'We Aren't Ancient History': Artist Inspired by Assyrian Heritage Raises Profile of Indigenous History Through Artwork

Rabel Betshmuel's Assyrian heritage inspires his art to revive and evolve his culture through his artwork – he has shared his incredible story with Culture Vibrations.

Liana Jacob
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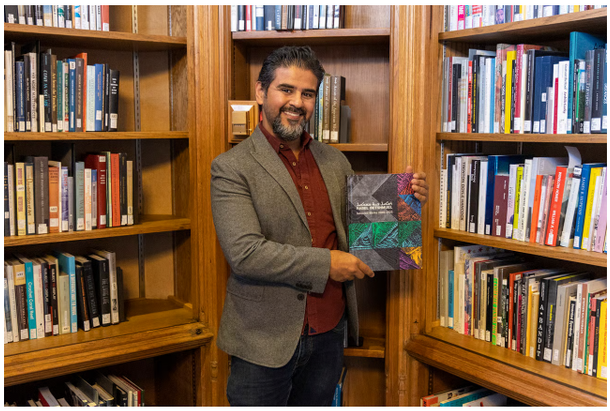


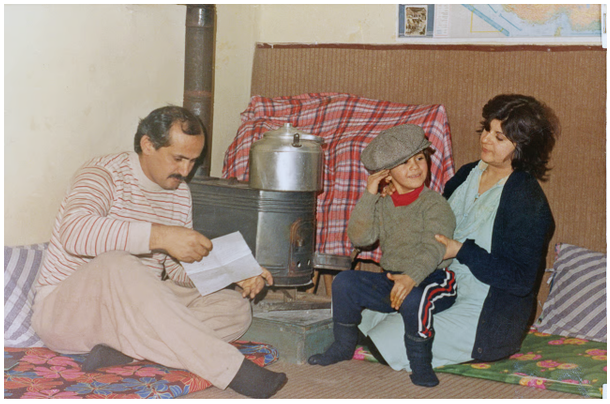
Rabel holding his book of selected artworks from 2000 to 2020.

Rabel Betshmuel, an Assyrian multidisciplinary artist, was born in Baghdad, Iraq and his family fled their home in the 1980s due to religious and political persecution.

They passed through Iran, Syria and Greece before they settled in Chicago, US.

Rabel said that his family's journey has taught him resilience and resourcefulness, and he now uses his passion and career as an artist to keep the Assyrian culture alive.

"My parents did everything they could to give us a sense of safety and a future, even when everything was uncertain," Mr Betshmuel said.



Rabel (middle) with his parents in a rented room in Urmia, Iran.

"My childhood was a balancing act between holding onto Assyrian roots and learning to adapt in a new world.

"I admire my parents the most for their resilience and sacrifice; they've rebuilt our lives from scratch.

"I aspire to be someone my kids will look up to for both strength and imagination.

"Growing up with constant change pushed me to adapt quickly and focus on what really matters.

"That experience is at the heart of why I make art and why storytelling is so important to me. My family's journey shaped my perspective and fuels my drive."

Rabel described his school experience in Chicago as a 'steep learning curve' due to the language barrier and cultural change.

"I had to learn a new language and get used to a different culture within a matter of months," he said.

Family trip to the Acropolis of Athens.

"I wasn't the best student until I got to college, but I always worked hard. I always had plenty of friends and never dealt with bullying.

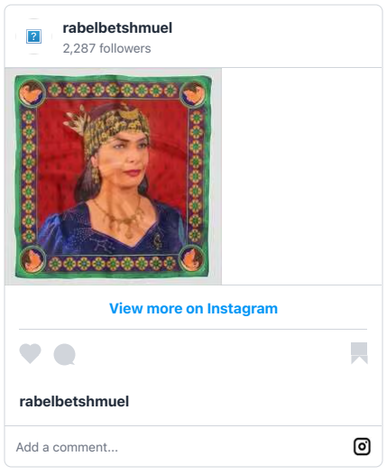
"I stayed active, made connections, and loved being out playing basketball (I'm a Chicago Bulls fan) and hanging out."

Throughout his childhood, he had been exposed to a variety of Assyrian traditions in music, language, art and food and he continued to embrace them into his adulthood.

He and his wife now share these traditions with their children.

"I still speak Assyrian at home, cook the dishes I grew up with, and let ancient and modern Assyrian motifs find their way into my artwork.

"I also value our traditions around family gatherings and storytelling.



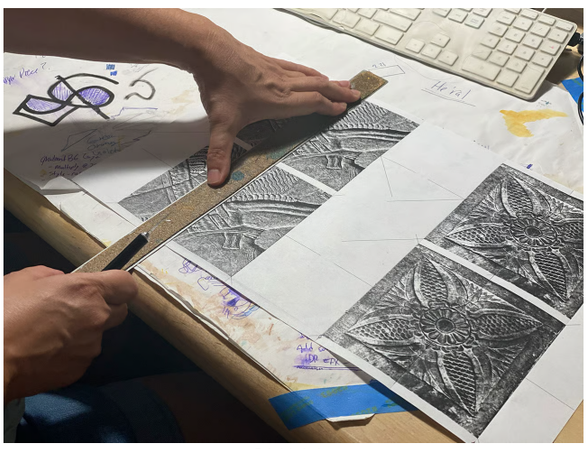
"Chicago is a hub for Assyrians, and having a strong community here provides a solid support system for sharing our history and advocating for our culture.

"While the community can sometimes feel disjointed due to weak leadership, there are still plenty of opportunities to raise awareness and educate others.

"We're lucky to have many talented, educated people here who are focused on meaningful goals.

"At the same time, it's important for us to look beyond our own circle, learn from others, and recognise that their struggles are just as real as ours."

Rabel's artistic skills stretch from painting and drawing to digital media and making sculptures.

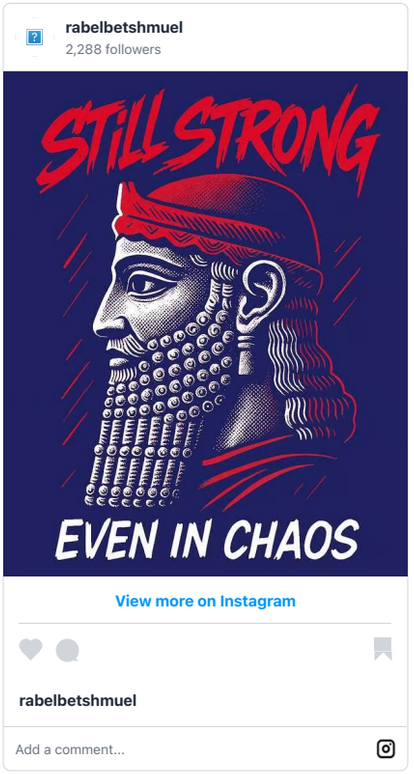


Rabel designing.

His art is inspired by his Assyrian heritage, and he's determined to increase Assyrian representation in contemporary cultural institutions.

"Art has always been my way to process the journey, trauma, and beauty of my upbringing," he said.

"I always find myself returning to my Assyrian heritage as a source of inspiration. We have almost no representation in modern cultural institutions, and I'm determined to help change that.



"My work blends ancient Assyrian symbols with contemporary techniques, creating a bridge between the past and the present. It's how I keep Assyrian culture alive and evolving."

There are some misconceptions about Assyrians Rabel would like to dispel.

"One of the biggest misconceptions about Assyrians is that we're 'ancient history'—and yes, the pun is a little bit intended," he said.

"But the truth is, Assyrians are very much alive and thriving today. We're not relics in a museum or just characters in a history book.

Rabel standing next to two of his pieces at the Diaspora In Bloom exhibition in San Jose, California.

"We're a modern people, still creating, building, and shaping our culture every day; our community is vibrant and active, blending ancient traditions with contemporary life.

"We're here, and we're still making history. We're actually experiencing an Assyrian Renaissance right now, which I explore in more detail on my website."

Rabel returned to Iraq twice since his family fled, once in 2000 and again in 2018.

He has also seen a positive impact of social media when trying to connect with other Assyrians.

"Both trips, especially the first, were incredibly humbling and grounding," he said.

"There's nothing quite like seeing the place where your story truly began.

Rabel (right) reunited with his Uncle Robin in Iraq in 2000.

"Social media is a powerful tool; it allows me to connect with Assyrians around the world, share my art, learn from others, and keep our culture in the spotlight.

"It also gives us the chance to tell our own story, which is especially important for a community that's often overlooked."

Rabel has shared his recommendations of Assyrian businesses and establishments.

"Places like Lawando's Food Mart are great for traditional Middle Eastern products, and The Olive Brunch is a favorite spot for Mediterranean-inspired brunch."

When discussing the value in varied cultures, he said: "Diversity is a real strength.

"When we celebrate and embrace different ethnicities, we build empathy and a stronger sense of community.

"It also makes life a lot more interesting; the more we learn about others, the better we understand ourselves."

Stay tuned for part two of Rabel's journey in next week's newsletter to learn about how he keeps his Assyrian culture alive with his family and his thoughts on how diaspora generations can maintain their heritage.

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