

## REVIEWS

## BEIRUT

## Mohamad-Said Baalbaki

MAQAM ART GALLERY

Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's recent exhibition "Al-Buraq" was filled with elegant glass-fronted display cases made of dark wood and deep red velvet, light cascading into them through intricate cutouts in a pattern of eight-pointed stars. Each case was a cabinet of curiosities, filled with old books, maps, letters, sketchbooks, vintage photographs, miniature paintings, and plaster casts, some of them gilded, of mysterious bone fragments.

One case held a gorgeous collection of what were said to be ancient artifacts: a tiny Etruscan funerary vase adorned with a representation of Pegasus from around 300 BC; a small bronze griffin, discovered in Afghanistan, and dating back to the Sassanid Empire; a terra-cotta sphinx, nearly three thousand years old, from South Lebanon; another sphinx, this one with wings, adorning a delicate silver comb discovered on the island of Crete; and a sixteenth-century incense burner in the shape of a dove with a human head. Another case, placed just inside the entrance to the storefront gallery space, featured a detailed model of a skeleton depicting Pegasus with a particularly wide and mighty set of wings.

Hanging on the walls around and between the vitrines were frames holding postcards, engravings, anatomical studies, and the yellowed pages of a long correspondence between a paleontologist named Hans Wellenhofer and an ornithologist named Heinrich Ralph Glücksvogel, who, in the years between the world wars, studied a set of fragile bone

Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, *The von Königswald Collection* (detail), 2010, fifteen objects in display case: silver, terra-cotta, porcelain, bronze, ceramic, dimensions variable.



fragments discovered earlier by an archaeologist named Werner von Königswald. Working on an excavation site in Jerusalem, von Königswald made two startling discoveries on the eve of World War I. He not only unearthed an Islamic burial ground on the southeastern slope of the Temple Mount, he also found a box of bones hidden inside an alcove near one of the site's retaining walls. Stumped as to the exact nature of these remains, he sent them to Wellenhofer in Berlin, who made copies and sent them along to Glücksvogel in Munich. Wellenhofer and Glücksvogel consulted each other closely but drew dramatically different conclusions about the bones. The paleontologist thought they were the remains of a malformed horse with odd protrusions on its back. But the ornithologist, more magically, thought those strange stumps were wings and that von Königswald had found evidence supporting the existence of a mythological creature akin to Pegasus, from Greek mythology, or Al-Buraq, the winged horse with a human head who, according to Islamic tradition, had spirited the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and back again over the course of a single night in the seventh century.

Of course, the whole story was an elaborate hoax. Everything on view, conceived as a single installation and billed as the first in a trilogy of works on Al-Buraq, was crafted by Baalbaki in his Berlin studio—the letters, artifacts, photocollages alleged to be studies of articulated wing movements, even the display cases themselves. The political and conceptual undercurrents coursing through Baalbaki's show were many and multilayered, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, sending up the authority of museological display, and chipping away at the colonial ambitions behind the emergence of modern states in the Middle East from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Baalbaki, who until now has been known primarily as a painter, is certainly not the first artist from the region to suggest that the meddling of foreign powers, past and present, is the source of much discontent in the contemporary Arab world. But where other works delving into the subject are too often dismal or doctrinaire, Baalbaki's Al-Buraq project took a wondrous and imaginative turn.

—Kaelen Wilson-Goldie