Commemorations

THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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John R. Gillis
Chapter V

THE MUSEUM AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CONTROL IN MODERN IRAQ

ERIC DAVIS

What is the relationship between the museum and the state? More precisely, in what ways do the activities of a state-sponsored museum reflect efforts by the state to expand its power in society at large? This question has only recently begun to be raised within the Western context and, to my knowledge, has not been raised at all in the Middle East. In Iraq, as in most countries, the museum is not just a neutral public space where citizens come to view painting, sculpture, or artifacts of the past. As with other aspects of Iraqi cultural life, the museum has become highly politicized. Both in its conceptual foundations and contents, the museums established by the Iraqi state during the twentieth century reflect very specific ends.

This is especially true of museums established by the Ba'athist regime under Saddam Hussein that came to power in July 1968. The state's attempt to use the museum as a symbolic tool to enhance its power and authority points to the shortcomings of the discourse of violence and coercion that has been the dominant conceptual prism through which most Third World regimes have been viewed. Even the most repressive regimes, of which the Iraqi Ba'ath is an exemplar, seek to develop ideologies that generate "self-discipline" among the populace at large. In this context, a study of the museum becomes not only an end in itself but also a corrective to social control understood only through violence and coercion.

Does this approach mean that all cultural representation in Iraqi museums can be reduced to some instrumentalist logic? Such an argument would be far too simplistic. Power, as Foucault argues, is not a static element waiting to be appropriated by a Great Leader or a ruling group. Rather power must be understood as an ever-changing set of relationships between dominant and dominated. Power becomes effective only if a social and cultural grid within which it can be exercised already exists. Thus, it does not inher in the state but rather requires the complicity of subaltern groups. This argumentation necessitates first and foremost a historical analysis not only of the growth of the museum as a form of social control, but also of the social, cultural, and political environment—the "fertile soil" as it were—that has allowed it to assume this quality. Put differently, how did the museum become part of national political discourse, and how did social conditions propitiate for the use of the museum to advance state power develop in Iraq?

It might be useful to begin this historical analysis by contrasting the museum in Iraq with the growth of its counterpart in the United States. The development of the museum in Iraq, as opposed to its development in the West, occurred under direct state tutelage. In the United States, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the New York Historical Society, and grantee museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts were the creation of an emerging bourgeoisie rather than the state. As has been persuasively argued, the American museum, especially following the Civil War, served an important role in consolidating the status and power of many nouveau riche families. During the late nineteenth century, the museum served a nationalist function as well, as the United States began to expand into the world market and sought to assume a position equal to that of European competitors. In more recent times, as the works of Troupkins, Silverman, Rosler, Haucke, and Schiller indicate, the museum has increasingly assumed marketing and consumerist functions.

The museum's development in Iraq followed a very different historical trajectory. Rather than being the creation of a powerful Iraqi bourgeoisie, the first museums were established by a relatively weak state. The first major museum to be founded by the state was the Iraq Museum, in 1923, which contained exhibits drawn almost exclusively from Iraq's pre-Islamic and pre-Arab past. The 1930s witnessed the opening of the Museum of National Costumes and the Museum of Arab Antiquities. During the 1930s, the state began to send Iraqi artists and archaeologists to study in Europe. As a result, archaeological excavations and restorations of antiquities increased dramatically during the 1930s. State funds were used to publish numerous directories of excavated sites. In 1943 the Iraqi state opened the first gallery of modern art in the country.

Although, on the face of it, none of these developments was particularly unusual, they did reflect a number of underlying social tensions and power struggles. First, the Iraqi state's renewed interest during the 1930s in the country's Mesopotamian heritage, and its history and artistic creativity, more broadly defined, reflected the intensification of the nationalist struggle that emerged following Great Britain's conquest of Ottoman forces and its occupation of Iraq in 1917. The mass-based Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the League of Nations' subsequent designation of Britain as a mandatory power in 1921 were two critical events that further galvanized nationalist feelings. As in other countries under colonial domination, the increasing
polarization between nationality and their foreign overlords served to intensify the dichotomy between self and other.

Questions were raised as to what gave a country its distinctive sense of national identity. What did Great Britain possess that was lacking in Iraq and that enabled it to assume the role of imperialist power? The sharpening of the boundaries between "us" and "they" and the spread of concern with questions of self-identity began to make explicit the political issues that had heretofore been much more implicit and diffuse in national discourse. Specifically, a large debate began to develop around the question of Iraqi heritage. Should Iraq define itself in terms of its Arab heritage, should it look to ancient Mesopotamia or Islam, or should it forge a new identity from a populist heritage such as that professed by the nascent Iraqi Communist party? It is within this context that the question of the nation's antiques became a political issue. During the early part of this century, many Iraqi nationalists were angered that foreign nationals were depoliticizing thousands of ancient artifacts over which the state exercised little control. Despite an Iraqi law stipulating that archaeological finds be divided in half between the state and foreign excavation teams, in reality foreigners were taking far more than half, and the most important discoveries at that. Thus, qualitatively and quantitatively, Iraq was losing much of its national heritage.

The excavation movement in Iraq, undertaken by French, British, and German scholars during the first half of the nineteenth century and joined by American scholars by the end of the century, led to numerous discoveries. Under the Ottoman Empire's antiques law, all archaeological finds became the property of the Sultan. However, thousands of items found their way into European and later American museums as well as into the private collections of wealthy collectors of art. In addition to the loss of much of their ancient heritage, what Iraqi nationals found particularly galling was the complete lack of interest among Western researchers in the country's "living heritage," namely, its Arab and Islamic past. It was almost as if foreigners saw the country's Arab and Muslim inhabitants as interlopers who might threaten what they considered their legitimate efforts to appropriate knowledge and representations of the "exotic" (Western) civilizations. The Iraqis often felt "invisible" in the eyes of the Westerner, who, in preferring the necropoleis and monuments of ancient Mesopotamia to all other aspects of Iraq's culture, would just as soon have seen the land devoid of its modern inhabitants.

With the rise of nationalism during the First World War, Iraqis, as well as other Arab states, refused to remain invisible. Mass-based uprisings broke out in Egypt and Iraq in 1919 and 1920 respectively, as well as in other parts of the Arab world such as Palestine, Greater Syria, and North Africa. Following the 1920 Revolution, British colonial officials developed a system of indirect rule in Iraq. Under this system, a British advisor was attached to each Iraqi ministry and became the effective decision-making force, since all decisions required his or her approval. Attached to the Ministry of Education, the Iraqi Museum came under the tutelage of Gertrude Bell, the Oriental secretary of the British high commissioner and honorary advisor with the ministry. Efforts by Iraq nationalists within the ministry to revise the antiquities laws Iraq inherited from the Ottomans ran up against Bell's opposition. She argued that if Iraq's laws were changed to give more controlable terms to the state the number of foreign teams coming to Iraq would sharply decline. When Sayf al-Hasani, a ministry official who later became director general of antiques, pointed out that in Crete all items discovered during excavations were given to the national museum, Bell simply replied that "Iraq is one thing and Crete is another thing altogether." Using the argument that the Iraqi Museum concerned itself primarily with stone objects and architecture, elements associated with engineering, Bell advocated removing it from the Ministry of Education and attaching it to the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation, as had been done with its counterpart in Egypt. Since the latter ministry did not contain a large contingent of nationalists who would fight to protect the museum's interests, Bell was effectively able to remove control over the disposition of newly discovered antiquities from any Iraqi authority.

This particular incident underlines not only the extent to which the emergence of the museum as a domain of struggle was tied to the rise of the Iraqi nationalist movement but also the need to institutionalize the museum historically in order to understand its political and social meaning. A historical approach indicates that the state's efforts to use the museum to strengthen its power and authority did not begin with the rise to power of the current Ba'ath regime and the dramatic influx of oil wealth during the 1970s. The complex network of social, cultural, and political relationships upon which the contemporary state could build in expanding its base of power was set in place well before it came to power in 1968. How was this foundation established?

In Iraq, as in other societies, the museum is situated within a multi-layered network of oppositional relationships. In the writings of Arab nationalist, such as the Memoirs of Sayf al-Hasani, the museum becomes a metaphor for the nation's ability to assert control over its cultural heritage. When Sayf al-Hasani first entered the Iraqi Museum during the early 1920s, his shock at the lack of exhibits from Iraq's Arab or Islamic past was less a personal reaction than a realization that the museum represented a heritage over which the British acceded little or no relevance. For Iraqi nationalists, the museum thus became a contested domain in two senses. One part of the
Despite its inherently elite and exclusionary character, there was no contradiction in the monarchy's promotion of Arabism in the form of the Museum of Arab Antiquities, opened in 1937 in a famous Baghdad covered market, the Khan Murjan, and the Museum of National Costumes. The fact that the Hashemite family traced much of its own heritage to the Bedouin tradition of the Arab tribes in Transjordan led to its promotion as a "sincere" and "Abrahamic" Arab culture.

The Museum of National Costumes, opened in 1937, housed a collection of traditional clothing and artifacts from various regions of the Arab world. The exhibits were intended to highlight the cultural diversity and richness of Arab heritage. The museum was a significant cultural landmark in Baghdad, attracting visitors from all walks of life. Its role in preserving and promoting Arab cultural identity was recognized by both the local community and the international community as a whole.

The museum's collection included a wide range of artifacts, from clothing and textiles to jewelry and ceramics. Each piece was carefully curated to reflect the unique cultural and traditional practices of the different Arab communities represented. The exhibits were displayed in a manner that allowed visitors to appreciate the historical and cultural significance of each item. The museum also organized temporary exhibitions and educational programs to further enrich the visitors' understanding of Arab culture.

The Museum of National Costumes played a crucial role in preserving Arab identity and heritage. It served as a cultural hub where people could come to learn about the rich history and tradition of the Arab world. The museum's efforts in collecting and preserving these artifacts were instrumental in maintaining a sense of cultural continuity and pride among the Arab community.

In conclusion, the Museum of National Costumes in Baghdad was a symbol of the Hashemite monarchy's commitment to preserving and promoting Arab culture. It served as a reminder of the rich heritage and diversity of the Arab world, and its significance continues to reverberate even today. The museum's role in preserving Arab culture is a testament to the enduring legacy of the Hashemite monarchy and its dedication to upholding Arab identity in the face of modern challenges.

References:
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In arguing that the state promoted these types of representations in museums and affiliated institutions, it is important that we not treat the state as a monolith. While the monarchy supported the establishment of museums and other cultural institutions, it was within the timeframes, especially in the nationally oriented Ministry of Education, and in the Iraqi parliament, that the imputus for their development really began. Ultimately, it was within the higher echelons of the state that decisions were finalized as to which projects would be given an official impetrator. Political factors, I would argue, were uppermost in all these decisions. Again, the need for a historical dimension is apparent. Many of the ideas that would later become influential in the writings of the architects of current Ba'thist efforts to rewrite history and reinterpret popular culture were being formulated by lower-level officials within the Iraqi state during the prerevolutionary period. Many of these lesser bureaucrats would assume much more prominent positions in the postrevolutionary regime.

The 1938 Revolution brought with it a tremendous expansion of state activity in the cultural sphere. Given the constant political turmoil that plagued Iraqi society from the end of the Second World War until 1958, the monarchy's support for archeological research and the arts had declined as it became preoccupied with domestic security and the increasingly troubled international politics of the Middle East. One of the first tasks of the new military regime of Abd al-Karim Qasim was to establish a Ministry of Guidance. As indicated in The Iraqi Revolution in Its Fourth Year, "The Ministry of Guidance is shouldered with two main tasks, first, to orientate [sic] the individuals according to sound national principles, and second, to introduce the Republic of Iraq to the outside world."10 The period between 1958 and the overthrow of the Qasim regime in 1963 saw the establishment of guidance centers throughout the major regions of the country, where the populace was exposed to lectures, films, publications, photography exhibits, and speeches by Qasim himself. For the first time, the state pursued a comprehensive study of folklore. Research teams were sent to the northern and southern portions of the country to document, photograph, and collect as many aspects of Iraqi folk culture as possible.11 The regime stated that one of its primary objectives was to revive handicraft production and an interest in folklore. Since many of the museums owned by the state had fallen into disrepair prior to the 1938 Revolution, one of the first activities of the Ministry of Guidance was to transfer operation of museums to its own control. The Museum of National Costumes was transferred from the Directorate of Antiquities to the ministry's Directorate of Popular Arts and Culture, as was the Museum of Modern Art, later the Museum of Iraqi Art Formers.12 The state's active role in promoting culture, especially popular culture, was at one level a reflection of its mass base. It also reflected the presence within

the state bureaucracy of many members and sympathizers of the Iraqi Communist party (ICP). Iraqi leftists saw the 1938 Revolution as a golden opportunity to effect the type of people's democracy that the ICP had been advocating since its founding in 1934. In this sense, the museum is in it developed under Qasim's republic regime reflected pressures from below in the form of the ICP and Iraq's powerful and radical trade-union movement, which was closely linked to the party.13 In its cultural orientation, the Qasim regime did not place a strong emphasis upon Arab nationalism. Its retreat from Arab nationalism was a result of several factors. First, many members and sympathizers, especially leftists and Communists, felt that culture should reflect the ethnolinguistic and confessional diversity of the country. Second, a competition existed between Iraq and the Arab nationalist regime in Egypt under Nasser, which was striving to achieve a dominant leadership role within the Arab world. Symbols drawn from Iraq's Mesopotamian heritage were incorporated into the new flag and the emblem of the revolution. Communists and Shi'is who supported the regime were especially hostile to the corporatist Arab nationalism advocated by Iraqi Nasserites and Ba'thists, since their ideologies derided the primacy of class conflict in social change and privileged Sunni Islam to the detriment of Shi'ite Islam. In other words, many Iraqi Nasserites and Ba'thists were unwilling to accept the reality of Iraq as a class-based and multicultural and multiconfessional society. The period between 1958 and 1963 thus represented a critical period in the struggle over the official definition of Iraq's national identity. Would modern Iraq choose a narrow Arab Nationalist interpretation of Iraq's national character, or would it opt for a broader interpretation that would allow for expression of sociocultural diversity? This also represented a struggle over whether political participation and a wider distribution of economic wealth would be made available to a broader sector of Iraqi society. In short, would Iraq become a society in which equality and tolerance of sociocultural differences were promoted by the state? The coup d'état of February 1963, which brought a coalition of Ba'thists and Nasserites to power, answered this question in the negative. In thousands of Communist party members, workers, and leftist intellectuals were killed or imprisoned. While there was little significant social development between 1958 and 1963, when the current regime under Saddam Hussein was able to come to power by capitalizing on the continuing political instability that beset the country, the post-1968 period saw a tremendous outpouring of state-sponsored cultural production. Part of this process entailed a greatly expanded political role for the museum that was intended to promote nationalist feelings among Iraqis. At least nine new museums were founded between the 1968 coup d'état and 1977. One of these, the Museum of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, was
established in the academy of Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, a respected general and party member who became president in 1968 and was removed by Saddam Husayn in 1978. The museum was designed to document the undergrowth struggle of the Ba'th party against the monarchy, the Qassim regime, and the rival wing of the party, which was eliminated during the July 1968 "revolution." Arabic and Islamic and children's museums were also built, as well as numerous museums in the provinces in order to spread cultural activities outside Baghdad, which had been its main venue to date. Older museums, such as the Iraq Museum and the Museum of National Costumes—now broadened in scope and renamed the Costume and Folklore Museum—were greatly expanded and given the responsibility of developing traveling exhibits throughout the provinces. The budget of the Directorate of Antiquities was also increased, with the expectation that the expanded number of excavations it would undertake would produce artifacts to fill the newly expanded museums.

What did all this activity reflect? In the most immediate sense, the expanded cultural activity of the state was intended to bolster the legitimacy of the Ba'thist regime. Despite the state's designation of the events between July 17 and 30, 1968, as a revolution, most Iraqis saw this period as another in a long line of factional struggles. The one weapon that the new regime soon came to possess that had not been available to its predecessors was a tremendous increase in revenues due to a dramatic rise in oil prices during the early 1970s.

For the new regime, the museum was first and foremost a part of a larger strategy designed to demonstrate the Ba'thist party's populist character. Despite having lost a substantial portion of its cadres in 1968, the ICP had been able to reorganize by the end of the 1960s. The fact that the party had become so powerful under the Qassim regime and that it continued to be popular among the working class and intelligentsia and among segments of the peasantry worried the regime.

One way to compete with the ICP for the loyalty of the masses was through emphasizing folkloric. Not only did the regime expand the Costume and Folklore Museum, but it also established an institution known as Dar al-Turath al-Shabi (the House of Popular Culture) in 1972. The purpose of this latter institution was to revive the production of traditional crafts. The state argued that the revival of folklore was key to progressive national development, since one of the aims of imperialism was to sever the Iraqi populace's links to its past. As the monarchy had attempted much less effectively earlier in the century, the Ba'thist state co-opted the desire of large segments of the populace, especially the upwardly mobile middle classes, to understand better their history and national heritage. This and other social strata faced rapid change that included the breakdown of the traditional extended family and the rapid expansion of urban areas, char

activated by an erosion of traditional values governing child-rearing practices and gender and business relations, as well as the spread of materialism and a consumerist mentality promoted by the influx of Arab wealth. As a consequence many Iraqi left more and more isolated and alienated. Increasingly these feelings were manifested in literature, films, and programs in the mass media. The mass migration from rural areas that characterized Iraqi society between the 1930s and the 1970s provided fertile ground for the state's attempts to restructure the society's understanding of its national heritage.

The emphasis on popular culture, which was a key component in this process, became a way of ameliorating feelings of social disorientation by giving the public an accurate sense of Iraqi history and folklore. It is important to recognize that the Dar al-Turath al-Shabi was not restricted only to preserving Iraq's folkloric heritage but also with rewriting it. By this latter phase political ends could best be pursued, since it was here that the state maintained the best opportunities to "invent tradition." Arguing that prior regimes collaborated with imperialism to deprive Iraqis of their heritage through neglecting their history and folklore, the official task of the House of Popular Culture and its companion institute, the Institute of Arts and Craft Industries, was to create a new generation of nationally oriented artists. Many of the activities of the Dar al-Turath al-Shabi point to their underlying political ends. One example is the manufacture of traditional rugs containing the Ba'thist party emblem and slogans by students in the Section for Weaving and Handmade Rugs. Another is the incorporation in works produced in the Section for Painting and Sketching of imagery from the Battle of Qadisiya, white, in x.xx. 637, Arab forces in Iraq were able to defeat the Persian Sassanians. Appropriated to become "Qadisiya Saddam," or Saddam's Qadisiya, after the outbreak of the Iraqi-Iran War in 1980, folkloric production centered around this historic battle was used to mobilize the populace against the Iranian enemy. Similar examples can also be found in the production of traditional clothing and ceramics. Although at the time of this writing the Iraqi Ba'th faces an uncertain future given continuous upheavals in the north and dissident shi'is in the south, undoubtedly the Dar al-Turath al-Shabi will work to develop an officially sanctioned iconography surrounding the 1991 Gulf War that supports the regime's attempt to turn defeat into "victory."

The state's effort to "popularize" culture initially represented an attempt to enhance its legitimacy and oust a possible resurgence of strength by the ICP. It was later expanded to incorporate efforts to combat a rise of radicalism among secular youth and Muslim fundamentalism following the successful Islamic revolution in neighboring Iran. Given the historic economic and cultural ties between Iraqi and Iranian shi'is, the Ba'th
armed forces in Kuwait can no longer afford, either in financial or human resources, to continue the intensity of its Campaign to reconstitute the country’s national heritage. Thus we can expect that the pace of establishing new museums will slacken. However, the ability of Saddam Husayn to exploit the Gulf Crisis should not be underestimated. “Museums” may assume more avant-garde forms, as with the so-called Victory Arch monument (qaws al-adwa) constructed by Saddam to celebrate and personalize his supposed vanquishing of the Iranian enemy. 5 Certainly the regime will continue its efforts to exploit the suffering of its Mesopotamian heritage, since more valuables patterns practiced by the ancient inhabitants of the region were said to parallel those of modern Iraq. 6

Prior to the debacle in Kuwait, the regime of Saddam Husayn had been successful in either co-opting or physically eliminating opponents during its first decade in power and, during its second decade, delaying or at least fighting to a stalemate a much larger Iranian army. The false sense of security that the regime had built up before August 1990 was reflected in the development of the museum. While the museum and visual representation in general continued to be manipulated by the state, wall posters and official photographs were two prominent examples. More recent efforts were directed at the commodification of culture. This reflected the continuing movement from the gradual dispersing of the radical anti-imperialist and socialist rhetoric that had characterized the early years of the Ba’athist regime. Using the argument that prices of traditional hand-craft production had declined through neglect, the regime began to emphasise marketing both within Iraq and abroad the production of craft centers such as the House of Popular Culture. During the late 1970s, a Dar al-Azya’ (House of Fashion) was established to revive ancient Mesopotamian dress. 7 Attempts at marketing fashionable dresses that mix Western and Mesopotamian styles.

Those efforts reflected not only the greater political security that the state felt during the 1980s but also the dramatic growth of a new Iraqi bourgeoisie that was in demand of wealth. As a parallel to the relationship of the museum and the bourgeoisie in the United States the museum and the bourgeoisie tied to the state in Iraq. In each case, the historical event indicates that, in its earlier stages, the museum was used to promote nationalism and enhance the bourgeoisie’s social status. As the bourgeoisie came to feel more established both politically and culturally, the museum assumed an additional function in augmenting the bourgeoisie’s financial interests. Just as artistic production has become a big business in the West, so the 1980s witnessed the beginnings of a similar process, albeit much more limited and tied primarily to “promote” folkloric art, in Iraq. The weakened Iraqi state that emerged from the massive defeat of its
1983); and Suhail Ammar Rashid, al-musika fi-l-dawr al-qatim [Music in ancient Iraqi] (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, Dar al-Nuri, 1987). Texts such as these resonate far more with the literate public than more didactic works such as those by the prominent historian Amjald al-Susa, e.g., budur al-arab wa-l-masdar al-tatamara bi-shar al-‘asr [Arab culture and the stages of its development through the ages] (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, Dar al-Nuri, 1987); budur wa-l-masdar wa-l-nafizayn [Mesopotamian culture between the Semites and the Sumerians] (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, Dar al-‘Asal al-Nuri, 1987); and feragh bu-bu wa-l-masdar al-dar al-imtihaniyya [The history of Mesopotamian crofts: a case in light of agricultural integration projects, archaeological discoveries and historical sources] (Baghdad: Dar al-Nuri, 1987).

33. al-nafizayn al-wa‘id, muhaddith biha, pp. 9–10, 12.

34. Culture and Arts in Iraq, pp. 162–164.