

Lifestyle

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An actor performs during the general rehearsal of "Singin' in the rain" directed by Robert Carsen, on the stage of the Theatre du Chatelet in Paris. — AFP

Iraqi art lovers throng to Picasso in Baghdad

Picasso, Dali, Miro, Chagall... names that are instantly recognizable in the international art world. Now works by these masters are being exhibited in Baghdad thanks to an anonymous Iraqi collector. The exhibition at the Hiwar gallery—one of the last to remain open in the city—includes 24 Picasso lithographs. For gallery owner Qassem Sabti, "this exhibition is a historic chance" for Iraqis to feast their eyes on artworks of such a high standard, in a first for the capital.

"It is presented by an Iraqi person who prefers not to disclose his identity due to the circumstances in Baghdad," Sabti said. There are 42 works in all being shown: in addition to those by Pablo Picasso, there is work by Salvador Dali, Joan Miro and Marc Chagall. They "belong to an Iraqi who lives in the United Arab Emirates who wanted to open a museum dedicated to Picasso in Baghdad or Karbala, where he's from," said Sabti.

"But he wasn't able to do so as he couldn't secure the necessary guarantees to protect the artworks," added the gallery owner, who also heads the Iraqi Plastic Artists Society. "The works on display are very valuable and have been collected over 30 years... some date from the 1950s and 1960s." Priced at between \$15,000 (12,600 euros) and \$25,000 (21,000 euros), there is little chance of them being snapped up by local buyers.

Instead, the main aim of the show is to let them be seen by students and those who appreciate the fine arts. For painter Mohammed Shawqi, "this exhibition reflects a return to stability in the country. 'Who would have dared mount a show of such valuable works just a few



Iraqis attend an exhibition, titled Picasso in Baghdad. — AFP photos

years ago?" After the US-led invasion of 2003 that toppled now executed dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq descended into a lengthy period of

violence that saw waves of sectarian killings and culminated in the Islamic State group offensive of 2014. The exhibition was a breath of fresh air

for 30-year-old engineer Zinah Sulaiman, who heard about it on Facebook. It was the first time she had been able to see works by Picasso, "and

I hope I will see more of this". "It's important that art be supported here, especially since we are a people of culture and history."

In related news, an "exceptional" trove of sculptures by the tragic French artist Camille Claudel has broken records at auction in Paris, going for 3.5 million euros (\$4.1 million) — three times their estimate.

Prices for work by Claudel, who died in a mental hospital after a tortured love affair with fellow sculptor Auguste Rodin which has inspired several films and plays, have rocketed in recent years.

The star of the auction late Monday, a bronze called "The Abandonment", went for nearly 1.2 million euros, twice its estimate. The statue is one of a series inspired by the Indian myth "Shakuntala" about an overlooked wife from the Hindu epic "Mahabharata" from which Claudel drew parallels with her own tumultuous relationship with Rodin, who was both her lover, boss and artistic rival. It was snapped up by an "international collector", auction house Artcurial said. Interest in the "unprecedented" sale of bronze, plaster and clay works still owned by the artist's family was intense, it added. French museums also stepped in to try to stop 12 works that were sold at the auction to stop them falling into private hands or going abroad.

The Musee d'Orsay, which holds the country's largest collection of Impressionist and 19th century art, now has a year to raise the 467,800 euros for a study of "Shakuntala". The piece went for nearly ten times its estimate, breaking the record for a clay work by the artist, who died in 1943 after spending 30 years in a psychiatric hospital. — AFP



Iraqi artist Qassem Al-Sabti speaks during the exhibition.