

Breaking with Tradition

Francesca Leoni



Fig. 1. Installation view of *Iraqi Artists in Exile* at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, 1st November 2008–15th February 2009

The affinity between *dafātir* and traditional Islamic manuscripts was quick to reveal itself on my first encounter with this genre during the 2008 exhibition *Iraqi Artists in Exile* (fig. 1).¹ Amongst the examples on display were books by a young generation of artists that explicitly commented on the destruction of Iraq and its heritage as a result of the Second Gulf War. Similar to Islamic book arts, these contemporary examples combined text and image, although they did not seem to follow conventional approaches. Rather than a justification for the work itself, the textual elements created backdrops for multi-layered compositions voicing contemporary concerns, when not offering a platform for contemplative escapism (figs. 2, 3). Like their historic counterparts, the *dafātir* on show also embraced a variety of recognisable formats – such as the conventional bound codex, traditionally privileged for continuous narratives, and the more dynamic accordion, preferred for more autonomous calligraphic or pictorial selections instead. In addition, they appeared as portable as their forefathers, designed for intimate contemplation, but equally able to support sociable engagement. What clearly set these modern book-like works apart was a novel emotive charge and a compelling documentary power. More than alternative celebrations of important literary texts, these objects felt more like journals, recording and preserving their makers' visceral artistic reactions to unspeakable personal and communal losses. The traditional art of illustrating books had clearly undergone a radical transformation.



Fig. 2. Himat Mohammed Ali, *Al-Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad – Book 2*, 2007, mixed media on paper, 34 × 25 cm (open: 34 × 50 cm). Azzawi Collection (PC.HMA.AB.3)

Fig. 3. Rafa Nasiri, *From That Distant Land*, 2007, etching on paper, 40 × 38 cm (image 19.5 × 29 cm), edition 9/20 in Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (acc. no. 2011.230.3); (pictured) edition 2/20 in the British Museum (2015,6019.2)



Figs. 4–5. Dia al-Azzawi, *Wait for Me by the Edge of the Sea*: Youssef al-Sayigh, 1983, China ink on paper and paperboard; acrylic on paperboard, 36 × 28 × 2 cm (length 395 cm); slipcase 37 × 28.5 × 2.5 (open 37 × 35 × 15 cm). Azzawi Collection (AZ.DAF.83.1)

Figs. 6a–b. Dispersed bifolio of Dioscorides's *De Materia Medica*, possibly Bijapur, India, 1595, gouache and ink on paper, 39.9 × 25.5 cm (open 40 × 50.8 cm). Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford (EA2014.63)



Iraqi Artists in Exile was not the first presentation of *dafātir* in a western museum. A couple of years before, an exhibition curated by Nada Shabout for the University of North Texas Art Gallery had already introduced this genre to North American audiences.² The objects on display there were all on loan from Dia al-Azzawi's personal collection, publicly revealing for the first time his double role as a prolific contributor to the genre, as well as a patron and champion of contemporary Iraqi art abroad. Three of his *dafātir* on show, in particular, all from the 1990s, immortalised his distinctive approach to the written text and his unique partnerships with some of the most celebrated poets of the 20th century, emerging as the 'evolved form[s]' of historical antecedents, to use Nada Shabout's words.³

The idea of Azzawi's *dafātir* as an evolution of traditional Islamic book arts has been commented on by a number of scholars since.⁴ Emphasis, in particular, has been put on the way in which gestural lines, saturated colours, bold images and textual elements converge on the page to create an integrated whole, thus breaking away from the more disciplined use of word and image in historic examples. The apparent lack of a hierarchy between textual and visual elements, in particular, has been identified as the most palpable difference between many of Azzawi's *dafātir* and pre-modern book arts, their newly found autonomy and parity on the page representing the measure of the alleged advancement of the genre.

In *Wait for Me by the Edge of the Sea*, one of the earliest *dafātir* ever developed, for instance, the images either bracket or anchor the verses, determining their arrangement on the page (figs. 4, 5). In several instances the text ends up encircling their uneven profiles in ways not dissimilar from some pre-modern manuscripts, such as a late 16th-century copy of Dioscorides's *De Materia Medica* (figs. 6a–b), one of the first Greek scientific texts to be translated into Arabic in 9th-century Baghdad. While in the historic manuscript the images are conceived as visual extensions of the text, which describes their characteristics and medicinal properties, the semantic correspondence between words and images in the *daftar* is hardly this literal. Azzawi's drawings capture the anguish and sense of loss pervading the whole narrative, with a few visual details – a woman's bare feet and long hair, a coffin, or some fish – providing hooks to specific passages of Youssef al-Sayigh's poem. Often generated by an act of listening, the paintings in his *daftar* are indeed abbreviated references to the ideas conjured by the verses, created by the same power of imagination as the one underpinning poetry itself, hence their equivalence on the page.

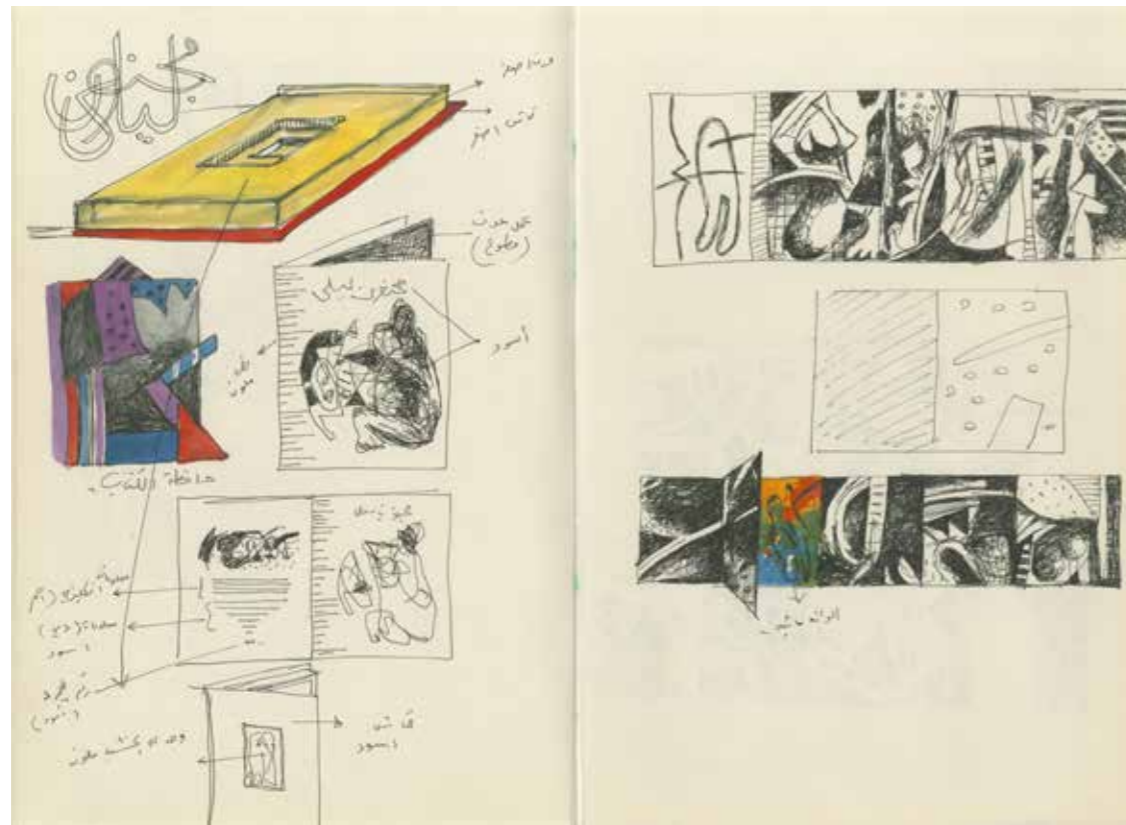


Fig. 7. Dia al-Azzawi, *Book of Ideas*, 1995/2000, ink on paper, 29.5 × 20.5 × 1.5 cm (open 29.5 × 41 × 2 cm). Azzawi Collection (AZ.DRA.95/00.1)



Fig. 8. Dia al-Azzawi, *The Petra Table: The Stone Hand Draws the Place: Adonis*, 1996, gouache and ink on paper, 38 × 29.5 × 3 cm (length 504 cm). Azzawi Collection (AZ.DAF.96.1)

Fig. 9. Dia al-Azzawi, *The Tatar's Swallows: Mahmoud Darwish*, 1995, gouache on paper, 38 × 26 × 2.5 cm (length 255 cm); box 40.5 × 26.5 × 4 cm. Azzawi Collection (AZ.DAF.95.1)



The way in which Azzawi experiences poetry – by listening or through recollection – not only determines the pictorial response to it, but also the actual planning of his *dafātir* (fig. 7). In particular, the order in which images and words appear on the page is completely different from that which occurs in traditional illustrated manuscripts. In historic examples, in fact, paintings are mostly confined to areas of the page mapped by calligraphers at the time of the book's initial planning. The breaking line, that is, the verse immediately preceding the composition, usually introduces the subject or episode about to be represented, thus binding it to the demands of the narrative. This also means that images are executed *after* the text is copied. Furthermore, more often than not, they rehearse well-known episodes and themes, as these are not only the most appreciated (and possibly requested) by their users, but also part of a useable stock of imagery that can be quickly reproduced and customised. Original compositions are relatively rare.

In many of Azzawi's *dafātir*, instead, the paintings tend to be created first as reactions by the artist to a text that is in fact not yet on the page. As a result, the pictorial element spreads over a clean surface, either in the form of a continuous set of interrelated images, as visible in *The Petra Table: The Stone Hand Draws the Place: Adonis*, for instance, or as individual and autonomous segments, as in *The Tatar's Swallows: Mahmoud Darwish*. The text, copied or applied later, takes the form of running commentary or a caption, taking on a much more subdued role than in historical counterparts. The beholder's experience is thus transformed from one where reading dominates, to one where the eye, the mind and the heart are left to wander and forge their encounter with each element – word, image, line, colour, mood (figs. 8, 9). This ultimately makes the experience of *dafātir* closer to that of larger-scale paintings, liberating the viewer's involvement from the more controlled and contained experience offered by traditional examples to one where the opportunity is created for an individual emotional response.

¹ *Iraqi Artists in Exile*, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, 1st November 2008–15th February 2009, later appearing in the homonymous catalogue by James Harithas and Alan Schnitger (*Iraqi Artists in Exile*, Houston: Ineri Publishing and Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012).

² *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, [first shown at] University of North Texas Art Gallery, 17th October–22nd November 2006, accompanied by a catalogue edited by Nada Shabout (*Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2007).

³ Nada Shabout, 2007, *Modern Arab Art: The Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, p. 135; Nada Shabout, 2009, 'Iraqi Art: *Dafatir*', *The Middle*

East Institute Viewpoints, Special Edition: The State of the Arts in the Middle East, pp. 62–64, at p. 63; <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/state-arts-middle-east.pdf> accessed 18th August 2022. For example, Dia al-Azzawi, *The Tatar's Swallows: Mahmoud Darwish*, 1995 (AZ. DAF95.1), below.

⁴ Shabout (2007), pp. 135–136; Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, 2012, 'Contemporary Book Art', *Art History* 35, 4, pp. 816–832; Nada Shabout, 2019, '*Dafatir*: Testimonies of Forgotten Times', in Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib (eds), *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*, New York: MoMA PS1, esp. pp. 187–193; Laura Egerton and Venetia Porter (eds), 2022, *Amakin: 21,39 Jeddah Arts*, Jeddah: Sarawat Printing House, p. 149.