

Saddam's shadow no longer darkens Kurd's paintings



Living the Kurdish version of the American Dream, artist Sadraldeen Hama sits among the artwork that would have caused problems for him in his native land.

BY HILAN M. CHRISTOPHER
 Baghdad Special Staff
 When Sadraldeen Hama attended a Baghdad art school, he and his fellow students practiced political painting.
 The style and subject of their work, however, was controversial. Instead, they said they painted the portrait of one man—a man they hated.
 "Saddam's picture was everywhere," said Hama, sitting in the neat and comfortable living room of his brick row house in Lancaster city, far from the Iraqi capital. He is surrounded by his artwork.
 The bright, colorful images of his paintings and drawings are a stark contrast to the dark, somber tones of the Iraqi capital. Hama's work is a reflection of his life in the United States.

For two years, Sadraldeen Hama and eight others lived in a single room in Jordan while trying to raise enough money to smuggle their bodies out of Iraq. He eventually managed to do so by selling his paintings.
 The artist and his wife, Zhihan, and their two children, Medoza, 8, and Aritoza, 6, fled Iraq in 1980.
 The family's escape from political persecution was a result of their political beliefs. Hama is a Kurd, and his work is a reflection of his life in the United States.

They are complex black-and-white images created by Hama in the 1980s during Iraq's war with Iran.
 "It was wartime. It is reflected in my work," said the artist, wearing a black beret to match his thick black beard.
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Artist: Kurd escapes Saddam's shadow

When he was a young boy, Sadraldeen Hama and his family fled Iraq for Jordan. He is now a resident of Lancaster, Pa., where he has a brick row house. He is surrounded by his artwork.
 "I just thought about my life," he said. "I wanted there to be some hope for me."
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Saddam's shadow no longer darkens Kurd's paintings

By Brian Christopher, Intelligencer Journal Staff
 March 6, 2003

Living the Kurdish version of the American dream, artist Sadraldeen Hama sits among the art that would have caused problems for him in his native land.

When Sadraldeen Hama attended a Baghdad art school, he and his fellow students practiced portrait painting.

The style and subject of their work, however, was extremely limited. Over and over, they painted the portrait of one man—a man they hated.

"Saddam's picture was everywhere," said Hama, sitting in the neat, comfortable living room of his brick row house in Lancaster city, far from the Iraqi capital where huge pictures of the dictator line the streets.

The stifling artistic environment and increased pressure from Iraqi officials eventually caused Hama to flee his homeland and seek his freedom in Jordan—first alone and later with his wife, Zhihan, and their two children, Medoza, 8, and Aritoza, 6.

The family's escape from political persecution and a new life in the United States follows a line, a line that streams from the tip of Hama's paintbrushes.

In the hallway of the family's James Street home are two pen-and-ink drawings. They are complex black-and-white images created by Hama in the 1980s during Iraq's war with Iran.

"It was wartime. It is reflected in my work," said the artist, wearing a black beret to match his thick black beard.

After moving past those dark images and up the stairs of his house, a visitor finds colorful images of small figures splashed on canvases of yellow. They are not a reflection of war, but of freedom.

"It's a new world. Change," he said.

Hama, 40, said he is a Kurd, not Iraqi. Although Kirkuk, his hometown, is shown on geopolitical maps as being in northern Iraq, Hama, as well as the more than 3 million Kurds who still live in the region, call it Kurdistan.

In 1998, facing pressure from local police who wanted him to renounce his Kurd ancestry and classify himself as Arabic, Hama escaped to Amman, Jordan, the first stop for many Iraqi refugees.

For two years, he and eight others lived in a single room while trying to raise the money needed to smuggle their families out of the country. Hama eventually was able to sell enough paintings to raise the \$2,000 he needed.

When word reached his wife, Zhian, 35, that he had the finances to get her out of Iraq, she was torn between her family in Kirkuk and her husband.

"It was hard to leave my family," she said. The choice was made for her by the couple's daughters. She decided a life of freedom for Medoza and Aritoza was more important than staying close to her family.

"I just thought about my kids," she said. "I wanted them to be more happy than me."

Once in Amman, however, the Hama family reunion was short-lived—lasting only four days. A church group had been successful in getting permission for Sadraldeen to come to the United States, but he had to temporarily leave his wife and daughters behind.

His family made the trip to the United States four months later and they were reunited in 2000. In August 2001, Hama's brother, Shamsaldrin also made the trip.

Since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, no refugees from Jordan have been allowed to immigrate to the United States.

And they won't, Hama said, until Saddam Hussein is no longer in power.

"My dream, and all the Iraqi people's dream, is for Saddam to leave. But how (will he) leave?" Hama said. "When I call people there, they say, 'When America come? When?'"

There is no open discussion or even mention of Saddam during these conversations.

"We say, 'Big Uncle might be dying,'" said Hama, using Iraqi slang for Hussein.

The Hamas are able to keep up with the events in their homeland through Middle East television channels available through their satellite dish. There is a United Arab Emirates channel, two Kurd channels and one from Iraq.

"I don't watch that one," he said, referring to the Iraqi channel. "It's just a commercial for Saddam."

Despite being in the United States for about three years, the Hama family is flourishing. Both girls have been named students of the month at Ross Elementary School, and Hama's art has been well-received.

An exhibit of his work is on display at Suk Shuglie Fine Arts Gallery, 1320 Manheim Pike.

Hama said the number of artists in the Lancaster area surprised him. "When I came here, I thought there would only be artists in New York City and Chicago," he said.

He has traveled to New York, however, to see the great works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and Guggenheim Museum.

"All my friends dream to come to the U.S. to see that art," he said.

Hama, whose work also will be seen this summer in an art walk planned by Tabor Community Services, said he paints in a primitive style.

The bright, colorful images show a relationship between all living things, both human and animal, in a Garden of Eden-type setting.

"My message is that I want (all of them) together—in peace," he said.