

artsignal

Oriental Window

Dia Azzawi

Object Report

April 2026



Oriental Window

Dia Azzawi

2013

Overview

This late-career painting masterfully synthesizes Dia Azzawi's core themes, using the recurring 'window' motif to explore memory and exile through a monumental, architectonic style that fuses ancient Mesopotamian references with a mature modernist language.

Situated within the global re-evaluation of Arab modernism, this painting affirms Dia Azzawi's unique visual language, which synthesizes European modernist principles with Iraqi heritage and stands in dialogue with the diverse approaches of his regional contemporaries like Shakir Hassan Al Said and Etel Adnan.

As a canonical work by a key figure in Arab modernism, this painting holds enduring relevance through its engagement with themes of diaspora and cultural memory, a status reinforced by major institutional validation from museums like the Tate Modern and significant international retrospectives.

Sales Points

- Major work by a master of Arab modernism
- Strong institutional backing from Tate and Mathaf
- Vibrant, monumental scale for significant collections
- Classic 'window' motif central to his practice
- Appeals to collectors of global modern art
- A late-career work showing mastery of his style

Promotional Opportunities

- Anchor exhibitions on diasporic art and memory
- Connect to scholarly interest in global modernisms
- Highlight dialogue between European and Arab abstraction
- Strong visual impact for art fairs and digital media
- Tell stories of Iraqi heritage and modern art
- Position within the canon of post-war abstraction

About the Work

Created in 2013, *Oriental Window* is a product of Dia Azzawi's late career, a period marked by synthesis and masterful confidence. By this time, Azzawi had been living and working in London for nearly four decades, allowing him to consolidate the major themes that have defined his practice: ancient Mesopotamian heritage, architectural forms, and a deeply personal use of color. The window motif is a significant and recurring one in his work, acting as a powerful symbol of the connection—or separation—between past and present, interior and exterior, and his homeland of Iraq and his life in exile. This painting continues the formal exploration of flattened figuration and architectonic compositions that characterized his important work from the 1980s.

The style of *Oriental Window* aligns with Azzawi's lifelong project of forging a unique language within modernism. The bold, flat color blocks and crisp, geometric structure recall the principles of the New Vision group he co-founded in 1969, which sought to link art to contemporary life, yet the scale and intense chromatic relationships are hallmarks of his mature style. Unlike his more overtly political and narrative works such as the monumental *Sabra and Shatila* mural, this piece operates on a more symbolic and poetic level. However, the act of looking through a window can still be interpreted as a political gesture, implying a perspective shaped by distance, memory, and longing.

While a singular, large-scale painting, *Oriental Window* shares a structural and conceptual kinship with Azzawi's multidisciplinary practice. The careful composition and layering of forms echo the way he combines text and image in his celebrated *dafatir* (artist's books). The central, abstracted figure possesses a monumental quality, reminiscent of both ancient Mesopotamian statuary and his own sculptural works. The work is not a departure but a powerful summation, demonstrating his ability to distill complex cultural histories and personal experiences into a condensed, visually arresting statement.

Wider Context

By 2013, Dia Azzawi was an internationally recognized master of Arab modernism, and *Oriental Window* should be seen as a reaffirmation of the visual language he helped pioneer, rather than a reaction to contemporary trends. The work confidently participates in a global dialogue with 20th-century modernism, showing a clear engagement with the formal strategies of European movements like Cubism and the work of artists like Fernand Léger, particularly in its use of bold color and interlocking forms. However, Azzawi fundamentally re-contextualizes these influences through a distinctively Iraqi and pan-Arab lens, embedding references to Mesopotamian symbols, Islamic architecture, and calligraphic dynamism.

The work stands as a powerful example of the diversity within Iraqi modernism when compared to his contemporaries. While his peer Shakir Hassan Al Said explored the spiritual and textual dimensions of abstraction through the *One Dimension* group, Azzawi's approach in *Oriental Window* is more pictorial and structural, focusing on the visual power of form and color. There are also conceptual parallels with the text-image practice of the Lebanese-American artist Etel Adnan, as both artists translate personal history and a sense of place into abstract compositions, though Azzawi's work remains more graphically monumental compared to Adnan's lyrical landscapes.

The creation of this painting in 2013 coincided with a period of intense and growing international institutional interest in modern art from the Middle East. Azzawi's work was central to this curatorial re-evaluation, which would culminate in his major retrospective at Mathaf and QM Gallery Al Riwaq in Doha in 2016. Therefore, *Oriental Window* is not an experimental gesture but a definitive statement from a mature artist whose historical importance was being globally recognized and cemented, produced for an art world finally catching up to his significance.

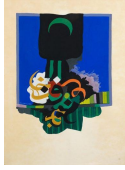
Cultural Relevance

The synthesis of ancient cultural memory with a modernist aesthetic in Dia Azzawi's work continues to hold significant cultural relevance. As curators, scholars, and audiences increasingly seek to understand non-Western narratives of modern art, Azzawi's practice provides a crucial reference point. The theme of the 'window' is particularly resonant, speaking to enduring contemporary experiences of diaspora, migration, and the complex relationship between cultural heritage and global modernity. Its powerful graphic quality and sophisticated use of color also give it a timeless visual appeal that engages audiences beyond those familiar with its specific historical context.

Azzawi's prominent place within the institutional landscape underpins the work's importance. His art is held in the permanent collections of major international museums, including the British Museum, Tate Modern, and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. The major 2016 retrospective in Doha, followed by important solo exhibitions such as *Painting Poetry* at the Ashmolean Museum (2022-2023), has firmly established his canonical status. *Oriental Window* is a prime example of the large-scale, chromatically rich canvases that are central to this institutional acclaim and are considered cornerstones of his practice.

About the Artist

- Dia Azzawi was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1939 and has lived in London since 1976, making him a central figure of both Iraqi modernism and the Arab diaspora.
- He studied archaeology at the University of Baghdad, graduating in 1962, and then earned a diploma from the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad, in 1964.
- His archaeological training shaped a lifelong engagement with Mesopotamian heritage, myth, and material culture, which recur throughout his paintings, sculpture, prints, and books.
- Before leaving Iraq, he worked in the Department of Antiquities in Baghdad until 1976, linking his artistic career to cultural preservation as well as studio practice.
- Azzawi was a co-founder of the New Vision group in 1969 and later joined One Dimension, placing him at the center of postwar Iraqi debates about how to modernize art through Arab and Islamic visual traditions.
- He also played an organizing role in Iraqi art institutions through the Iraqi Plastic Artists' Society, where he helped establish the Al-Wasiti Festival in Baghdad in 1972.
- His practice is notably multidisciplinary, encompassing painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, design, publishing, and artist's books rather than a single signature medium.
- Azzawi is especially known for combining Arabic calligraphy, Babylonian and Mesopotamian motifs, poetry, and political witness into a modern visual language with strong pan-Arab resonance.
- Poetry is a major structural influence in his work, and he has created numerous *dafatir*—hybrid artist's books that merge image and text in accordion, boxed, and other nontraditional formats.
- His artist's books frequently engage leading Arab poets, including Adonis, as seen in works such as *Adonis LX* and *Colour-light, shadow of speech; speech-light, shadow of colour* in the British Museum collection.
- Azzawi's work often addresses grief, war, exile, injustice, and collective memory, making political violence in Iraq, Palestine, and the wider region a persistent subject.

**Dia Azzawi (Iraq, Born 1939) Untitled (Arabian Window)**

Dia Azzawi
1981
Gouache on paper
77 x 57 cm | 30 ³/₈ x 22 ¹/₂ in

Bonhams, GB
Middle Eastern Art Online
Sale
Mar 2021

Price
USD 12,386
Estimate
USD 6,939 - 11,102

**Dia Azzawi, Remains**

Dia Azzawi
1995
Acrylic on canvas
148 x 183 cm | 58 ¹/₄ x 72 ¹/₈ in

Sotheby's, GB
'1 In 11' Auction
Feb 2015

Price
USD 153,579
Estimate
USD 153,579 - 230,369

**La Ayoun Taltakitahou (No Eyes Can Catch Him)**

Dia al-Azzawi
1972
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm | 39 ³/₈ x 39 ³/₈ in

Christie's, AE
Modern & Contemporary
Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art
Mar 2015

Price
USD 75,000
Estimate
USD 40,000 - 60,000

**A Cubist Portrait Of A Woman**

Shakir Hassan Al Said
Oil on board
48 x 30 cm | 18 ⁷/₈ x 11 ³/₄ in

Bonhams, GB
The Art of Lebanon Part II
and Modern and
Contemporary Middle
Eastern Art
Oct 2016

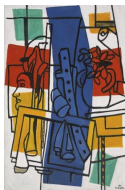
Bought in
Estimate
USD 30,615 - 61,229

**Kadhim Hayder (Iraq, 1932-1985) Motherhood**

Kadhim Hayder
Oil on canvas
47 x 40 cm | 18 ¹/₂ x 15 ³/₄ in

Bonhams, GB
The Art of Lebanon and
Modern and Contemporary
Middle Eastern Art
Apr 2016

Price
USD 15,501
Estimate
USD 11,671 - 17,507

**Le Vase de fleurs dans l'atelier**

Fernand Léger
1950
Oil on canvas
92 x 60 cm | 36 ¹/₄ x 23 ¹/₂ in

Sotheby's, US
Impressionist & Modern Art
Day Sale
May 2016

Estimate
USD 1.20M - 1.80M

**Les Deux Rouges**

Mohamed Melehi
1997
Oil on canvas
80 x 60 cm | 31 ¹/₂ x 23 ⁵/₈ in

Sotheby's, GB
20th Century Art / Middle
East
Mar 2022

Price
USD 141,270
Estimate
USD 52,762 - 79,143