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## **Discovering a Poetic Revolutionary**

## **A Must See Show in London This Week**



Hamed Abdalla, *Al Tamazouq (Torn)* (1975). Courtesy Hamed Abdalla family collection

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In the distinguished line-up of 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists investigating the power of the painted word, a special place must belong to Hamed Abdalla. This pioneer of Egyptian Modernism may not be as well-known as the likes of René Magritte, Lawrence

Weiner or Ed Ruscha, but his fusion of Arabic words with the human form were every bit as inventive—and are especially relevant today.

“ARABÉCÉDAIRE”, is an appropriate title for his current survey at [The Mosaic Rooms](#) in London’s Earl’s Court: it is a term that flags up both his love of letters and also the determined rooting of his work in Arab—and specifically Egyptian—culture (until 23 June).

Born in 1917 into a humble peasant family in Upper Egypt, Abdalla first trained as a calligrapher, an experience that was crucial in the evolution of the expressive, and often erotically charged, hybrid pictograms that he was to define as “The Creative Word”.

In works such as *Torn (Al-Tamazuq)* of 1973, a lush, gestural hieroglyph, painted in a series of loaded brushstrokes, which forms both the abstracted shape of a crouching figure floating on a crackled blue ground, as well as spelling out the Arabic word for the state of being torn.

Especially transgressive, given Islam’s forbidding of figurative and sexual imagery, are the four monographs *The Creative Word (erotic)* (1961), in which couples assume Kama Sutra-like positions that also provocatively form the words for Zionism, dowry and defeat.



Installation view of “Hamed Abdalla: ARABÉCÉDAIRE” (until 23 June) at The Mosaic rooms. Courtesy The Mosaic Rooms. Photo credit: Andy Stagg

Abdalla’s insistence on working exclusively with Arabic script was also an overtly political act. It distanced him from Egypt’s French-speaking art institutions and also firmly declared his origins in—and enduring allegiance to—Egypt’s Arab-speaking rural majority.

Despite leaving Egypt for Copenhagen in 1956 and, a decade later moving permanently to Paris, Abdalla remained fundamentally committed to the Pan-Arab movement and to developing a grassroots Modernism that draws heavily on the imagery of ancient Egypt and Egyptian folklore, as well as being influenced by the country’s turbulent recent history.

The painting *War (Al Harb)* (1963) presents the word for war in the form of a skulking bull-deity, abandoned against a desolate void-like background of crumpled silk paper. It is a forceful reminder both of the Palestinian Nakba of 1948 and the Suez crisis of 1956.

More optimistic is *Revolution (Thowra)*, painted in 1968, the year of international protest—especially in his adopted city of Paris—in which both the word and the spirit of revolution is conjured up in this crowd of thrusting, energetically painted

forms.



Installation view of "Hamed Abdalla: ARABÉCÉDAIRE" (until 23 June) at The Mosaic rooms. Courtesy The Mosaic Rooms. Photo credit: Andy Stagg

Abdalla also experimented with a radical range of unorthodox materials and processes. In *Hob (Desire)* (1963), silver paint has been fired by a blowtorch to form a puckered, bubbling skin into which the Arabic word for desire is scorched with a tarry, graphic intensity.

Another, *Sorrows (Ichgan)* 1981, is spelt out in a constricting relief of red and black painted wooden blocks. In other works, he makes monoprints, collages and even draws directly onto photographic negatives. Right up until his death in 1985, Abdalla remained committed to investigating new means of expression.

"ARABÉCÉDAIRE" forms part of the tenth anniversary celebrations of The Mosaic Rooms, a modest not-for-profit operating out of a west London townhouse which, for the past ten years, has quietly offered a non-partisan, non-religious forum for contemporary Arab culture in all its rich and multifaceted variety.

Given the negative, reductive treatment of the Middle East in so much of today's media, the work of this small organization with big ambitions has never been more crucial. In our current climate, the provocative and richly referential work of Hamed Abdalla is especially meaningful.