

# Ibrahim Serbaï

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## His Life & Work

This website is a tribute to a late 19th-early 20th century great Lebanese painter. It is also a tribute to his fellows in the “School of Beirut”, aka the “Marine School”, who were the founders of what later became known as the “Arabic Artistic Renaissance” similar to the “Arabic Cultural Renaissance”. This school of painting has been the dominant influence on Lebanese painting for almost half a century and left an indelible mark on this art.



Ibrahim Serbai was born in 1865 to a well-off Sunnite family of Ain-el Mraisseh, a seaside quarter of Ras Beirut in the Lebanese capital. He did his studies in various colleges of Beirut and upon graduation, took up lessons in drawing and painting at the “Ottoman Imperial Academy of Fine Arts”.

He got married at some stage of his life, but as no descendant was ever recorded, we

assume that the marriage has remained childless.

Little else is known about his private life. Though his great nephew, Mr. Amine Areisi, later shed a light on a trip Ibrahim Serbai had made to the USA in order to improve his technique and deepen his knowledge in painting.

He died in 1931.

The early painting schools of late-19th century Lebanon

Serbai was a pioneer of the “School of Beirut” for painting, currently better known by the professionals as the “Marine School”. A host of other painters, all coming from bourgeois Sunni families, natives of Beirut, had their names linked with this School during the second half of the 19th century. Next to Ibrahim Serbai, we can list Ali Jammal, Hassan Tannir, Dimashkieh and Toufik Tarek (1875-1940) and others. Even Salah Lababidi (1898-1985) and Mustafa Farroukh (1901-1957) were later associated with the school. Some art historians go as far as to include Habib Srour (1863-1938) in the same list, arguing that, Srour applied the same precision to his paintings and portraits and also taught painting in the “Ottoman Imperial Academy of Fine Arts” in Bachoura-Beirut. (Please refer to the synoptic table of the “Beirut School”). Although the first paintings by beiruti sunni individuals go back to the early 19th century with the topography cadets of the Ottoman army, the actual emergence of the “School of Beirut” didn’t occur before the 2nd half of the same century. It remained, though, a major influence on the Lebanese national painting movement until the great upheavals that affected the world of painting in Europe. The coming of Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and all the other masters revolutionized the concepts of space, composition and colours radiance.

The “School of Beirut” was distinctly different, or more to the point, in some sort of rivalry from the Christian and Europe affiliated “School of Religious Painting” that emerged from the convents circa 1700. The major names then included Boutros Kobressi and Ibrahim Kerbaj, and in the 19th and 20th centuries other painters continued the same tradition such Moussa and Kanaan Dib, Daoud Corm, Habib Srour, Philippe Mourani and many other talented painters.

As reflected in the name given to their School, these latter artists, most of whom have studied painting in Rome, not only painted religious figures, such The Christ or The Virgin Mary, Saints and Church figures, but also took to frescos of cathedrals, churches, convents and other sanctuaries and holy places. They still managed, though, not to neglect other themes.

But despite their differences and rivalry, painters of both “Schools” had to share a common interest, the lucrative market of portraits for the rich and famous. Wealthy Lebanese, Turk, Syrian, Egyptian and many other Levantines flocked to painters of all obediences for their portraits to be taken against the sum of around 10 pounds Osmanly. Certain artists ashamed of the mercantile aspect of the portrait business, refused to sign their work.

Moustafa Farroukh , the great artist had to his name thousands of paintings with some of them were considered as echoing those of the “School of Beirut”. Farroukh, while addressing the “Cénacle Libanais” on Sep 14th 1947, had referred to the 19th century “Arabic Artistic Renaissance” as being somehow an “ Arabic Cultural Renaissance”. He also maintained that behind this renaissance lay several artists. And without any distinction between the two Schools, he went on to name: Abdallah Zakher, Kannan Dib, Najib Shukri and Najib Fayad. He then mentioned Dimashkieh, Said Merhi, Ali Jammal, Salim Haddad and Najib Bakhazi and specially Ibrahim Serbai whose work, Farroukh was the first to compare to that of Canaletto (the great painter and engraver of the “Venitian School”, a chronicler par excellence of the Venice’s canals daily life). He finally spoke of “the group who pioneered the learning trips to Europe in order to study the art of painting under the guidance of the grand Masters of the period”. Among these he listed: Raïf Shaddoudi, Daoud Corm, Habib Srour, Khalil Saliby, Gibran Khalil Gibran and Makaroff Fadel. (You can see extracts of Farroukh’s conference in the “Bibliographies” of the site).

#### Roots of the “School of Beirut” or “Marine School”

The painters of “School of Beirut” followed in their works Turkish traditions, inheritors of Persian-ottoman art of miniatures. They were, also, heavily influenced by the orientalist and the European landscaper travellers (mainly coming from England, France and Italy) be they established residents or occasional dwellers in the Orient. The final influence, albeit to a lesser degree, came from the European Renaissance Masters.

For their part, both Mr. Edouard Lahoud, in his book titled “L’Art Contemporain au Liban” (Contemporary Art in Lebanon) and Abdallah Naaman in his “La petite Histoire de la peinture au Liban” (The Short story of Painting in Lebanon), agreed with what Farroukh said in his conference and likened Ibrahim Serbai’s paintings to those of Canaletto.

The Muslims painters, unable to draw Islamic religious figures (forbidden by their religion), applied their talent, instead, by turning towards landscapes, especially the maritime ones, which have always fascinated them, and still life painting. They cheekily bypassed the Islamic ban over sketching the living, by doing portraits of the ordinary people, as opposed to religious ones.

Serbai, during his pilgrimage to Mecca, painted the holy city itself and an oasis in the Arabian desert. The fate of these two paintings is still unknown to these days, alas together with many others of this artist.

According to Mr. Areissi, these paintings were destroyed by accidental bombing during the last Lebanese civil war. The great nephew of the artist maintained that they were of a very high quality. No one really knows how many Serbai landscapes and portraits have survived the vagaries of time or how many are still hanging on the walls of Lebanese homes.

The pictorial composition of the “School of Beirut”

Contrary to the “School of Religious painting” which was massively archived and documented to the finest detail, the “School of Beirut” is scarcely documented and its painters barely kept records of their work, as was discovered by Mr. Michel Fani while writing his book “Dictionnaire de la Peinture Libanaise”.

The artists of the “School of Beirut”, some of whom were serving officers, were not frankly prolific painters. Each had a few paintings to his name, and of those, few withstood the vagaries of time, as they crackled and got damaged under the dual fatal effect of humidity and high temperature prevailing in Beirut climate. One should also notice that these painters were not really experts in preserving their work and that they lacked the basic techniques to do so. One would suspect these painters were oblivious to the real value of their work, and would regret that very little number of paintings have known a restauration job and/or were properly preserved.

But all those painters, in general, have demonstrated a distinctive ability at illustrating figurative paintings that strike the observer as pleasant, serene, enchanting, but also frightfully meticulous. The elaborate neatness of their pictures remind of the military plans or photos, and the minding of every detail takes it nearer to a photo than a painting. Incidentally, the then burgeoning rivalry between the art of painting and that of photography couldn't be better reflected than in the paintings depicting boats immobilized over the sea waves.

The temperance of these Officers-painters even extended to the use of colours, no

vivid or loud colours are to be found here, but rather real ones drawn or collected from the landscape, the stone, the sea, the sky, the fruits or the model at hand. The colors and chiaroscuro bestowed upon the paintings their charm, refinement, harmony, taste and ultimately their oriental elegance.

Ibrahim Serbai and other historical painters

There was a number of painters from the “School of Beirut” who were socially and/or politically involved in the issues that were the period’s concern. Emulating the famous French painter Louis David (with his “Le sacre de Napoléon Bonaparte”, “L’assassinat de Marat” Etc.), they tried to immortalize historical moments or events by drawing them on the canvas.

Ibrahim Serbai, for instance, was interested in the German Kaiser Wilhelm II visit to Lebanon in the wake of the first restoration of Baalback’s Temples. Circa 1895 (1312 AH calendar, and entitled “Balbek” as noted on the canvas by Serbai himself), he did a large oil painting (150×90 cm) representing the temples surrounded by the battlements built by the Arabs in 636 AD and other significant features. He then did another oil paintings (around 135×70 cm) in 1898 entitled “The Reception of Wilhelm II in the Port of Beirut” featuring all the pomp of the event.

The Emperor Wilhelm, dazzled and overwhelmed by the Baalback vestiges, had then sent an archaeological expedition with the mission to clear the sand, rubble and extricate the ruins.

The funny side of the story was that although the painting had been entitled the “RECEPTION of the Emperor in the Port of Beirut”, it was actually drawn at his DEPARTURE from the same place.

He had, in fact, arrived by land on Nov. 10th, 1898 after his pilgrimage and his inauguration of the protestant Church “St. Sauveur” in Jerusalem. He then visited Damascus, Zahle by train and Baalback on horse, where he unveiled the commemorative plaque offered by his friend and ally the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The two monarchs had met during the Kaiser’s 3 weeks visit to Istanbul, prior to his pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In 1918, General Allenby, after defeating and driving out the Turks from the region, took the marble plaque off and tried to wipe away the names and titles of the German Kaiser and his wife. But in 1970, it was restored and put back in its original place where it can still be admired.

When he later came to Beirut, the Kaiser resided in the “Grand hotel d’Orient” (renamed hotel Bassoul in 1920) in Ras-Beirut. He made a tour of the city and finally

embarked from the Port of Beirut heading towards Pula in Istria on board of his royal yacht “SMY Hohenzollern II”, escorted by a flotilla of smaller ships as depicted by Serbai in his “The Reception of Wilhelm II in the Port of Beirut”.

Another painter from the same school of Beirut who had recorded on a canvass a historical event was Dimashkieh. The great artist Mostafa Farroukh, and in his same famous conference at the “Cénacle Libanais” in 1947 tells how Dimashkieh had painted, in 1893 “The Sinking of the Victoria”, the English battleship that ran aground off Tripoli’s coast, and whose wreckage was recently found. The sunken ship was, apparently, a real heaven for scuba divers. The ship was rightly described as the “Mount Everest of Wrecks” for the way she sunk 145m vertically to the seabed with its propellers only 77m deep (newspaper L’Orient-LeJour of 10/12/2009). Alas, this unique work of Dimashkieh remains missing.

Salim Haddad, another artist from the school of Beirut, and who was a Christian Orthodox, went to Egypt and made many portraits for the rich and famous of the period, political figures as well as artistic and literary ones. We can quote, among many others, Ibrahim Pacha Najib (political figure), the brothers Bechara and Salim Takla (founders of the famous Egyptian newspaper “AL-AHRAM”), Yaacoub Sarrouf (writer) etc.

### SERBAI’S ARTISTIC LEGACY

The great committed artist, Ibrahim Serbai, is a pioneer and founder of “School of Beirut”. Unfortunately, we don’t have left but a few of his paintings. To the best of our knowledge only six major works by the great Serbai were lucky to be saved and accounted for:

- 1- The first impressive painting (oil 150x90cm), representing Baalbeck painted in 1895 or 1896, is currently owned by a private collector.
- 2- Four other paintings, around 135 x 70 cm, illustrate “The Reception of Wilhelm II at the Port of Beirut.” Serbai painted four copies of this fascinating work with a few minor differences in design and dimensions. However we could only trace the location of three versions: two belong to private collectors and the third can be found in the HQ of Beirut Port Authority. This last painting was initially exhibited in the Kantari quarter of Ras Beirut, at the museum previously known as the palace of Henry Pharaon, a great sponsor and collector of art works. Later, he offered the painting to the company of Beirut Port when he was its CEO.
- 3- The sixth painting (unsigned) is a remarkable view of the seafront in Ras Beirut. It

is 200 x 70 cm and drawn with impressive details. Mr. Michel Fani in his “Dictionary of Painting in Lebanon” (p. 359 – 360), confirmed the authenticity of this work and that it was painted by Serbai himself and it was exhibited for a century at the “Grand Hôtel d’Orient,” which became in 1920 the famous “Bassoul” hotel. The painting is now part of a private collection.

In fact, two of these 6 paintings were recently exhibited in the Sursock Museum during the exhibition “Glance at Beirut – 160 years of images,” which took place between late 2015 and early 2016. One of the paintings was “The Reception of Willhelm II at the Port of Beirut,” and the other was “Seafront View of Ras Beirut.”

All six paintings are still in a good condition since most of them were restored by Mr. Faddoul Khallouf, a conservator-restorer of French National Museums and Sursock Museum in Lebanon.

We ask the Ministry of Culture to speed up the creation of a permanent national museum for fine arts to delight the public with our priceless treasures of the national artistic heritage.

ED: We hope that anyone in possession of a painting, document or any piece of information about Ibrahim Serbai or any of the “School of Beirut” painters, would contact us and consider this website a first step to document these great artists of the 19th and early 20th century.

NB: For more detailed information and to view some paintings of all the artists mentioned above, it is strongly advised to refer to the “Dictionnaire de la Peinture Libanaise ” by Mr. Michel Fani – “Michel de Maule” editions – since it offers a precise professional outlook on our great artists.

Bibliography:

1- “Dictionnaire of the Lebanese painting” by Michel Fani – “Michel De Maule editions”. (Dictionnaire de la Peinture Libanaise).

2- Mostafa Farroukh Conference at the “Cénacle Libanais”  
– September 14, 1947.

3- “Contemporary Art in Lebanon” by Edouard Lahoud – Dar Al Mashrek.(L’Art Contemporain Au Liban).

4- “The Short Story of Painting in Lebanon ” by Abdallah Naaman.(La Petite Histoire de la Peinture au Liban)

5- “Heliopolis – Baalbeck 1898 – 1998 – Discover the Ruins” – Directorate General of Antiquities in Lebanon.(Héliopolis-Baalbeck 1898-1998-A la Découverte des Ruines)

6- “The Wreck of Victoria in Tripoli, an underwater treasure and a media star” by Charlotte Séguin – L’Orient–Le Jour, December 10, 2009. (L’Epave du Victoria au large de Tripoli, un trésor sous-marin et une vedette médiatique).

7- “The Great Unknown: Ibrahim Serbaï, Lebanese Painter of the Nineteenth Century” by Nicole Malhamé Harfouche – La Revue du Liban -from November 3 till November 10, 2007.( Le grand méconnu : Ibrahim Serbai,peintre libanais du XIX ème siècle).

8-“Baalbeck Cradle of the Gods” by Michel Hariz.(Baalbeck Berceau des Dieux).

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