

THE  
Woman  
Artist  
IN  
Lebanon

*by Helen Khal*

P R E P A R E D U N D E R G R A N T  
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I S T I T U T E F O R W O M E N S  
S T U D I E S I N T H E A R A B  
W O R L D B E I R U T U N I V E R S I T Y  
C O L L E G E , B E I R U T , L E B A N O N



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## *Juliana Seraphim*

*"The images in my paintings come from deep within me; they are surreal and unexplainable. Consciously I want to portray a woman's world and how important love is to a woman. Few men understand the quality of love a woman seeks. I try to show them."*

Her grandfather was an architect in Jerusalem whose home, once a convent contained wall frescoes by 19th-century Italian artists. Her father was a government clerk of refined and intelligent taste who selected his wife, a girl of beautiful voice, from a family of musicians.

Into this enlightened background of culture, Juliana Seraphim was born, the eldest of four children.

Her birthplace was Jaffa, Palestine, and it was in this city surrounded by orange groves and situated on a hill rising from the Mediterranean Sea that Juliana spent her childhood. The nearby seashore became her favorite playground. Its white sands, the delicately coloured sea shells she found, the prismatic sparkle of light on the blue waters, the sea gulls and marine life, all left an indelible impression on her young mind. These images would stay with her. Later as an artist she would draw upon them, and they would provide inspiration for many of the shapes and colors of her paintings.

In 1948, her idyllic world was shattered. Palestine became a battlefield and the Seraphim family sought refuge in Lebanon. Juliana, then 14, was placed as a boarding student in a Catholic school in Saida, where she spent three years. Although the pattern of her life became structured, she passed through disturbing period of displacement and adjustment, made more difficult by the turbulent years of adolescence. Also, as the eldest child, Juliana faced the responsibility of contributing to the support of the family as soon as she finished her education. Barely 18, she found work as a secretary in the UNRWA offices in Beirut and remained there for six years.

Underneath this conventional veneer, however, lay a strong, though undefined need for self-expression, a need which began to assert itself and led Juliana into a series of attempts to find a creative medium compatible to her temperament. For a while there were singing lessons, then poetry, and also a brief venture into sculpture.

"For some reason, I avoided painting," she says. "Without understanding why, I was afraid even to try. Maybe the memory of those grand paintings in my grandfather's house still intimidated me, put art on a pedestal higher than my dreams dared reach. They



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26 & 27 EXPACES MARINS I & II  
oil on canvas, 1974,  
130 x 110 cm.

In Seraphim's latest paintings, exhibited in Beirut in 1974, the horizons of her private world have widened. The earlier symbols of imagined flora, fauna, and the female, which had been portrayed separately and chiefly in her drawings, are all brought together here in a formal ritual of communication. From painting to painting the symbols are repeated -- the butterfly, the bird, the flower, the female, the eye -- all woven together in silken threads of design and transparent veils of emotive color. One finds in these paintings a mysterious and poetic mythology depicting the lost Atlantis of a woman's mind.



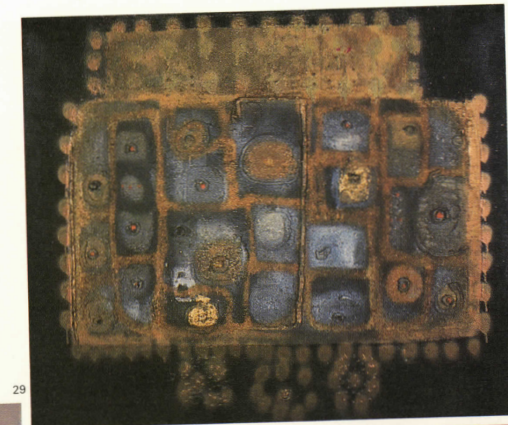
portrayed a mysterious world - - birds, animals, trees, moons, faces... all exotic and foreign, fascinating, and a bit frightening to a child's imagination. Maybe that mystic world still dominated my unconscious, and I wasn't ready to open that door yet, to go so deeply into myself."

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For whatever reason, it was not until Camille Aboussouan, Lebanon's well-known man of letters, entered her life that Juliana turned to art. Friend and relative, Aboussouan was impressed by the unusual qualities, the strange, dark beauty of this young, spirited girl who "wanted to do something." He persuaded her to try painting, and through her first hesitant efforts he continued to encourage and guide her. She was an eager, though shy protégée, still very unsure of herself; but slowly the sophisticated Aboussouan loosened the restraints in her personality. He gave her art books to read, and in long conversations he talked to her about life and art, about history, philosophy, and psychology.

When she took up pen and began to draw, it became almost like another kind of writing, a poetry not of words but of lines. Out of a long-pregnant imagination, the images began to flow - - strange, elegant figures, flying horses, flowers and birds. Oil painting, however, was another matter and not so simple. For this she needed training, and for a while Juliana took lessons from the Lebanese artist, Jean Khalife. Her first canvasses depicted human forms, imagined and unreal, immersed in a transparent, underwater dream world. Wisely avoiding the restricting discipline of academic instruction, Khalife permitted the young artist to follow her own intuitive style, and told her, "You are a mystic, a surrealist painter."

Meanwhile, Juliana continued working as a secretary. "I was still the responsible, obedient daughter; but more and more, painting became my real world. When I was offered a scholarship to study art in Europe, I decided to go." Parental objections were immediate and strong. How could she go, leave her secure job and its assured income upon which the family partially depended; what would happen to a young girl, alone, in Europe? Overriding their distressed reactions, their angry remarks about her selfishness and the madness of her decision, however, Juliana went off to become an artist.



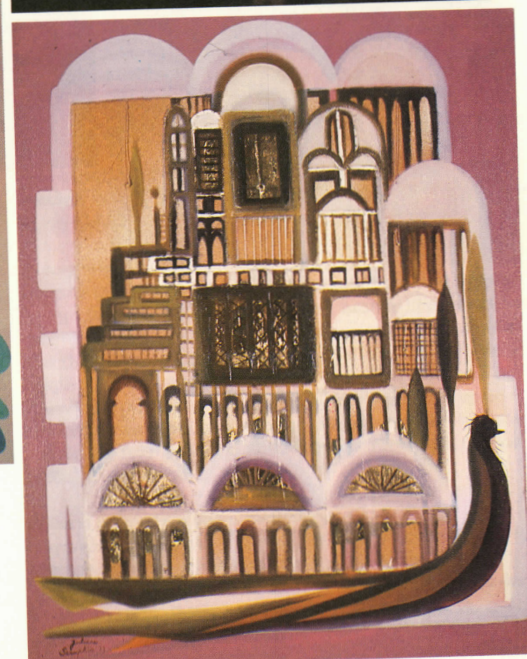
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28 FEMME FLEUR  
1972, oil on canvas,  
80 x 100 cm.  
It was in the "Femme Fleur" series that Seraphim first translates into paint on canvas the fragments of imaginative symbolism that her drawings contain. It took her a decade to devise and polish the painterly technique necessary to interpret the transparencies and detailed figuration of her subconscious imagery.



29 BYZANTINE PERIOD II  
1964, sand, gold leaf,  
powdered pigment,  
100 x 80 cm.  
After a period of study in Spain, Seraphim spends some time interested in the abstract qualities of material. The subject upon which she exercised this interest in material and texture still finds its source in Byzantium, but color begins to assume a specific relevance.

30 LEBANESE ARCHITECTURE  
1970-73, oil on canvas,  
80 x 100 cm.  
In searching for the style and technique her surreal imagination demands, Seraphim's subject matter serves merely as a pretext. From Byzantium, she moves to Phoenicia, then to Lebanese architecture as a design motif. The elongated bird at the base of the picture is a first suggestion of the surreal imagery that will later dominate her work.

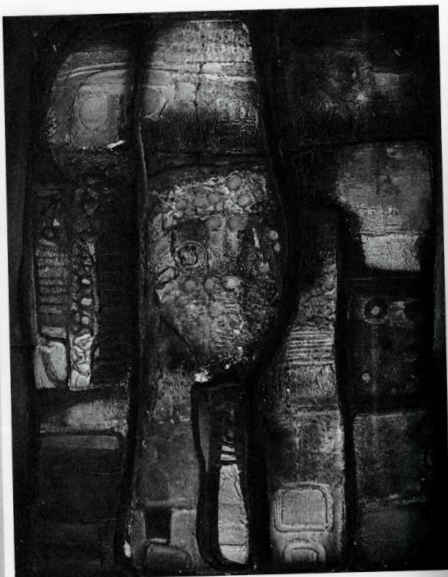


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31 UNTITLED DRAWING  
1965-70, pen and China  
ink, 40 x 60 cm.  
From the beginning,  
drawings such as this  
example earn Seraphim  
recognition, in Europe as  
well as in Lebanon. In  
them she freely expresses  
the private imagery and  
surreal direction of her  
creative purpose. Her pen  
moves with sublime  
graphic grace, building up  
prismatic transparencies  
of an ethereal and some-  
times erotic dream  
world. Meanwhile, she  
slowly and patiently  
works at her paintings to  
find a technique in that  
more difficult medium  
that will achieve in color  
a comparable elegance of  
expression.

32 BYZANTINE PERIOD  
1959, sand, gold leaf,  
powdered pigment,  
80 x 100 cm.  
Unaware of the surreal  
substance of her imag-  
ination, Seraphim's first  
paintings find a con-  
scious intention in an  
expression of her Byzan-  
tine heritage. There is an  
icon quality in this fron-  
tal human visage and in  
the suggestion of cathed-  
ral space in the back-  
ground.

The years that followed were not easy, even with the benefit of scholarships. She spent a year in Florence where, in a 1959 exhibition, she showed a series of underwater landscape paintings - of dreaming women floating in a transparent, fluid world. Another year was spent in Madrid. "That was a very important year for me," Juliana recalls. "I started my China ink drawings in Spain. It was the art critic, Carlos Ariane, who suggested this medium as the one best suited to express the imagery of my surreal imagination... and how right he was! An important change occurred in my painting there, too. I began to explore the density, the material properties of paint. I started using it sculpturally, building up abstract forms in bas relief on the canvas with sand and other materials. This technique later developed into the paintings of my Byzantine and Phoenician period."

Upon returning to Lebanon, Juliana prepared for her first Beirut exhibition. In every sense of the word, she was determined to become a professional artist; she would work on selling her paintings and on becoming a "success." Weighing upon her was the responsibility of helping to support her family; she had to prove to them that her decision to become an artist was not a mad one after all. The public response to her work was encouraging, but during the first years sales were modest, her income was irregular, and there were times when in order to continue, money had to be borrowed.

Along with the difficult years, however, there were also periods of exciting promise. Another scholarship helped her go to Paris in 1965, where she further developed her technical proficiency and also gained wider recognition. Her drawings caught the interest of the editors of *Planete Magazine* and were published in one of their issues. A New York publisher, impressed by her work, commissioned her to execute a series of engravings to illustrate a special de luxe portfolio anthology of the works of nine Nobel Prize writers.

Juliana spent two years in Paris working on the engravings 27 of them. It was an enormous challenge for one who at that point was still a beginner in graphic techniques. There was the frustrating process of trial and error, of plates destroyed, and eyesight strained to exhaustion. But completed they were; and Juliana emerged from the experience -- a test met and overcome

-- with the steel durability of a mature artist, sure of her talents and skill, and totally dedicated to her career.

Today, Juliana Seraphim's life is inseparable from her art. Her days follow a strict pattern. Each morning there are several hours of work, then lunch and a brief rest, followed by a late afternoon walk in the mountains or by the sea. Now 40 years old and prizing her independence, Juliana sees no room in her life for marriage. "Men just don't understand the needs of a woman," she says. "When she is in love, she is a delicate, fragile flower, easily bruised. How many men have the sensitivity to know this? This was what I wanted to express in my 'Femme Fleur' paintings, the emotional and psychological fragility of woman. The two men in my life who I would have married failed me, just couldn't fulfill all my needs -- the 'flower' woman in me, and the artist. They were afraid of both... the woman was too complicated, and the artist was too independent."

It is evident in her work that Juliana is voicing the private desires of her own womanhood. In exploring her own psychological depths, the images which emerges are often the archetypal symbols of a female collective unconscious. Through them she expresses a feminine sensuality, an emotionalism, which she believes is the essential core of all women. In her paintings, the vision is a romantic one, a gossamer world of dreams. In the drawings, however, the imagery becomes more explicitly erotic, and male sexuality frequently becomes the subject of her inquiry.

Juliana says that women prefer her paintings, while the drawings appeal more to men. To her, they are both equally important, equally female, equally the message she has to convey -- love to a woman embodies both the romantic and the erotic, she says, and both men and women must recognize this.