

ARTIST OF THE MONTH

Mohammed Al Hawajri



Based on an interview by Ahmad Damen.

Mohammed Al Hawajri was born in Al Bureij Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip in 1976. He started with drawing basics in 1994 at the Gaza YMCA, which was a great kick-start that inspired him to improve his skills and capabilities through various available means: books, magazines, and whatever he could get hold of.

He was nominated by the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre to participate in a workshop in Amman that was supervised by the Syrian painter Marwan Qassab. Mohammed found inspiration and motivation in Qassab's words and was able to win the first prize at the workshop.

Mohammed is passionate about experimenting with various tools such as the bones of dead animals. He also uses herbs in creating various colours in order to solve the problem of limited supplies caused by the siege on Gaza. In 2007, he set up a gallery of paintings that used this method, which he called

"Soul and Smells." He has participated in workshops in France, Italy, Bahrain, and Jordan.

Mohammed's *Guernica-Gaza* is another project of interest. It consists of several paintings by famous international artists such as Picasso, Dali, Van Gogh, Chagall, and others. Mohammed explains that he presents these famous paintings in a "contemporary" way by adding his own touch to them, which respects his perspective as a Palestinian painter: "The reality has changed: daily life, the social, political, and economic environments are not the same. This directly and indirectly impacts our creativity, which is what I want to show in my paintings."

Mohammed attributes the importance of his project to his experiences as a Palestinian and his desire to express the suffering of his people as they witness the Israeli attempts to destroy Palestinian history and identity. He chooses what he calls



"black humour" to merge the famous-paintings masterpieces with his own imagination to express the suffering of the Palestinians in one complete piece of art.

The title *Guernica-Gaza* expresses what he sees as a resemblance between the situation in Gaza today and the German aggression against the village of Guernica in Spain in 1937, during the Spanish Civil War. Pablo Picasso expressed the story of Guernica in a famous painting that influenced the style of many painters thereafter.

Mohammed stated that he is engaged in a constant search for new tools and possibilities for his works. He despises the direct approach of expression and feels his works respect the audience's aspirations in a painting.

"It's very hard to be an artist who is fully dedicated to his/her work," admits Mohammed, not even referring to an artist living under siege in Gaza's horrible reality. He believes in art as a message for his people and a powerful tool for dialogue and enlightenment.

