Dear Peter,

I have been trying to write you this letter since last week, but each time I sat at the computer with the intention to start, no words came out.
Today is Wednesday, April 28, 2021. In the afternoon I went to Rataplan, a small theater in Borgerhout. There I met Enrica Camporesi and Rona kennedy as they are having a residency there which they invited me to work with them; and guess who was there too, Merel Franx, 'onze Merel' she came to Antwerp especially for to spend some time participating in Enrica's work. It was heartening to see all of them. I really wished you were there too to see the work, and I keep wondering what you would think of the work if you will ever see it.
This evening I went to bed early, the sun was not gone yet; it is the 16th day of Ramadan, but I don't fast anymore due to a stomach condition. I put the curtain down attempting to rest, there was still so much light in the room and no sleep came as my soul stayed attached and urged my body to start. It appeared that there was a beat in my heart which was playing: (it only takes to start). Now it is 11pm.

Professor, I have read your introduction in the course book about Vincent van Gogh again. The question: **"how to paint the light of darkness? How to be colourful in darkness?"**[1] blows my mind.
In the second paragraph, I read that Van Gogh was inspired by a couple of painters, such as Charles Daubigny, Jules Louis Dupré and Rembrandt which, "...Van Gogh himself asserts in a letter of 1877 to his nephew Theo."[2] I think there is a typing error in the sentence. Theo was the brother of Vincent. Regardless, the sentence encouraged me to go and search for the letters of 1877, but the link provided at the end of your article is not available any more! I looked at the book that I bought during the course, Brieven van Vincent Van Gogh, Troost Voor Bedroefde Harten, but unfortunately, the book only provides the letters starting from 1880. Eventually I found a website and I could read the letters of 1877 from Vincent to Theo, but I didn't find any letters of 1877 from Theo to Vincent. This asserts what Arnold Pomerans the editor of a 1966 selection of the letters said; Theo "was the kind of man who saved even the smallest scrap of paper"[3].

The Letters of 1877 were written in Dordrecht and Amsterdam. This overwhelmed me, especially because I lived one year in Amsterdam near Museumplein. Van Gogh's museum was about a five minutes walk from the studio where I lived. Later, I studied Dutch for one year in Dordrecht, as I lived in Sliedrecht for six years.

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[1] Peter Peters, Master theater-studies 2020/2021. Course Book: Travel Companion, Doing Artistic Research.
[2] Peters
[3] Wikipedia. (n.d.) The Letters of Vincent van Gogh.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Letters_of_Vincent_van_Gogh

“Let us have as few secrets from each other as is possible. That is what brothers are for.”[4]

In 2001 I finished my diplomas degree in theater directing at the Baghdad Institute of fine arts and entered the College of fine arts, seeking to gain my bachelor. After the first course, I decided to quit college and even leave the whole country. The subjects of the study were not difficult for me as I decided to continue studying theater directing; what was very difficult to handle, for me, is that some of the teachers were high ranked members from the party[5] and I couldn’t cope with the terror that they were depicting especially when some of them entered the class with a gun attached to the belt.

By some magic, say, a coincidence, perfect timing... I got a small role in a tv series and I had to shoot one scene in Lebanon, so the production got me a passport and a visa.[6]

I took two luggages, one was filled with my personal belongings and clothes and the other one I packed in all my treasures as I decided to never go back. When I arrived in Lebanon, the production told me that the scene that I was supposed to shoot was deleted, but that was not a problem, I even thanked them. And I started to discover the nothingness as I was nil, and had only 125 dollar in my pocket which was enough to rent a shared bedroom for one month. I stayed in Beirut for two years. In short, in the last eight months my big toe of the right foot was out of my shoe due to walking so much because I had no money left to even get on a bus. I went back to Baghdad after the American invasion and the fall of Sadam’s regime in 2003 but this time I had to smuggle myself from Lebanon to Syria!

When the driver that was going to take me to the smuggler saw the two luggages with me, he told me that I was insane and I should leave both of them behind. I refused, especially since one of the luggages was full of treasures. The trip took about 12 hours. We left Beirut at sunset and arrived in Damascus at sunrise. The first five hours the driver drove on an unpaved road up the mountains, and whenever my luggages was bumping at each other in the back of the car the driver looked at them and then looked at me and said: “you should have left them behind”. I couldn’t leave them because I decided that I will never ever travel again.
When we arrived at the smuggler point, he was cursing like a maniac for we were about an hour late. He saw my luggages and got even madder and asked me to leave them with the driver so he can take them back to Beirut. I refused again. He told me that he will not wait for me if I fall during the walk.
There were other travelers who were waiting and cursing as well, one of them yelled towards me: “are you the one that we were waiting for all this time?”; there were about eleven or twelve persons, all men, all carrying one single plastic bag no more. I was the only one who was not following the script.

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[4] The Vincent van Gogh gallery (last update 22 April 2021). The complete letters. Letter 086, Dordrecht, 26 February 1877 http://www.vggallery.com/letters/098_V-T_086.pdf
[5] Ba’ath party.
[6] At that time, the authority made it so difficult and expensive to get a passport that a student like me couldn’t even dream of.

The driver called somebody, the smuggler was on the phone as well, both cursing and nervous, trying to solve my riddle! The travelers were eager to start the trip which they uttered telegraphic sentences I couldn’t decode. All the men were already exhausted from waiting so one of them shouted: “we will help each other let's just start the trip”. Only then, the smuggler and the driver turned their phone off and we started walking.

Dante would rewrite his inferno. The ground was muddy so after a couple of meters my new laceless shoes were swallowed by the dirt, then two steps later my socks were gone too in that cold dough. I continued barefoot and therefore I stayed the last one during the whole trip because I had to be careful with my steps.

I actually had to make a choice and, at least, keep one luggage, but I couldn't decide; do I keep the suitcase that was full of drawings, scraps, books and letters or do I keep the backpack of my personal belongings! I had this thought while I was falling from a hill into a hole of thorns. Dear Maryam, I couldn't move. The backpack on my shoulder kept me motionless as a tortoise that flipped over and couldn't put itself right, the suitcase landed on my chest and was of no help on that moonless night, and whatever I tried to grab was pricking and causing pain. I shouted towards one of the travelers and begged him to come down and pull me up, the traveller looked at the convoy that kept heading forward at a brisk pace, then looked at the talking tortoise.

I got a hand from one traveller and another one took the suitcase from me and helped me to catch up with the convoy. I was bleeding but the warmth of the blood kept me awake. Later when I survived the trip and I arrived home, my mother spent one week observing my body and operating to get all the splinters out of my skin.

It is a dangerous game, life. One more time, the smuggler came to me and told me to get rid of my luggages as we were going to cross a canal. “The weight will take you and us away” he told me (and that was the last time he talked to me) then he got distracted by other travelers. Some asked him about the depth of the canal, some confessed that they can’t swim, and some requested to use the stone arch bridge that was right under our noses, but the smuggler refused to use the bridge and gave a clear instruction: “grab each other’s shoulder and make a chain, the ones who can swim go to front, put the man of the luggages in the middle, the ones behind, always push. In the middle of the canal some of you have to hold their breath for five seconds, don’t panic, the ones in front will pull you, and remember, never let go”.

I couldn’t grab somebody’s shoulder as I had to put the suitcase of the treasures above my head and hold it with two arms to protect the contents from getting wet. We rushed into the water like a snake as the barking of the dogs from the nearby village were getting louder.



Waarde Peter,

This is a photo of that suitcase I was talking about, I still have it.

During my proposal for the final essay I opened it and translated one poem of Mohammed Alhamrani, a friend and a poet that died in 2007, 35 years of age.

Inspired by Vincent van Gogh, his letters and relationship with Theo, and with focus on the link between his painting and his biography (how is his life reflected in his paintings?)[7] I sent my proposal of the final essay to Griet Minnebach, and once again I would like to share her response with you.

[7] Peter Peters, Master theater-studies 2020/2021. Course Book: Travel Companion, Doing Artistic Research.

March 22nd, 2021

Dear Duraid.

I read your letter.
I saw the images you sent me.
Thank you for that beautiful poem. I know it belongs to everyone, but in my mind I was the first one to experience your translation, feel the words you carefully chosen.
Your letter made me cry and I have yet to figure out why.
Can I ask for a little more time?
I need to think, and feel, and get rid of the smoke in my head first.
If you allow me, I want to come back to it later please.

And yes.
I know the tunnel to Linkeroever very well.
Thank you for spending a thought on me while traveling towards dead.
It touched me.

I see you in Peters class. I will be wandering in and out, as long as the pain allows me to. I informed him so I wouldn't look ungrateful for his time. Because as you indicated as well.. he contributes to our journey right?

See you soon

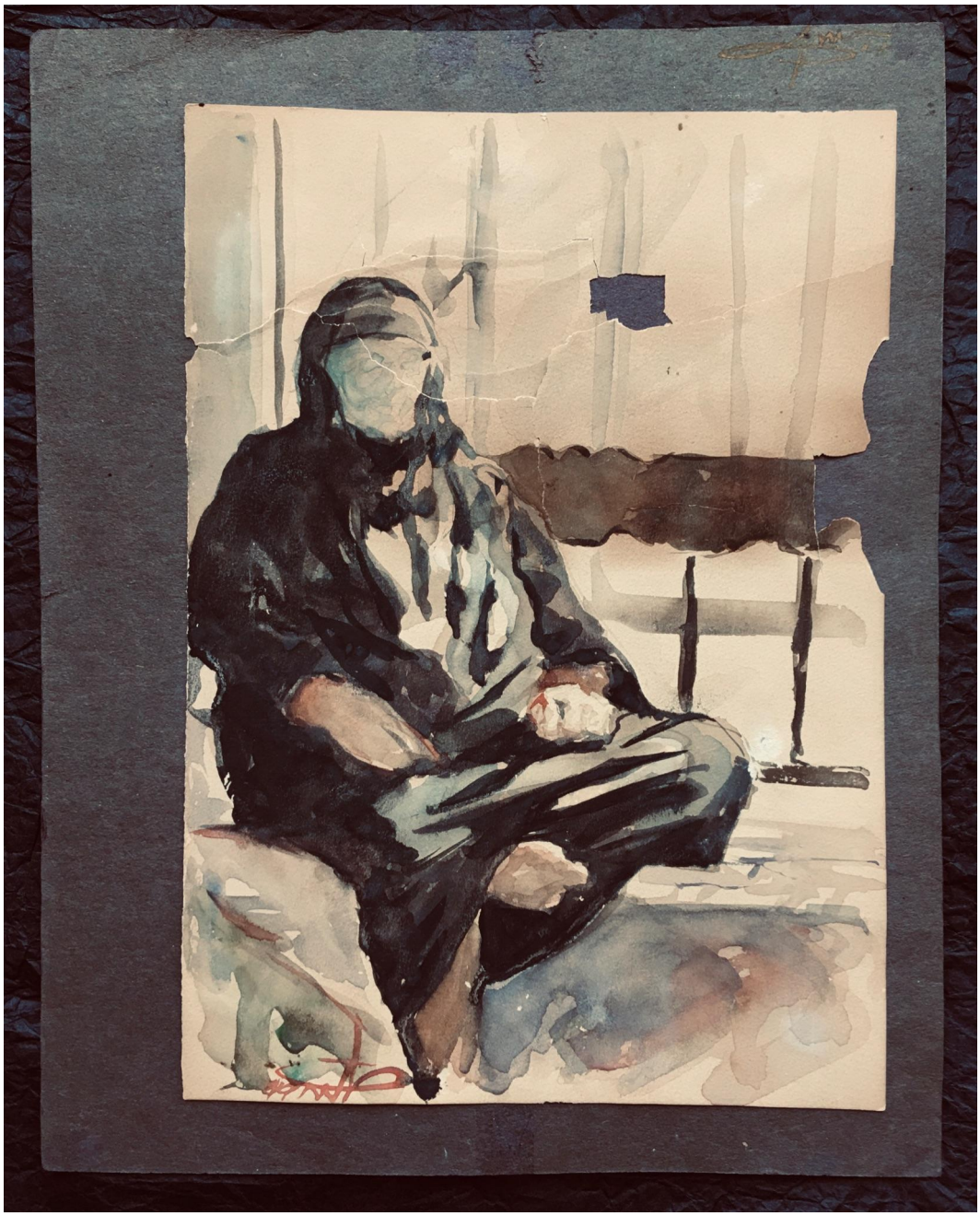
I was also inspired by Vincent's sister-in-law and wife to his brother Theo, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, who spent many years after her husband's death in 1891 compiling the letters of the brothers, which were first published in 1914.[8] Johanna did also translate the letters to English but she died before finishing the work.[9]

Johanna played a key role in the growth of Vincent's fame and reputation through her donations of his work to various early retrospective exhibitions. She also wrote a Van Gogh family history as well[10].
I could imagine her entering the flat in Paris and finding the letters which made me touch a bit of the rushes of emotions that she may have felt, as when I picked out from the suitcase (for the final essay) a drawing of a friend and painter **Abdullah**, who died in 2006 by splinters of a car that exploded in the center of Baghdad near Church of Sayidat Al Nejat Syriac Catholic during the anarchy in 2006 - 2007. I couldn't remember the second name of my friend.

I could only feel his sensations, the sweet smile he had, that he made no sound when he was laughing, that he was extremely thin, poor, and kind. That he was an easy being to talk to and a talented artist.

[8] Wikipedia. (n.d.) The Letters of Vincent van Gogh. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Letters_of_Vincent_van_Gogh
[9] Wikipedia. (n.d.) Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johanna_van_Gogh-Bonger
[10] Same reference.

Mother and the painter



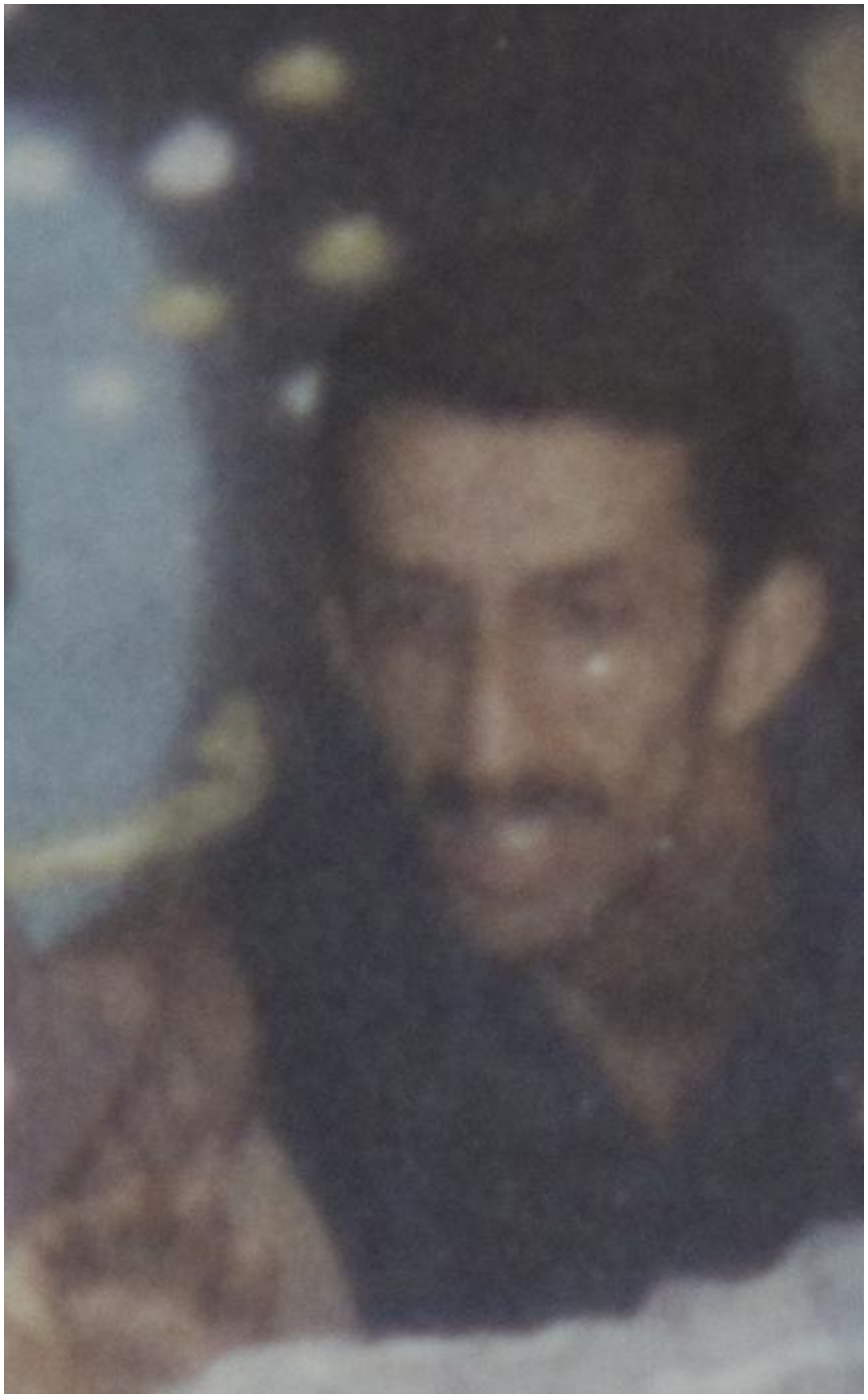
This watercolor drawing (due to time and traveling) started to crumble and many cracks occurred in it. Abdullah drew a set of drawings of his own mother sitting on a ‘karaweeta’[11]. Once he finished the series he distributed all the drawings among his friends.

[11] A sort of a couch made from wood and with craft and care to be strong.



These are the only photos I have of the painter Abdullah. He is in the middle of both photos with a black pantalon and a dark blue striped shirt posing with some theater students in 1997. While we were walking in the streets of Baghdad, we passed by a photograph studio and we decided to take photos that would give an expression that we were falsely acting.

To gather some information, I contacted three friends: **Yousif Abbas**, **Samem Hasab Alla** and **Baqer Hassan** (known as **Bager Al shaikh**).
Samem reminded me of the second name of Abdullah. He also remembered that he has one version of the “Mother set” but he couldn’t find it so far.



With the help of a friend and photographer, **Hussein Shabeeb** we zoomed in on Abdullah.



Yousif helped me to find another photo of Abdullah, and also found a Chinese artist who lives in Amman/Jordan who painted a portrait (of the photo) of our friend.



Abdullah Mahmood. 2006.



Eyes won't closed Abdullah
2014 Jan. 6th acrylic on canvas 40x50cm
by
Ronnie lee Nimer

Baqer told me (who lives in Sweden now) that Ronnie was a friend of his, during his stay in Amman. The artist was overwhelmed by the unfortunate fate of Abdullah and due to the stories that Baqer was telling he painted him.

Most of the information I have about Abdullah here is from Baqer as he was his soulmate, even, they were both born on 06/06/1975.
When I called Baqer he told me that he was supposed to meet Abdullah on the day of his death.., then he paused and asked me: “why are you opening this subject?” I told him about the essay and the idea of restoring the drawing.

“Do you know that Abdullah was practicing Taekwondo”. Baqer added.

Al shaikh says

I did go to the morgue, a splinter from the explosion went right in his heart, he was 31 years old. At a loss, I didn’t go to his funeral (me neither[12]). His father and mother died after him in less than 4 months. Their hearts were broken too.

The ‘mother set’ that Addullah drew was based on a research he did on the techniques of Faeq Hassan.[13]

The first time I met Abdullah, I was sitting in the cafeteria of the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad with my girlfriend and I was dressed like a dandy. A thin grubby boy with a curve in his back like a flower approached me with a thought that I was a teacher and asked: “How can I become a painter?”
To get rid of the intruder I told him to go home right away, and draw 60 drawings and bring them the next day.
The next morning the gubby boy came to me and showed me 60 drawings. I was startled as I completely forgot about him. But I felt like playing with him and told him, again, to go home and draw another 60 drawings and bring them the next day.
On the second day Abdullah approached me and showed me the new 60 drawings and asked me again while I was looking at the second set: “Can I become a painter?”
I couldn’t believe that person and I was confused so I asked him to go home, for the third time, and draw 120 drawings and bring them the next day. The next day he came and showed me the 120 drawings.
“I can’t believe you, how are you doing this” I asked him
“I haven't slept for 3 days,” Abdullah answered and closed his eyes.

We never left the sight of each other, we worked and drew all the time to the limit that we could not recognize which of us drew some of the drawings we made.

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[12] During the conflict in 2006-2007 some areas were dangerous to enter.
[13] A well known artist who participated in the establishment of the Institute of fine arts in Baghdad. Studied and died in Paris.

Restoring

Inspired by Kintsugi[14] similar to the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, an embracing of the flawed or imperfect,[15] a holistic lifestyle and a philosophy that relieves stress and pressures of life,[16] and is a worldview centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.[17]

I contacted an artist and friend **Lumarsol Brito de Oliveira[18],** who lives in Antwerp and asked him if he can help me restore the drawing with gold.

Lumarsol liked the idea so he took the measures of the drawing and the thickness of its paper and made his calculation. It appeared that he would need 5 grams of gold 22ch 916/1000 to carry out the “troc”.

We bought the gold from Argentor at Lange Herentalsestraat 84 in Antwerpen. It cost 290 Euro. Dear Peter, you don’t have to pay me any of this money back.

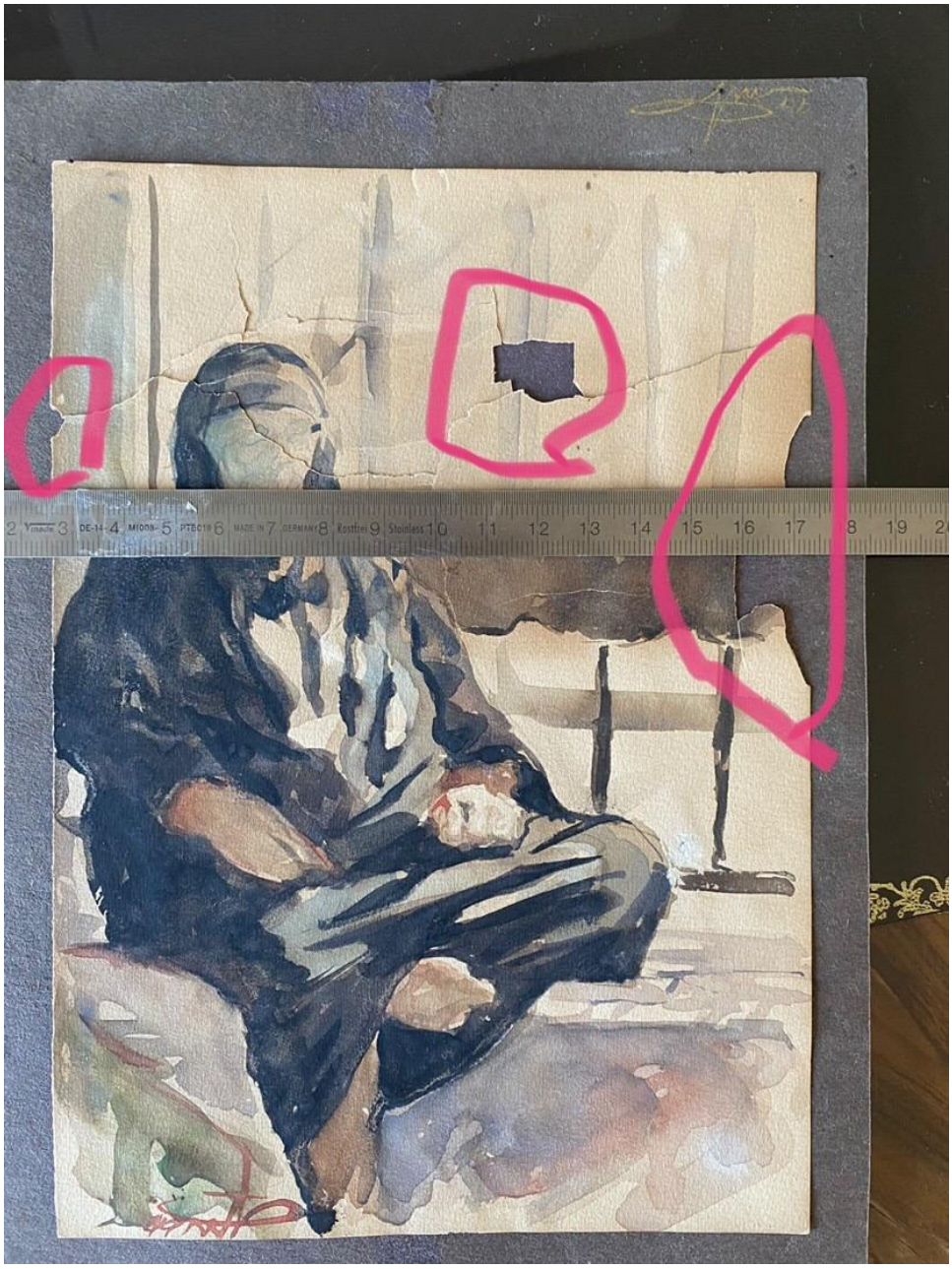
I asked Lumarsol if there is slavery footprint in the gold. Lumarol was very kind and didn’t make fun of me, he summed it for me in some words:

“Gold is bussiness, it is the market, its price didn't change in the past 1000 years, and everything in the market has slavery footprint”.

I remained silent and didn’t talk to the driver.

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[14] ‘golden joinery’ Japanese art of repairing broken pottery
[15] Wikipedia. (n.d.) Kintsugi. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kintsugi
[16] Arabia. Wabi-sabi is not just a philosophy in decoration! It's a way of life. https://aeworld.com/ar/ليس-مجرد-فلسفة-في-الديكور،-بل-أسلوب-wabi-sabi-لايف-ستايل/ديكور/ (the article is in Arabic).
[17] Wikipedia. Wabi-Sabi. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi
[18] I’m from São Paulo - Brazil, 39 years old. My mother was Brazilian hieppi and with her I had worked as a jewellery designer from my 14 to 21 while I had my own job as henna tattoo maker in a touristic city on the coast of São Paulo. In Belgium I had taking acting and body expression lessons at KunstZ. Since 2017 I am taking lessons at the TNA Londenstraat of gold smith and stone setter.
Lumarsol



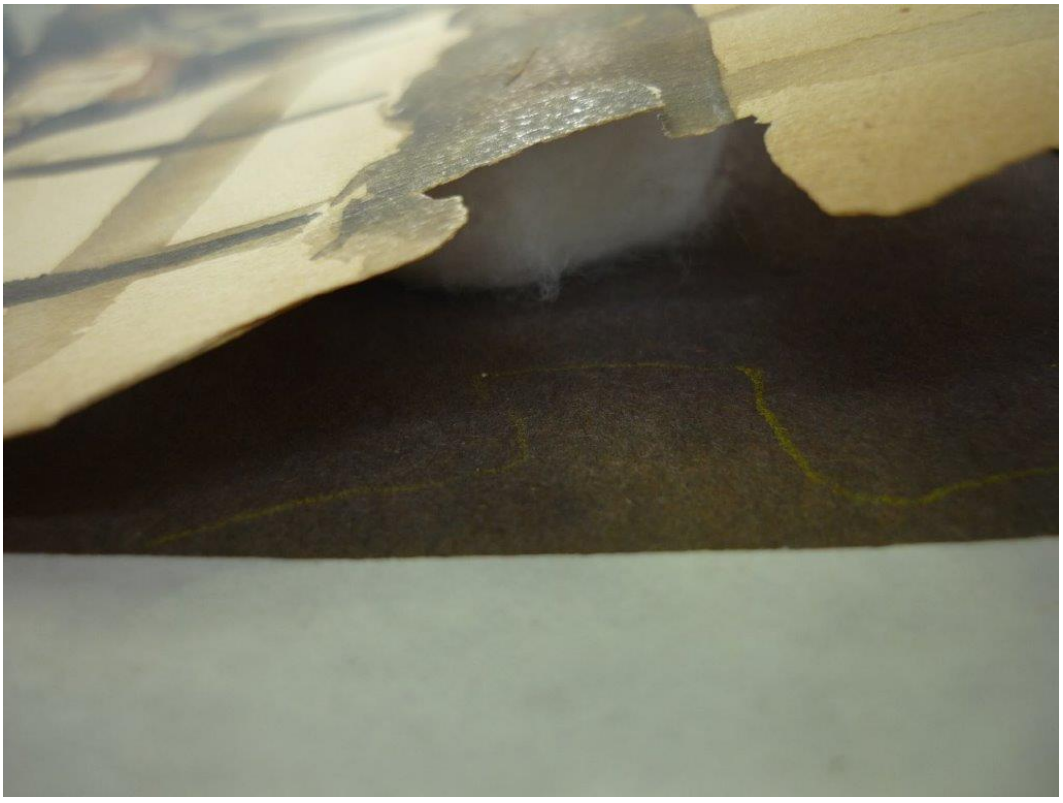
Lumarsol was about to make 0,3 or 0,2mm of space between the cracks of the drawing, melt the gold, prepare it in sheets and fill in the cracks with it. But before executing his idea he went and asked a teacher at the academy TNA Londenstraat **Luc Mariën.**

Luc told him that this idea will destroy the drawing completely and then showed interest in restoring it himself.

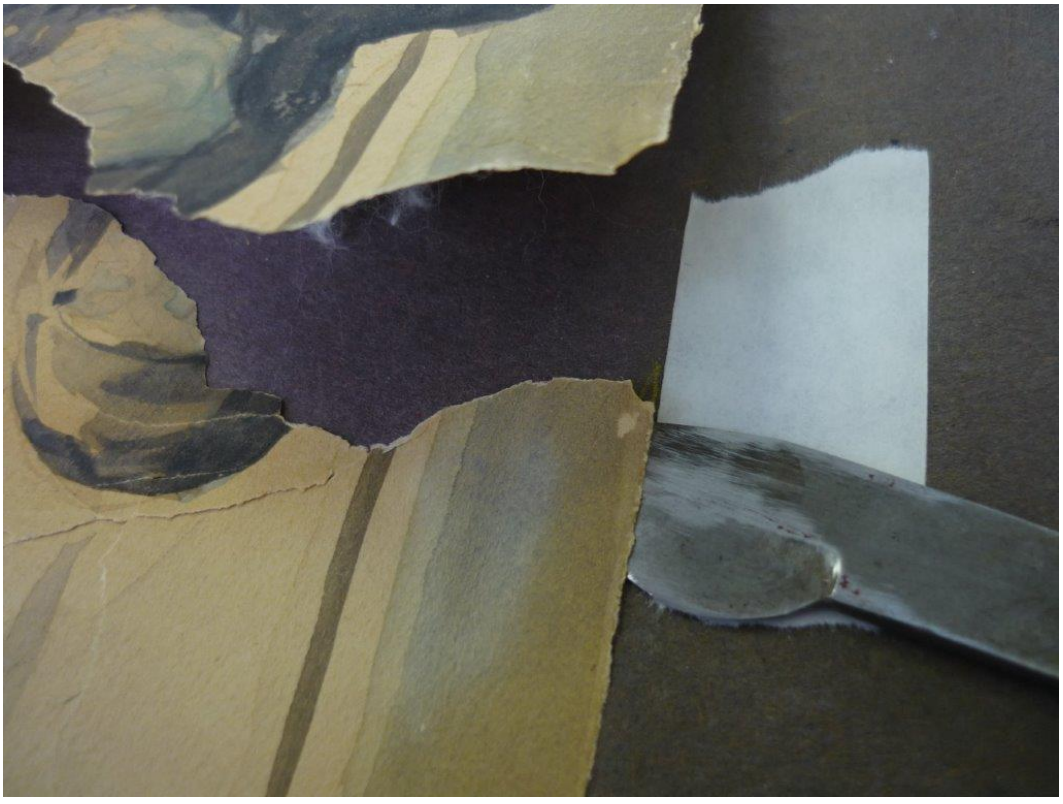
Luc needed 14 days to finish the work, he used gold leaf 23 ¾ karat 80 x 80mm and “parel lijm”. Luc finished the work on April 26th, 2021.

The process of Luc Mariën

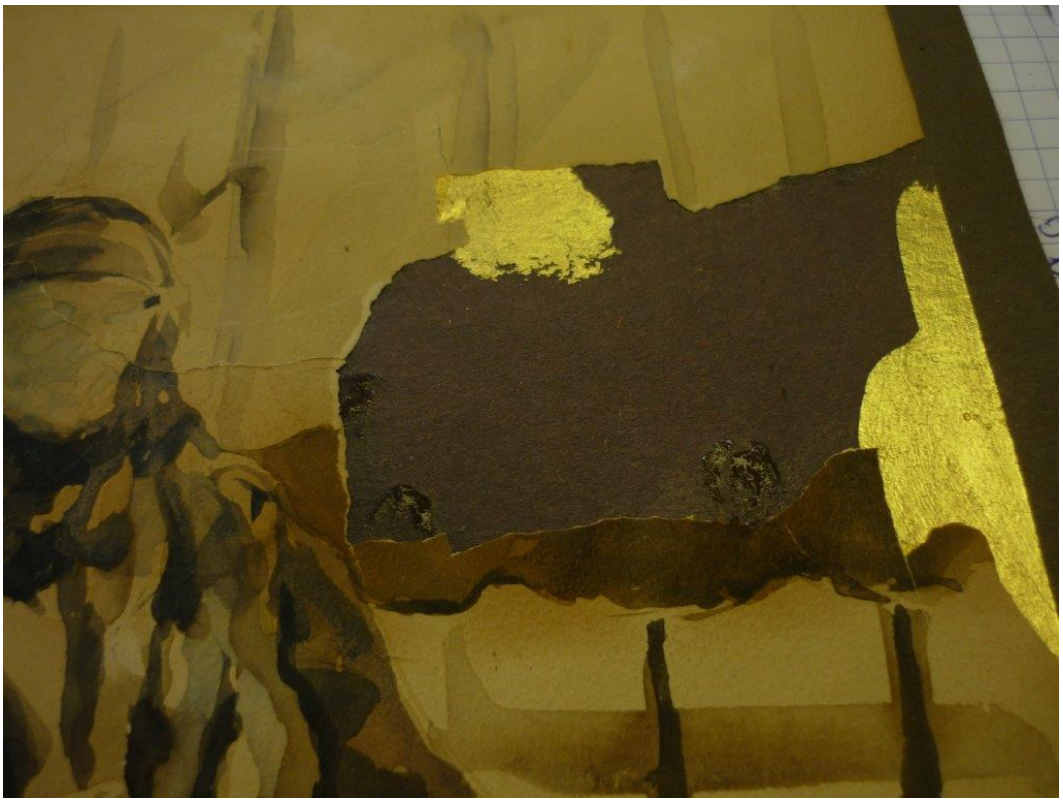





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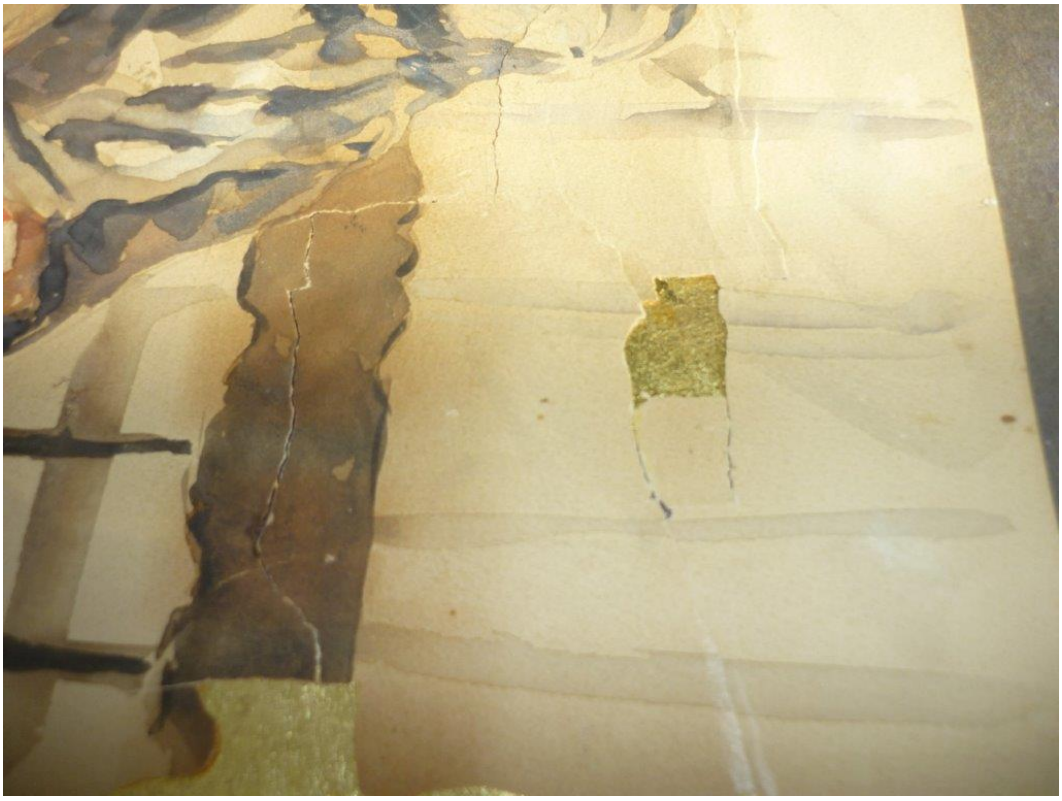



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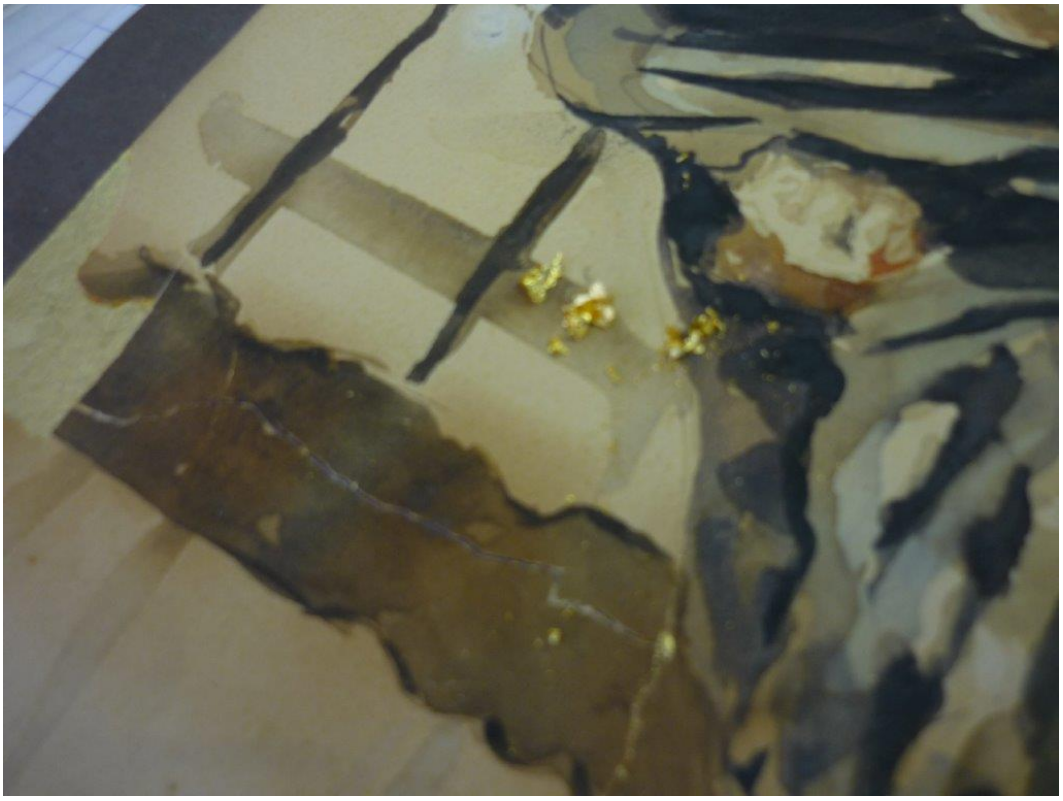




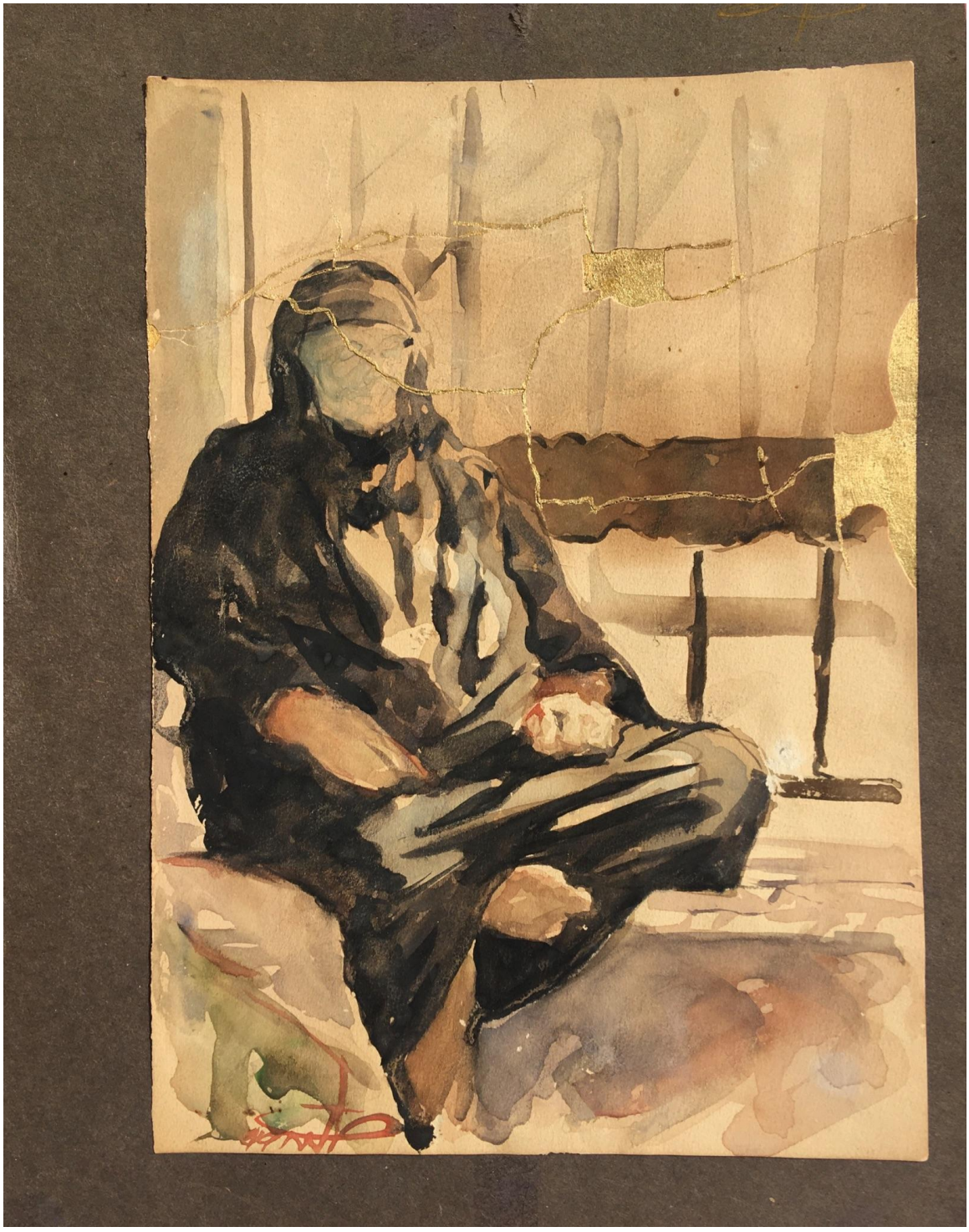












Mother by Abdullah Mahmood. 1997-1999. Watercolor on paper. 19 x 24 cm

I can’t wait to show you the drawing in real life. I hope to see you soon. Accept a warm handshake in my thoughts.[19]

Tout á toi
duraid

May 2nd, 2021

[19] Thank you to Somalia Williamson for her unending help and correcting my English.