

## THE EXHIBIT

The U.S. Diplomacy Center is honored to present these heartfelt paintings by the Iraqi women of Muthanna province. What began as a public diplomacy project captured the voices and aspirations of many of the participating artists for the first time in their lives. To quote Aaron Snipe, the U.S. Public Diplomacy Officer who headed up the project: *"Very few of the women had formal art training. Painting was a hobby for all, a creative outlet for some, and an escape for others."* In organizing the original exhibit, his goal was to engage a demographic within the province that had traditionally been overlooked. In the process a story of courage, respect and empowerment emerged.



By Muneeba Jaleel Hadi

### United States Diplomacy Center

Dedicated to increasing public awareness of diplomacy and the work of the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Diplomacy Center produces exhibitions and organizes conferences and educational programs. Currently a visitors center and museum is under development, to be housed at the headquarters of the Department of State in Washington, DC, with interactive exhibits designed to stimulate learning about American diplomacy and help prepare youth for the global challenges of tomorrow.

## THE COLORS OF WARKA:

Paintings by Iraqi Women of Muthanna Province is presented in celebration of Women's History Month, March 2010 and International Women's Day, March 8, 2010.



*"Warka"* refers to the local name of the ancient Sumerian goddess of beauty. It is the name of a city in southern Iraq and an ancient site, also known as Uruk.

### Special thanks to:

Aaron Snipe, Foreign Service Officer,  
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

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PRT Muthanna, Iraq

Embassy of the Republic of Iraq

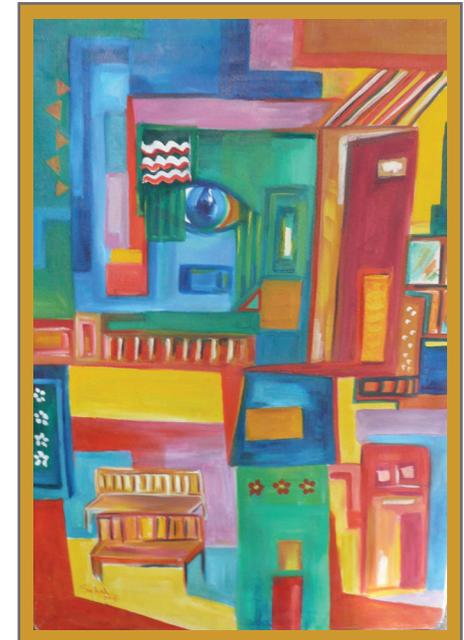
*At the U.S. Department of State:*  
Office of Global Women's Issues  
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs  
Bureau of Public Affairs  
Diplomatic Reception Rooms



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<http://diplomacy.state.gov>

## THE COLORS OF WARKA:

### Paintings by Iraqi Women of Muthanna Province



By Sudad Abdel Ghani

Presented in the United States by the  
U.S. Diplomacy Center  
U.S. Department of State



Organized in 2009 by the  
U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team, Muthanna, Iraq and  
Public Awareness Organization, Iraq



By Adyan A. Mirhij



By Sameera Jabir



By Wala Muhammed

## THE STORY

In late 2008, members of the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) assembled a group of women artists from Iraq's southern rural province of Muthanna interested in working on a cultural program. Around the same time, news broke of U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker's first visit to Muthanna, planned for January 2009. The PRT asked the women to contribute their paintings for a gallery showing in honor of the Ambassador's visit, the first showing ever mounted by women artists in the province. The event was outstanding, the Ambassador speaking with each artist, but there was much more to this project than just a one-time showing for the Ambassador. The PRT, in cooperation with a local Iraqi group called Public Awareness Organization, embarked on a larger project supporting art and artists in Muthanna, distributing new canvases, paints and an easel to 40 artists. Their paintings would form a major exhibit of almost 100 works that would tour three of Muthanna's largest cities: Samawa, Rumaytha, and Khider.

The exhibit opened in March 2009 in Muthanna's capital city, Samawa. Eight media organizations covered the event and a broad cross-section of Muthanna's citizens came out to see this landmark exhibit including a college art professor who brought his forty male students. Writers, poets, and other members of

the artistic community viewed the paintings and chatted with one another. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, much like any exhibit opening at any art museum.



PRT member Albert Hadi distributes art supplies to an exhibit participant, Samawa City, Iraq, January 2009

This public diplomacy program served as an example to the local Iraqi citizens that the United States was supporting art — its creation and exhibition — in Muthanna. It was a signal to the Iraqi people that the relationship between the two countries was normalizing. The artists had not shied away from portraying the difficulties facing Iraq. When the art supplies were distributed at the beginning of the project, the

women were told that they should feel free to paint whatever they liked — even if it did not flatter the U.S.

In the process of producing this exhibition, the PRT members also came to know each artist personally, fostering mutual respect with the artists and their families. The exhibits gave the women courage to address the public and the media, which they had never been able to do before. Through this program of cultural diplomacy they spoke out on the importance of art and the role of women in Iraqi society. As one artist said, *"Through our paintings, everyone will know our stories. They will know we are here."*



Iraqi artist Eqbal Razzak Abid stands next to her painting in Samawa city, Iraq. (courtesy Aaron Snipe)

This text is based upon Aaron Snipe's April 28, 2009 posting on Dipnote (<http://blogs.state.gov>)