

Recollections of a Fellow Artist

Sultan Al Qassimi interview with Sami Mohammad

This interview was conducted with Kuwaiti artist and sculptor Sami Mohammad¹ to learn about the Kuwaiti and Gulf art scene in the 1960s and the cultural scene that prevailed at the start of the artist Abdul Qader Al Rais’s career.

Q: Would you talk to us about the art scene in Kuwait in the 1960s?

A: It is no secret that the fine arts movement in Kuwait originated in the 1950s, and that was started by the late Mojeb Al Dousari. He was the first person to study fine arts in England; he was then followed by Ayoub Hussein and Khalifa Al-Qattan. Art was not welcome at the time, but whoever had it as a hobby practised it. I believe that Ayoub Hussein was one of those who recorded the history of Kuwait, documenting the environment, customs and traditions with his brush in many paintings.

Khalifa Al-Qattan was in England in the 1950s, and came to Kuwait in the 1960s. I was part of a group that included, Khazal Awad Al-Qaffas, Issa Al-Saqr, Abdullah Al Qassar, Bader Al Qatami, Musaed Al Fahad, Abdullah Al-Salem and Jassem Bou Hamad. We started in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The Marsam Al Hurr studio was the real nucleus of the fine arts movement in Kuwait when I started out. It had begun its activities in 1958. The idea was to try to establish an art college, but it did not mature directly. Officials such as Abdul Aziz Hussein, founder of the studio, and then Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem, were the real motivation behind the cultural movement in Kuwait.

It was adopted by Abdul Aziz Hussein under the guidance of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem. In general, this was our beginning in the 1960s and late 1950s.

Of course, the Ministry of Education paid a great deal of attention to the studio after its opening and provided it with materials and teachers for students and hobbyists alike.

I started earlier, when there were fewer people.

It was not just Kuwaitis who attended, but Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians and other nationalities as well. The studio was very busy in its early days. There was an exhibition called the *Spring Exhibition* in which we used to participate – in which everybody on the scene took part in be they hobbyists, calligraphers, artists, teachers or professors.

We participated in the annual exhibition at Al-Mubarakiya School, which lasted for almost nine years. The formative arts movement then blossomed into a framework of officials and artists until the idea of the free studio materialised.

Some became full-time artists at the studio; I was one of them, as were Issa Saqr, Khazal Al Qaffas, Khalifa Al-Qattan, and Bader Al Qatami. The entire group consisted of 12 to 13 people. Attendance was limited to Kuwaitis, instead of being open to all.

Q: When was your first meeting with Abdul Qader Al Rais? What was his relationship with the free studio?

A: Abdul Qader was born to be an artist. There was an art teacher named Nasr

Al Din Mohamed Taher (1935–2007) from Egypt, also an artist, and he used to talk about Abdul Qader; it was him who embraced and encouraged and taught him. Also, whenever Mr Nasr Al Din came to the studio he would talk about the artist, Abdul Qader.

Abdul Qader participated with us and exhibited his paintings in the *Spring Gallery*, through schools and teachers.

I think I first met him in the 1960s, in 1962 or 1963. I liked him because he was an artist who loved art, like me. He would come to the studio and read the art books, which were not available at the school.

We had a very rich library of foreign art books, including Italian, French and Dutch, as well as from academic schools and all artists, such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo.

Abdul Qader used to visit the studio regularly, and I think he adopted many artistic personalities.

He once invited me to his studio at his home in the Qadisiya area. It was very small but Al Rais’s work was wonderful and creative in the paintings: they are considered academic. He used to paint still life. He would copy them, and copy portraits too. He mastered the painting of human forms, but he left all this recently. For some reason he started to avoid drawing the human form and focused on things he wanted and loved.

Q: What year did you visit Abdul Qader’s studio?

A: I think in 1963 or 1964. I was in my twenties then, while he was no older than 18. But he was an artist, he had the artistic sense from the start. He was not a member of the studio; he was a student. This place was set aside as a place for Kuwaitis to work.

Q: How did the teacher, Nasr Al Din, influence Abdul Qader Al Rais?

A: I think he definitely influenced him artistically. Abdul Qader surpassed his teacher, because Nasr Al Din was excellent and a wonderful artist. He was busy in those days, drawing for magazines, newspapers, books and covers.

He drew in *Al-Arabi magazine*, *Kuwait Magazine* and a military magazine. He was a loyal teacher, but he did not find a student to stand by and support as he did with Abdul Qader Al Rais.

Perhaps the reason why Abdul Qader Al Rais was influenced by this teacher is the fact that Mr Nasr Al Din was good at drawing the human form beautifully and accurately.

Q: What do other artists think of Abdul Qader Al Rais’s work?

A: There were many admirers of the works of the artist Abdul Qader Al Rais. I remember Jawad Boushehri, the owner of the Boushehri Gallery.

He was a wonderful artist, sculptor and painter who, as far as possible, tried to stand with Abdul Qader. I think he acquired some of his work from him, but I am not sure.

Of course, many people had a high regard and respect for Abdul Qader Al Rais and appreciated his wonderful works, be they artists or teachers at that time, when he was no more than 19 years old.

Q: What developments took place at that stage that influenced the work of artists in Kuwait? For example, political developments or independence. Were there political or social movements that influenced the works of artists and the works of Abdul Qader Al Rais?

A: The political stability that generated the cultural movements was good. Most of the Kuwaiti artists were influenced by the environment, and even Abdul Qader was influenced by it. He painted many boats, ponds and the sea, like most artists of the 1960s and 1970s.

Many of us painted in this field, but I worked in sculpture as well as painting, as did Issa and Khazal. Abdul Qader painted the environment. He also sold paintings, because people and ministries rushed to acquire these works and encouraged him. The situation changed completely in the 1970s when most of us travelled to study. Abdul Qader disappeared from me during the 1970s because he left for the UAE.

He was a resident of Kuwait for more than a year. He was studying in Kuwaiti schools. When I met him in the UAE, he told me that he had stopped drawing for 10 years. Then, after returning to painting, he turned to painting landscapes and produced high quality work.

I think that, had he continued to draw the human form, he would have excelled because of his talent and ability for this kind of art. He then went on to do things that he deemed suited his time, age and country, and emerged in a very wonderful way.

My testimony of Al Rais may be biased, to be honest, because I really admire him and love his work. He is a very dear person to me.

Q: Was there any kind of censorship on art at that time?

A: Not at all, but there was encouragement from the ministries, as I mentioned at the beginning. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bought the works of artists and distributed them to embassies outside Kuwait.

Art enjoys good attention in the Gulf in general. No one views art as an enemy in any way at all.

Q: You spoke of a library where Abdul Qader Al Rais used to read. Could you also tell us of a book or two that he read, or which circulated among artists at the time?

A: The library was small but full of foreign art books. There were no Arabic books. All of them were foreign and most of them were from impressionist and classical schools. Modern art books were rare.

Then modern art began to take its place, as most artists left for various European countries, through their research and communication on the internet.

Abdul Qader painted many personalities. He also liked to paint doors. He would copy every detail and add a beautiful aesthetic element to it.

Q: Did any Kuwaitis own works by Abdul Qader Al Rais? And do you remember them?

A: I remember Jawad Boushehri because he had a strong and special friendship with Abdul Qader, and I think he acquired some of his work, but I am not sure about that.

Boushehri may be more familiar with people who have acquired works of Abdul Qader Al Rais.

Q: Were there critiques of the works of Abdul Qader Al Rais? And what was said about him?

A: There are no critiques so far. There have been efforts by some people and the press to compliment him, or interview him, but I do not know how many interviews the Kuwaiti press had with Abdul Qader, or whether they were individual or through the presence of the press at exhibitions. Abdul Qader was very simple, and I think he did not introduce himself as an artist. He had an artistic sense, and he loved art and artists and always mixed with them.

Q: My last question. There was a dialogue between you and the artists who went to study in Cairo at that time. The situation concerned the artist Abdul Qader Al Rais. You stood up for him and defended him. Tell us about this situation.

A: Certainly, there were many discussions. I was a strong advocate for him, seeing that he is a dear friend of mine and I always stood by him.

Of course, jealousy exists between artists, and some did not like it. But these are personal things.

I predicted that Abdul Qader would be one of the leading artists in the Gulf, and I was right.

¹ Sami Mohammad
Artist and sculptor Sami Mohammad was born in the Sharq area of Kuwait in 1943. He studied sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1970 and received an appreciation diploma from Cagnes Sur Mer in France in the same year. He was a founding member of the Kuwaiti Society for Formative Arts in 1967.

He went to the United States on a scholarship in 1973 and won a number of national and international awards, including the Golden Sail First Prize from the Exhibition of Arab Artists in 1975 and 1977, and first prize at the Kuwaiti Society for Formative Arts in 1974, 1976 and 1977.

In 1981, he again won the Golden Sail First Prize from the Exhibition of Arab Artists and was also awarded the Gold Medal of the 12th Exhibition of the Kuwaiti Society for Formative Arts.

In 1984, he won First Prize at the First International Cairo Biennial.

In 1985, he won first prize in the Al Safat Square public monument design competition in Kuwait, and in 1989, won the Golden Frond first prize at the Gulf Cooperation Council Art Biennial Exhibition in Riyadh.

The Sami Mohammad Collective of Kuwaiti Formative Artists was launched under his name in 2007, to which he was elected honorary chairman.