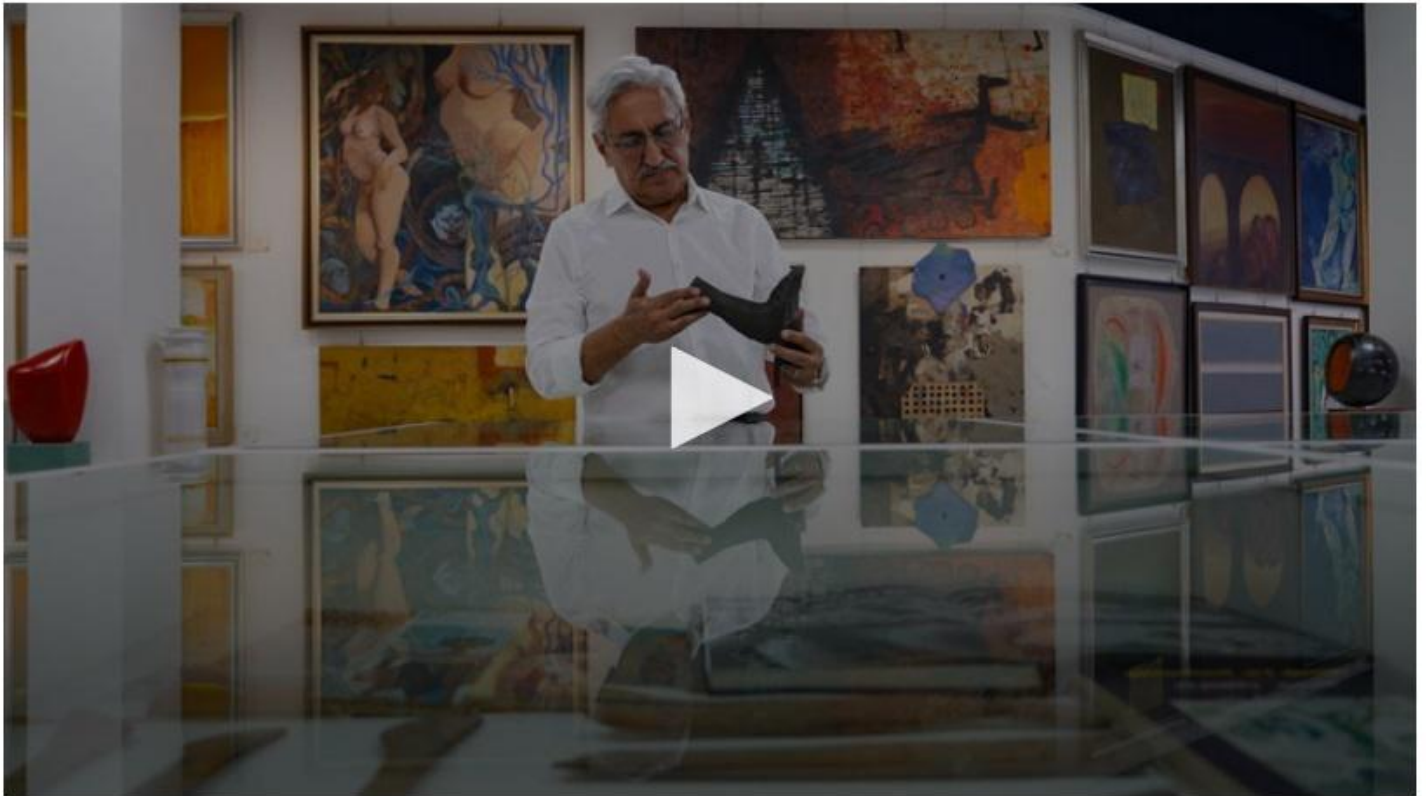


News **MENA**

# Collected with care: Iraqi doctor seeks to protect nation's modern art

Over more than two decades, physician Hasanain Al Ibrahimi has assembled the largest private collection of Iraqi artworks from the past century



**Sinan Mahmoud**  
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Postcard  
from  
Baghdad

In a country where the scars of war run deep and the echoes of lost heritage are ever present, doctor-turned-businessman Hasanain Al Ibrahimi has taken on a unique mission – mending the fractures of [Iraq](#)'s soul by preserving its cultural memory.

For decades, Iraq has been a landscape of loss, with its rich artistic heritage fractured by decades of war, economic sanctions and political and security instability. Dr Al Ibrahimi has emerged as an unlikely saviour, meticulously assembling the country's largest private collection of modern and contemporary Iraqi art.

“My personal passion for art has turned into a kind of mission, carrying cultural, historical and intellectual responsibilities,” Dr Al Ibrahim told *The National*. “It deals with the memory of the nation through knowledge and heritage, which I believe are among the most valuable treasures.”

The anaesthesiologist and intensive care doctor quit his job at the Iraqi Health Ministry in early 1990s, when Iraqi wages averaged between \$5 and \$25 a month – hardly enough to afford basic necessities. He started working in the private sector until establishing his own company that offers medical equipment and services, focusing on the UN-run oil-for-food scheme that enabled the government to secure the essential needs for Iraqis.

His art collection started as a hobby in 2000, when he bought two paintings by [Hafidh Aldroubi](#) (1914-1991), considered one of the pioneers of modern Iraqi art, in Baghdad. Then he acquired several drawings by artists Jewad Selim (1919-1961) and Faik Hassan (1914-1992). By 2003, he had 50 artworks in his collection.



After witnessing the looting and vandalism at the Iraqi National Museum, the National Library and Saddam Hussein Centre for the Arts during the chaos surrounding the 2003 US-led invasion, Dr Al Ibrahim decided to set aside part of the profits from his AGMEST Group for Investment and Development to build a collection to help preserve Iraqi art. His collection is mainly paintings and drawings, but also includes other artforms.

"All Iraqis were shocked, especially those who follow cultural, artistic and historical affairs," the 62-year old father of four, who divides his time between Jordanian capital Amman and Baghdad, recalled.

His first post-invasion purchase was 13 works from a retrospective of the painter Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925-2004), an exhibition he financed on condition that he got first pick from the display.

"By then, the journey of collecting had started, and when you start that journey every new piece that enters your collection entangles you further in the passion of art," said Dr Al Ibrahimi, with a smile.

Like many other middle-class Iraqis, Dr Al Ibrahimi's family had settled in the Jordanian capital Amman after the 1991 Gulf War to escape Saddam Hussein's regime and UN sanctions imposed on Iraq. Being in Amman gave him access to more Iraqi art, as many new arrivals sold artworks they had brought with them, in order to raise funds.



In July 2014, after ISIS overran the northern city of Mosul and other parts of Iraq, it launched a campaign to destroy archaeological and heritage sites, which the militant group considered pagan, and Islamic sites it considered idolatrous.

"After that, the conviction strengthened that we are a country constantly facing dangers, and it is essential to do something to preserve this memory," said Dr Al Ibrahimi. By then, he had accumulated about 1,500 artworks.

In 2015, he launched the official website for the Ibrahimi Collection, with the biographies of more than 250 Iraqi artists. Two years later, he modified his company's four-storey headquarters in Amman to display the collection in a gallery that was open to the public for the first time.

As the collection grew to about 3,000 works, he divided it between Amman and Baghdad, where he opened the first privately funded public art gallery in November last year.

"Baghdad is the cradle of the Iraqi art movement, and therefore, being present here is essential," he said, gesturing to the works inside his gallery.

### **Glory days and struggles**

The quiet calm of the Baghdad gallery is broken only by the gentle strains of classical music. The artworks on display, predominantly by pioneers of Iraqi art, vibrate with the untold stories of a nation. Each brushstroke carries the weight of an Iraqi heyday – the golden era of cultural flourishing – but also casts a shadow on the darker chapters of its history.

Among them is *Fragments*, an oil painting on canvas by Hassan. The 72cm x 193cm work, which is dated 1977, is unusual in both size and style for the painter, according to Dr Al Ibrahimi.

"Against a pale indigo background, fragments float like a panorama on the canvas surface, evoking the walls and ruins of ancient Iraqi relics. Just as those relics have remained in the form of mere fragments, like a puzzle waiting to be solved, the elements in this painting also appear separated and incomplete," Dr Ibrahimi writes in one of his five books that document Iraqi art from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day.

"Dominated by shades of blue, the artwork conveys a sense of mystery and nostalgia for the past, inviting the viewer to reflect on Iraq's ancient history and the beauty of its remaining fragment."

"This artwork is not only a departure from the artist's usual style, but it is also considered an extremely rare piece, being the largest abstract work by the artist to date to have been surfaced on the global market," he writes.



Other works show how Iraqi pioneers were influenced by European styles and artists after spending years in Europe, before shifting to local themes. In one corner, an oil on canvas by Jewad Selim – best known for the Freedom Monument in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, commemorating the 1958 revolution – is titled *A Boy as Pierrot, after Jean-Honore Fragonard's Painting*.

Opposite it are two works by his wife Lorna Selim (1928-2021), depicting old Baghdadi houses, captured in browns and its shades before their removal during modernisation of the city in the 1960s.

Two oil paintings from 1975 by Faisal Laibi Sahi show the brutal side of Iraq's history with mangled and wounded bodies. Titled *Al Nehaia (The End) Palace Prison, 1 and 2*, they are named after a place notorious for the torture and execution of dissidents during the 1960s.

Despite the quiet, the gallery is noisy in spirit. The artworks tell a complex tale – one of a nation's glory days, but also of its struggles and scars.

"Whenever I see the look of astonishment and admiration in the eyes of every visitor who arrives here at this place or in Amman, I feel a sense of pride and exhilaration," said Dr Al Ibrahim.

"A person should always light a candle, even in the darkest times."