

AUB acquires Saleeby art collection

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BEIRUT: The American University of Beirut announced Thursday that it has secured a donation of over 60 paintings, most from the early 20th century and more than 30 of them by the renowned Lebanese artist Khalil Saleeby (1870-1928). The collection, which has never been exhibited to the public, has been donated by a distant relative of Saleeby.

Khalil Saleeby is regarded to be among Lebanon's earliest impressionists, and thus a founder of modern art in Lebanon. He studied, worked and exhibited in Edinburgh, Paris and the U.S. as well as in Lebanon. He knew and was influenced by such significant European artists as John Singer Sargent, Pierre Cecile Puvis de Chavannes and Pierre Auguste Renoir.

Kirsten Scheid, a professor of anthropology at AUB whose research focuses on contemporary and modern Lebanese art, is skeptical of "firsts," but she readily acknowledges Saleeby's talent and significance as an artist.

"There is frustratingly little information about him," Scheid told The Daily Star, "which is odd because he and his work were so widely discussed after he was killed. He was a serious professional painter who trained in France but also in Scotland and on the east coast of the U.S."

The son of a landowning family in the Mountain village of Btalloun, Saleeby enrolled at AUB (then the Syrian Protestant College) in 1886. After graduating, he traveled to Edinburgh in 1890 and there became acquainted with Sargent and his work. He returned to Lebanon in 1900 and appears to have worked mainly on portraits.

"He returned to Lebanon with his American wife, who posed for his nudes," Scheid said. "It seems this was a bit controversial at the time as people weren't painting nudes here, though they were in Ottoman Turkey."

“He set up an atelier on Bliss Street, near the AUB main gate. He certainly had an impact upon the AUB community, which hosted art exhibitions. He was a huge influence on [Lebanese artists] Omar Onsi ... and Cesar Gemayel.

“Saleeby’s work was exhibited in Paris by Durand-Ruel, known for their work with the impressionists. In 1920 he bought a home in Btalloun where he fell into a conflict about water usage that was never resolved. Actually, when he and his wife were murdered in 1928, just outside AUB, it was connected to this conflict. He was 58.”

In addition to the Saleeby pieces, the collection also includes works by such leading Lebanese painters as Saliba Douaihy (1915-1994), Cesar Gemayel (1898-1958) and Omar Onsi (1901-1969).

AUB spokesmen have said that the quality and significance of the collection is “evident by its size, the high quality of the paintings, the fact that they are all still in their original condition, and the breadth of the work by Saleeby.”

Lucia Scalisi, the former senior conservationist of paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, is overseeing work on the works and the university is having Sotheby’s appraise the entire collection. Scholarly research on the collection will also be undertaken to prepare a catalogue of the works.

“We are honored to receive such a prestigious and important art collection and are very grateful for this extraordinarily generous gift,” said AUB President Peter Dorman in a university press release. “The university has long been a supporter of the arts through our teaching and research in the arts and humanities.

“We are also proud to have practicing artists amongst our students, faculty and alumni. This collection forms a vital part of Lebanon’s and the Arab world’s cultural heritage and we consider it a privilege to preserve and

promote it for the benefit of future generations. Not only will the collection enable a public art exhibition but it will also serve as a unique resource for students, researchers and art specialists.”

AUB spokesmen said the university considers it essential that the collection be seen as widely as possible in the Middle East and internationally. The first public viewing is scheduled for March at Paris’ L’Institut du Monde Arabe.

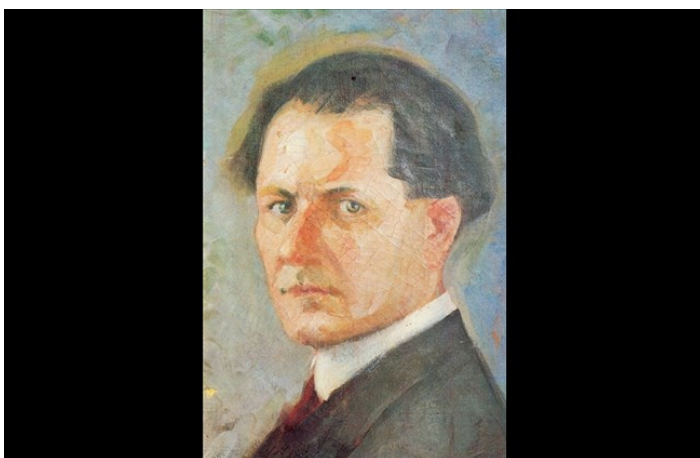
University spokesmen say AUB has already created a temporary gallery space in Hamra to showcase the collection, which is set to open by early summer. A projected permanent space will be named “The Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum” after the donor’s parents. When it opens, it will be the first major Lebanese art collection to be made permanently available to the public.

“I wanted the collection to remain permanently in Lebanon and to be made available to the public,” said donor Samir Saleeby. “It was critical that the paintings be taken care of by a trusted and respected institution and there was no better choice than the American University of Beirut.”

By Jim Quity

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Saleeby's "Self-Portrait" (1928)