

Satta Hashem born in 1959 near Baghdad, might fairly be termed an internationalist and a synthesist. Not only has he physically worked and trained in Algeria, Russia, Sweden, Greece and the United Kingdom and is his work collected internationally, but he has transmuted and drawn on the range of cultures he has experienced to produce a signature that is powerfully his own.

Combined with his modernist language, there is a strong sense in his work of his cultural origins in the ancient art of Mesopotamia and the traditions of Arabic art with its symbolic identification with abstract symbolism, colour and pattern. His approach claims a clear relationship between art, science and technology derived from the traditions of Arab culture where boundaries between disciplines are indistinct. Here his investigation of scientific colour theory plays an important part.

Colour in particular has a deep significance for Satta. He regards colour as revelatory. For him colour is embedded in the physiology, psychology and cultural evolution of the human being. He sees colour as a culturally specific overlay superimposed on the principles of perception. As he states: *I believe colours have a psychological impact through our visual sense. Every change in the way artists paint light (i.e. colour) reflects the evolution of our civilisation.*

Light and colour are also metaphors of sublimation and stand for freedom and consolation. In his work there is a thread that sees painting as a necessary compensation for inhumanity and for an elevation of the soul. Satta talks of the serenity of Arabic art and Christian icon painting as a refocusing away from the brutality of oppression. The human tragedy of contemporary Iraq and the destruction of its ancient heritage, from which Satta Hashem draws so much, make this particularly poignant.

As a public art, mural painting during the twentieth century has provided problematic issues for artists when there is no longer any universally accepted iconography or a commonly shared set of beliefs. In this situation mural artists have often resorted to the purely ornamental. Satta Hashem has been courageous in facing this challenge in his architectural work in Sweden and the United Kingdom. His broad cultural background is an important factor in addressing the need to find a humanist meaning in mural painting. His smaller uniformly sized series paintings also have an architectonic quality. In the cumulative way in which they assemble themselves into a larger pattern both physically and in the mind, they remind us of the individual panels of medieval stained glass or the icons of the Orthodox iconostasis wall and the way these units constitute a larger architectural whole. This again points to his belief in the continuity of art and the lessons that art history suggests.

**Gordon Millar
Art Historian
January 2008**