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Art Through Assyrian Eyes: Rabel Betshmuel

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Art Through Assyrian Eyes Series

Iraqi Christian Relief Council is proud to launch, Art Through Assyrian Eyes, a monthly blog series on innovative Assyrian artists around the world. January is our inaugural month with our first featured Assyrian artist, Rabel Betshmueel.

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Finding Magical Optimism with Rabel Betshmueel

[Rabel Betshmueel](#), an Assyrian artist and designer living and working in Chicago, is ICRC's first featured artist in the Art Through Assyrian Eyes monthly blog series. Born in 1981 in Baghdad into an Assyrian family, Rabel says his origins are in Bebede, a small village nestled in the Mateena Mountains overlooking the Sapna valley in northern Iraq. His family fled Iraq when he was 3 years old, and in the United States Rabel developed his skills as an artist in sculpture, painting, and design.



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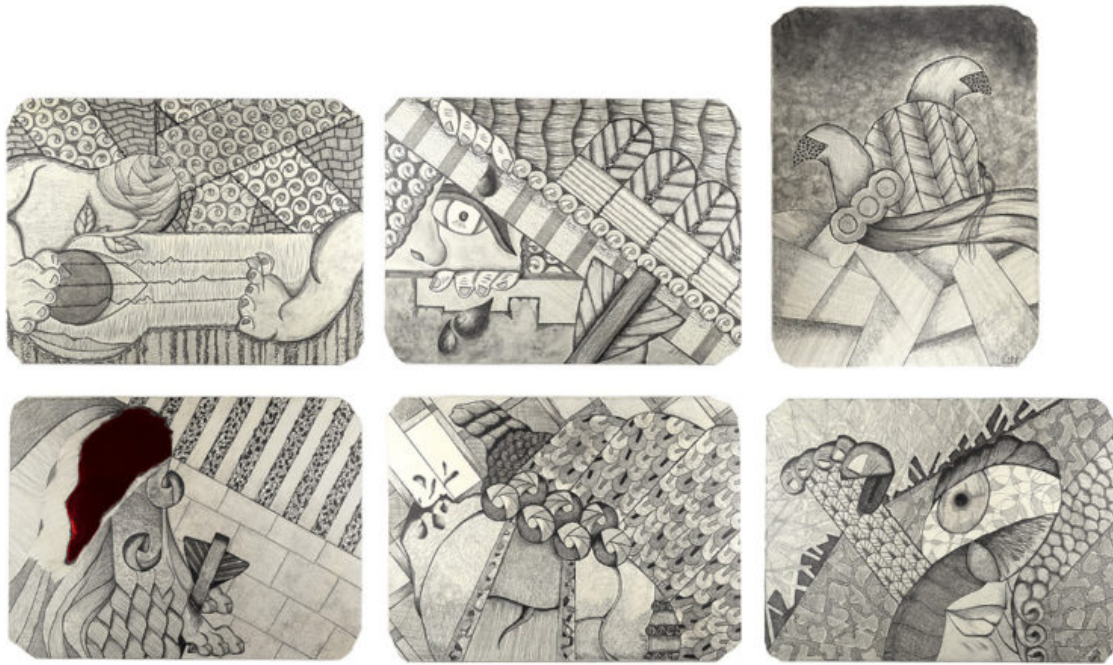
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and indigenous oppression. The result is a magical optimism in a rising Assyria where Assyrians live as their truest selves.

ICRC interviewed Rabel on his art and his vision for his people.



Pattern Language is the discovery of a new language through the layering of Syriac letterforms. The overlapping shapes create negative spaces that are filled in to reveal a new letterforms.

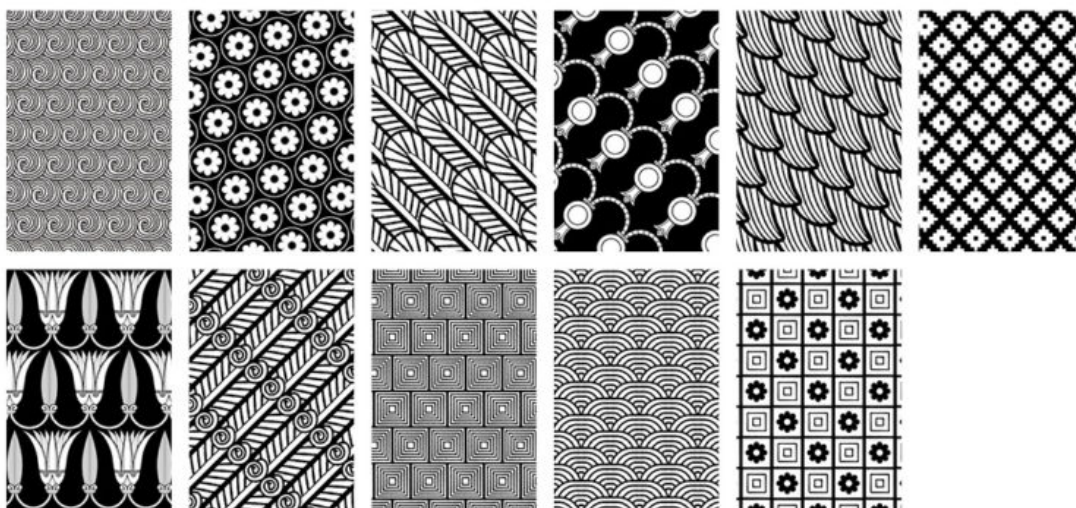


Drawing influenced by ancient Assyrian bas reliefs.

ICRC: Describe what you see as the Assyrian soul.

Rabel: The Assyrian soul is both ancient and contemporary with a strong desire to be discovered. I find it to be mystical and not just from the religious teachings that come to us. As a people, I feel we are connected to a greater power.

If you think about it, when artifacts were dug up in the 1800s, it wasn't the Kurds, the Arabs, or the Turkman who claimed these artifacts as their own. It was these Assyrians who related to those ancient discoveries. That in itself is so incredibly powerful that a people could look back over thousands of years and still relate themselves to something that ancient. It is deeply moving and there is also something very magical about it as well.



Assyrian Pattern Project series of work inspired by the patterns used in ancient Assyrian art. Each pattern is meticulously scanned or photographed, redrawn and made into a seamless pattern using Adobe Illustrator.

ICRC: Why do you make Assyrian-centric art?

Rabel: Not many artists reference this ancient culture when looking for creative inspiration. It serves as a point of differentiation for me. I also find the artwork visually appealing with its use of elaborate pattern, scale, and texture. I find myself drawn to the Assyrian feather pattern on the Lamassu and a few other ancient pieces. This pattern has a tie to birds and flight, and to me it is a visual representation of freedom. I've always wanted to fly. I've had lucid dreams where I am flying and I can control my speed. For me, this is symbolic of a physical manifestation of absolute freedom for myself and all Assyrians.

Another symbol is the swirl, which you see in beards found in Assyrian carvings. The swirl is a reference to an infinite time or space, a sort of a foreverness. I like to incorporate foreverness into my art. Ultimately that is my goal as an artist and as an Assyrian. In forever, we find an immortality.



Native Assyria is a series of work that combines ancient and modern Assyrian themes with Native American design. “Two cultures who share a similar history of triumph and lament,” write Rabel on his website.

ICRC: Is there an Assyrian aesthetic?

Rabel: Modern Assyrian art has gravitated towards portraiture and landscape imagery with hints of nationalism as a main theme. Abstract Assyrian art is rarely appreciated or understood. Thus, the Assyrian aesthetic for the time being is a bit stale. I’m working on introducing new styles that will broaden the visual vocabulary for Assyrian art.



Assemblage Collage

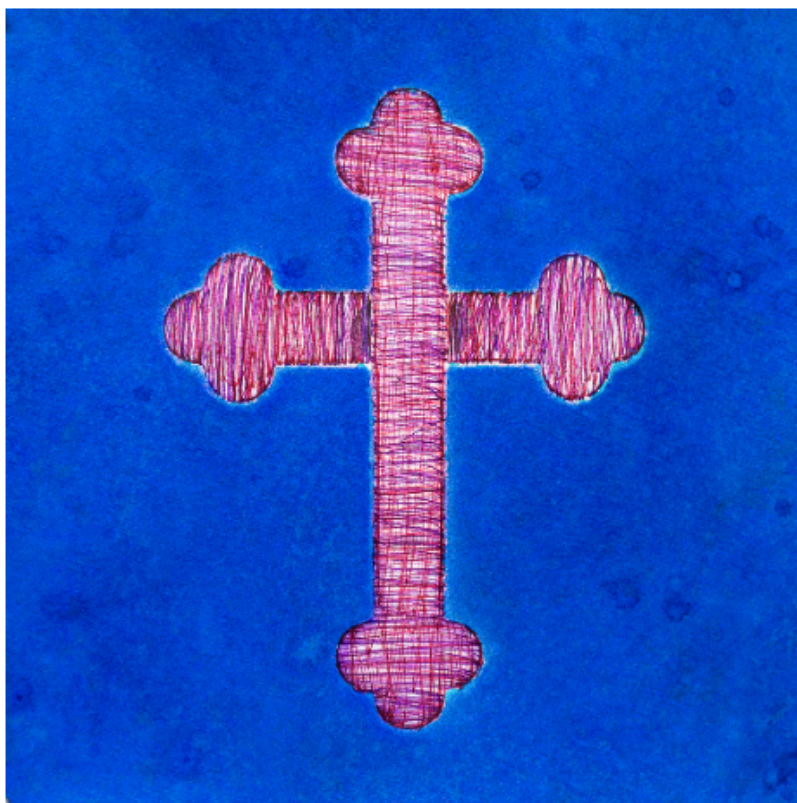


An old photograph of the Assyrian Lamassu, an ancient figure that has inspired Rabel's art

ICRC: What will a future Assyrian state look like?

Rabel: From a design perspective, I often think about what a local Nineveh Plain logo would look like as a symbol of self-governance. This has fed into my desire to create a visual guideline on what it means to be Assyrian. Essentially, this would involve building a state using principles of graphic design. All great brands have a brand guideline, so the public knows its purpose, mission, strategy, and so forth.

One idea I have experimented with is deconstructing the Assyrian flag. It has so many elements: triangles, a circle, waves, color. I'm working now on seeing how many versions I can make from the elements of our current flag. In general, Assyrians have many patterns that form our visual language and we need to bring them back to life through reinvention and repurpose.



Rabel's ACOE series is about bringing art back to the Assyrian Church of the East by using familiar church symbols as subject

matter.

ICRC: Do you have a favorite Assyrian symbol or figure?

Rabel: The Lamassu is an Assyrian protective deity often depicted as having a human's head, the body of an ox or a lion, and a bird's wings. It's an amazing structure and design that for many represents Assyria in its elaborate pattern, sheer size, and play on scale. Ancient Assyrians knew how to incorporate a theatrical element into their art that I appreciate. Its enormity resonates with people once they go up and examine its detail. Also, it has such a strong mythological history, not just art, in its purpose to ward off evil spirits. It was a great artistic masterpiece, visually and technically, in ancient times.



Relics of Nineveh series references a bond to the Assyrian homeland, history and culture.

ICRC: Tell us about a story behind one of your favorite Assyrian-centric art pieces that you have done.

Rabel: A few years back, I was going through a creative purge and decided to break about half-dozen vases. I smashed them all and then noticed some interesting shapes emerge from the rubble. I selected about 30 broken pieces and dwindled the list down to

seven, which became [Relics of Nineveh](#). This series of work is a reference to a lost glory and one's bond to homeland, history and culture. It's a reminder to stay alive while being broken.



ICRC: How did you feel seeing the video recordings of Islamic State militants smashing and destroying the Lamassu in February 2015?

Rabel: As a response to that horrific event, I got to work and designed my Lamassu Skin t-shirts. It's a part of a series of work called [Indigenous Skin](#). More designs coming later this year!

ICRC: Can art help mend the wounds inflicted on Assyrians by the Islamic State?

Rabel: Yes, absolutely! A voiceless imagination has only art to rely on. Art reminds us all that beauty exists. Introducing art to kids who have been victimized by the Islamic State can have healing qualities.

ICRC: What role do Assyrian artists play in the future of the Assyrian nation?


Rabel: I'm hopeful that current and future Assyrian artists will bring innovative thinking to the problems that persist and prevent us from moving forward through community engagement.

Find more of Rabel Betshmueel's work at rabelbetshmueel.com and on Instagram at [@rabelbetshmueel](https://www.instagram.com/rabelbetshmueel). To support the real life return of displaced Assyrian family to Nineveh after the Islamic State,

please donate to [Operation Return To Nineveh](#), a campaign to rebuild communities and churches in the Nineveh Plain.

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Our Mission

Iraqi Christian Relief Council serves persecuted Assyrians Christians in Iraq and the Middle East through emergency humanitarian relief, such as food distribution and shelter, prayer support and advocacy.