



## Iraqi Vernacularism in Contemporary Art (Mahmoud Fahmi as a Case Study of Cultural Patriotism)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theory of Vernacularism within the framework of Iraqi visual arts, focusing on the works of Mahmoud Fahmi - one of the most vivid contemporary artists to engage in vernacular expression. Fahmi's art celebrates the architectural, social, and folkloric vocabulary of Iraq through highly symbolic visual language. By employing modern artistic techniques such as stylized realism, abstract figuration, and textural layering, his works revive elements like the Shanāshīl, brick alleys, alley cats, minarets, traditional garments, and vernacular objects. Positioned within a broader movement of Iraqi Vernacularism, this paper contextualizes Fahmi's work alongside that of earlier pioneers like Shakir Hassan Al Said, Faeq Hassan, and Hafidh al-Droubi, arguing that Vernacularism is both an aesthetic and ideological position rooted in cultural patriotism and resistance to erasure.

**Keywords:** Vernacularism, Iraqi modern art, Mahmoud Fahmi, cultural patriotism, Shanāshīl, Baghdadi architecture, Arab vernacularism, realism, abstraction, Iraqi visual heritage.



## Introduction:

### Vernacularism as Cultural Memory

Iraqi art has long wrestled with the question of identity: how to be modern without being uprooted. In this negotiation, Vernacularism emerges as a powerful framework - centered on grounding visual art in the forms, patterns, and lived realities of the people. Whether through architectural forms, religious symbols, street life, or traditional objects, vernacular expression in Iraqi art is a form of cultural patriotism: an aesthetic resistance against the forces of cultural erasure, colonial gaze, or aesthetic exile.

This paper examines the works of Mahmoud Fahmi, a contemporary artist whose practice embodies Vernacularism in its purest visual form. His canvases are saturated with local memory - Baghdadi homes, urban sounds, silhouettes of mosque domes, rusty doors, market walls, Shanāshīl, alley cats, and the humble yet lyrical objects of the Iraqi every day.

### Mahmoud Fahmi: Vernaculates Baghdad in Texture and Form

Fahmi's visual language is deeply tied to his upbringing and lived experience in the old quarters of Baghdad. His paintings are a testimony to the ordinary: the alleyways, the minarets obscured by rooftop laundry lines, the layered graffiti, and the decaying elegance of Ottoman architecture.

### Key Vernacular Themes in His Work:

- **Shanāshīl and Vernacular Architecture:** Wooden lattice windows often appear as central elements, not merely decorative but as architectural witnesses to generations of Iraqi life.
- **Urban Ephemera:** Wall textures, peeling posters, and rusted metal doors offer a tactile narrative of decline and resilience.
- **Cultural Icons:** Roosters, coffee pots, bread ovens, and cats become visual metaphors for the cultural intimacy of home and neighborhood.



- **Baghdadi Uniforms and Shadowed Figures:** Traditional dishdashas, abayas, and silhouettes in alley scenes evoke continuity with cultural identity despite modernization.
- **Spiritual Forms:** Minarets, Quranic calligraphy, and domes embedded into abstracted cityscapes maintain spiritual resonance without overt religious framing. Fahmi's palette is earthy and subdued - browns, ochres, faded blues - mirroring the dust-covered heritage of the neighborhoods he evokes. His brushstroke is confident, layered, and raw, further rooting his work in the tactile world of Iraqi material culture.

### Vernacularism Beyond Nostalgia: Dialogue with Modernism

Like the earlier works of Faeq Hassan or Hafidh al-Droubi, Fahmi's engagement with the vernacular is not sentimental. Rather, it is analytical and conscious. He is part of a lineage of Iraqi artists who adopted Western techniques but rejected Western hegemony in content and context.

- **With Shakir Hassan Al Said**, the philosophy of "al-Bu'd al-Wahid" (One Dimension) explored spirituality through abstraction rooted in Arabic script and architecture.
- **With Ismail Fattah**, form and material (especially in sculpture) became ways to articulate Mesopotamian memory and human resilience.
- **With Faeq Hassan**, the impressionistic eye captured daily life with romantic vigor yet national grounding.
- **With Hafidh al-Droubi**, realism became documentation of urban vitality through vernacular eyes.

Fahmi builds on this trajectory. He is post-modern in technique but vernacular in subject. His works do not universalize - they localize. They do not generalize - they specify. In doing so, he embodies what Nasser Hajjaj (2024) calls *Arab Vernacularism* - a method of asserting indigenous aesthetics and cultural intimacy as sources of artistic power.



### **Vernacularism as Resistance and Continuity**

In a post-invasion Iraq marred by displacement and destruction, Fahmi's commitment to vernacular forms is an act of cultural resistance. It counters amnesia. It insists on remembrance. His scenes are not utopias; they show rust, decay, and fragmentation. But in their very imperfection lies authenticity.

Through his work, we see that the vernacular is not only aesthetic - it is political, social, and ontological. Fahmi's Baghdad is not the Baghdad of fantasy or history books—it is the Baghdad of the soul.

### **Conclusion: The Vernacular as Legacy**

Mahmoud Fahmi stands today as one of the clearest exemplars of Vernacularism in Iraqi art. His paintings function as visual archives - living documents of spaces, objects, and symbols under threat. In celebrating the vernacular, he does not retreat into the past but builds a future rooted in memory.

By examining his works alongside those of earlier modernists, we understand that Iraqi Vernacularism is not a trend but a tradition - a philosophy of art rooted in *place, language, and people*.



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