

# 'I am Libya': 24-year-old artist Shefa Salem re-imagines Libyan history

November 23, 2021 at 2:09 pm | Published in: Africa, Interviews, Libya



In the show "I am Libya", painter Shefa Salem presents outstanding canvases, demonstrating that the public is eager to learn about the ancient history of Libya

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November 23, 2021 at 2:09 pm

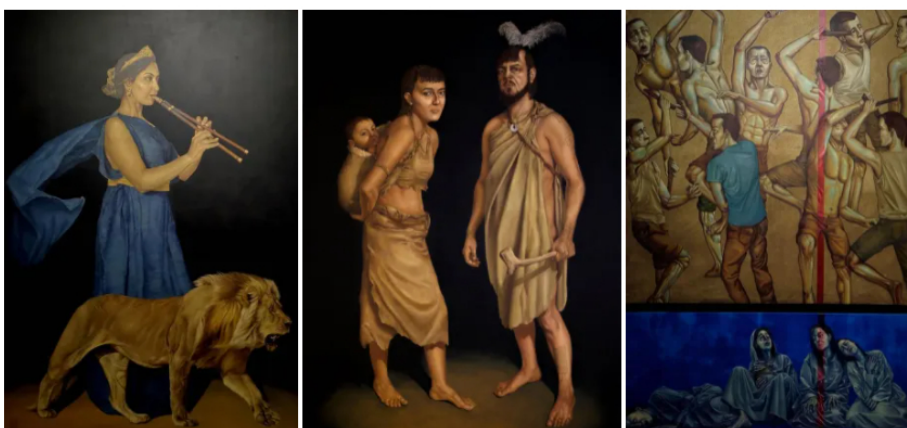
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What does it mean to be Libyan? How to reconstruct a sense of belonging for the country and its people, starting from the deepest roots of Libyan culture, while preserving diversity? These are the questions that artist, Shefa Salem, is grappling with for her first solo show *I am Libya*, which took place a few weeks ago in the *Barah Arts and Culture Centre* in Benghazi and will travel to Tripoli's old city at the beginning of December.

"We live in a culture that is based on visuals," says the artist. "However, the ancient history of Libya has mostly been oral, rather than image-based, so we have a hard time visualising it. We do have some pictures found in Libyan caves, but most of them come from other cultures that, at the time, developed a cohesive written language, such as the Egyptians. Alternatively, we have books by archaeologists coming to research Libya from foreign countries."

Through large-scale paintings, the artist is filling this gap by re-imagining Libyan history: "My work is a reconstruction based on trusted sources, from books, academic articles and the archaeologists' research."



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Given the recent history of Libya, as well as the current scenario, where many cultural nuances were lost and history subjected to revisionism, this kind of work is ever so important. Culture in Libya is constantly on the brink of being wiped off by opposing forces and, in this scenario, having the younger generation becoming interested in excavating Libyan identity is key for a reconstruction process, as well as for enduring the present conditions.

### The Identity Project

Born in 1996 in Benghazi, Shefa Salem just graduated this July in architecture. A kind and friendly spirit, she emanates fierceness and strength, characteristics that also come across from her paintings, where socio-political issues meet feminism and history.

"I have been always passionate about art," she says. "In the beginning I was copying images, teaching myself how to tackle realistic work until, in 2018, I started making my original art." While she did not grow up in an artistic household, she bonded through art with a cousin living Tripoli, who is also an artist. They started a dialogue between two Libyan cities, which are quite disconnected on a cultural level, to encourage each other to improve.

The canvases shown in "I am Libya" are part of a larger body of work called "The Identity Project", which marked her transition from a more intimate kind of paintings, to larger historical subjects: "But I'd say that even my self-portraits have a socio-political underpinning," points out the artist. "They show how an individual is personally affected by the situation in the country."

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One of the first paintings she realised for the Identity Project is *Kaska, Dance of War*. *Kaska* is the name of a traditional Libyan dance, from the Timihu people. The first depiction of this dance appears on the walls of Egyptian temples in Deir El-Bahari, five thousand years ago. Libyan soldiers were depicted dancing *Kaska*, while fighting with sticks for water. Salem's realistic painting shows two sides of the war, sharply divided by a red line; on one hand, the men engaged in fighting cruelty and terrorism and, the other side, the women subject to pain and loss as a consequence of the war.

Among the new paintings she presented in the show, is "Libyan Flute". The idea for the work came to the artist after reading a paper article published in the Cambridge Libyan Studies magazine about the oldest flute in the world, found in Libya. The study suggested that the Greeks adopted this instrument and made it their own, building their own mythology around it, but it actually originated in Libya.

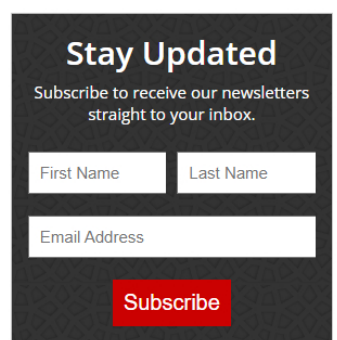
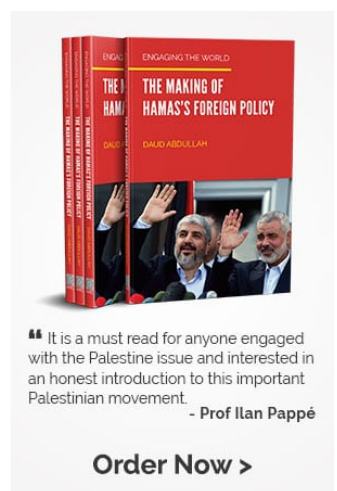
In the painting, the artist re-claims the maternity of this musical instrument for Libyans, by giving the Libyan land the shape of the nymph-huntress, Cyrene, a mythological character, daughter of a king and a Naiad. *Cyrene* is also the name of the site situated across Libya's Green Mountain, where this ancient flute has been found. According to Libyan myths, one day Cyrene wrestled a lion that had attacked her father's flocks, so Shefa represented the figure playing a flute and with a lion walking alongside her.

"It is not uncommon to find figures of warrior women in Libyan stories," notes Shefa. "The most popular are certainly the Amazons, the legendary archers riding horse-back. While the myth became incorporated in Greek mythology, it was also one that originated in Libya."



[Shefa Salem]

Another striking canvas in the *I am Libya* show is called *Funeral Ritual in the Acacus*. The work is based on a cave painting from roughly 4000 BC, found in the *Acacus Mountains*, depicting a boat with some people on it, including one that is upside down.



The artist found an account of this in a book by Italian archaeologist, Fabrizio Mori, who believed that upside-down figures represented dead people, in the same symbolism used by the Egyptians. He thought, then, that the cave painting represented a funeral ritual, by connecting it, again, to the Egyptians' funerary ceremonies, who carried the dead on a boat from dawn to sunset. In the same location in the Acacus, the archaeologist found the oldest mummy in the world, as evidence that Egyptians carried on and adapted many Libyan rituals.

The artist took the scene and made it in a fully-fleshed, dramatic and poetic painting scene, allowing viewers to really travel to that time in history.

#### A "majestically approachable" style

In terms of style, Shefa Salem's latest production is veering towards more of a realistic style, moved by the necessity to connect with all kinds of viewers, and not just the art elites: "I want to present this history to all people, not only art appreciators, to move something in them," she says. "That's why I decided to use a realistic style; to be more approachable and communicate to a wider audience."

The progress she observes in her last series of paintings is not as much in the increasing realism of her figures, but more in the use of colour and light: "I see the improvement in my paintings, and that's something that develops naturally by continual practice."



The importance of the work of Shefa Salem is testified by the resonance of the "I am Libya" show. Social media were taken by storm; poetic observations, enthusiastic comments, interesting reflections and a number of images were shared by visitors on different platforms, testifying the thirst to discover the ancestral history of Libya, and a deep appreciation for the artist's work: "I admit I had high expectations for the outcome of the show, but I have to say that these were exceeded," says the artist, with sincere bliss.

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A lot of work went into the preparation of the exhibition, at a time that was particularly full for her. While she was finishing her thesis in architecture, she also took care of all the bureaucratic and curatorial aspects of the show, from the design of brochures to the lighting of the space. With the same care and attention, she is now redesigning a new setup for the Tripoli show, bound to open in the heritage building in Tripoli's Old City on the 2nd of December.

While preparing for this new exhibition in her studio, a big room in the roof of her building that she decorated with a lively minimalist taste, she still browses through her books, looking for inspiration for the next series of works. For artists like her, the only way to answer the "What is to be Libyan" question is through the painting practice, and reimagining Libya is a never ending story. One that we all need to hear and see.



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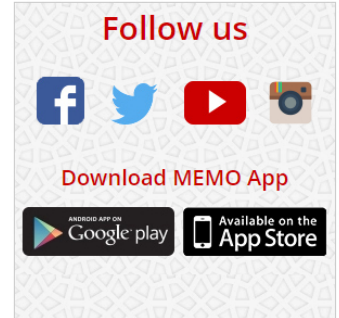
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