

Ten years of Banipal magazine
by Abbas Beydoun
poet and cultural editor, *As-Safir* newspaper

Published in Arabic in As-Safir newspaper, 14 January 2008. Translated into English and published in Celebrating Arabic Fiction, March 2008, in a special tabloid newspaper issued for London Book Fair, 2008, marking the Arab World as its Market Focus

TEN years ago, Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon embarked on an adventure of establishing an English magazine for Arabic literature. They must have doubtlessly needed large doses of optimism and risk – and even of madness – to do that. Banipal for us was always a project spurred by a moment and we all expected it, of course with a measure of anxiety, to cease publication. It was naturally the daughter of ambition, hard work, and perseverance; but it remained also the daughter of risk without guarantees.

This was a time when we could hardly find an Arab literary magazine; it was a time when the few Arab literary magazines continuously complained of isolation, siege, and the threat of stopping publication. Yet it was the time when a magazine for Arabic literature was established in England, yes in England; and it was established in English, yes in English. Only a few expected Banipal to continue publication; and even those few did not expect it to live for a full decade. Yet, the adventure bore fruit and Banipal survived its ten years. And here it is now, certainly youthful and much stronger than it was in its first year.

We all recall that Samuel Shimon was the first to get in touch with us. We were still a lost generation when Banipal took the risk of presenting our work in the language of others. It did so with tremendous generosity and on countless occasions. It did so without a moment's hesitation in the face of anyone or apology for any text it presented too. It valued Arabic literature more than Arabic literature did itself. From the very first, Banipal saw the value and validity of its interaction with other literatures and cultures. There is no doubt that there was love in this venture deep down to its very foundations: love of the literature, love of the language and love of the people. We can have no real idea what Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon have had to endure in their lives in order to pursue this project. There is no doubting at all that the Arabs and their literature will not easily find such overwhelming love and devotion again.

Those who know English and those who don't have found in Banipal a home larger and more hospitable than an Arab palace or tent. In Banipal, an Arab writer finds mostly a beautiful neighbourhood but also a wonderful picture of himself and a lovely production. Banipal has a certain creative imagination in presenting literature in a pleasant way. Whether one knows English or not, one realises that Banipal is a beautiful magazine and going through its pages enriches one's vision; one realises that Banipal is not merely a magazine but a large storehouse of Arabic literature.

We even find here a common ground for Arabic literature: the magazine helps the growth of relations among writers, it reports meetings and friendships, it records interviews, and thus helps the formation of a whole geography of Arabic literature and the creation of a real centre of friendship. Today, one can say Banipal has travelled in all the world. Today, it is firmly rooted in its earth, it is rich and it is equally generous. Its doors are open to all and its dining table is stretched out for everyone. As it did when it started, it still serves the old and the young, and its hospitality continues. It is an Arab tent in the London cold, but it is also an attractive and bright show window to the passers-by.