, p.12) (Makiya, 2004, p.83) . Furthermore, the *Freedom Monument* is a reflection of the ideas of the Modernist movement in architecture and art, as it is a reflection of one of the most important artistic symbols of Mesopotamia, seen in part by the cylindrical seals and relief sculpture (Al-Salihy, 2011, p.14) .

The reader of the history of the civilizations of Mesopotamia will discover many large statues and monuments in addition to many smaller sculptures. However, after the end of the Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations, Mesopotamia did not witness the creation of any monument or statues until Jawad Salim’s design of the *Freedom Monument*. Makiya (2004) states that before the creation of the *Freedom Monument*, there were three statues in Baghdad. All of these statues were completed during the monarchy era and all of them were designed by non-Iraqi sculptors. Makiya (2004) points out the following:

Until 1958, Baghdad boasted a total of three public sculptures all built by non-Iraqi artists after the collapse of Ottoman rule in 1918: General Maude, the British officer who took Iraq from the Ottomans in 1914, cast in bronze outside the British embassy; King Faisal, founder of the modern Iraqi state, near the radio and television broadcasting station; and the innocuous figure of Muhsin Saadon, a former Iraqi prime minister. (p.81)

The fact that these three statues were designed by non-Iraqi sculptors in the first decades of the twentieth century, does not mean that Iraq was devoid of artists or art movements. In his introduction of the book titled *Iraqi Art Today*, Jabra (1972) mentions that:

Although in the first decades of the century two or three painters, notably Abdel Kader Rassam, did some serious painting, it was at the beginning of World War II that painting and sculpture revealed the first signs of revival. The colorful palette of some Polish refugee impressionists staying then in Baghdad had dazzled a few young Iraqis; and an English artist, Kenneth Wood, who did some painting in Baghdad in the midst of a group of keen youngsters contributed to the rising enthusiasm. As soon as the war was over, a number of students were sent by the government on Art Scholarships to

Paris, London and Rome, and at the Fine Arts Institute, established in 1939, a rapidly mounting number of students were enrolled until the Institute had to give morning as well as evening courses to cope with the demand. In the early sixties the Academy of Fine Arts was established and incorporated to Baghdad University.

The revolution occurred on 14 July 1958 in Iraq, which brought down the Iraqi monarchy and proclaimed the Republic of Iraq. Two of these three statues were smashed on the morning of 14 July, 1958 (Makiya, 2004, p.82). After that, the Muhsin Saadoun statue was the only one that remained standing in Baghdad. A few months after the revolution, the leader of the revolution General Abdel-Karim Kassem decided to establish three monuments in Baghdad to commemorate the July revolution. The first one was a monument of the *Unknown Soldier*, which was designed by the Iraqi architect Rifat Al-Jadirji. It was officially inaugurated on the first anniversary of the revolution in July 1959. The second one was a *peace fresco* or fresco of 14th of July revolution, which was painted by the Iraqi painter Faiq Hassan. And the third one was the *Freedom Monument* which was commissioned to Jawad Salim to design (Al-Sultany, 2015, p.10) (“Fiaq Hassan Fresco,” 2015). Such a tragic loss occurred with the demolition of the old monument of the *Unknown Soldier* in Baghdad in 1983 in order to create a new monument for the *Unknown Soldier*. Additionally, and in a clear example of the impact of political events in Iraq on Iraqi art, the dove of peace was erased from Faiq Hassan’s peace frescoes in Al-Tahrir Square in 1963 in a futile attempt to erase the Baghdadis’ memory.



Figure 1: *The Freedom Monument* [Photograph]. Baghdad.
Photo by Abdul Wahid Al-Behadili (2016)

Who is Jawad Salim? Jawad Salim was born in Ankara in 1919, from Iraqi parents. All of his family members were painters. His father Haj Salim Musli was a painter during the Ottoman era, and all his brothers (Souaad and Nazar) and his only sister (Naziha) were painters. In the 1930s the Iraqi government began to send students abroad to Europe to study painting (Jabra, 1972). Thus, Jawad Salim went to Paris in 1938, where he studied at the School of Fine Arts in Paris for a year and then to study in Rome in late 1939. With the beginning of World War II, he returned to Baghdad and worked as a teacher of sculpture at the newly opened Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. At the same time he worked at the Iraqi Museum on the restoration of the

statues and artifacts of the Assyrian and Sumerian civilizations. After the end of World War II, he returned to Europe to complete his study of painting and sculpture and joined the Slade School of Fine Art in London (Jabra, 1974). Bernhardsson (2008) indicates that Jawad Salim and the Iraqi Painter Faiq Hassan formed the Iraqi art group Al-Ruwad (The Pioneers) in 1950 (p.85). But after one year, it seems that Jawad Salim decided to form another artistic group, thus he formed the group of Baghdad for Modern Art in 1951 (Jabra, 1974, p.44).

In March 1959, Jawad Salim went to Florence, Italy to work on the establishment of carving and molding the pieces of the monument. Jabra I. Jabra mentions that the government of the revolution gave Jawad Salim full freedom in how to design the monument, and the Iraqi government then undertook all the costs of establishing this monument (Jabra, 1974, p.75). The opening of the *Freedom Monument* occurred on July 16, 1961. Unfortunately, Jawad Salim died just a few months before the inauguration on 23 January 1961 due to a sudden heart attack while he was at the monument site, overseeing the installation of the monument (Jabra, 1974, p. 85). The *Freedom Monument*, which rises 8 meters in height, is located in Baghdad, In Al-Tahrir Square. The *Freedom Monument* consists of 14 bronze units which are installed on a giant white foundation that is 50 meters wide.

To understand the idea of the monument, it should be read from right to left as Arabic manuscripts are written and read (Makiya, 2004, p.83). In addition, Makiya mentions that The *Freedom Monument* can be considered a narrative of the 1958 revolution. Actually, three stages in the life of the Iraqi people can be clearly distinguished in this giant manuscript. The first stage which begins on the right side is the pre-revolution. The period of the revolution is located in the middle of the monument. And finally, the post-revolution stage extends on the left.



Figure 2: *The Freedom Monument* [Photograph]. Baghdad.
Photo by Abdul Wahid Al-Behadili

Unfortunately, Jawad Salim died suddenly at the final stages of the completion of the monument in Al-Tahrir Square, and therefore did not have the full opportunity to explain the details of the *Freedom Monument*, thus, the following explanation of the

symbols of the monument is based on the books by Jabra I. Jabra and Kanan Makyaia: The far right, pre-revolution side is represented by the sharp movement of the head of a runaway horse, which is turned violently to the left. The horse is surrounded by three men, one of them stands and raises a banner (Jabra, 1974, p.136). Then, the second scene of the monument depicts the pioneers of the revolutions. They are represented by a group of people carrying banners (Jabra, 1974, p.138). According to Makyaia (2004), "Innocence and hope show the way, leaping off the marble background towards us in the shape of a child, the only completely three-dimensional figure of the relief" (p.84). Then the scene moves to the fourth main piece in the monument, which Jabra (1974) calls the crying women. According to Jabra (1974), the sculptor here wanted to point out the important role of Iraqi women in all revolutions and uprisings in Iraq. The fifth piece is the martyr. Makyaia (2004) argues "Iraqi history is often portrayed as the playing out of a great tragedy with martyrdom as its major theme" (p.84). However, throughout history, Iraqi people gave hundreds of thousands of martyrs for the sake of freedom. In this piece, Jawad Salim immortalized the memory of all those martyrs. Following is the sixth piece with the mother and child. According to Jabra (1974), in this panel and the previous one, Jawad Salim expresses the idea of death and birth, or death for life. As the viewer's eyes reaches the center of the monument, it comes upon three pieces. Starting from the right, there is the political prisoner, the soldier and freedom (Makiya, 2004, p.84). The subject of the political prisoner was apparently a very important topic for Jawad Salim. Jabra (1974) mentions "the idea of political prisoner was one of the topics that preoccupied Jawad Salim throughout the fifties. In 1953, he participated in an international sculptural competition on this topic, and he won the second prize" (p.148). If the pieces of the monument, starting from the right, reflect the pre-revolutionary stage, and the central piece representing the soldier expresses the event of the revolution, the remaining bronze panels to the far left of the monument express the post-revolution period. So, the viewer will see the peace, Tigris & Euphrates, the agriculture, the ox, and finally industry (Jabra, 1974, 154-158). The fourteenth and final piece of the monument to the far left, which indicates industry is in fact carved in the form of the worker carrying his hammer. According to Jabra (1974), the epic tale of the *Freedom Monument* ends with this majestic stand of the worker (p.158). This can be understood as the announcement of the victory of the Iraqi working class. This is because the 14 July revolution was in one of its greatest aspects, a victory for the Iraqi working class.

The in-depth examination of the *Freedom Monument* and the attempt to dismantle the symbols of the 14 sculptures that compose the piece, will lead us to note that the first inclination is that the *Freedom Monument* is an attempt by Jawad Salim to restore one of the most important artistic icons from the civilizations of Mesopotamia; a cylindrical seals. In fact, Jawad Salim worked at the Iraqi Museum restoring the Assyrian and Sumerian statues and artifacts in the early 1940s after his return from Rome at the beginning of World War II (Jabra, 1974, p.21). The idea to design a giant stone slab in Baghdad tells the story of the struggle of the Iraqi people through the times can be understood as deriving from the same idea of Mesopotamian cylinder seals (Al-Salihy, 2011). Those cylinder seals were considered documents that recorded the details of the daily lives of the Iraqi people thousands of years ago, when

there was no paper or tools for printing. These cylindrical seals served as the printing tools invented by the people of Mesopotamia to codify their history.

Conclusion

The *Freedom Monument* was not just a monument to glorify the 14th of July Revolution in Iraq, or an example of an artistic achievement which came into existence as a result of a clear political decision, but as a journey through time and history. Jawad Salim in these 50 meters of giant manuscript, reviews the history of the Iraqi pain and struggle. The *Freedom Monument* pays homage to the Mesopotamian civilization, as a giant cylindrical seal documenting the struggle of the Iraqi people through the ages against dictators.

Jawad Salim said, at the opening of the first exhibition for the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, "The advantage of mind and thought in humans cannot be achieved only with exchange and experiences. I will tell my comrade about my thoughts, and someday I will speak with the whole of humanity" (Jabra, 1974, p.189). Jawad Salim sent an at once political and ideological message to the whole of humanity in the *Freedom Monument*.

Just as the cylinder seals in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia documented the daily events and commercial transactions, wars and victories, in the *Freedom Monument*, Jawad Salim sought to document the history of the Iraqi people that is full of tragedies and misfortunes. Not only did he cite these hardships, but from the central panel he documents the 14 July Revolution, and looks forward to the future, which Jawad Salim and other Iraqi intellectuals and artists were dreaming about in Iraq - one nation who collects all his sons under the umbrella of citizenship. Kanan Makiya indicates that the *Freedom Monument* was an expression of the revolutionary city that Baghdad was in the 1950s and early 1960s (Makiya, 2004, p. 82). It was a message from a Revolutionary City.

However, after more than 50 years, the design of the *Freedom Monument* is all that remains of that revolutionary city. Makiya (2004) says that the city, which Jawad Salim designed the *Freedom Monument* for is gone forever (p. 90). At first glance this sentence seems very painful. Sadly, it seems to me that this sentence by Makiya is the reality of Baghdad now. 40 years of fascist dictatorship destroyed it, then 13 years (and still continuing) of the violence and terrorist attacks. Nothing remains from that revolutionary city, only the monument of Jawad Salim, which stands with its giant white frieze in the heart of Baghdad. Baghdad as a revolutionary city in the period of fifties as described by Makiya may be gone but Baghdad itself is not dead. I am confident that someday, from the center of the smoke of car explosions and explosive devices, Baghdad will emit again like the Phoenix, and Baghdad will once again be the beautiful and glittering city which Jawad Salim designed for her his greatest work, the *Freedom Monument*.

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