

# SHAKO MAKO

*Voices of Identity*

**Exploring Storytelling in  
Multidisciplinary Design**

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media, and Design (IAMD).

The ADA Slaight Gallery, OCAD University, March 19-23, 2025  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

*March 2025*

## Abstract

This thesis explores the intricate relationship between Iraqi culture and language, specifically focusing on the unique phrases and dialects that embody the essence of Iraqi identity.<sup>1</sup> By examining the ways in which visual storytelling can bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, this research investigates how graphic design, illustration, animation and the design implementations into generic everyday products can be strategically integrated to create an immersive and emotionally engaging experience that authentically represents the rich diversity and cultural nuances of Iraqi dialects through visual storytelling. What design methods can be employed to visually and conceptually highlight the unique linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts embedded in these dialects, ensuring their portrayal resonates with both Iraqi audiences and global viewers? Furthermore, how can this approach contribute to the preservation and celebration of these dialects, particularly among Iraqi diaspora communities in Western societies?<sup>2</sup> In what ways might such creative interventions affirm cultural identity,<sup>3</sup> foster a stronger sense of belonging, and revive a connection to Iraqi heritage within these communities, while also promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of Iraq's linguistic and cultural diversity on a global scale?

The project examines the dialects of Iraq's three largest cities, Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, spanning the country from south to north. These dialects are explored through famous song lyrics, which are visually translated into illustrations and applied to everyday merchandise. This enables users to share Iraqi culture with the world by carrying, wearing, or using these products.

My research project is based on autoethnography and my own experiences as an Iraqi citizen living in the diaspora.<sup>4</sup> As an Iraqi who has never lived in Iraq, autoethnography offers a valuable approach by merging my personal perspective with the cultural influences of the countries I've lived in. Iraqi songs play a vital role in the nation's heritage, and their distinct dialects and rhythms are admired in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria for their poetic beauty and lyrical richness.

My thesis project presents Iraqi dialects through song lyrics, illustrated with portrait characteristics inspired by traditional Iraqi art. The selected songs range from classic historical pieces to mainstream hits. This work aims to keep Iraqi traditions and dialects vibrant in both the present and future, serving as a source of cultural pride and reshaping how Iraq is perceived globally, particularly within the diaspora and Western society. By celebrating cultural identity, the project addresses both the misrepresentation and lack of representation in Western media, offering Iraqis abroad a meaningful way to reconnect with their roots and foster a sense of pride and belonging.

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<sup>1</sup> A *dialect* is a variation of a language spoken by a particular group of people, often distinguished by unique vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Wardhaugh 54).

<sup>2</sup> "*Diaspora* refers to a large group of people who share a cultural and regional origin but are living away from their traditional homeland. Diasporas come about through immigration and forced movements of people" (Diaspora 2025).

<sup>3</sup> *Cultural identity* refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group, shaped by shared characteristics such as language, nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, and locality (Cultural Identity | IPBES Secretariat).

<sup>4</sup> "*Autoethnography* is a form of ethnographic research in which a researcher connects personal experiences to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings" (Josselson 2005).

## Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents, Ismail and Alwan Azzam, for their constant love, support, and belief in my abilities. Their encouragement has fueled my passion for both art and design, motivating me to always strive for excellence. Their successful careers in the arts have been a continuous source of inspiration, and it is because of them that I have the knowledge, drive, and passion to pursue a career as both a graphic designer and an artist at the highest level.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my primary advisor, Diane Mikhael, for her unwavering guidance, support, and invaluable feedback throughout the development of my thesis project. Her encouragement has been instrumental in shaping the work I am presenting today.

I would like to thank my secondary advisor, Suharu Ogawa, whose remarkable work in illustration has been a great source of inspiration. As illustration was a new field for me to explore, Suharu's influence helped me discover a new passion that ultimately shaped the focus of my thesis project.

I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Bahjat family for welcoming me as one of their own during my time away from home. Their care and support have been a constant source of strength and comfort throughout my MFA journey in Canada, and I am deeply grateful for their kindness.

To my friends and peers, your companionship made this experience not only achievable but also truly enjoyable.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have worked on this thesis and bring a part of my identity in the research and work I have been creating. I look forward to continuing my exploration of design and illustration in my future endeavors.

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## Introduction

Language, dialects, and culture are intricately intertwined, shaping how individuals articulate their identity and cultivate a sense of belonging. In this thesis I explore how the Iraqi dialects in song lyrics play roles in preserving linguistic and cultural heritage among the Iraqi community in diaspora, including myself. I chose to title my thesis project *Shako Mako*, a casual and commonly used Iraqi greeting. "Shako Mako is an Iraqi colloquial expression commonly used to ask *What's up?* or *How are you?* The phrase is derived from the Akkadian words *aku* meaning *what* and *maku* meaning *not*, combined with an Arabic addition, *SH*" (Shako Mako 2024).

The cultural significance of songs extends beyond entertainment. "Music, song, and dance are often central to the identity of language speakers. They also play critical roles in attracting learners to the language, documenting the language, and using it" (Echeverria & Sparling 2024). As the authors point out, music, song, and dance are not only essential to cultural identity but also serve as powerful tools for preserving linguistic heritage, which is vital for Iraqi communities. In my country, dialects and song lyrics are tools for preserving history, tradition, and nostalgic memories. Iraqi dialects are not just regional variations of the Arabic language within the Middle East. These various dialects are tied to the country's diverse landscapes, as well as its historical and regional influences. Song lyrics capture the poetic essence of these dialects, which transcends generations through storytelling.

Through the integration of graphic design, illustration, animation and the design implementations into generic everyday products, this research explores how visual storytelling can celebrate and sustain the linguistic diversity of Iraqi Arabic dialects, spanning from the south to the north, with a focus on Iraq's three largest cities: Baghdad (central), Mosul (north) and Basra (south). Each city carries its own poetic expressions, historical narratives, and emotional significance. By visually interpreting popular Iraqi song lyrics through illustrations and applying them to everyday merchandise, the work transforms cultural references into tangible experiences.

My thesis addresses the challenges faced by Iraqi diaspora, especially in the West who struggles with Arabic literacy.<sup>5</sup> Through transliteration and translation, the project ensures that both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers can engage with the rich linguistic and cultural nuances embedded in these lyrics. Presenting lyrics in both their original Arabic script and Latin transliteration, allows the poetic beauty of Iraqi dialects more accessible to a wider audience and eliminating language barriers. Transliteration is an important factor in this project as it enables the accurate representation of words from one language to another, preserving both pronunciation and meaning (What Is Transliteration?), which is crucial for cross cultural communication, particularly in multilingual contexts. For Iraqis in the diaspora, dialects serve as a vital link to their cultural roots. Living abroad due to displacement, war, and other immigration reasons, many Iraqis grow up without practicing their native dialects. Many people from Mosul are afraid their dialect might disappear. According to the newspaper *Arab News*, about 90 percent of those who left the city speak the Maslawi dialect, and there's a concern that future

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<sup>5</sup> "The West refers to Europe and those countries settled by Europeans, especially the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand" (Western Culture 2025).

generations won't speak Maslawi and will use other dialects instead (Casualty of War, 2019). This disconnection makes cultural preservation and sustainability even more important, as dialects carry a part of our identity and history.

I use autoethnography as a point of departure to reflect on my own personal experiences of cultural disconnection and reconnection. As part of my autoethnographic approach, I documented and reflected on my personal experiences as an Iraqi living in both Toronto, Canada and Doha, Qatar, using mood boards and mind maps (Figure 1) to visually represent my emotional and cultural journey. This process helped me identify key moments that contributed to my disconnection from my native language and Iraqi traditions. Through these visual reflections, I explored how living in a multicultural city like Toronto often overshadowed my connection to my Iraqi roots. Although spending most of my life in Qatar exposed me to cultural practices closer to my heritage, it still felt different from my own Iraqi dialect and lifestyle, revealing the challenges of reintegrating into a culture I had become distanced from. Drawing from personal experience as an Iraqi immigrant who has lived in both the Middle East and the West this paper explores the complex challenges of maintaining a connection to Iraqi culture while navigating language barriers, cultural adaptation, and the gradual loss of traditions in diasporic communities. My journey as an artist and individual has been deeply intertwined with the cultural richness of Iraq, particularly the art style known as *Baghdadiyat*.<sup>6</sup> This art style has been a significant source of inspiration in both my creative practice and the development of my thesis project. It has become an anchor to my heritage as well as to my research.

The accompanying body of work includes nine illustrations and their visual narratives, design implementations into generic everyday products such as on tote bags, apparel, and everyday items, animations of the illustrations, and an immersive exhibition setup. It was created to encourage dialogue within the Iraqi diaspora community, challenge negative stereotypes of Iraqis and Arabs perpetuated by Western media and offer Iraqis a meaningful way to reconnect with their linguistic heritage.

Growing up in a family of creatives who deeply valued art, I was introduced at an early age to the rich history of Iraqi art. I was particularly influenced by the works of Jawad Saleem, whose modernist sculptures and paintings capture Iraq's historical and political narratives, and Ismail Fatah Al-Turk, whose powerful public sculptures reflect the beauty and simplicity of Iraqi identity. I also owe my artistic journey to my father and a portrait painter, Ismail Azzam, who nurtured my appreciation for portraiture and continues to use art to preserve the essence of Iraqi people and history through his masterful techniques. These artistic influences shaped my understanding of Iraq's fine art heritage and continue to inspire my creative practice. In this research, I explored the unique art style of *Baghdadiyat*, characterized by its depictions of daily life in Iraq and its use of vibrant colors and intricate details to evoke nostalgia and a deep sense of connection to the Iraqi land, its people, food, poetry, music, and traditions. I believe it has always been more than just an aesthetic. It is a narrative tool, a way to connect with my roots and the collective memory

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<sup>6</sup>*“Baghdadiyat* describes the traditional art style that derived from Baghdad. It is influenced by the country's rich heritage and blends classical art with modern art” (The Baghdad Modern Art Group 2021).

of Iraq.<sup>7</sup> However, living in a Western society, I have often thought about how I can sustain this connection to my cultural identity when surrounded by influences that differ from my upbringing.

Through my research and project, readers will encounter an exploration of how art and design can serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity. My work demonstrates how art and storytelling can go beyond nostalgia. It offers new ways, such as modernizing the traditional Baghdadiyat Iraqi art style into digital media. These works are displayed on everyday products to celebrate, share, and sustain the beauty of the three main Iraqi dialects: Baghdadi, Maslawi, and Basrawi. This approach helps preserve our mother tongue, songs, and everyday practices for future generations.

The following chapters will guide the reader through the research and creative process behind my thesis project, beginning with an introduction to its core objectives and research questions. The methodology section outlines the autoethnographic approach and secondary research that informed the work, focusing on the power of lyrics, the role of storytelling in illustration, and the depiction of Arabs in Western media. This is followed by a historical and cultural analysis that explores Baghdadiyat, the various Arabic dialects in Iraq, and the use of symbolism in visual representation. The body of work and design process sections detail the components of the project, including efforts to bridge language barriers and the mediums and techniques used. The reader will also be introduced to the selected songs, which demonstrate how lyrics shape visual storytelling. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the exhibition and presentation of the work, as well as the project's impact and its contribution to the broader discourse on language, culture, and identity.

## Research Questions & Project Objectives

The diverse dialects of Iraq are brought to life through fun and modern illustrations. These illustrations reveal the nuances of Iraq's linguistic and artistic heritage to those unfamiliar with it. At the same time, for Iraqis living abroad, they provide a meaningful way to reconnect with their roots, bridging generational gaps that could be in language, traditions, and cultural experiences between older and younger Iraqis, particularly those raised in the diaspora.

In my thesis, I question how can graphic design, illustration and the design implementations into generic everyday products combine to create an immersive experience that authentically showcases the diversity of Iraqi dialects from Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra through songs and lyrics? Moreover, how does the preservation and celebratory portrayal of these dialects not only affirm but also deepen the shared heritage and lived experiences of diaspora Iraqis in Western societies? How does this, strengthen their emotional and linguistic connection to their land and foster a profound bond with their roots? In this research, I focus on the shared language, traditions, values, and customs of Iraq, exploring how people connect to their heritage through dialects, storytelling, music, and art. Cultural identity is not only rooted in these tangible elements but also in the collective memory and emotional ties individuals have to their homeland, even when living in diaspora. In *Shako Mako*, my goal is to create an interdisciplinary

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<sup>7</sup> "Collective memory refers to the shared pool of memories, knowledge, and information among a group that significantly contributes to the group's identity" (Roediger).

visual identity and illustrative experience that blends various art and design disciplines with Iraqi song lyrics. This aims to evoke a linguistic and cultural sense of belonging for an Iraqi audience and strengthen their connection to their homeland.

Why do songs hold such significant cultural importance in Iraqi society? How do they serve as crucial channels for preserving folklore traditions, everyday stories, and traditional phrases? Additionally, how do they convey historical narratives and strengthen the shared language, values, and emotional connection to ethnic background among diverse communities within Iraq and across its diaspora?

My project's central goal is to explore and showcase the beauty and significance of Iraqi dialects as essential components of cultural heritage. By incorporating the three most distinct dialects from Baghdad, Mosul and Basra into visually engaging illustration-based products, the project aims to both preserve and educate. Through storytelling and visual representation, it provides an intimate glimpse into Iraq's daily life, social customs, and emotional expressions embedded from song lyrics. The project captures the essence of Iraqi identity by exploring the connection to language, cultural practices, and historical narratives, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of these elements among those distanced from their roots.

Younger Iraqis in North America may not speak their ancestral dialects fluently or fully understand the cultural nuances embedded in everyday expressions. By visually representing these dialects from various regions in Iraq, the project informs younger Iraqis with the heritage their parents and grandparents grew up with. Using digital media and interactive design implementations into generic everyday products, make traditional cultural elements more accessible and engaging for today's audience. The songs I have chosen for my thesis project reflects the daily lives, humor, expressions of love and longing of Iraqis, which risk being lost or undervalued with time in diaspora communities. The thesis aims to capture and sustain this Iraqi heirloom for future generations.

This project aims to reach a larger audience with artwork that tells unique Iraqi stories in the art style that bridges the past and present. Much like the Japanese American illustrator Yuko Shimizu,<sup>8</sup> who combines traditional ink brush painting technique with bold color palettes and dynamic compositions. This fusion between traditional tools used in a contemporary way creates a dynamic blend of past and present, allowing for innovative expression while preserving cultural authenticity. By combining the Iraqi Baghdadiyat art style with my contemporized minimal approach, I am developing my own distinct style of illustration that I aim to be recognized as *Shako Mako's* signature visual aesthetic. Additionally, I am influenced by urban fashion company Jobedu,<sup>9</sup> whose product line serves as tangible goods that people wear and carry to represent a significant aspect of their culture. With my own products, I aim to produce everyday items, such as apparel and accessories, that allow people to proudly

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<sup>8</sup> Yuko Shimizu is a Japanese illustrator based in New York City whose work combines Japanese heritage with contemporary reference points (Gosling 2017).

<sup>9</sup> "Jobedu embodies the spirit of urban culture with a distinct fusion of contemporary fashion and authentic Arabic flair. Every stitch, every design, and every slogan is a testament to the raw energy and diversity found in the bustling streets of our region" (Jobedu 2025).

showcase and connect with their Iraqi heritage, making culture accessible and wearable in everyday life.

## Research Methodology

### *Autoethnography*

The primary research method for *Shako Mako* relies on autoethnography, a method that combines personal experience with cultural analysis. As an Iraqi who has never lived in Iraq, autoethnography offers a unique lens through which I can explore my identity, shaped by the cultural influences of the countries I've lived in. This approach allows me to blend the subjective nature of personal experience with the objective analysis of broader cultural contexts, creating an intimate and reflective examination of identity. My personal stories, which depict the experiences of an ethnic Iraqi who has only encountered Iraqi culture from afar, inform this research and provide valuable insights. This is not only a theoretical exploration, but rather a lived experience. The insights I offer come from my own ongoing journey, shaped by my upbringing, the stories shared by my family, and my personal search for connection with my homeland. It's a continuous process of reconciling my Iraqi heritage with my reality as a diaspora citizen, seeking to feel rooted in a place I have never fully inhabited.

Although I have never lived in Iraq, I've always felt a deep connection through my family's traditions, language, and shared cultural references, all of which have shaped my understanding of patriotism. Patriotism, in this context, is not simply a feeling of loyalty toward a physical homeland; it is a sense of emotional and cultural attachment that transcends geography. Recording my thoughts and recollections of past stories and experiences through mind mapping and journaling (Figure 1) has allowed me to reflect on my understanding of my position as a member of the Iraqi diaspora. This journal helps me explore how my heritage influences my art, language, and sense of self. My visual documentation, which includes sketches and digital designs, serves as both a creative outlet and a record of my evolving understanding of Iraqi culture. These records allow me to analyze my experiences and knowledge, translating them into illustrated compositions that can be shared as visual stories with a wider audience. The thesis investigates how feelings of patriotism are expressed, maintained, or transformed within the diaspora and how they contribute to the formation of a distinct cultural identity.

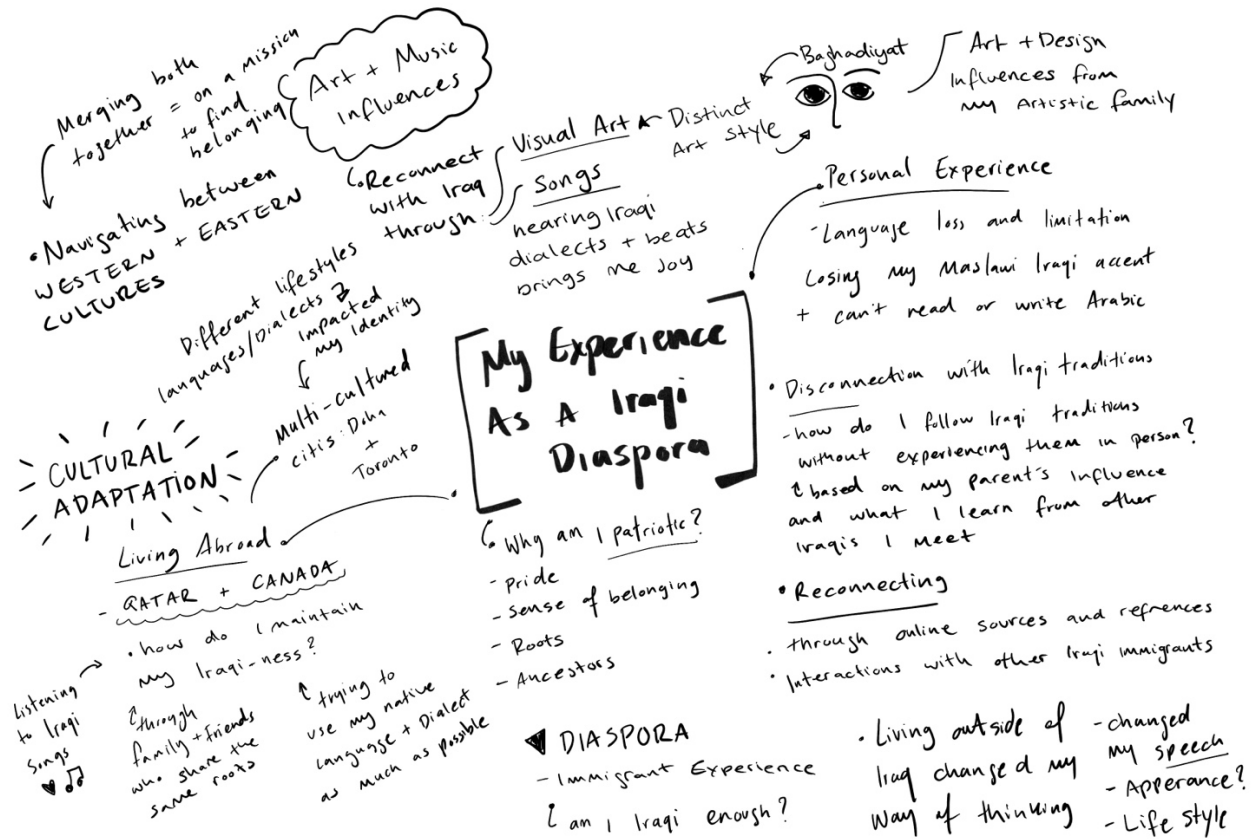


Figure 1. Mind mapping my thought process.

### Secondary Research

In addition, qualitative and quantitative secondary research played an essential role in this thesis. This involves analyzing statistics, engaging in literature reviews to provide an overview of current knowledge and content, and identifying and debating similar themes that have been thoroughly explored by scholars. By examining the cities of Iraq, their unique dialects, and the famous song lyrics that embody the cultural essence of the country, I will gather a broader cultural context from various scholars' publications and historical accounts.

Secondary research from published articles and scholarly publications provides definitions and analyses of the key themes explored in this thesis: the power of lyrics, Baghdadiyat, storytelling, dialects, and symbolism. One of the most influential sources for my project goals was the publication *A is for Arab: Archiving Stereotypes in U.S. Popular Culture*. This work played a critical role in shaping my understanding of how visual representation affects cultural narratives. Growing up, I mainly watched Western children's cartoon shows, many of which displayed negative stereotypes about Arabs. These depictions often relied on exaggerated or inaccurate idea of the culture with a narrow and biased lens. Recognizing the impact of such representations, I felt a strong personal and professional responsibility to challenge and deconstruct these representations. Incorporating *A is for Arab* into my research provided a

framework for creating illustrations that promote a more authentic, nuanced, and positive depiction of Arab identity.

### *The Power of Lyrics*

Music is a universal art form deeply intertwined with human emotion. Rhythm, harmony, and melody plays key roles in evoking feelings. However, lyrics introduce another dimension, often intensifying emotional responses. In their study *When Words Matter: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Lyrics and Their Relationship to Musical Emotions*, Gonçalo T. Barradas and Laura S. Sakka investigate the psychological impact of lyrics across cultures. They argue that “when comparing emotional responses to music alone with a combination of music and lyrics, the addition of lyrics to music resulted in a stronger effect on mood” (Barradas and Sakka 2022). This highlights the unique ability of lyrics to enhance emotional depth beyond instrumental music alone. Their research provides evidence supporting the role of lyrics in shaping listeners' emotions, reinforcing the significance of language as an emotional expression. This finding directly correlates to my research, which explores how Iraqi dialects in song lyrics evoke cultural nostalgia and emotional depth. By incorporating lyrics from Baghdad, Mosul and Basra my work allows audiences to recognize and connect with their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Music and lyrics trigger one's emotions, particularly they influence a listener's emotional state and sense of nostalgia. Barradas and Sakka argue that lyrics often resonate on a personal level, bringing to mind past experiences and the feeling of nostalgia. “Lyrics increased the activation of episodic memory” (Barradas and Sakka 2022).<sup>10</sup> The emotional power of music and lyrics in shaping memory and nostalgia parallels the impact of visual representation in shaping cultural narratives.

Lyrics evoke powerful emotions such as sadness, joy, love, or nostalgia, especially when tied to cultural memory and personal experience. They can even activate psychological mechanisms like episodic memory, which allows people to recall specific events along with the time and place in which they occurred. This connection enables listeners to relate songs to personal or collective experiences, making the music more meaningful. I found it compelling that lyrics deepen our connection to music not just emotionally, but also through memory and imagery (Barradas and Sakka 2022). Songs with lyrics are more likely to trigger emotional responses, mental imagery, and personal memories. What stood out to me was how lyrics can evoke historical nostalgia, helping listeners connect with their identity and process emotions. This reinforces the importance of using authentic dialects in my work. By extracting and incorporating these dialects through song lyrics, I can foster a deeper emotional connection between the audience and the linguistic heritage I aim to celebrate.

“The potential to influence people's behaviour is also embedded in song lyrics, especially lyrics that are emotional, exceptional, profound, and persuasive. Perceptions and the sense of identity are highly influenced by music lyrics. Song lyrics serve as a carrier of cultural norms given that lyrics greatly contribute to reflecting cultural historicity and shaping the identity of society” (Mwansa 2). Lyrics in music are a significant cultural product, reflecting the identity and norms of

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<sup>10</sup> *Episodic Memory*: “a type of long-term memory that involves conscious recollection of previous experiences together with their context in terms of time, place, associated emotions, etc.” (Define Episodic Memory 2012)

a society. The way lyrics are written and combined with music often mirrors cultural values. In Iraq, song lyrics often focus on themes of sadness, resilience, love and shared traditions, which align with its collectivist cultural mindset. These lyrics not only express cultural values but also influence how people relate to music in their daily lives, making lyrics a powerful medium for preserving and celebrating regional dialects and oral traditions. With lyrics being the key component, Iraqi music and poetry has been used as a medium for emotional expression and storytelling. Traditional Iraqi songs often explore themes of longing and love. One of the nine songs I have chosen to illustrate is the folk song *Yardileh* (يردلي), sung in the Maslawi dialect. The lyrics express the singer's frustration with the train for taking away his loved one. Despite being a love song, the Maslawi dialect often incorporates lighthearted and humorous phrasing, adding a unique charm to the emotional narrative. All the songs I have chosen to work with are deeply rooted to regional dialects, each with unique sounds, rhythms, and meanings. Incorporating these diverse dialects into my illustrations allows me to preserve and celebrate Iraq's cultural and rich linguistic diversity. Each dialect brings a unique emotional and cultural context to the lyrics, making them powerful tools for storytelling.

Barradas and Sakka's also highlight the BRECVEMA framework to explain how music and lyrics evoke emotions through mechanisms like visual imagery and episodic memory. "A comprehensive approach for explaining how music arouses emotions is described in the BRECVEMA framework. This theoretical model features eight mechanisms, which are considered to underlie the induction of musical emotions: brain stem reflex, rhythmic entrainment, evaluative conditioning, emotional contagion, visual imagery, episodic memory, musical expectancy, and aesthetic judgment" (Barradas and Sakka 2022). The BRECVEMA framework explains how music creates emotions using different ways, such as triggering memories, matching our feelings, creating mental images, or syncing with our body rhythms. These mechanisms provide a foundation for my artistic process. By visually interpreting lyrics, I aim to evoke the same kind of nostalgia and emotional connection that listeners experience when hearing a familiar song in their native dialect. Visual storytelling through illustrations adds another layer to this process. I can add to the emotional impact of the stories by using symbolic elements, color palettes, and cultural patterns inspired by the lyrics.

I see lyrics as a bridge between the past and present, connecting themes and contexts through the meaning of the words. My project draws inspiration from this duality, using modern artistic techniques to reinterpret traditional Iraqi lyrics. For example, one of my illustrations is a love song from southern Iraq and it is represented with an illustration that combines traditional patterns, such as palm trees, done in a subtle and abstract way. This approach not only celebrates the cultural roots of the lyrics but also reimagines them, providing Western audiences with greater context and deeper understanding beyond the lyrics themselves. Each illustration becomes a celebration of the dialect it represents, showcasing the unique pronunciation, vocabulary, and emotional tone of the region. Not only does this preserve the cultural identity embedded in the lyrics but also invites viewers to engage with Iraq's linguistic diversity in a new and meaningful way. Barradas and Sakka have shown me that lyrics are more than just words; they are carriers of emotion, memory, and identity. By bringing these qualities to life through illustrations, my work seeks to honor the rich tradition of Iraqi lyrics while making them accessible to a wider audience, not only those who know and understand it. This process is a

testament to the power of lyrics as a cultural product. In a world where globalization can fade local traditions, projects like mine highlight the importance of preserving cultural heritage. Just as the study shows how lyrics can trigger emotions and memories through the BRECVEMA framework, my illustrations aim to create pride and connection to Iraq's musical and poetic traditions through the sense of nostalgia and engaging emotions through familiar lyrics, dialects and visuals. By turning lyrics into visual stories, my thesis research and project adds to the conversation about how art helps preserve culture, ensuring Iraq's stories and voices inspire future generations.

### *Storytelling Through Illustrations*

Illustrations has been a medium for storytelling for many years, allowing narratives to unfold through imagery and imagination, which is far more powerful than text and words alone. In a publication by The British Museum, *A history of storytelling through pictures*, it highlights that “humans have long used pictures to communicate their greatest tales,” emphasizing the historical and cross-cultural significance of visual storytelling (History of Storytelling Through Pictures 2025). This storytelling approach is similarly reflected in Iraqi historical accounts, as many Mesopotamian artifacts and Assyrian relics feature various forms of imagery through painting,<sup>11</sup> sculptures and reliefs. Ancient Assyria was a powerful civilization, centered in what is now northern Iraq. The Assyrian kings built grand structures, and Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) was the first to decorate his palace with carved stone panels. These artworks were not only decorative but also served to tell stories and history. The wall panels are arranged in sections, similar to a modern comic strip, allowing them to be read from left to right or right to left. Events from different times are often shown within the same scene, enabling the viewer to follow the story in sequence (History of Storytelling Through Pictures 2025). From ancient cave paintings to contemporary graphic novels, illustrations have preserved stories for future generations. Visual storytelling engages viewers by stimulating both cognitive and emotional responses, allowing the audience to interpret narratives through symbols, colors, and compositions. Unlike text storytelling, illustrations provide an intuitive understanding of a story's themes and emotions, this is especially beneficial when language barrier is a component to take into consideration. In the context of my thesis, the use of illustration as a storytelling tool is not only to celebrate the linguistic diversity of Iraqi dialects but also provides a visual representation of these expressions. Illustrations can bring lyrical and cultural narratives to life, transforming abstract concepts into tangible experiences that resonate with diverse audiences.

### *The Elements of Storytelling*

In researching about the structure of storytelling, Klaus Fog in his book *Storytelling: Branding in Practice*, introduces the four essential elements of storytelling, stating, “Like the four elements of nature—earth, wind, fire, and water—there are four elements that make up the core basis of storytelling” (Fog 2004). The four elements; **message**, **conflict**, **characters**, and **plot**, serve as the foundation for an impactful narrative. Fog applies this framework to outline the mechanism of a good story. In my work, the message centers on preserving Iraqi heritage, local dialects,

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<sup>11</sup> “Assyrians are an indigenous ethnic group native to Mesopotamia, a geographical region in West Asia. Modern Assyrians claim descent directly from the ancient Assyrians, one of the key civilizations of Mesopotamia” (Assyrian People 2025).

and traditional customs and expressions through illustrations. Conflict emerges in the struggle between nostalgia and modernity, belonging and displacement, tradition and adaptation. The characters in my visual storytelling include the voices of the Iraqi diaspora, figures from folklore, and personal representations of cultural memories. Finally, the plot unfolds through a series of illustrations that weave together personal experiences and visual reinterpretations of Iraqi music and dialects.

Storytelling is most powerful when it carries a clear message and emotional depth. “First you must develop a clearly defined message. Without it, there is no reason to tell stories—at least not with a strategic purpose” (Fog 2004). In my illustrated series, each composition goes beyond a literal visual translation of the lyrics. It tells a story about the region the song originates from, highlighting the traditions, customs, and cultural practices embedded within the music. Through these illustrations, I aim to capture the deeper emotions each composition conveys, such as a sense of nostalgia for a lost homeland, pride in cultural roots, a longing for connection, and the enduring resilience of the Iraqi spirit. These emotions reflect how Iraqis remain connected to their native milieu.

Conflict is essential to any compelling story because it reflects human nature. “Conflict is the driving force of a good story. No conflict, no story. But why is this the case? The answer lies in human nature. As humans, we instinctively look for balance and harmony in our lives” (Fog 2004). At first glance, my thesis project may not seem to contain conflict. However, upon deeper reflection, I realized the interplay between nostalgia and modernity, as well as the struggle between personal and collective identity within the Iraqi diaspora. My visual representations are rooted in my own lived experiences, memories, and reflections, which inherently shape my perspective on Iraqi culture and language. This personal lens, however, may not align with the interpretations or experiences of others in the community. Some may view my approach as too contemporary, straying from traditional representations, while others may feel that my depictions of lyrics or cultural symbols do not fully encompass the diverse experiences of Iraqis across different regions and generations. This becomes an integral part of the narrative, reflecting the broader complexities of what it means to be Iraqi in the diaspora.

I agree with Fog’s statement that “In order to get personally involved with a story, we, as readers or listeners, must be able to identify with the characters. This happens especially when we recognize a little bit of ourselves in the characters in the story” (Fog 2004). In my work, the characters I have illustrated are intentionally crafted to evoke nostalgia, drawing inspiration from the distinctive visual style of Baghdadiyat portraits. This is especially evident in details such as facial hair on men and the traditional attire paired with the sidara headwear.<sup>12</sup> While these classical styles may no longer be commonly worn by members of the Iraqi diaspora in the West, they remain deeply cherished symbols of cultural identity and heritage. Through these familiar visual cues, my illustrations create a bridge between past and present.

The structure and progression of a story are just as important as its message and characters in shaping the audience's experience. “Once your message, conflict, and cast of characters are all

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<sup>12</sup> *Sidara* is a traditional headwear worn by Iraqi men

in place, it is time to think about how your story should progress. The flow of the story and its events are vital to the audience's experience" (Fog 2004). Although my storytelling takes the form of 2D illustrations rather than a written narrative or a moving picture, the sequencing of my work plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's journey. The arrangement of my illustrations as a sequence informs the exhibition design, guiding viewers through a visual and emotional progression. I have structured the exhibition to take the audience on a journey from the South to the North of Iraq. Each illustration acts as a chapter, revealing regional differences in dialect, traditions, and artistic motifs while maintaining a cohesive visual narrative. This intentional flow emphasizes the diversity and unity within its cultural landscape.

### *Stereotype and the Shift in Representation*

The depiction of Arabs in Western media has always been controlled by harmful stereotypes, which plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Arabs. These portrayals have negatively influenced not only political but social positions toward Arab communities. A crucial part of my thesis project and illustrations plays a role to dismantle these stereotypes and replace them with authentic storytelling.

In the book *A is for Arab: Archiving Stereotypes in U.S. Popular Culture*, it was stated how Arabs have consistently been negatively represented in media, reinforcing a dehumanizing perception of Arab identity. An American reporter, Walter Lippmann, once noted that "The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them".<sup>13</sup> This concept is crucial in understanding how Western audiences have been accustomed to view Arabs through a narrow and orientalist lens.<sup>14</sup> The repetition of these images in Hollywood films, television, comic books, and even children's cartoons has reinforced biases that influence both media and real-world policies, shaping viewers' perceptions of Arabs, particularly among those who have never traveled to the Middle East or interacted with Arab communities. This lack of direct experience makes it difficult to differentiate between reality and the distorted portrayals in media.

Throughout history, repeated portrayals in media and popular culture have contributed to the development of biased perceptions of Arab identity. As a result, harmful stereotypes have spread. "Over time, these pervasive, persistent images helped create and enforce prejudicial attitudes toward Islam, Arabs, and Muslims, resulting in a narrow view of the Arab" (Tchen and Manghnani 18). This narrow view fails to capture the richness of Arab cultures, particularly the diverse dialects, traditions, and lived experiences that my thesis aims to highlight. One of the key objectives of my thesis is to challenge these negative portrayals by offering an authentic narrative that centers on the unique and nuanced linguistic and cultural diversity within Iraq. My work seeks to retrieve the authenticity of Arab representation and celebrate the beauty of an often-misrepresented culture.

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Lippmann in *A is For Arab: Archiving Stereotype in U.S. Popular Culture*.

<sup>14</sup> "Orientalist can refer to a Western depiction of Eastern cultures. The term has also come to be used as a degrading term for biased views of the East" (Said 1978)

While Arab men are often portrayed as ugly and cruel villains, Western depictions of Arab women are depicted as helpless who are obedient to men and have no agency. “As a rule, Arab women have been projected as mostly mute and submissive figures: belly dancers, bundles in black, and beasts of burden. Arab men surface as villains: Bedouin bandits, sinister sheikhs, buffoons, and gun wielding *terrorists*” (Tchen and Manghnani 15). As an Arab woman, I am proud of my roots and how my ethnic background and culture shaped me into becoming the individual I am today. My visual interpretations of lyrics serve as a counterpoint to these wrong perceptions. By challenging these portrayals through research and creative expression, I aim to shed light on the complexity, strength, and resilience of Arab women. The project highlights the diverse voices and roles of Arab women in society, reinforcing a positive and authentic imagery on Arab women, in specific, Iraqi women. This research is crucial in creating a better understanding of Arab identity and promoting cultural awareness. I hope to contribute to a broader movement advocating for accurate and diverse representations of Arabs in Western media.

My project adopts this concept in a transformative way, using it as a method of resistance against false narratives. Through design, illustration, and storytelling, I have created a visual system that not only preserves but also reshapes the perception of Iraqi culture. This system consists specific color schemes, symbolic attire and historic artifacts as well as facial features that evoke emotions tied to Iraqi identity. The visual language serves to offer positive representation for Iraqi diaspora communities, fostering a sense of connection and empowerment. At the same time, it allows Western audiences to engage with authentic Arab representations created by an Arab, challenging stereotypes and promoting a deeper understanding of the culture through a fresh, personal perspective.

Through design and illustrative storytelling, my project takes back control of the narrative and challenges the narrow views often shown in Western media, offering a more accurate and detailed picture of Arab identity. This research not only aims to correct stereotypes but also promotes understanding, encourages dialogs, and creates space for real Arab voices to be heard. My illustrations specifically focus on traditional Iraqi men and women, highlighting distinct clothing, hairstyles, and landscapes. I aimed to represent one of Iraq's most cherished traits, hospitality, by making the characters appear friendly and approachable. Generosity and kindness are deeply rooted in our community, not as acts of pretense, but as values we have grown up with. These qualities are often unknown to Westerners, who only come to understand them once they have the opportunity to meet an Iraqi in person. By focusing on everyday Iraqi culture and Arabic dialects, my work adds to a bigger movement of representation and preservation, ensuring that Arab Iraqi identity is shaped by its history, traditions, and people.

### *Baghdadiyat*

In *Shako Mako*, I am incorporating *Baghdadiyat*, the traditional art style that derived from Baghdad. It is influenced by the country's rich heritage and blends classical art with modern art, which seeks to connect the past with the present. *Baghdadiyat* art has become a cultural symbol, it typically features vibrant colors, intricate designs, and symbolic representations of the country's landscapes and people. “A number of different art movements emerged in Iraq following the colonial period. ‘The Pioneers’ founded the first twentieth-century movement,

closely followed by the 'Primitive Group'. By 1951, two prominent Iraqi artists had come together to form one of the country's most well-known movements, The Baghdad Modern Art Group. Founded by Jawad Saleem and Shakir Hassan Al Said, their aim was to reinterpret Western Modern Art to incorporate Iraqi heritage, culture, and tradition" (The Baghdad Modern Art Group 2021).

Jawad Saleem's artistic philosophy and contributions to modern Iraqi art align closely with my thesis project, which explores the intersection of cultural identity and contemporary visual representation. Jawad Saleem (1919-1961), is widely considered one of the most influential figures in modern Iraqi art. His legacy, deeply tied to both his personal experiences and his unique artistic vision, continues to resonate with artists and cultural movements around the world. Saleem was born into a family of artists in Baghdad, where he was exposed to creativity from a very early age. His artistic journey, however, extended far beyond his early years in Iraq. He pursued his art education in Europe, studying in Paris and Rome, which exposed him to various avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Surrealism. This experience influenced his approach to art but did not diminish his commitment to portraying the culture and identity of his homeland. Instead, Saleem wanted to reinterpret European styles and modernist techniques through the lens of his own Iraqi heritage, contributing to the development of a unique, modern Iraqi artistic voice (Jawad Saleem 2024).

This connection to an artistic family is something I relate to on a personal level. Much like Saleem, I grew up in an environment that nurtured both my design and artistic expression. My father is a renowned portrait artist, and my mother is a talented graphic designer. This dual artistic influence has allowed me to become well versed in both fields, and I continue to work as both a designer and an artist today. I find that this upbringing has not only shaped my artistic sensibilities but has also created a deep respect for the importance of heritage in creative practices. Just as Saleem used his European education with his Iraqi roots, I strive to blend the techniques I've learned through my graphic design practice and drawing skills with the traditions and symbols that define my cultural identity.

This art style is characterized by its display of everyday life in Iraq, capturing the cultural and social essence through a distinct visual language. This style is deeply rooted in a sense of nostalgia and collective memory, reflecting the historical and contemporary identity of Iraq. Baghdadiyat highlights its function in bridging tradition and modernity, allowing for reinterpretations that maintain and sustain cultural authenticity while engaging with contemporary artistic expressions.

### **Some of the key attributes of Baghdadiyat art:**

1: Vibrant and earthy color tones: The vibrant tones in Baghdadiyat art displays a sense of energy and life. The use of vibrant tones also suggests a connection to the vibrancy of daily life and the energy of Iraq and specifically Baghdad. Earthy colors, such as browns, ochres, and deep greens, are also key components of the Baghdadiyat style. These tones represent the natural landscape and architecture structures of Iraq. Faeq Hassan's *Village Scene* (Figure 2) reinforces the idea that Baghdadiyat art uses vibrant and earthy tones to reflect both the energy of daily life and the natural environment of Iraq.



Figure 2. Faeq Hasan, *Village Scene*, executed circa 1950's. *ArtNet*, [www.artnet.com/artists/faeq-hassan/village-scene-r8t7bR0TsTKboBq1TwJMXQ2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/faeq-hassan/village-scene-r8t7bR0TsTKboBq1TwJMXQ2).

**2: Geometric abstractions:** The Baghdadiyat style embraces basic geometric shapes such as squares, triangles and circles. These shapes are often used in an abstracted manner interaction between forms. By simplifying forms into geometric structures, the artwork focuses on emotions and harmony, which are central to both Islamic art and modern abstraction. Selim's *Young Man and Wife* painting (Figure 3) showcases this blend of curves and geometric forms to create a cohesive composition of figuration and abstraction.



Figure 3. Jawad Selim, *Young Man and Wife*, 1953. *Smarthistory*, <https://smarthistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/image-2048x1359.jpg>.

**3: Everyday scenes:** The Baghdadiyat style is deeply rooted in the representation of everyday life in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad. This style captures the rhythms, labor, traditions, and communal aspects of Iraqi society by merging the visual language of modern abstract art, such as simplified forms, bold lines, and geometric shapes, with motifs, stories, and artistic traditions rooted in Iraq's history and culture. In this context, this refers to the elements of Iraqi life passed down through generations, such as traditional clothing, local markets, street scenes, and architectural landmarks. It stands as a powerful artistic expression of everyday life in Iraq. Faisal Laibi Sahi's *Coffee Shop 4* (Figure 4) showcases how the Baghdadiyat style captures the routine of life in Iraq. The painting portrays a traditional Iraqi coffee shop, a central space for social interaction and gatherings. The coffee shop in the painting reflects a vital part of daily life in Iraq, where people gather to converse, play games like dominoes and backgammon, drink tea, and discuss politics, poetry, and social issues.



Figure 4. Faisal Laibi, *Coffee Shop 4*, 2016. Barjeel Art Foundation, [www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/faisal-laibi-sahicoffee-shop-4/](http://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/faisal-laibi-sahicoffee-shop-4/).

**4: Storytelling thematic structure:** Through depictions of everyday scenes, folklore, and historical events, Baghdadiyat paintings serve as visual storytelling devices that preserve and celebrate Iraq's heritage. This style captures expressive figures, intricate compositions, and rich color palettes, artists in this movement craft visual stories that preserve Iraqi identity while inviting viewers to engage with the narratives. *Watermelon Sellers* by Hafidh Al-Droubi (Figure 5) is an excellent representation of storytelling within the Baghdadiyat art. The painting portrays a common marketplace scene where vendors are selling watermelons, representing Iraqi street markets. This setting reflects a typical aspect of daily life in Iraq, where street sellers play a crucial role in daily community interactions.



Figure 5. Hafidh Al-Droubi, *Watermelon Sellers*, 1969. Barjeel Art Foundation, [www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/hafidh-aldroubi-watermelon-sellers/](http://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/hafidh-aldroubi-watermelon-sellers/).

In adapting the Baghdadiyat style to my own illustrations, I strive to honor the innovative spirit that artists like Saleem infused into his art. I am exploring new directions and adding my own artistic interpretations of line expressions, characteristics, colors, and techniques. One of the most interesting elements of Baghdadiyat that I incorporate into my work is the distinct use of simplified and stylized facial features. Characteristics such as wide eyes, circular faces, and single-line drawings for eyebrows and noses are techniques I am integrating into my illustrations, as they create an immediate visual connection to the style. These minimalist forms, which appear simple at first glance, hold deep emotional and cultural significance. By incorporating these features, I aim to capture the essence of Saleem's style while adapting it to reflect my own contemporary context and style in illustration.

An essential characteristic of Baghdadiyat that particularly influences my creative approach is its storytelling genre. Saleem used not only facial expressions but also background environments, body postures, and symbolic themes to represent complex ideas and convey emotions. I aim to incorporate the environment in my illustrations to enhance the emotional depth and symbolic meaning of the work. Based on my background settings and choice, I can evoke a sense of place that adds to the characters' emotional states or the underlying themes of the narrative. For example, an empty landscape might make people feel isolated or sad, while a crowded scene

could show happiness or togetherness. These are two of the nine scenes I have used in my illustrations. I hope to ground my art in the rich cultural history of Iraq while using modern techniques to make these symbols accessible to a wider audience. In doing so, I celebrate traditional Iraqi art and contribute to the conversation about preserving culture in a globalized world.

5. Simplicity and sophistication: Although Saleem's works often employed geometric forms and minimalist compositions, they carried significant emotional and symbolic weight. This duality is one of the most important aspects of Baghdadiyat, and it is something I consciously adopt in my work. By simplifying the composition, I intend to highlight cultural symbols and references while leaving space for personal interpretation. For example, I have incorporated geometric patterns found in Iraqi furniture fabric, iconic structures from Baghdad's ancient buildings, and the symbolism of the date palm tree, which holds cultural significance in the region. This enables the viewer to engage with the artwork more deeply, encouraging a connection to the Iraqi scenes or stories while also appreciating the universal human values embedded within the piece. By keeping the designs simple I can maintain the clarity of the message while providing the viewer with the opportunity to explore the layers of subliminal meaning or even leave it open for interpretation.

I have always been drawn to the idea that art should not merely depict reality but rather communicate something deeper about the culture, history, and identity it represents. Incorporating Baghdadiyat into my illustration medium offers a unique framework to my art and design work. Saleem's works proved that art could act as a bridge between the past and the present, and I aim to continue this tradition in my own practice. As I reinterpret this style, I am not only looking to replicate Saleem's approach but to evolve and adapt its principles to address the complexities of modern life and the challenges of representing identity in an increasingly globalized world while still illustrating stories from Iraq's history. Through my work my goal is to celebrate the visual richness of Iraqi culture and contribute to the evolving conversation about the role of tradition in modern creative practices. Art, for Saleem, was a tool for cultural storytelling and preservation and in my own practice I aim to keep that spirit alive, reimagining Baghdadiyat for new audiences while honoring its timeless connection to the Iraqi cultural identity.

This style serves as a reminder of the power of art to shape and define national identity. By adapting and evolving these artistic traditions, I aim to continue the conversation about cultural narratives and maintain the ongoing dialogue around art, culture, and identity, cultivating an appreciation for the lasting importance of tradition in the creation of contemporary art.

### *Dialects in Iraq and Visual Representations*

Across Iraq, dialects carry unique linguistic features, such as the playful sayings of Baghdad, the humorous slang of Mosul or the poetic expressions of Basra. The lyrics I have chosen to represent each city showcase the attributes that best define these dialects. These dialectal differences are also rooted in the geographical and environmental conditions of each region. Each dialect is not only reflected through the typography but also through the visual language of the illustrations.

The expressive and musical nature of Basra's dialect is mirrored with the flowing lines and organic color palettes that represent the city's southern location and its deep connection to Gulf culture. The warmth of Basra shape not only its lyrical dialect but also the deeper and thicker sounding manner of its people, which I reflect through balanced compositions and gentle movement in my illustrations.

In contrast, Baghdad's fast paced yet romantic way of communicating inspired me to create a structured yet charming and flirtatious connections with the characters in the compositions that reflect the energy and layered history of the capital. Baghdad, as a bustling center of commerce and culture, has absorbed a mix of linguistic influences, and I chose to showcase this layered history through architectural structures, symbolic elements, and an interplay of geometric and fluid forms.

Mosul's delightful and witty dialect is conveyed through playful composition arrangements and character expressions that emphasize the humor embedded in its everyday speech. Mosul's dialect, influenced by its mountainous landscape and cooler climate, carries a fresh yet calming atmosphere, which I visually capture through sharp contrast colors, intimate compositions, and more harmonious relationships between the characters in the drawings.

My approach to translating dialects visually includes the use of regional symbols, expressive character design, and environmental elements. I incorporate local landmarks, cultural architecture, and traditional attire to root each piece into its origins. The gestures and body language of illustrated figures reflect the rhythm and personality of their spoken dialects, ensuring that even without text, the illustrations communicate the distinct voice of each region and the meaning behind the lyrics.

### *Symbolism*

Symbolism is the practice of using objects, images, colors, or words to represent ideas, emotions or concepts beyond their literal meaning. In the context of visual arts, symbolism often creates emotional or intellectual impact, allowing for multiple layers of understanding and personal reflection. Nathalia Brodskaiia explains in her book *Symbolism*, symbolic imagery is used to convey inner experiences and philosophical ideas, aiming to evoke moods and emotions rather than portray physical reality (Brodskaiia 2023). It allows artists, designers, and researchers to capture complex narratives and communicate ideas that might otherwise be challenging to articulate with only words and text. In my research and illustrations, I explore the idea of symbolism as a core methodology, using it as a tool to interrogate semiotics, the study of signs, symbols, and their interpretation.

Semiotics provides a theoretical framework for understanding how meaning is constructed and communicated. It highlights and explores the relationship between the signifier, which is the form that a sign takes, and the signified, which is the concept it represents. David Crow in *Visible Signs* presents essential theories and concepts, such as signs, signifiers, language, and speech, all within the context of visual communication (Crow). By integrating semiotic principles, my work seeks to explore how visual elements can evoke shared or personal understandings and emotions, especially within a culturally and historically rich context like Iraq.

Iraq is a nation submerged in history. From the Mesopotamian civilization to the present day, Iraq's visual and cultural identity has been shaped by an interplay of mythology, art, and social values. As early as the ancient relics, such as cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals, and statues, are not just objects but vessels of meaning, reflecting the beliefs, values, and traditions of the societies that created them. Artifacts in Iraq such as historical as the Lamassu or Ishtar Gates to modern artifacts and sculptures such as the Freedom Monument or The Mother statue they are all representation to Iraq's rich culture and history. They tell stories of the people's past and values.

By embedding these symbols into my illustrations, I aim to bridge past and present, paying tribute to Iraq's historical legacy while recontextualizing it in a modern and minimal framework. For instance, the winged bull of Lamassu, a symbol of protection in Assyrian culture, serves not only as a representation of ancient religious and social values but also as a reminder of resilience and cultural identity in the face of adversity (Curtis 1995).

Symbols possess a unique ability to transcend linguistic barriers, communicating universal themes that resonate across cultures. They often evoke an emotional or subconscious response, grounding abstract concepts in tangible visuals (Barthes 1972). My use of symbolism is deeply rooted in this communicative power. By integrating Iraqi cultural elements, my work does not merely replicate historical motifs but reinterprets them to engage contemporary audiences.

This approach also examines how symbols contribute to identity formation and the preservation of collective memory. In the context of Iraq, where cultural heritage has often been threatened or misrepresented, symbolism becomes a tool of reclamation and storytelling. My illustrations, informed by semiotic analysis, seek to create a dialogue between the viewer and the visual elements, inviting interpretation and reflection on the layered meanings embedded within (Chandler 2002).

In my work, I use symbolism as a bridge between cultural stories and modern creative practices. By incorporating historical symbols into contemporary designs, I aim to bring new life into them, allowing them to move beyond their traditional contexts. This approach helps preserve the essence of Iraqi culture by ensuring these symbols remain visible and relevant in today's world. Each symbol carries with it layers of meaning, often rooted in the values, beliefs, and experiences of the past. By reinterpreting these symbols, I strive to create a dialogue between history and the present, highlighting the timeless significance of these cultural elements. At the same time, this work demonstrates cross-cultural understanding by drawing attention to the universal themes embedded in these symbols. Ideas like love, communication, beauty, and hospitality are not confined to one culture; they resonate with people everywhere. By showcasing these shared values, I hope to create a deeper sense of connection between diverse audiences. This blending of the traditional and the modern not only celebrates Iraqi heritage but also encourages others to see the richness of their own histories in a new light, promoting mutual appreciation and dialogue across cultures.

In my research, symbolism is not just a design tool but also a powerful method for exploring abstract representations in storytelling. Within illustrations and visual narratives, it becomes a

language catalyst that goes beyond words, enabling me to integrate Iraq's rich historical and cultural elements into modern contexts. Symbols act as visual anchors, carrying layers of meaning that bridge the past and the present. By weaving these symbols into contemporary illustrations, I ensure that the stories, values, and traditions of Iraq's heritage remain alive and relevant, resonating with new audiences. Each symbol serves as a portal to history, offering viewers a glimpse into the cultural identity and shared experiences that have shaped Iraqi society. This approach extends beyond preservation. It seeks to spark a profound appreciation for cultural heritage and its enduring influence on art and communication. In visual storytelling, symbolism enhances the narrative by adding depth and inviting interpretation, fostering a connection between the audience and the artwork. Through this process, my work contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural heritage can inspire creativity and dialogue, highlighting its role in enriching contemporary art and fostering meaningful connections across generations and communities

Graphic designers refer to pathos as one mode of communication to develop connotative messages using color,<sup>15</sup> imagery, typography, and composition to evoke specific emotions, whether it's joy, nostalgia, empathy, or love. The goal is to create a meaningful and memorable experience that resonates with viewers on an emotional level, ultimately leading to a deeper engagement with the content, product, or message being communicate. The pathos driven approach to this project focuses on emotional connection and cultural nostalgia to resonate deeply with the Iraqi diaspora. By incorporating familiar phrases, dialects, and cultural songs into the illustrations, the brand aims to evoke emotions, memories of the past, landscapes, the scent of national food, the sounds of the streets, and the breeze of the land. These elements collectively trigger a sense of belonging to Iraq as the homeland, fostering pride among Iraqis while educating those unfamiliar with Iraqi culture. Research into contemporary branding strategies, visual identity, and narrative construction informs the development of this project, ensuring that it not only captures the essence of Iraqi culture but also communicates it effectively to a diverse audience.

The project aims to create a powerful and emotive brand that not only revives Iraqi culture but also fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of it among a global audience, with autoethnographic insights, reflecting personal experiences and cultural stories.

## Body of Work & Design Process

This body of work focuses on developing a cohesive visual narrative through illustration, which draws inspiration from the lyrical richness of Iraqi songs. These illustrations will be applied across a range of merchandise products, such as tote bags, apparel, and everyday items, making cultural narratives accessible and engaging to a diverse audience. To enhance the impact of my illustrations, I've added an interactive layer by animating the 2D artwork, allowing it to come to life and further simulate a realistic representation of the scene.

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<sup>15</sup> *Pathos* – appealing to emotions: "Emotions have the power to modify our judgments, why appealing to emotions can help burst positive arguments or dampen negative arguments. Examples of using pathos to persuade are emotional outbursts, overstatements, narratives about emotional events, figurative or vivid language, or conveying connotative meanings". (Toxboe 2010)

### *Project Components*

The main component of the artwork consists of nine carefully crafted illustrations that serve as visual storytelling for selected song lyrics. Each region, spanning from the south to the north of Iraq, is represented through three unique illustrations. These are inspired by three songs chosen specifically to reflect the distinct linguistic, cultural, and musical traditions of their respective regions. The illustrations create vivid scenes that celebrate Iraq's diverse heritage by immersing viewers in the country's unique dialects and traditions. They also incorporate detailed references that visually translate song lyrics and highlight significant monuments, cultural icons, and distinctive regional elements. These visual cues are carefully selected to offer viewers a richer understanding of the cultural, historical, and geographical significance of each area depicted.

### *Bridging Language Barriers*

The nine illustrations are accompanied with the lyrics of the songs. First, the lyrics are displayed in their original language, Arabic, written in the regional dialect's phonetic style to authentically preserve their unique pronunciation and cultural identity. Second, the lyrics are transliterated into the Latin alphabet, allowing Arabic speakers who may not be literate in Arabic script to read the words as they are pronounced. This format also enables non-Arabic speakers to phonetically sound out the lyrics, creating a deeper engagement with the language. Lastly, the lyrics are translated into English, providing Western audiences with a clear understanding of their meaning and context. This presentation ensures that the artwork transcends linguistic barriers, making the cultural and emotional essence of the lyrics accessible to a global audience while honoring the richness of Iraq's dialects.

### *Merchandise Products*

The illustrations are not created for display purposes only. They are also integrated into the design of merchandise products where the artwork is transformed into functional and wearable pieces of cultural expression. The designs are featured on various items, such as tote bags, clothing, accessories, and home decor, ensuring the artwork reaches a wider audience through everyday use. Some merchandise showcases the full illustrations along with the accompanying lyrics, preserving the complete narrative and cultural essence of the songs. Other items focus on specific elements from the compositions, such as symbolic motifs, iconic imagery, or meaningful phrases from the lyrics. This approach offers flexibility, catering to different preferences while staying true to the artwork's cultural significance.

The development of a merchandise brand with a distinctive identity demonstrates expertise in branding and design principles, while the illustrations rooted in Iraqi song lyrics reflect my ability to create visual narratives. This project has allowed me to showcase a thorough understanding of cultural representation.

### *Animation*

To bring the still illustrations to life, I transformed them into looping animated videos, *using Adobe After Effects*, adding another layer of engagement for viewers. These animations were integrated into the exhibit through QR codes placed beside the artworks, allowing visitors to

scan them with their mobile phones and watch the illustrations come to life. The animations feature subtle movements, such as a figure's arm shifting, *rain drops* falling, or characters entering and exiting the frame. These motions are intentionally minimal to preserve the focus and integrity of the original illustrations while enhancing their emotional and visual impact. This approach not only deepens the viewer's experience but also modernizes the traditional Baghdadiyat art style, breathing new life into its classic techniques by merging *a traditional art style* with contemporary digital media.

### *Digital Brushes*

I have created all nine illustrations using digital tools, primarily Adobe Photoshop and a drawing tablet. I used *The Rusty Nib* digital brush set that imitate traditional pen and ink for the outlines of the drawings.<sup>16</sup> For coloring and shading, I use digital brushes that mimic brush markers, which gives texture and vibrancy. I specifically used the brush set *RizzCraft* which gives the digital artwork a risograph effect.<sup>17</sup> My process mimics analog textures to preserve the warmth and authenticity of the Baghdadiyat art style while blending tradition with modern adaptability. Creating these illustrations digitally is important for my project because I wanted to modernize the Baghdadiyat Iraqi art style, making it adaptable for a wider range of applications beyond traditional canvas paintings. Working digitally gives me the flexibility to easily make changes to my artwork, whether it's fixing small details, adjusting colors, or experimenting with different elements. This allows me to refine the design quickly and make sure the final piece matches my original vision without the limitations of traditional methods.

### *Typography*

For the typographic elements of the project, I have chosen to use Adobe Illustrator as my primary vector design tool to ensure that the typography is clean and precise, maintaining sharpness and clarity across various sizes and formats. This digital approach also provides the flexibility to experiment with different fonts, styles, weights, and colors, enabling me to quickly explore multiple options and make informed decisions based on how the typography interacts with the overall visual composition. This level of precision is crucial *as it* enhance the legibility and impact of the message being conveyed. Since my work is bilingual, it was essential to select a typeface that maintains cohesion across both Arabic and Latin scripts. I chose Brando Sans for its clean,<sup>18</sup> minimalistic design and readability in both languages. *The typeface* has a modern, sans-serif style that is both versatile and legible, making it suitable for diverse applications. Its simplicity allows it to function seamlessly in both Arabic and Latin scripts, ensuring that the two languages appear visually cohesive and unified.

The article *Word-As-Image for Semantic Typography* by Shir Iluz, explores the innovative concept of using typography to visually reflect the meaning of words through creative letterform manipulation, maintaining both aesthetics and readability. Semantic typography involves using typography to enhance the meaning of text visually. This can be done through the selection of

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<sup>16</sup> *The Rusty Nib* digital brush set from True Grit Texture Supply (The Rusty Nib 2025)

<sup>17</sup> *Rizzcraft* digital brush set from True Grit Texture Supply (Rizzcraft 2025)

<sup>18</sup> *Brando Sans* is an Adobe font designed by Mike Abbink, from *Bold Monday*, while *Brando Arabic* is designed by Khajag Apelian, Mike Abbink, and Wael Morcos.

typefaces, font sizes, styles, and other typographic features. A more creative approach to semantic typography is through word-as-image illustrations, where the meaning of a word is depicted using only the graphic components of its letters. These illustrations visually convey the word's meaning while maintaining its readability (Iluz 2023). This research got me to think about my use of typography with my artwork and how can the placement impact the overall message across to the audience. While my use of typography is more direct and does not incorporate much letterform manipulation, the incorporation of bilingual text introduces a layered communication strategy that bridges cultural contexts and enhances accessibility for diverse audiences. The process described in the article focuses on reshaping the outlines of letters to convey semantic meaning while preserving their original structure. Semantics focuses on the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences within a language. It studies how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and understood in communication. This aligns with my thesis research goal of creating culturally rich yet modern typographic and illustrative designs to visually translate song lyrics.

The article highlights the challenges and creative possibilities in semantic typography, noting that it requires both semantic understanding and design skill. Visualizing certain words might involve subtly reshaping letters to include elements that align with their meaning, creating a visual connection between the text and its concept. In my thesis artwork I am incorporate Iraqi cultural symbols and dialects into my illustrations and typography, allowing the design to resonate with both its visual form and its cultural significance. However, I do not intend to manipulate the typographic designs to incorporate visual meanings, as that role is fulfilled by the illustrations. Instead, I want the meaning behind the words to take center stage. The linguistic richness of the lyrics, with their poetic phrasing and beautiful pronunciation, already conveys deep meaning. By preserving the integrity of the text, the typography can emphasize the cultural and linguistic beauty of the lyrics without overshadowing them with additional visual elements.

The article mentions a key point about audience engagement, which is very relevant to my research project. It highlights the importance of combining visual creativity with functionality to ensure that typography conveys meaning effectively. Similarly, my thesis project aims to captivate both Iraqi and non-Iraqi audiences by using illustrations and typography to tell stories that transcend language barriers. The article showcases the valuable insights into how semantic typography can elevate the storytelling potential of text. By incorporating its principles into my artwork and research, I can enhance the cultural and emotional impact of my project.

Transliteration is “the act, process, or result of writing letters or words using the corresponding characters of another alphabet or writing system” (Dictionary.Com 2025). For example, the Arabic word *سلام*, meaning *peace*, is written as *salaam* in the Latin alphabet so that people who don't read Arabic can pronounce it correctly.

I am using the process of transliteration to bridge the gap between the Arabic language and those who, like me, face challenges in reading it. Growing up, I struggled with literacy in Arabic, especially when I encountered beautifully designed Arabic merchandise but was unable to read what the product said. I feel a sense of embarrassment when I'm wearing something with Arabic text, and when I'm asked what it says, I can't read it to them. Despite being able to speak the language, I found it difficult to fully engage with any written text. This struggle often left me

feeling disconnected from a significant part of my cultural heritage, as many of the songs, poems, and other cultural expressions I cherished were locked behind a script that I couldn't read. As I became more immersed in Iraqi culture and language through my work, I realized that many others share similar difficulties. Through my experience of accessing content in Arabic, I found that transliteration offers a solution by converting the Arabic script into Latin alphabet. This not only makes the language more approachable but also allows people like me to engage more deeply with Arabic lyrics, songs, and written expressions.

In such case, transliteration is often better than translation when it comes to preserving the original sound and cultural context of a word or phrase. While translation focuses on converting the meaning of a word into another language, transliteration prioritizes capturing the original pronunciation, which is especially important when dealing with languages that have different scripts or sounds. With my research and project, my goal is to maintain the closest phonetic representation, allowing non-Arabic speakers to pronounce it as accurately as possible. This is especially important for Arabic speakers because they can still enjoy the content without losing its essence in translation. Translating certain lyrics or words may not capture the same experience as the phonetic sound of the original words, which is preserved through transliteration. This is particularly useful in contexts like music, literature, or cultural expressions, where the original sound carries emotional or cultural significance. Transliteration enables people to appreciate the language's authentic rhythm and tone. The essence of the original language remains intact, fostering a stronger connection to the culture and language for those who may not be literate in the script but still wish to engage with it.

While transliteration plays a central role in my project, I also incorporate translation as a secondary reading for those who don't understand Arabic. The goal is to provide a complete and accessible experience for all audiences. While transliteration allows Arabic speakers and those familiar with the language to engage with the original sound and cultural nuances, translation ensures that non-Arabic speakers can still appreciate the meaning behind the lyrics or text. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the songs and the cultural messages they convey, offering both a phonetic connection to the language and a clear explanation of the content. This way regardless of their familiarity with the Arabic script anyone can enjoy and connect with the music and the stories behind it.

### *Printing*

Once the illustrations and typography were complete, I used professional vendors to produce printed materials to ensure excellent print quality and finishing. Bringing the work into physical form transformed the narrative from a purely digital experience into a tangible and immersive one. The colors and details not only elevated the visual impact but also made the artwork feel more real and accessible. This fusion of digital illustration with high-quality printed matter enhanced the sensory experience for viewers, allowing them to physically engage with the work and connect more deeply with the cultural narrative presented at the thesis exhibition.

### *Songs, Themes, and Visual Storytelling*

My illustrations narrate sceneries from Iraqi everyday life and will be designed and produced on a range of everyday products such as tote bags, clothing, mugs, coasters and more. The

objective is to have the illustrations shared and celebrated through the products we use and wear every day. I envision this project evolving into a fully developed brand, offering products that entertain, inspire, and connect people to Iraq. For Iraqis, it provides a way to carry a piece of home with them. The Arabic language is rich with poetic and rhetorical expressions, offering a beautiful opportunity for visual representation. I wanted to ensure this quality was reflected in the lyrics I selected and in the way I chose to illustrate them.

### *Lyrics Representing Baghdad*

The heart of Iraq, Baghdad, I have chosen three lyrics from three different songs to represent this culturally rich and historically significant region:

1. Song Title: Tal'ah Min Beit Abuha  
 Artist Name: Nazem Al-Ghazali  
 Original Lyrics: طالعہ من بیٹ ابوہا رایحہ لیبیت الجیران فات ما سلم علی یمن الحلو زعلان  
 Transliteration: tal'ah min beit abuha rayha lbeit eljiraan fat ma sallam 'alayya yimkin elhelu za'laan  
 Translation: She leaves her father's house, heading to the neighbor's without greeting me. Could it be my love is upset?
  
2. Song Title: Hachyak Mutar Seif  
 Artist Name: Fouad Selim  
 Original Lyrics: حچیک مطر صیف ما بلل الیمشون  
 Transliteration: hachyak mutar seif ma ballal elyamshoon  
 Translation: Your words are like summer rain they don't wet those who walk through them.
  
3. Song title: Khadri El-Chay Khadri  
 Artist Name: Salima Murad  
 Original Lyrics: خدري الجاي خدري مخلاه من أصب وأنطيه واگولہ إشرب وثهنه لو خاط إستكانه أطرب على الرنه  
 Transliteration: khadri elchay khadri mahla min aseeb wa anteeh wa agolla eshrab wa tahanna law khaat istikana atrib 'ala elrannah  
 Translation: Steep the tea, Steep the tea. How sweet it is when I pour and serve it to him, saying 'Drink and enjoy'. When he stirs the istikan, I vibe to the sound of its ringing.

The first lyric, *tal'ah min beit abuha rayha lbeit eljiraan fat ma sallam 'alayya yimkin elhelu za'laan* (Figure 6), playfully narrates a scene that translates to: *She's leaving her father's house, heading to the neighbor's house, and didn't greet me. Maybe my love is upset*. This line evokes feelings of being overlooked or neglected by a loved one. To illustrate this, I depicted a woman in a traditional Iraqi abaya, exhibiting a sense of flirtation as she deliberately ignores the person seeking her attention. The backdrop is set in an old Baghdadi neighborhood, showcasing the iconic *shanasheel*, a symbol of Baghdad's traditional architecture, to reflect the city's cultural heritage. The use of a vivid color palette enhances the sense of flirtation, emphasizing the playful and dynamic nature of the scene. I deliberately illustrated the woman to convey a strong character and a sense of independence, contrasting with the way Arab women are often portrayed in Western media as passive or oppressed.



Figure 6. Wurood Azzam, *Tal'ah Min Beit Abuha*. 2025.

The second lyric, *hachyak mutar seif ma ballal elyamshoon* (Figure 7), is metaphorical, comparing someone's words to the refreshing relief of summer rain. I visualized this sentiment by portraying a couple who are deeply in love, walking under an umbrella among the busy streets of Baghdad. Despite the noise and chaos around them, their focus remains solely on each other. To emphasize the cultural identity of the scene, I incorporated the *Freedom Monument*, a historic artifact created by renowned Iraqi artist Jawad Saleem, as a key element of the composition.



Figure 7. Wurood Azzam, *Hachyak Mutar Seif*. 2025.

The third lyric, *khadri elchay khadri mahla min aseeb wa anteeh wa agolla eshrab wa tahanna law khaat istikana atrib 'ala elrannah* (Figure 8), originates from one of the most celebrated Iraqi songs in history. This part of the lyrics poetically expresses the simple joy of sharing tea with a loved one and the pleasure derived from the ringing sound of stirring sugar in an istikan. For this piece, I took a unique approach, depicting the figures as silhouettes formed by the steam rising from the hot istikan chai. The background features the gates of Shabandar Cafe, Baghdad's oldest and most iconic coffee shop. This historic location is a landmark to the city, embodying the spirit and tradition of Baghdad.

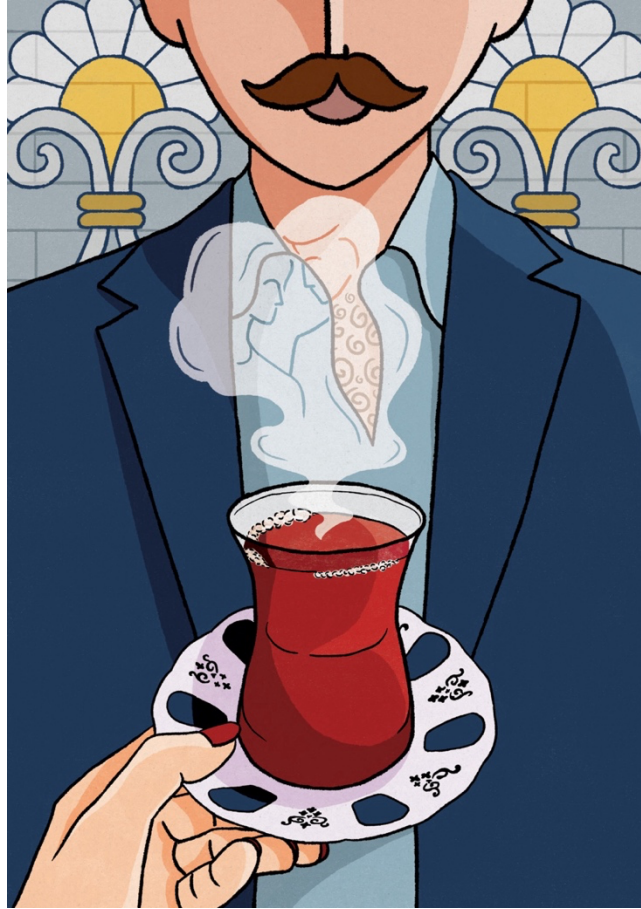


Figure 8. Wurood Azzam, *Khadri El-Chai Khadri*. 2025.

### *Lyrics Representing Mosul*

To represent the northern region of Iraq, Mosul, the second largest city in the country and a city renowned for its uniquely diverse Arabic dialects, I have selected three lyrics from two traditional folklore songs that best represents the essence of this vibrant region:

1. Song Title: Yirudli  
 Artist Name: Folklore song sung by many  
 Chosen Lyrics: أَنْعَلْ أَبُونُو الْقَطَارِ لَابُو حَرَكَاتُو أَخَذْ مَحْبُوبَ الْقَلْبِ وَخَلَانِي بِحَصْنَاثُو  
 Transliteration: an'al abuno elqitar labu harakato akhath mahbub elqalib wa khallani bhasghato  
 Translation: Damn the father of the train and his tricks, he took the beloved of my heart and left me in sigh.
  
2. Song Title: Yirudli  
 Artist Name: Folklore song sung by many  
 Chosen Lyrics: فَتُو عَلَى بَابِهَا عَتَّقِشِ الْوَرْدِي غَاسْ إِبْغَتَه مِنْ دَهَبْ وَبَرِيَسْمُو هِنْدِي  
 Transliteration: fettu 'ala babiha a'tinqish elwardi ghas ibghata min thahab wa breesamo hindi

Translation: I passed by her door as she embroidered a rose pattern, with a golden needle and Indian thread.

3. Song Title: Ya Sumaq

Artist Name: Folklore song sung by many

Chosen Lyrics: طَبَخْنَا سُمَاقَ سَقَاةٍ وَعَزَمْنَا كِلَ الْجَمَاعَةَ وَاشْتَعَلَّ طَوُّ الإِصْبَاعِ وَالْمَعْيَلِ قِيَقٌ وَجَاقٌ

Transliteration: tabakhna sumaq saq'a wa 'azmna kel el-jama'a wa ishtaghal taq"

elisba'a wil ma'alleg cheeq wa chaq

Translation: We cooked sour sumac, invited everyone, and we started celebrating, finger snapping and the spoons clanged.

The first lyric, *an'al abuno elqitar labu harakato akhath mahbub elqalib wa khallani bhasghato* (Figure 9), reflects a sense of frustration stemming from a loved one's departure by train. Despite its sad meaning, the lyrics are conveyed in a humorous tone, which is a common characteristic in many songs originating from Mosul. The train in the illustration is based on the original train that began operation in the 1940s, once connecting Mosul to Basra. Though this train is no longer in use, it holds historical significance. To subtly integrate Mosul's rich heritage into the illustration, I dressed the woman on the train with a cuneiform necklace, representing one of Iraq's ancient artifacts.



Figure 9. Wuhood Azzam, *An'al Abuno El-Qitar*. 2025.

The second lyric, *fettu 'ala babiha a'tinqish elwardi ghas ibghtha min thahab wa breeamo hindi* (Figure 10), portrays an elegant and intimate moment. It describes a man admiring his beloved as she embroiders a rose. This is a tradition done by newlywed brides who create floral patterns on pillowcases and bed covers before their wedding night. The illustration deliberately features red roses, symbolizing love but also chosen specifically because the red rose is Iraq's national flower.

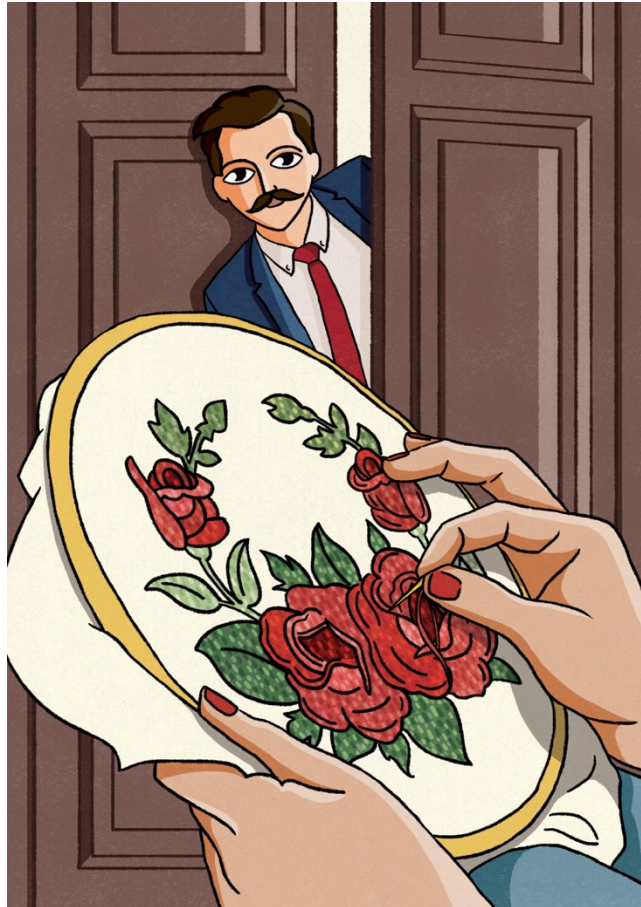


Figure 10. Wurood Azzam, *Fettu 'Ala Babiha*. 2025.

The third lyric, *tabakhna sumaq saq'a wa 'azmna kel el-jama'a wa ishtaghal taq elisba'a wil ma'alleq cheeq wa chaq* (Figure 11), evokes a lively and celebratory atmosphere. It depicts the joy of cooking a dish, sumac, and sharing it among family and friends. The lyric paints a vivid picture of a traditional gathering filled with laughter and a festive spirit. The illustration is set in a traditional Mosul house, decorated with elements that celebrate Mosul's historic artifacts, such as the lamassu, a mythical creature from ancient Mesopotamia.



Figure 11. Wurood Azzam, *Tabakhna Sumaq*. 2025.

### *Lyrics Representing Basra*

Basra, in southern Iraq, has inspired many songs and poems that reflect its rich culture and deep emotions. Three lyrics especially highlight Basra's artistic spirit and region:

1. Song Title: Hiya w Hay w Heya  
 Artist Name: Rabi'a al-Basrawiya  
 Chosen Lyrics: عيوني من الشوگ خطأ كحلها هي وهاي وهيه  
 Transliteration: ayuni min elshawg khattan kehelha hiya w hay w hey  
 Translation: My eyes, from longing, placed kohl upon themselves.
  
2. Song Title: Mu Bdena  
 Artist Name: Fouad Selim  
 Chosen Lyrics: أنا مو أول زیند یزرع شیلب ويحصد بزدي  
 Transliteration: ana mu awwal zened yezra' sheleb w yihsid bardi  
 Translation: I am not the first arm to sow rice and harvest reeds.

3. Song Title: Hali  
 Artist Name: Fouad Selim  
 Chosen Lyrics: هَلِي سَوْد الْعُكْلُ بِيض الدشاديش ليلهم گهوه وفناجين وديارهم هيل ورياحين  
 Transliteration: hali sud el'ugul beeth eldashadish lelhum gehwah wa fanajin wa diyarhum hel wa rayahin  
 Translation: My people, in black agal and white dishdashas. Their nights filled with coffee and cups. Their homes fragrant with cardamom and basil.

The first song lyric, *ayuni min elshawg khattan kehelha hiya w hay w heya* (Figure 12), evokes poetic imagery where a woman's deep longing for her beloved is so profound that it metaphorically paints kohl on her eyes. The use of kohl, a traditional eyeliner applied with ancient beauty tools, symbolizes both beauty and sorrow. This lyric captures a moment of intimacy and tradition. To visually represent the region, I incorporated palm tree leaves as the backdrop in my illustration. Palm trees are iconic to Basra and serve as a symbolic connection to the land's identity.



Figure 12. Wurood Azzam, *Ayuni Min Elshawg*. 2025.

The second lyric, *ana mu awwal zened yezra' sheleb w yihsid bardi* (Figure 13), literally translates to, *I am not the first arm to sow rice and harvest reeds*. It serves as a metaphorical expression likely reflecting effort and disappointment, where one works hard but achieves an

undesired result. Since Basra is known for its vast farmlands and agricultural heritage, I represented this lyric with an illustration of a man dressed in traditional Iraqi farming attire, standing in the middle of a field. The cooler and harmonious color palette further enhances the sense of sadness, reinforcing the emotional weight of unfulfilled effort.



Figure 13. Wurood Azzam, *Ana Mu Awwal Zened*. 2025.

The third lyric is particularly dear to my heart as it beautifully captures the hospitality of the people of Basra. The lyrics, *hali sud el'ugul beeth eldashadish lelhum gehwah wa fanajin wa diyarhum hel wa rayahin* (Figure 14), describe the traditional attire worn by men and poetically reflect pride in heritage, culture, and hospitality. The description of scents and coffee symbolizes warmth and generosity, key aspects of Basra's traditional values. To add a deeper and richer representation of Iraq to this particular illustration, I incorporated aspects of the Ishtar Gate by integrating them into a visual aesthetic inspired by the sadu pattern. This pattern was used as the background of the illustrations, as it best represents the area where people welcome guests into their homes, reflecting warmth and hospitality. The character is illustrated with a gentle gaze and offering Arabic coffee creating a sense of welcoming warmth. This challenges the Western depiction of Arab men as greedy or violent, instead highlighting their generosity and kindness.



Figure 14. Wurood Azzam, *Halli Sud El-'Ugul*. 2025.

I aimed to design a cohesive visual system that tied all these illustrations together. By balancing constants and variables in the compositions, I was able to create a distinct identity that unifies the artworks, making it recognizable as a series of illustrations. The core constants in these artworks are the Baghdadiyat inspired facial features. Each figure shares the same face shape, eyes, and noses, emphasizing a shared aesthetic. Color also plays an important role in this system. I consistently used lapis lazuli blue across all the illustrations, a color deeply rooted in Iraqi art history. Lapis lazuli was highly prized in ancient Mesopotamia. Additionally, each illustration subtly incorporates a reference to the region or a specific artifact from Iraq's rich history, which added layers of meaning and context to my work.

## Exhibition & Presentation

The exhibition setup was metaphorically designed to take the audience on a journey from the south to the north of Iraq. Each set of illustrations representing Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, was placed in a different section of the exhibition space, guiding the viewer across the different regions of the country. For each city, the three artworks were displayed side by side on the wall, representing the region they depict. The layout encouraged the audience to engage with the

illustrations as part of a broader narrative, reflecting Iraq's rich heritage and interconnected history. It was important for me to create a tactile exhibition space where, unlike traditional exhibition settings, the audience are encouraged to touch and pick up the artwork and closely examine its details. To create this environment, I designed the space to resemble a retail shop, inviting visitors into an immersive experience by allowing them to interact directly with the artwork. It was great to see that exhibition guests were not hesitant to interact with the items, freely browsing through them and even asking if they were available for purchase. This approach is grounded in the theory of creating engaging and interactive environments, designed to allow visitors to engage with Iraqi culture on a sensory level. The goal is to simulate the sensation of journeying to Iraq, fostering a deeper emotional connection and understanding of the culture. Creating an exhibition that mimics the setup of a shop provides an innovative way to blend art, culture, and education into an immersive sensory experience. This was achieved by designing various product displays that feature illustrations, merchandise like tote bags and apparel, and interactive elements such as animations. Visitors will be able to engage with the exhibits through tactile interactions, listening to traditional Iraqi music and exploring visual storytelling elements that bring Iraqi dialects to life. One of the items that attracted the most interaction was the puzzle displayed at the center of the exhibition, a 252-piece version of one of the illustrations. It encouraged audience members to engage with one another and collectively take part in completing the artwork together. By incorporating familiar retail elements, the exhibition becomes a space where art and cultural education are integrated, inviting visitors to engage with the experience. Simulating the aesthetics and ambiance of a shop, the exhibition not only introduces outsiders to the richness of Iraqi heritage but also offers ethnic Iraqis a nostalgic journey into their cultural roots. Through carefully curated design elements, the experience becomes a dynamic platform that blends learning, emotional connection, and artistic expression. The space was welcoming to both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers, filled with curiosity about the stories behind each illustration, the sounds of different dialects, and the authentic representation of Iraq and its people. One of the most meaningful interactions I experienced during the showcase was when a young audience member approached me to introduce herself as a Canadian with Iraqi roots. Her great-grandparents were originally from Baghdad and had immigrated to Canada many years ago. Although she doesn't speak Arabic and has never visited Iraq, her connection to the homeland exists solely through her heritage. I was deeply moved when she shared that the exhibition made her feel 'at home.' This moment powerfully demonstrated how the project succeeded in creating a sense of belonging, even for those who feel culturally distant from their origins.

To deepen the sensory engagement, the space incorporated traditional and popular Iraqi songs that were played using speakers to add another layer of cultural atmosphere. Some of these songs were the same as the lyrics illustrated for the thesis project. These songs instantly evoked a sense of nostalgia for the Iraqi community, whether or not they have lived in Iraq. All Iraqis have grown up listening to these traditional songs, shared by family members, friends, and their surrounding environment. Initially I wanted to incorporate the sense of smell into this exhibition, using aromas like coffee, cardamom, and even bukhoor.<sup>19</sup> However, due to a

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<sup>19</sup> *Bukhoor* is a traditional incense made from wood chips infused with fragrant oils and natural ingredients like musk or amber, burned to release a rich aroma and widely used in the Middle East.

university policy restricting the use of scents on campus, I am unable to include this sensory element in my exhibition. That is why I made sure to prioritize the tactile experience, with the addition of sound as a secondary sensory element. Rather than presenting a traditional art exhibition where touching the artwork is prohibited, I want my audience to feel as though they are genuinely browsing designed merchandise, just as they would in a store. This approach is important to my research as it emphasizes interactive engagement, allowing audiences to connect with Iraqi culture on a sensory and experiential level, which aligns with my goal of making cultural narratives more accessible and relatable. This also shifting the viewer's role from passive observers to active participants. The interactive nature of the space encourages exploration, visitors can browse the displays, pick up objects, or even try on items. The exhibition bridges the gap between art and everyday life. it transcends the boundaries of a traditional art showcase, making culture tangible, relatable, and deeply impactful. I want to develop this sense of familiarity in the exhibition to remove the intimidation some might feel in a conventional art gallery or exhibition, making the content more accessible to a diverse audience. This is especially important for my project as my content is already very foreign to most of the visitors and audience who will be attending.

To encourage further audience engagement with the illustrations, animated versions of the artworks can be accessed by scanning a code on the artwork's description label. Viewers were able to watch the animated video on their phones, which not only adds another level of interaction but also allows them to save these simple animations directly to their mobile devices. Four of the nine illustrations in this exhibition were brought to life through animation. Three were manually animated by me as GIFs, while one was created in collaboration with creative technologist Will Selviz, using artificial intelligence (AI) to explore new possibilities in animated storytelling.

Beyond its visual and sensory appeal, the shop-like experience serves as a powerful educational tool. Each item on display will tell a story, offering insights into Iraqi history, traditions, and language. For ethnic Iraqis, these stories and displays act as a bridge to their heritage, offering a tangible way to reconnect with their roots. For non-Iraqis, the exhibition becomes a gateway to understanding a culture that may feel distant or unfamiliar.

One of the exhibition's key objectives is to evoke a sense of nostalgia among ethnic Iraqis. This was achieved through the positive representation of Iraqi people, traditional attire, architecture, food, and everyday cultural scenes that reflect the richness of Iraqi life. The sense of pride and connection is especially vital for preserving Iraqi culture among younger generations of the diaspora. By presenting their heritage in a modern and engaging format, the exhibition inspires a sense of ownership and appreciation for their cultural identity, encouraging them to carry it forward.

## Conclusion

### *Significance*

*Shako Mako* authentically explores the diversity of Iraqi dialects in song lyrics through the intersection of graphic design, illustration, and animation. By combining elements such as typography, layout, illustrative composition, narrative, and short frame animations, I have created an immersive visual experience that celebrates the dialects of Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, ensuring accessibility for both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers. This interdisciplinary approach allowed me to craft a cohesive and engaging platform, blending visual narratives with Iraqi music to reflect the richness of the country's cultural landscape.

The selected songs and lyrics, brought to life through visual representation in this project, play a pivotal role in deepening the connection between diaspora Iraqis and their homeland. They act as cultural vessels, preserving folklore, everyday stories, and traditional phrases. The lyrics featured in my illustrations and visual narrative convey rich cultural and social scenes, reflecting shared values and emotional ties that bridge generations and connect Iraqis both within Iraq and across the diaspora.

The significance of this project lies in its role as a subtle form of activism, aiming to shift global perceptions of Iraqi cultural identity and challenge common misrepresentations. Iraq's rich linguistic diversity is often overlooked or distorted, particularly in media narratives that emphasize political conflict. By focusing on the beauty and variety of Iraqi dialects, this project challenges these stereotypes, offering a more positive and nuanced representation of Iraq's cultural depth.

The project offers tangible expressions of Iraqi identity through familiar song lyrics, illustrations, and printed applications on everyday products, creating a sense of belonging and pride for individuals who may feel disconnected from their roots. By addressing the cultural gap that many younger generations face in countries where their traditions are not celebrated, this project engages Iraqis in learning about their ancestors' everyday life, social interests and customs to ensure that future generations of Iraqis will have the tools to reconnect with this heritage.

This work is not only about preserving language but about creating a lasting emotional connection to the past, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, and fostering a deeper sense of belonging for Iraqis worldwide.

### *Perspective and Methodology*

By sharing my journey and exploring broader themes of cultural preservation, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience by adapting Iraqi references to a Western context and fostering a sense of belonging through the preservation of dialects and traditions.

Visual storytelling highlights each dialect's unique character, while transliteration and translation ensure accessibility for both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers, making the project inclusive, especially in its Western exhibition context (Toronto, Canada). By preserving and celebrating

these dialects, the project strengthens the cultural identity of diaspora Iraqis, fostering a reconnection with their linguistic and artistic heritage. Song lyrics serve as a bridge, capturing everyday stories and traditional phrases that reflect Iraq's rich history. Autoethnography allowed me to explore themes of identity and language barriers, particularly for Iraqis unable to read Arabic. Secondary research deepened my understanding of dialects, song lyrics, and visual traditions. Inspired by *Baghdadiyat* art, with its emphasis on heritage, portraiture, and symbolism, this project authentically explores Iraqi Arabic dialects and their connotative and symbolic representations, which evoke emotions among Iraqis living in the diaspora.

The exhibition itself became a critical part of the research, offering an interactive and immersive space for viewers to engage with the work on both emotional and intellectual levels. Audiences projected their own memories and cultural associations onto the pieces, making the experience highly personal and reflective. While the entire showcase was designed for viewers to engage with the displayed items by browsing through them, the piece that stood out the most was the interactive puzzle display, where visitors were invited to complete the pieces that formed one of the nine illustrations. This sense of play added another layer to the artwork, encouraging dialogue, curiosity, and even collaboration among audience members as they helped one another complete the puzzle.

### *Challenges*

Language barriers further complicate the progress of this project. While I speak Arabic fluently, my inability to read and write in Arabic complicates my ability to dive deeper into the language and fully understand the richness of the dialects. This presents a unique challenge for a project centered around Iraqi songs and dialects, as the depth of cultural and linguistic understanding is important to accurately represent the heritage I aim to celebrate. My limitations in reading and writing Arabic might affect the accuracy and depth of the content I'm conveying. This could hinder the authenticity of the dialects and cultural references I intend to showcase in the illustrations and other design elements. As I research Iraqi related topics, I am doing it in English and writing my findings in English too. However, since my focus is on Arabic lyrics and specific dialects of the Arabic language, it is harder to find sources with enough depth and to explain some parts clearly in a language that is not used as much in Iraq. As an immigrant, there is a constant hesitation between embracing the culture of the country I reside in versus maintaining my native traditions. Over time I have observed how language, or the lack of using a language, has created an emotional distance from my heritage. Which is what I am exploring in my written thesis paper. Relying only on my Arabic speaking ability that lacks competency, I find myself not only losing my mother tongue language but also losing a part of myself.

Another challenge was finding scholarly sources on the subject, particularly since much of the research and documentation on Iraqi diaspora experiences has been written from the perspective of those with similar backgrounds. While their experiences are valuable, the challenge lies in accessing material that complements my own unique perspective as someone who has never lived in Iraq. This gap in available resources could open new avenues for research focused on the history of Iraqi dialects and sustainability.

*Potential Growth*

The niche topic of this study and its audience are culturally specific. While the engaging illustrations are designed to attract outsiders and engage broader interest in Iraqi culture, there is a concern about whether this will be enough to effectively captivate and educate those unfamiliar with Iraqi dialects and cultural nuances. The visual elements might not always provide enough context or explanation for someone with no prior knowledge of Iraq or its culture. The project aims to bring attention to the importance of Iraqi dialects and preserve cultural heritage, but reaching a wider audience beyond the Iraqi diaspora requires creating a bridge between the artwork and the viewer's understanding of the cultural references embedded in the illustrations, especially since this project will be exhibited in a Western country.

Incorporating the illustrations and the stories behind them onto everyday items was an essential part of the project, serving as a method to share these narratives with a broader audience. Someone could simply be carrying a tote bag featuring one of the visually appealing illustrations, which might catch the attention of a passerby, but it goes beyond that. Each item also carries the selected song lyrics in three different forms: the original Arabic, a transliteration in Latin script, and an English translation. These everyday items were intentionally chosen for their familiarity, acting as conversation starters while allowing individuals to represent their heritage and culture. To take this concept even further, future iterations of the project could adapt traditional Iraqi items rather than generic everyday products, creating a deeper cultural experience. For instance, instead of a standard tote bag, a traditional Iraqi-style carrier could be reimaged, or instead of a generic hat, the design could incorporate the traditional sidara (Iraqi headwear). This approach would open the door to exploring how traditional items can be modernized and sustained for newer generations, blending cultural preservation with contemporary design.

It was essential to keep my work in this project simple and straightforward, especially given that the topic is relatively unfamiliar and untapped in Canada. By presenting the material through storytelling and engaging illustrations, I aimed to create a project that would resonate with a wide audience and serve as an inviting introduction to a part of Iraq that often goes unnoticed. My goal was to design and create an experience that is both informative and enjoyable, sparking curiosity and fostering a deeper appreciation for Iraq's linguistic and cultural heritage. From an exhibition standpoint, I would like to immerse myself with mediums like augmented reality or interactive installations to further enhance the idea of audience engagement and educational impact.

I attempted to solve this issue by implementing transliteration and translation to make Iraqi dialects accessible to both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers. This fosters inclusivity and bridges cultural gaps. My illustrations and the design implementations into generic everyday products celebrate the poetic nature of Iraq's song lyrics while challenging stereotypical depictions of Arabs in Western media, offering an authentic, nuanced view of Iraqi identity. Accessibility, inclusion, authenticity, and challenging stereotypes in the design process are essential for shaping future approaches to decolonizing design and ensuring cultural sustainability.

To ensure accessibility and cultural inclusivity, it was essential to use three modes of text in the project. Which were, the original Arabic lyrics, their English translations, and a phonetic transliteration of the Arabic. This tri-layered approach allowed audiences from diverse linguistic backgrounds to engage with the work, whether they were fluent Arabic speakers, diaspora Iraqis who could understand but not read Arabic, or non-Arabic speakers entirely. The transliteration served as a bridge for those who felt disconnected from their native script, offering a way to hear and speak the words of their heritage. During the exhibition, viewers often paused to compare the three versions, sounding out the lyrics and connecting emotionally with the stories behind them. This interaction revealed the powerful role that language plays in shaping identity and memory. By making Iraqi dialects both visible and audible through this multi-text approach, the project created a deeper and more inclusive experience.

### *Future Development*

One of the most rewarding aspects of this project has been its potential to grow and adapt. While my focus was on three primary Arabic dialects spoken in Iraq's largest cities, this is only a starting point. Iraq is home to over ten languages, including Arabic, Kurdish, Chaldean, Armenian, Assyrian and many more, each with its own variety of dialects. The diversity of languages and dialects is a testament to Iraq's rich culture, but it was also a challenge for me as it would have been impossible to address even a fraction of this linguistic variety within the scope of a single thesis. With this limitation in mind, I concentrated on the three most widely spoken Arabic dialects to ensure the project remained manageable and impactful. To further my research and expand on my project in the future, developing the project to include other languages and dialects spoken across Iraq (Kurdish, Chaldean, and Assyrian) would deepen its inclusivity and further preserve cultural narratives and native languages. This would even open the scope to minorities in the country whose language or dialect is at risk of being forgotten. I hope that my work inspires individuals to explore further into Iraqi stories through the lens of language and music.

I see significant potential for this project to grow and evolve through the integration of advanced technologies. In the final phase of my work, I began exploring this by collaborating with a creative technologist to animate one of my illustrations using AI. This experiment brought a fresh, contemporary dimension to the traditional style of my artwork and opened new creative possibilities. The fusion of hand-drawn illustration with emerging technology enriched the visual experience and revealed promising directions for future adaptations of the style. Although my experience with AI tools is still developing, this collaboration marked an exciting first step and sparked a strong interest in further experimentation.

The positive response to the exhibition affirmed the potential of design as a tool for cultural dialogue and reconnection. Building on this momentum, I envision expanding the project by incorporating more AI-generated animations that bring still illustrations to life, telling more layered and dynamic stories. Additionally, integrating augmented reality or interactive digital tools, such as audio pronunciation features or spaces for users to contribute their own stories and phrases, could further enhance the participatory and educational aspects of the work. These future directions would transform this project into a living archive of Iraqi dialects and heritage. As both a research tool and a platform for cultural engagement, *Shako Mako* offers a

compelling model for how design can preserve, celebrate, and evolve linguistic identity across borders and generations.

Through my illustrations and designs, I aim to create a dialogue between the past and present, tradition and innovation, ultimately fostering a deeper appreciation for Iraq's diverse linguistic heritage. *Shako Mako* represents more than just a project, it is a heartfelt exploration of identity, culture, and the power of design to bridge cultural gaps. As this journey continues, there is immense potential to expand and evolve, ensuring that future generations will not only carry the stories of their ancestors but will also contribute to the ongoing narrative of cultural preservation, understanding, and connection. Through this project, I hope to inspire further exploration into how design and technology can unite people across cultures and provide a sense of belonging and pride for Iraqis worldwide. This future direction could also offer insight into how design can play a pivotal role in fostering cultural inclusivity and emotional connection, especially in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

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