

## A Time of Gifts

**The donation of an art collection to the American University of Beirut has prompted plans to create two new galleries in Lebanon**





The legend of Khalil Saleeby, one of Lebanon's most eminent but unexamined painters, goes something like this. He was born to landowning Greek Orthodox peasants in 1870, in the village of Btalloun in the mountains outside of Beirut. As a child, Saleeby started drawing with the heads of matchsticks before graduating to charcoal and ink. He studied at the Syrian Protestant College, which later became the American University of Beirut (AUB). Saleeby impressed his teachers enough to be sent off to Scotland for further study where he trained with John Singer Sargent, who encouraged the young painter to continue his education in Philadelphia. There, Saleeby met (and promptly married) Carrie Aude, who soon became his favourite subject and lifelong muse.

The couple spent ten years on the move in Edinburgh, London and Paris, where Saleeby met Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Gustave Courbet. At the turn of the century, he returned to Beirut, began teaching at his Alma Mater, and rented a studio across the street. Saleeby was doing well enough to buy a house in his ancestral village.

It is perhaps one of the cruelties of Lebanon's art history that Saleeby's legacy has been wholly eclipsed by that of his students, Saliba Douaihy and César Gemayel. It is certainly one of the cruelties of Lebanon's political history that Saleeby's prodigal son-style return to Btalloun sparked a dispute over water resources, which ended in the summer of 1928, when a group of village thugs murdered the artist and his wife as they were returning home from a swim. Some accounts say they were ambushed; others say they were hanged. According to AUB professor Kirsten Scheid, Beirut's newspapers covered the assassination obsessively for months.

Despite the tragedy, Scheid says that still very little about Saleeby is known. In his quizzical *Dictionnaire de la peinture au Liban* (Dictionary of Painting in Lebanon, 1998), the writer and archivist Michel Fani laments that much of Saleeby's oeuvre – paintings, sketchbooks, letters, diaries – was destroyed or dispersed after his death. But was it?

In January, while much of the Middle East's art scene was dispersed around the globe – in Berlin for the launch of Okwui Enwezor's 'Meeting Points 6'; in Doha for the opening of the Louise Bourgeois exhibition 'Conscious and Unconscious'; and in London for the opening of Hossein Amirsadeghi's conference 'Art and Patronage: the Middle East' – AUB made a quiet but consequential announcement.

Samir Saleeby, an 86-year-old ophthalmologist and distant relative of the ill-fated painter, has donated his family's entire art collection to AUB, including all of the unfinished paintings in the artist's studio when he was killed, and some three dozen works by Douaihy, Gemayel and Omar Onsi, among others. The collection is an unabashed boy's club – there isn't a single painting by a woman – which makes for dramatically skewed history, but at least it's a start.



The gift came with conditions: the collection must never be sold, must be kept intact, must be housed in a museum named for the family, must be used to anchor serious academic research, and must be made accessible to the public. (AUB's campus is closed to all but university or alumni ID holders, a remnant from the civil war, when a president, two deans, a librarian and countless students and teachers were killed there.) To meet those conditions, AUB is entering a game it hasn't been playing for decades.

Ever since the first wave of announcements for new museums and their top-down, state-run institutional ilk started rolling in from the Gulf six years ago, there's been a low-grade war raging between the old cultural centres of the region – Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus – and the upstarts of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha. The former are still sites of production: the cities where artists live and work and tear into the tensions that drive their art. The latter are, at best, poised to become sites of consumption: the cities where art is bought, sold, bankrolled and put on display. The promise that scholarly art-historical research would inevitably follow has so far failed, particularly in Doha, which said so much about it before pitching Takashi Murakami instead.

Lebanon may be a political and financial basket-case, but it has a long, if uneven, history of educating artists and art historians. AUB's fine art department, recently reinstated after closing down in the 1970s, was kick-started in the 1950s by professors hired from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to bring the Bauhaus to Beirut. Now, for the Saleeby collection, AUB is opening a temporary exhibition space in June, with two permanent galleries for modern and contemporary art in the pipeline. It is hiring a curator (in addition to the conservators and professors already on board), drafting an acquisitions policy and developing an exhibitions programme – three things nobody associated with AUB in the postwar period would have ever predicted.

Add to this the Home Workspace Programme, Ashkal Alwan's eight-month-old

experimental art school, and two new curatorial studies departments – at Balamand University and Université Saint Joseph – and Lebanon has stepped into one of the region’s most critical intellectual and academic breaches. Could it fail or fall apart? Absolutely. But Lebanon has virtually no resources, nothing to lose, and some incredible stories to tell.

**By KAELEN-WILSON GOLDIE**

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