



Iraqi carpenter Nour Al-Janabi works at her home furniture workshop in Baghdad's Abu Dsheer area. — AFP photos



## 'But you're a woman': Iraqi furniture-maker carves up stereotypes

With hammer and saw, Nour Al-Janabi is building her latest creation, a candy-pink sofa, in the carpentry workshop she runs in male-dominated and conservative Iraq. "At the start, relatives criticized me," said the 29-year-old carpenter and furniture-maker, who is also a mother of four. "They would say: 'But you're a woman... You're an amateur... It's a men's trade'." Covered in velvet or imitation leather, the sofas and armchairs that she designs, makes and mends in her south Baghdad workshop go from rustic style to Louis XV. Her order book is full, with new lounges starting at a cool 700,000 dinars (around \$480).

Janabi has been making furniture for several years, and launched her business, Nour Carpentry, a few months ago. She recently moved operations from her home to a house turned workshop, where she has four employees—one of them her retired husband. "But it's not right to say it like that," she said with an embarrassed smile, her hijab covering her hair. In oil-rich Iraq, women make up just 13.3 percent of the labor force, according to the World Bank, while the World Economic Forum ranked



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the country 154 out of 156 in its latest Global Gender Gap Report. A study published last year by two UN agencies noted that while most Iraqis consider tertiary education equally important for men and women, "attitudes toward equal rights in employment are discriminatory against women".

### 'You make Iraq proud'

Janabi attributes her success largely

to do-it-yourself tutorials that she first posted on Facebook to share her passion for carpentry and furniture-making. She uploads videos about everything from how to re-stuff an old sofa to using a sander to TikTok and Instagram too, where she has more than 94,000 followers. "I am the first Iraqi woman to do this trade and break the barrier in this field," she claimed, in a country still largely dominated by conservative attitudes

about women's role in society, and where those perceived as too independent are sometimes even considered immoral.

She said she receives comments from women and men telling her: "You make Iraq proud and you have accomplished something." "May God give you strength and health!" one user commented on a video of Janabi presenting a sofa decorated with a floral pattern. One of her clients, Abu Sajjad, dropped by to see how his sofa repairs were going—untroubled by prejudices some others might harbor against dealing with a female carpenter and business owner.

Most working women in Iraq are teachers or nurses, though a small number have entered the police or armed forces. One of them is Angham Al-Tamimi, who this year became the first woman army general. In a video broadcast by the military's press service, she said she had "faced the non-acceptance of women in the military". But she said she had succeeded thanks to her "persistence" and "passion". — AFP



Iraqi carpenter Nour Al-Janabi displays a piece at her home furniture workshop.



Iraqi carpenter Nour Al-Janabi walks next to pieces waiting to be renovated at her home furniture workshop.



Iraqi carpenter Nour Al-Janabi is recorded as she prepares to make a social media video at her home furniture workshop.



Iraqi carpenter Nour Al-Janabi walks next to pieces waiting to be renovated at her home furniture workshop in Baghdad's Abu Dsheer area.

## The art world's female revolution

It was a relatively promising start for gender equality when London's Royal Academy of Arts was set up in 1768, with two women artists included among its 40 founding members. But that was a false dawn—it would not be until the 1930s that another woman was elected a full member of the Academy.

While a few big names—Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alice Neel, Tracey Emin—gave the impression that the art world has opened up since then, the Western canon remains dominated by men. Among the 18 leading museums in the United States, 87 percent of works are by men, according to the Public Library of Science. The Prado in Madrid has 335 works by women out of 35,572 — less than one percent—and only 84 are on public display.

### 'Historical misogyny'

Attitudes are changing. The Prado held a women-only exhibition in 2020 which highlighted its "historical misogyny", in the words of curator Carlos Navarro. Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic will be the first woman to get a solo show that takes over all the main galleries of the Royal Academy next year. Increasing the share of overall works is tougher for museums that focus on the distant past—at least, that is the excuse of the Louvre in Paris, whose paintings stop at 1848, and include just 25 women among 3,600 artists.

But at Britain's Tate, there has been scope for improvement. Only five percent of its pre-1900 collection is by women, but this rises to 20 percent for artists working after 1900, and 38 percent for those born after 1965. "With each rehang at each of Tate's four galleries, the gender balance improves," said Polly Staple, head of Tate's British Art collection.



In this file photo French art historian and curator Camille Morineau attends the traveling exhibition "Solaire Culture" in celebration of Veve Cliquot's 250th anniversary in Beverly Hills, California.—AFP

"When Tate Modern opened its new displays in 2016, half of all the solo displays were dedicated to women artists, and this balance has been maintained ever since." As for private buyers, change has also been slow. "Today, all museums pay attention to equality, the number of solo exhibitions for women artists is increasing... but in reality they remain largely under-represented in auction houses," an art market insider told AFP, requesting anonymity.

But with women increasingly welcomed into art courses from the late 20th century onwards, the tide is turning here, too. The 2022 report by market-tracker Artprice found that women accounted for eight of the 10 best-selling artists under the age of 40.

### 'The whole story'

It is not enough to blame the past, argues Katy Hessel, author of the recent "The Story of Art Without Men". Women artists, such as Italy's Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656) or Flemish painter Clara Peeters, were "known during their lifetime but have been erased over the centuries", she told AFP.

Unearthing these forgotten names has been hugely popular. Her podcast, The Great Women Artists, has more than 300,000 subscribers. "Imagining that a woman could invent something remained an anthropological taboo for a very long time," said Camille Morineau, who founded research group Aware (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions), to gather data on the topic.

As curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2009, she hung nothing but female artists from its collection for two years, "to prove there were enough of them in the museum reserves to tell the whole story of 20th- and 21st-century art". New avenues of (re)discovery are still to come, added Hessel, highlighting Algeria's Baya or Singapore's Georgette Chen, as the sort of non-Western names who have "never really been part of our history". — AFP

## Rebel dancer suddenly quits Paris Opera

One of the best-known male dancers at the Paris Opera, who has won a big following outside ballet for working as a judge on the French equivalent of "Strictly Come Dancing", on Wednesday quit the company after months of tension. Francois Alu, 28, known for his rugged physique and virtuoso leaps, will leave the

Paris Opera so he has "complete professional freedom", both parties said in a joint statement published by the opera. The news was unexpected, coming just seven months after the Paris Opera named Alu an "etoile" ("star"), its highest-ranking title, after intense pressure from ballet fans for



the promotion.

But there has also been tension over his highly publicized role as a judge on "Danse avec les stars" ("Dance with the Stars"), the French equivalent of the smash hit BBC show in Britain "Strictly Come Dancing". "I have decided to regain my complete professional freedom in order to be able to fully realize my artistic aspirations," Alu said in the statement. The Paris Opera emphasized that the decision came after a "dialogue" between the two sides and would allow "new forms of collaboration" by Alu with the company.

"This decision is the culmination of the close dialogue we have had with Francois in recent months, said the Paris Opera

director Alexander Neef. Alu has also been touring France with a solo show. But to the chagrin of his fans he never danced at the Paris Opera since being named "etoile", which is unprecedented.

His departure comes at a turbulent time for the Paris Opera ballet, with former dancer Jose Martinez in December set to take over from Aurelie Dupont as head of the company. Such high-profile departures are relatively rare with the last such example in 1989 when superstar ballerina Sylvie Guillem walked out to focus on an international career. — AFP