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Features

Beirut: A World of Art

An insider’s look at the 20th century art movement in Lebanon through the reminiscences of Helen Khal, Lebanese artist, critic, and instructor in painting at AUB (1967-76), featuring a selection of artwork by university faculty and alumni, with highlights of the AUB permanent collection.



“At ALBA from 1946 to 1948 we students were left pretty much on our own,” Helen Khal (see pages 13, 14) recalled. “The director, Cesar Gemayel, would pass by occasionally, make a stroke, a quick change, and then walk away. We [Helen and fellow students: painters Chafic Abboud, Farid Aouad, Yvette Ashkar, George Guv, Mounir Eido, Nicola Nammar, and sculptor Michel Basbous (see page 19)] learned to paint by ourselves, from each other. I would watch what Chafic was doing and try his way. . . We learned by doing it.” (Two remarkably similar paintings, both dated 1947, hang side by side in the living room of Helen’s Fat’a apartment; one is by Khal and the other by ALBA classmate Chafic Abboud. Each painting portrays a young boy—the curious, moving expressions revealed in impressionistic brush strokes, color, and shading.)

Recalling her classmates, Khal wrote later: “They were all intensely committed, and it was within that environment of enthusiasm and creative energy that I arrived at a similar commitment.” In the Bourg cafés with the male students, Helen, wearing slacks, unheard of for Lebanese women at the time, startled the coffee drinkers. “We talked endlessly about the French art scene at the time,” she said, and about the works of pioneer Lebanese painters **Mustapha Farroukh** (1907-57) and **Omar Onsi** (1906-69). (Both attended AUB. Farroukh also taught at AUB and was the subject of Lebanon’s first solo exhibition, held at the University in 1929.)

Several among Helen’s first ALBA class took up permanent residence in Paris. Chafic Abboud (1926-2004) showed his paintings throughout Europe. Farid Aouad (1924-82) exhibited widely in Europe and took up permanent residence in Paris in 1959. Yvette Ashkar (b. 1928), who had joined the ALBA class, encouraged by Fernando Manetti and George Cyr, after her fingers were deemed too small to continue her study of music, also showed in Europe but had many solo exhibitions in Lebanon, where she taught at the Lebanese University for more than 20 years. Sculptor Michel Basbous (1921-81), like Achkar, returned to spend most of his time in Lebanon, where he taught briefly at AUB before retreating in 1958 to Rachana to devote himself completely to sculpture. All these ALBA classmates exhibited internationally.

After two years at ALBA Helen returned to the United States, where she took courses at the Art Students League in New York City. Back in Lebanon with her poet husband Yusuf el Khal, it was not until 1960 that painter friend Aref

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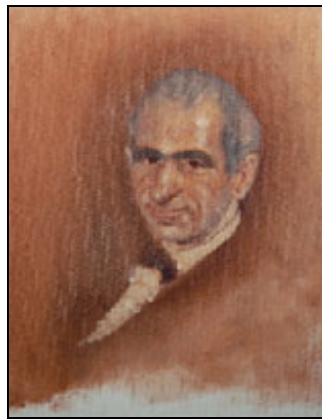
Rayess (1928-2005) persuaded her to exhibit her work for the first time—at the Alecco Saab Gallery. “At that time, I was still focused on portraits and still lifes. I didn’t feel I should show my paintings, but Aref thought I was the best portrait painter in Lebanon at the time—good enough to show. He saw in my work a wider, more universal view of humanity.”

Khal remembers Rayess as a unique artist. “His work was full of variety. He shifted and changed easily from figurative to abstract paintings, and from drawings to sculpture.” Self taught, he began painting in remote African villages while working with his father. “He told me more than once about

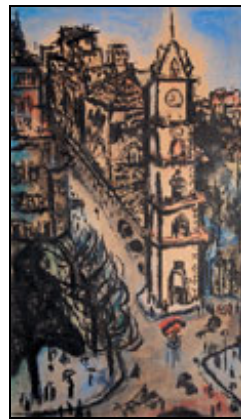
how he hung his own paintings, attended the show, and pretended other people in the village were also admiring his work.” Back in Lebanon, via France and Italy, Rayess set up an atelier in the family home in Aley and continued painting. “He was important in developing Lebanese art,” Khal said, “organizing committees and trying to persuade the government to support the Lebanese artist.” He had more than 15 solo exhibitions in Lebanon, and also served as president of the Lebanese Association of Painters and Sculptors. Rayess was widely popular throughout Europe and the Arab world. Some of his sculptures are on display in the Gulf.



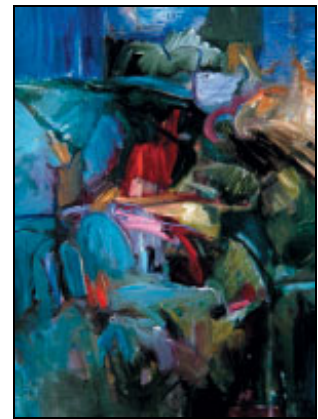
Mustapha Farroukh



Samir Thabet



Maryette Charlton



Ghada Jamal

In 1963 Helen and her husband established Gallery One, the first permanent exhibition gallery in Lebanon. She selected the artists. “Most of them were new names nobody had ever heard of before. I deliberately stayed away from the established well-known artists.” **John Carswell** (AUB professor of art from 1956-76, see page 16) later wrote, “The exhibitions held at Gallery One had an edge which removed them from the numbing commerciality of most of the shows with assured sales. . . to clan, family, and friends.” Helen showed Hrair, Assadour (Bezdikian), and Mohammad Sakr. Sakr was “a poor fellow, a carpenter with a shop in Manara, where he was painting, all by himself—completely self-educated.”

By 1967 Helen had joined the art department of AUB as a part-time instructor of painting, a position she held until 1976. The evolution of art departments at AUB began with the first solo exhibition of Farroukh in 1929. Appointed full-time art instructor in 1935, he taught until his retirement in 1954. At that time President Stephen Penrose initiated the Department of Fine Arts under the direction of Maryette Charlton (see page 15) and George Buehr, two artists recruited from the University of Chicago. The department flourished, bringing art to everyone through popular art seminars open to the public, several lecture series, and the establishment of a Mini-Gallery on the third floor of College Hall. **David Kurani** (see page 19), former chair of the current department, remembers taking lessons in drawing from Charlton as a child.

Helen reminisced about Carswell: “He was a very unusual person. He had a marvelous creativity in whatever he was doing. His mind was really inventive and inquiring—the way he was teaching, the way he was living his life. (In his home overlooking the bay of Tabarja, he kept a small elephant, a real stuffed elephant.) No one was allowed near his studio at AUB.” When preparing pieces for shipment to an exhibition in London, he “paint sprayed, rubbed, and polished their wooden surfaces to a smooth silk finish before sending them off.” Carswell, she pointed out, was in the vanguard of artistic change in Lebanon. His famous installations—the tying together of the AUB campus (see “Reflections,” p. 48) caught excited students and faculty alike, and his 1972 Jafet Library display of a long plastic tube of garbage collected from the beaches of Lebanon significantly foretold current concerns about environmental pollution.

Helen also remembers **Arthur Frick** (see “Reflections”, this issue), another American faculty member of the Department of Fine

and Performing Arts from 1956 to 1976, and the first chair of the department. Frick was a conservative traditionalist, but, said Helen, he knew all about different techniques, and he mentored burgeoning Lebanese artists, for example, persuading Mouazzez Rawda (1906-86) to embrace sculpture. His students emerged from his courses well grounded in the essentials. Recalling his early days with the AUB art department in a 2003 lecture, Frick said, "The intellectual disciplines were exacting and the standards were high," and described the arts seminars as "one of the most effective and contributive activities encountered at AUB."

With the outbreak of the civil war both Carswell and Frick left Lebanon, and in 1976 the department was forced to close. When they returned in 2003 to lecture and exhibit, both of them contributed fundamental and useful recommendations for the reconstitution of the art department, which reopened in 2005, this time as the Department of Fine Arts and Art History. Helen, who had always wanted to be a writer before she discovered painting quite by accident, had a simultaneous career as art critic and editor. Peter Harrison Smith, chair of the AUB art department in the early seventies, wrote, "from the early sixties she guaranteed a refined place among the best art writers on contemporary art in the Middle East." She wrote frequently as an art critic for *The Daily Star* and *Monday Morning*.



Helen Khal



Zahi Khuri



Mohammed Rawas

Fascinated with the predominance of women on the Lebanese art scene (in the 1980s Helen found that 25 percent of artists were women), she launched into a study which led to the publication of *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (completed in 1976, publication delayed until 1987) in which she documented the lives of 43 Lebanese women artists. Of these women, thirteen, including Helen herself, either studied or taught at AUB. Four were among twelve closely profiled: **Huguette Caland**, a prolific and original painter, studied at the University (1965-69); Saloua Raouda Choucair, an innovative sculptor, a special student while working in the library; Mouazzez Rawdah, a rigorously independent painter and sculptor—a student and later an instructor (1957-66); Helen herself was a part-time instructor of painting from 1967 to 1976.

Helen recalled independent sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair. "She was, in my opinion, the best artist of her time." Beginning as a painter, Choucair was attracted, Helen later wrote, "to the cool, pure abstract intricacies of design she found in Islamic art; and it was the conceptual and formal genius of this art that finally caught her imagination, directed her creative impulses, and turned her into an abstract artist—the first in Lebanon (and perhaps in the Arab world)." After an exciting three and a half years in Paris, Choucair returned to the relative artistic isolation of Lebanon in 1952 and "with remarkable determination and a dogged faith" continued working, "moving from painting to tapestries, to jewelry and sculpture, to graphics and stained glass and enamel. . . . It is for her extraordinarily abstract and mathematically conceived wooden, metal, and stone sculptures that she is remembered today."

In a post-script to *The Woman Artist*, Khal cites two artists teaching at the time at BUC, who are now members of the AUB faculty. Each was profoundly influenced by Helen in her formation as an artist. Leila Musfy (see page 17), currently chair of AUB's Department of Architecture and Design in the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, managed to squeeze in two semesters as a student in the art department in 1976 before the outbreak of the civil war led to its dissolution. Earlier, Aref Rayess had recommended that she study painting with Helen Khal in the Extension Program during her last year in high school. She encountered Helen again during her one year at AUB when Helen took over some courses as other instructors left the country. "When she gave us painting she was really popular because she was such a well-known artist. She came to the rescue at a difficult time, taking over courses and giving us the grades, but apart from that she was such a great teacher." Later, after Musfy completed her BFA and MFA degrees in the United States, she once again encountered Helen in 1981 in Washington, DC. The two painters had kept in touch over the difficult war years, and Leila now persuaded Helen to teach her once again. Together they set up a studio in the basement of Helen's Washington house, bought easels and canvas, and recruited students—four in all. The students posed for each other, and eventually found a model. "I stayed with Helen for a year and a half. As a teacher she was fantastic. She never forced any ideas on you, but rather made you think. She urged us to find our own solutions—in the color, the angle, the shading."

Another painter now teaching at AUB in the art department, **Afaf Zurayk** (see page 18) remembers Helen's teaching from 1967 to 1970. Like Musfy, she first encountered Helen outside the University. Her mother brought Helen to their home as a special tutor for the talented 15-year old. Afaf recalls Helen's teaching, her insistence on independent solutions. "She was spare with her words. She showed me certain brush strokes, of course, but she left me pretty much on my own. But I loved it. There's nothing like learning from someone who's a master." At the time, Zurayk painted mainly portraits.

Studying at AUB in the late 1960s, Zurayk described the art department at that time as "so exciting, so lively. It was a family department, a fun department. We were all characters—odd balls on campus." She recalled the inspiring teachers: John Carswell, Arthur Frick, Joseph Tanous, Erica Dodd, who taught art history in the history department, and Helen Khal, whom she now met at the university level. Recently, Zurayk wrote, "Helen as an artist and a person (Can we separate them?) inspired me early in my life. Her fierce independence of character combined with the spiritual use of color in her paintings had a lasting influence on me as an artist and a person. Helen taught me gentleness in applying color and refined my overly emotional tendencies. For that and so much more I thank her." All the faculty members, Zurayk said, contributed to the special atmosphere of the art department and to the students' passion for the study of art.

More On-line

The AUB Art Committee generously granted us full access to AUB's unique contemporary art collection. This committee, which was established by former president John Waterbury, manages the university art collection, sponsors arts related lectures and events on campus, and is charged with re-establishing AUB as an innovating contributor to the art movement in Lebanon and the Middle East. – Ed.

Farid Haddad

Farid Haddad, a painter and media artist, graduated from the AUB Department of Fine Arts and Performing Arts in 1969 (BA). He holds an MFA in painting and drawing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. From the mid- to late 1970s, he taught drawing and painting at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and since 1979 he has been on the faculty of the Department of Art and Art History at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. He is a former Fulbright Scholar (1972) and is a recipient of two Individual Artist Grants from the NH State Council on the Arts (1983 and 1984). His early works as a painter dealt with color field painting, and in the early eighties he turned to an art based on experimental abstraction. He has had one-person exhibitions in Beirut, Kuwait City, Rome, New York, Paris, Milwaukee, WI, and Henniker, NH. The artist has also participated in more than forty group shows (since 1968) in Europe, the Middle East and North America.



Vladimir Tamari

Born in Jerusalem, Palestine, in 1942, Vladimir Tamari studied physics and art from 1957 to 1963 at AUB, where he was art editor of Outlook. He has continued drawing and painting up to the present, while maintaining parallel careers as an inventor and physicist. Since 1980, in addition to his artwork, he has conducted intensive studies in optics and imaging, and has developed a new theory to unify quantum and relativistic physics. He is currently finishing work on designing AIQuds, a sans-serif Arabic font for the computer, a project that he started in his student days at AUB. AIQuds Arabic font will be released as part of Tasmeem in Adobe InDesign CS4 this year.



Huguette Caland

Born in Beirut in 1931, Huguette Caland is an abstract painter and sculptor who has also worked in fashion design (notably for Pierre Cardin) and filmmaking. The daughter of a former president of Lebanon, she trained under Italian artist Fernando Manetti and Rumanian sculptor George Apostu and at AUB, where she graduated in 1968. In Lebanon, she cofounded the Inash al-Mukharryim art center. She lived in Paris for many years and participated in individual and group exhibitions, primarily in Europe and Lebanon. She has participated in major exhibitions in Europe, notably the Venice Biennial, and currently lives in California.

Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui

Over the years, Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui, an AUB student (1962-64) and instructor (1993-96) has produced an extraordinarily rich variety of work in graphic design, film-making, lithography, and painting. She has designed stamps, pamphlets, posters, and children's books and games, and was in charge of the Graphic Art Department of the Lebanese Council of Tourism. Winner of many prizes, she has held numerous exhibitions, both group and solo throughout Europe and the Middle East. She is listed in the world reference, the Bénézit Dictionary of Artists under the name Bassili Sehnaoui. Her painting, "The Fortune Teller," donated by the artist in 1999, is a part of AUB's permanent collection.