

By Claude Khoury

Despite over five years of Lebanese violence, the paintings of Lebanon's Hrair are still stubbornly refusing to reflect any of the blood and destruction that has become this country's hallmark.

"I will not trade in misery and the destruction of my country," Hrair told me. "I see what is happening, and it's breaking my heart, but I will not let it dominate my paintings. The people are down. Their morale has hit rock bottom. I will not make things worse by allowing this war into my work. What I try to do is breathe a sense of optimism into my paintings, inject a touch of hope and happiness."

He does not always succeed.

"I am an artist, and my feelings are bound to show in my paintings. I try to keep everything in, but I cannot say that what is happening to my country is having no effect on my work at all. It is. A hint of melancholy has crept into my paintings despite all my attempts to keep it out. It shows most in my choice of colors. Before the war, my colors were more vivid. Now, I use more pastels, more sober shades."

Hrair, the Lebanese painter whose works have gained him international acclaim, left this country when the war broke out and settled in Paris.

"I left because it became impossible for me to work here," he said. "My studio, which was in the Khan Antoun Bek area (near the Bahri restaurant in downtown Beirut) was completely destroyed. I got myself a workshop/apartment in Paris and started working there and having exhibitions in various countries.

"When the Arab Deterrent Forces came to Lebanon, I returned and resettled in Beirut after a two-year absence, determined never to leave it again. I kept my workshop/apartment in Paris as a sort of second home for a while, but six months ago, I let go."

ROOTS

"You seem to be a rare specimen," I told him. "Most of Lebanon's painters are abroad, and they appear to have no intention of coming back at the moment."

He said, "You see, I need Leba-

non to be able to work. I need the light of Beirut. It inspires me. And my roots — they're here. I was born and brought up here. I am a Lebanese through and through. I identify with the Lebanese menta-

lity. Some Lebanese who were born and raised here think European. I don't. I feel more Lebanese, Arab, Oriental, and this shows in my way of thinking and in my behavior...

"I definitely paint better in



I will not depict the war in my paintings, because I refuse to trade in the destruction of my country

Lebanon than I do in France, for instance. And that is as it should be. I have nothing in common with the French school. I have my own style, and that style springs from Arab and Armenian — Oriental — art. I already have a rich heritage to draw on. I need no inspiration from Europe. All I need from Europe and the West in general is knowledge — knowledge of the trends — and I get that by keeping in touch,

following up on various exhibitions, and so on. But I don't belong there. I belong here — in Lebanon, in the Arab world, in the Orient.

"I adore Lebanon, and I need it."

The feeling is mutual.

Lebanon has "adored" Hrair since the early 1960's — 1961, to be exact, when, at the age of 18, he imposed himself on the country's attention by winning the first prize at the Autumn Exhibition of the Sursock Museum.

For Lebanon, it was love at first sight.

Well, second sight, perhaps.

Because although Hrair would rather forget the experience, he first presented his works to this country in 1959. The exhibition was at the Alecco Saab gallery, and Hrair winces when he remembers it now.

"It was a complete fiasco," he says. "I must admit my paintings

were horrible then. I was very young — 16-17 — and when one is young, one believes in his talent, even when he doesn't have one. The paintings I exhibited that year were a mixture of abstract and Western styles. No good. I can honestly say that exhibition is the greatest disappointment I have ever had."

HAPPIEST

And the happiest moment in his life, he adds, came two years later, when he was given the first prize in the Sursock Museum's Autumn Exhibition.

He was to get many more prizes: the 1964 Sursock Museum Spring Exhibition's first prize, the first three prizes in the 1964 contest of decorative tapestries for the new presidential palace in Baabda, the gold medal at the 1969 Sao Paulo (Brazil) Biennial Exhibition, the gold medal at the 1972 exhibition organized in Rome by the Italian government...

He was to receive the critics' acclaim for the exhibitions he held all over the world — Greece (Athens and Mikonos), France (Paris), England (London), Italy (Rome, Venice), the United States (Las Vegas, New York, Los Angeles), Brazil (Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro), Japan (Tokyo), Saudi Arabia (Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam), Kuwait...

His paintings were to be purchased by some of the world's greatest celebrities: Queen Elizabeth, Princess Grace, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Princess de Ribes...

But Hrair's happiest moment remains that initial testimony to his talent — the first prize of the Sursock Museum in 1961.

For Hrair, who had been painting from the age of 12 and had been referred to as a "child prodigy," the Sursock prize was a dream come true — a dream, which, after the 1959 experience, he had feared he would never realize.

He realized it not only by talent, but also by a great deal of hard work. The 1959 disappointment, far from plunging him into despair, served to double his efforts. He was a student of architecture and interior decoration at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) at the time. Alongside his major, he





My first major exhibition in Beirut since 1975 will probably be next spring

took painting courses and applied himself to the canvas around the clock.

Immediately after the Sursock victory, Hrair held what he now regards as his first real exhibition, at Beirut's Gallery One, and from then on, he moved from triumph to triumph.

SAUDI ARABIA

His latest conquest is Saudi Ara-

bia, where he first exhibited his works in 1975.

"I went there at the invitation of the Saudi Youth Welfare organization, whose president is His Royal Highness Prince Feisal Bin Fahd (son of Crown Prince Fahd). That first exhibition in Riyadh, inaugurated by Prince Feisal, launched me in Saudi Arabia. I was very well treated in the Kingdom, especially by His Royal Highness Prince Feisal Bin Fahd, who appreciates art and is doing his utmost to promote it in his country. He encouraged me a lot, and I was very well received by the Saudi public.

"I was astonished to find that, even at the beginning, people knew about me. The Lebanese press being among the most widely read in the Arab world, the Saudis and the Kuwaitis had read about me.

"There is a great deal of interest in art in Saudi Arabia, although this field still needs to be developed.

The students there are particularly interested in art. Entire schools would come to my exhibitions and enquire about my paintings. It's not only the royal family that's interested in art. Many other Saudi families would come to those exhibitions. And then there are the Palestinian, Jordanian, Syrian, American, British and Canadian expatriates there, who come in large numbers and buy."

"There are some," I said rather tactlessly, "who are saying you have turned to Saudi Arabia for no other reason but to make more money."

"That is not true," he said. "I'm not exhibiting more in Saudi Arabia than in other foreign countries. I've had four exhibitions in Brazil, for instance, and only three in Saudi Arabia. I'm an international artist. I exhibit all over the world, and I don't charge more for my paintings in Saudi Arabia than I do anywhere else.

"Maybe they're saying that because my exhibitions in Saudi Arabia were very successful and much talked about. The Lebanese sometimes have a tendency to criticize success. Actually, it's not a purely Lebanese trait. It's human nature. There are some people everywhere who dislike successful people. That kind of criticism does not bother me."

He added: "As for me, I like all my fellow painters, and I always focus on the positive aspects of their work, never on the negative aspects. Because I believe that one should never try to destroy an artist."

THE BEST

But much as he likes his fellow painters, Hrair is of the opinion that he towers over them

I found that out when I asked him who his favorite painter was.

"My favorite painter," Hrair told me, smiling, "is Hrair."

He explained: "It is, after all, my personal likes that go into my paintings, and my personal dislikes that are kept out of them. A painter paints what he paints because he likes it best, because that is exactly what he wants to see in a painting. So my favorite painter, naturally, is myself."

"You like yourself a lot," I observed.

"I do have a tendency to narcissism," he confessed.

"But apart from you, who is the best painter in Lebanon, in your opinion?"

"There are several 'bests.' You have the old-school painters, like Omar Ounsi, Farroukh and Gemayel, who are great painters and have done a lot for Lebanese art. These days, you have Paul Guiragossian, Juliana Seraphim, Helen Khal — and Shafik Abboud, although I'm not very fond of abstract painting and don't relate to his work very much. Those are the bests.

"But the best of the bests," he reminded me with a laugh, "is me."

PUBLIC

And Hrair's greatest pleasure lies in the knowledge that many people share his high regard of himself.

"I feel that the public likes what I do," he told me, "and I believe that is because of what I communicate through my paintings. I



I have a rich Arab heritage to draw on. I am a Lebanese, an Arab, an Oriental.
I need no inspiration from Europe

can paint what I want to communicate very easily.

"For instance, I have never heard anyone who has bought one of my paintings say that he's sick of it. What I hear many say is, 'I discover something new in your painting every day,' and 'Seeing your painting makes me happy somehow.' I am pleased when I hear such comments, of course, because this means that I am succeeding in put-

ting a message across, a happy message."

Hrair's next collection of messages will be exhibited in October, at the Charles Cressente Gallery in Paris, and the exhibition will inaugurate that gallery, which is located on the Avenue Montaigne.

Then, in January, he will have another exhibition at the Malki Gallery in Jeddah.

And what about Beirut?

"I'm in the middle of negotiations with several Lebanese galleries right now," he said. "I haven't decided on the gallery, but I plan to hold an exhibition in Beirut next spring, all things being equal.

"I did have an exhibition at the Chahine Gallery here last year, but it was a small one. My real comeback exhibition — my first since the 1975 war — will be in the spring."

But that is not a definite promise. Hrair is also considering an exhibition at Finlay's Gallery in New York, and since he only exhibits once or twice a year, he will have to choose between the Big Apple and the Great Devastation.

BEIRUT

But devastated though it is, Beirut, as far as Hrair is concerned, remains the center of art in the Arab world.

"Of course, you have Baghdad now, which is enjoying a great art boom — in painting, sculpture and music. In fact, I think the Iraqis are the Arab world's best painters and sculptors. There is also a vigorous art movement in Syria. And in Saudi Arabia, art is really being encouraged. All talented people are getting scholarships and other kinds of assistance. They have the financial means to do this. In Lebanon, there's a lot of talent, but not enough financial means. That's how we lose many talents. Most talented people have to take another job and paint on the side — which is bad, because a painter must devote all his time to painting, and he must have enough income to keep him from worrying about money. This is very important. I am not of the opinion that misery makes a good painter. That may be true in the movies, but not in real life.

"So because of the lack of financial means, the Lebanese painters are at a disadvantage, and



Monday Morning's Claude Khoury with Hrair

because of the current situation, Beirut's position as a regional art center is, in the opinion of some, threatened.

"I believe, however, that Beirut remains the art center of the region — because of its geographical location, because of its freedom of expression, because it allows for interaction between East and West — and because of its people. In spite of everything that has happened and is happening, the Lebanese people remain deeply interested in the arts, maintaining constant contact with artistic affairs and events. At the same time, you find parents here encouraging their children's interest in the arts — encouraging them, for instance, to learn drawing at school. That is very important, because these children are the Lebanon of tomorrow.

"The instability of Lebanon has, of course, affected the country's painters and artists, but they have not lost hope. They go on working, each painting what he feels. Some feel the need to paint peace, others to paint war, but they go on, refusing to give up. It is this determination to survive that has saved us.

Lebanese art will survive, no matter what happens."

PERIODS

Hrair's own style has not changed.

"One does not change his style," he told me. "One can't change it. One remains oneself. But styles can evolve, as mine has."

Hrair started out with an "icon period," putting out tens of icons inspired by the Byzantine era.

"Then I evolved, moved into the erotic and started painting nudes. Very few people are aware of that period. They remember my paintings of horses and women and the sun, but that period came after the nudes. And after the 'horse period,' I went on to paint cities, felines and traditional Arabic calligraphy. The calligraphy period was not really me. I just gave it a try. It was very successful, but I don't identify with that stage of my career, because I didn't create it myself; it existed before, and the calligraphy of the 12th and 15th centuries was more beautiful than mine."

Today, Hrair's exhibitions are a retrospective of most of his periods,

but they appear to be dominated by cities — cities inspired by the Arab world and Brazil.

In some of them, you may see one of the famous Hrair horses.

In some, hope triumphs over despair.

But in others, the sorrow is reflected in every stroke. As in the first city Hrair ever drew. It was a 1.5x2-meter painting of Beirut 1975: a weeping city, but a city determined to survive.

And it will survive.

Hrair is sure of it. ●

My favorite painter, naturally, is myself, because I put into my paintings exactly what I like to see in a painting