

Turning a Russian Book Into Art in Iraq

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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BAGHDAD — As Baghdad burned, Iraqi artist Qasim Sabti headed for one of the places he loved the most — the Academy of Fine Arts — only to find thousands of its books and archives on fire.

It was April 2003 and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, begun in March, had reached the capital.

Sabti, who had seen the blaze from his balcony in central Baghdad, recounts the destruction of 6,000 books on art and how he tried to recover just a handful from the flames.

"I tried to save a Russian landscape book. I loved it, I always looked at Russian artists for how to do landscapes and used them to teach my students," he said.

"I see this book and this huge fire, so I put my hand out to save this book. The fire touched my fingers and the text fell into the fire and only the cover of the book stayed in my hand."

The loss of the books was a huge blow for the academy, which had struggled to build up its

collection in recent years as a result of sanctions and meager funding.

But for Sabti, the damaged books also became a source of artistic inspiration that stayed with him for nearly a decade.

"When I looked at this cover, I saw something artistic: the secret life of the text," he said, pointing to the delicate webbed binding of a hardback book, dissected by fire and water.

Sabti used pieces of the books to create angular abstract collages, layering the tactile covers with pages and paint.

The 58-year-old encourages visitors to his small gallery in Baghdad to touch the artworks and stare closely at pieces that make up the works, such as a librarian's stamp or scribbled Arabic notes in the margins. He later started printing enlarged images of the books on canvas.

Since 2003 he has held exhibitions in Paris, New York, Tokyo and Kyoto. In his home country, artists struggle more than ever to make a living, if they remain in Iraq at all, he said.

Baghdad now hosts only two private galleries, he said, whereas before 2003 there were more than 20. Officials, middle class Iraqi families and foreign visitors have fled, leaving a dwindling number of people who might promote or buy art.

While violence has eased in Iraq from its post-war peak in 2006-07, a series of recent bombings has highlighted the huge security challenges still facing the country.

Yet there is a glimmer of hope for Sabti and his peers. Last week the government promised him funding for 24 exhibitions in his gallery to showcase the country's artistic talent. He says it the first time he has ever been offered state funding.

"Because there used to be many visitors interested in art I did not care if the government helped me or not. Now, really, we need some help," he said.

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