

# HRAIR

## Spontaneous, Unhampered Expressionism

Hrair, more than any other artist, reminds me of Lebanon's pre-war art scene. How continental the vernissage atmosphere was then, a cultural-cum-social event attended by "tout le Beirut," where anyone who didn't speak French was conversationally side-lined.

Treated as celebrities, artists were honored, admired and pursued. Throngs of people, many from the large foreign community in Beirut, gathered together at the openings – the literati and the social elite, the diplomats and government officials, the artists, journalists, actors and musicians.

Anyone who in any way lay claim to culture or its pursuit, whether simulated or authentic, was there. All elegantly dressed and scintillating in demeanor, they came to be entertained, to see and be seen. They also looked at the art and, if they admired what they saw, quickly purchased their choice before it was gone.

I recall the young, seraphic boy of the sixties and how much the refreshing exuberance of his personality and art captivated Beirut. No one missed a Hrair vernissage. And to own a Hrair at the time became to many a coveted status symbol.

Looking at Hrair's paintings, I noted how they had changed and yet remained unchanging through the years. I first met Hrair in 1963, when a painting of his at the Sursock Museum's annual autumn salon caught my interest. I was at the time in the process of establishing Gallery One, Lebanon's first



Harmony, oil painting, 100 x 100 cm, 1991



Flower Women, oil painting, 120 x 80 cm, 1978



permanent art gallery, and was looking for new talent to show.

The painting was, as I remember, entitled *The Wedding Feast*. It portrayed a semi-circular gathering of people in ornate dress seated around a table. Color was almost monochromatic, consisting of browns, ochres and off whites. Composition was simple yet dramatic: an embracing line of almost identical faces, seated in a curving line across the top of the canvas and seeming to peer across the wide, solid expanse of table stretched beneath them.

Hrair, who was no more than 18 then and still a student at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, had already chalked up two first prizes for his work: one in a competition for the design of three tapestries intended for hanging in Lebanon's new presidential palace, and the other for the paintings exhibited in the Sursock Museum salon.

The subsequent works that brought Hrair fame and success were, in color, mood and texture, a departure from the austere browns of his earlier canvases. Applying paint in thick luscious swirls, often straight from the tube, he would build up a tactile tapestry surface loaded with a rich orchestration of every color in the rainbow.

He has always had and still has the spontaneous, unhampered freedom of a child in applying paint. Call it expressionism, if you will, but with this difference: a sure control over the graphic rendering of the images he wants to portray – the elegant figures



Fire Horse, oil painting, 100 x 100 cm, 1987



The Fountain, oil painting, 120 x 150 cm, 1994



and prancing horses, the trees in leaf, the birds and flowers and schools of fish, the bursting suns and the intricate Byzantine weavings of swirling design that echo his Armenian heritage.

Another distinctive element in Hrair's work is the use of gold leaf as his ground for painting. Each canvas is prepared by the adhesion of an under layer of gold leaf, filmy-thin and brilliant. Superimposed with the textural play of solid, scum bled and scratched-through color, the gold throws a shimmering glow across the entire surface of the painting.

Hrair's manner and materials of painting have not changed, nor have his images. The oval, almost identical faces of 1963 still peer out in static, enigmatic and sexually ambiguous expression. The elongated figures, hands and feet now exaggerated into an innovative element of design, are still draped in opulent robes of brocade. All this remains unchanged.

What is different is Hrair's very apparent departure from the multi-colored world he once inhabited. The color we see in the current show and which he has been using for the past several years is monochromatic in scale, confined mostly to an interplay of browns, ochres and off whites. In a few canvasses, blue, red or burnt sienna takes over as the dominating hue. The one enlivening note that Hrair keeps is the pervading sparkle of gold.

Amal Trabulsi, who was Hrair's classmate at the Academy, tells this story about him: "Whenever we were assigned to paint outdoors, in the ugly, treeless, colorless "garden" of the Academy building, we all produced dull paintings of ochres and dusty greys. All except Hrair. He'd come up with the most wondrous colors – pinks and oranges, blues, yellows and greens, all alive and dancing in the light. We never understood how and where he saw them." ■

*The Daily Star*, January 31, 1999, exhibition at Gallery Rochane Gallery subtitled "Helen Khal notices a subtle evolution in the work of Lebanese artist Hrair"



Princess and Blue Horse, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm, 1998

Born in Beirut in 1943, Hrair studied art at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA). From the very beginning, Hrair's artistic career has been crowned with success both in Lebanon and abroad, with numerous exhibitions held in Europe, the United States, the

Arab countries, and as far as Japan. He was awarded the Sursock Museum prize in 1965, the *Palais de la Présidence* prize of Beirut in 1964, the gold medal in the Sao Paolo *Biennale*, 1969, and was honored by the Italian government in 1971.

Hrair's dominant theme is the horse, symbol of male virility, strength, and mastery – the semi-mythical stallion and the centaur sprung from the legends of Phoenicia and the ancient Orient. Often the horse is accompanied by a "flower-woman" whose

curling tresses intermingle with the spirals of its mane – an unreal doll-figure spellbound in willing passivity as if engendered from the flanks of the horse-male in an echo recalling the creation of Eve. Since his first exhibit in 1960 at the Alecco Saab Gallery in





Beirut, Hrair has held more than twenty exhibitions in Beirut and many exhibitions in Bahrain, Damascus, Jordan, Jeddah, Kuwait, Qatar, Riyadh, the UAE, Brazil, Greece, Paris, Spain, London, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, DC,

and participated in the international *biennales* of Sao Paolo and Venice. His paintings have been collected, notably by Queen Elizabeth II of England, King Faisal Bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia, King Hussain Bin Talal of Jordan, Prince Rainer of

Monaco, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and many others.



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