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Lebanese Art In The Spotlight In Paris Exhibition

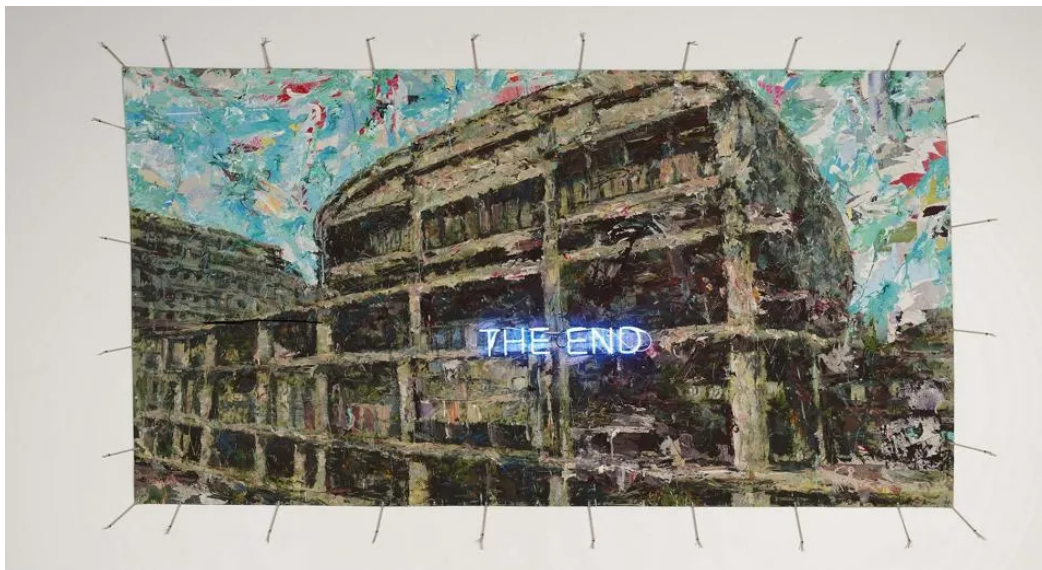
Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle Contributor *I write about luxury, art and culture.*[Follow](#)

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More than a year on from the deadly blasts that rocked the port of Beirut, the [Institut du Monde Arabe](#) (World Arab Institute / IMA) in Paris presents an exhibition, *Lumières du Liban* (Lights of Lebanon), running until January 2, 2022, which pays tribute to the resilience of Lebanese artists as they deal with one crisis after another. I sit down with Nathalie Bondil, Director of the Museum and Exhibitions of the IMA, to discuss the group show.



Ayman Baalbaki, *The End*, 2016, mixed media on canvas and neon, 220 x 400 cm PHOTO COURTESY OF IMA

How did the idea for the *Lumières du Liban* exhibition first come about and what is its aim?

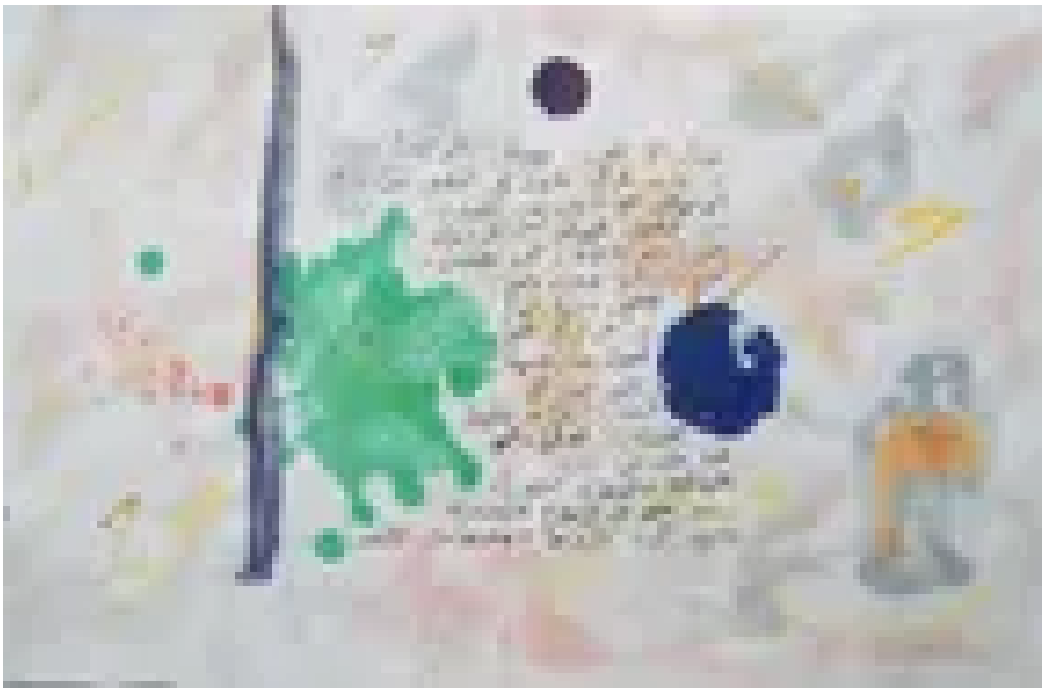
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Claude Lemand, our main donor and collector, who was born in Lebanon, had this wish several years ago. Following the tragic explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020, Jack Lang, President of the IMA, decided, on Claude's proposal, to bring the exhibition forward. Of course, an exhibition of this magnitude always involves many people, in Lebanon as well as in Paris: artists, experts, authors, collectors, gallery owners, donors, technicians, designers... A whole team came especially from Lebanon to carry out the design, which was built on the spot thanks to the Beirut architect Carl Gerges. The paint on the walls is made with Lebanese sand: it is a real solidarity project.

Working together with Eric Delpont and Claude Lemand, how did you select the 55 artists to present in the *Lumières du Liban* exhibition?

I joined the IMA team last May when Claude and Eric had already worked on a large selection, enriched by many new commissions and purchases. The IMA's collection of Lebanese art is enormous! Working to reduce this selection was therefore heartbreaking for us all. I was able to travel to Lebanon to visit committed artists and gallery owners. My meeting with Mona Saudi, this immense contemporary sculptor, moved me: a woman who cuts stone is very rare... and apart from Barbara Hepworth, I don't know of another one of this level from the 20th century. As the IMA has a major and monumental work by Mona that was to be restored and reinstalled a long time ago, as soon as I got back, I immediately took care of this follow-up for the opening of *Lumières du Liban*. Promise kept! Otherwise I was involved in the scenography, the narration of the exhibition and the exhibition catalog. Of course, it is always the result of teamwork.





Etel Adnan, *Le Retour de Lilit*, 2004 PHOTO COURTESY OF IMA

What are some of the highlights presented in this exhibition?

The modern section is unique with, among many other masters, the paintings of Shafic Abboud, which are truly remarkable thanks to the donation of Claude and France Lemand to the IMA Museum, as well as Saliba Douaihy's *Beirut, Mediterranean* from the IMA's historical collection, a true masterpiece whose reproduction does not do justice to the stunning beauty of its colors. Another strong aspect of this exhibition is the presence of highly talented women artists of each generation – nearly half of the selection on display. We have many new acquisitions by the sculptors Moazzaz Rawda and Simone Fattal, great works by major artists such as Maliheh Afnan, Laure Ghorayeb, Etel Adnan and Mona Saudi, and finally the young generation with Zena Assi, Tagreed Darghouth, Hala Ezzedine and Sara Char whom I particularly appreciate, without forgetting the designers of Bokja, among others...

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Saliba Douaihy, Beirut, Mediterranean, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 205.5 x 205.5 cm PHOTO COURTESY OF IMA

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How did the major donation of Claude and France Lemand in 2018 help to make the IMA's collection of



modern and contemporary Arab art the most important in Europe?

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This fabulous donation not only completes the IMA's modern and contemporary collection, which was cleverly initiated in 1987, but also the new IMA Museum we want to inaugurate around 2024 will be the most important in Western countries. There are wonderful and extensive private and public collections in the Arab world, but nothing comparable in the Western world. We will be able to tell the stories of numerous artistic exchanges between East and West during the colonial and our decolonial times. It will be a fantastic opportunity to open a new modern art history chapter, which remains unfortunately not known enough, so not recognized enough here.

How would you define Lebanese art and what is its place and importance in the international art scene today?

The vitality of Beirut between the independence of Lebanon and the crisis nowadays is inspiring. In the heart of a turbulent zone, this country is a multi-faith and intercultural melting pot unique in this region of the world: a meeting place welcoming artists and intellectuals from neighboring countries when occupations, wars and oppression are, alas, rampant. Lebanon has always functioned as a human and cultural melting pot, welcoming Armenians who escaped the genocide, Palestinians after 1948, Syrians, Iraqis and all those who seek freedom.





Shafic Abboud, L'Aube, 2003m oil on canvas, 105 x 120 cm PHOTO COURTESY OF IMA

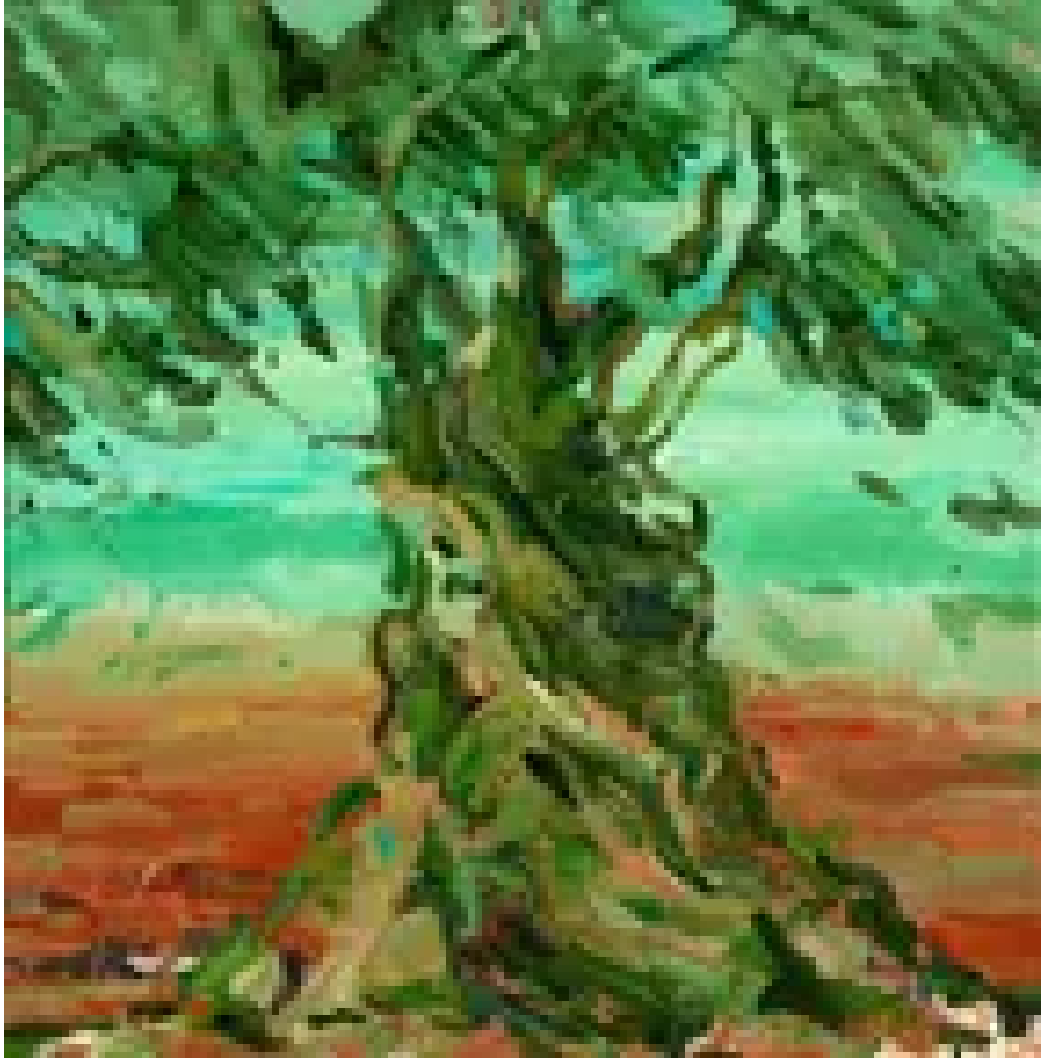
How has the modern and contemporary Lebanese art scene evolved over the past seven decades, from the post-WWII period and the upheavals of civil war and exile to the economic and health crisis today, and which are the young artists to watch whom you believe have the greatest potential?

Lebanon is a country in perpetual reconstruction, and the current artistic scene is part of this long history: bearers of wounds and hopes, artists of all generations and all exiles participate in the same cathartic and universal narrative. They tell the story of a country with multiple rebirths, of a people so close to us. Talented and combative, the artistic scene bears witness to these violent realities without being a reportage: transcribed according to each artist, it transcends each singular story to offer a universal message, with a striking return to painting, among other techniques. I am impressed by the strength of the new painting, expressive and almost expressionist. Without ever falling into



literal description or pathos, it reveals a great maturity even among very young painters. Let us mention for example Anas Albraeche, Ayman Baalbaki, Hanibal Srouji, Yazan Halwani, Marwan Sahmarani, Serwan Baran, Tagreed Darghouth, Hala Ezzedine, Khaled Takreti and Marc Guiragossian.

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Tagreed Darghouth, The Tree Within. A Palestinian Olive Tree PHOTO COURTESY OF IMA

What has been the direct impact of the explosion of the port of Beirut on the city's art scene, and why did you initiate and finance a call for projects by the Claude and France Lemand-IMA Fund in 2020? What were your criteria for choosing the 11 winners?

The exhibition unveils the works of 11 very young artists created in response to a call launched in 2020, just after the Beirut explosion, thanks to the Claude and France Lemand Fund. The

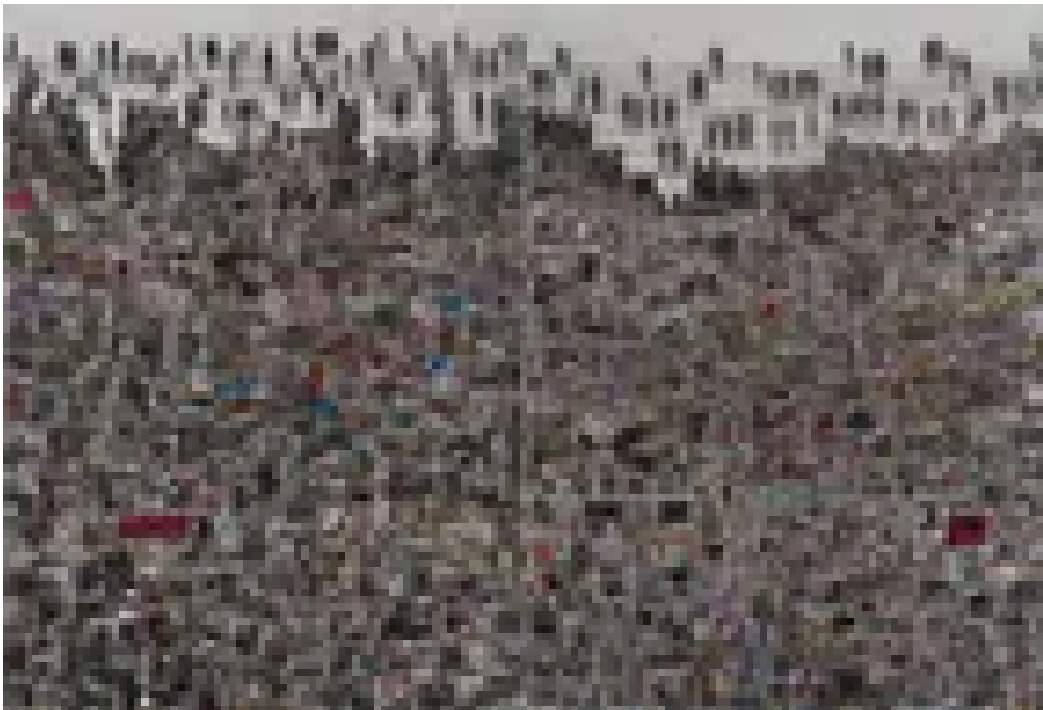


goal is not only to reveal new talents, but overall to concretely support them now. They will enrich the IMA's collection.

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Tell me about the new exhibition space “The Donors’ Circle” and why Carl Gerges was chosen to design it.

This exhibition inaugurates “The Donors’ Circle” within the IMA, created with the support of the Barjeel Art Foundation and Claude Lemand. Thanks to this new gallery, we will continue to enrich our collection with two exhibitions each year. We want to show our museum collection, gather new donors and collectors, and publicize artists before the opening of our new IMA Museum scheduled around 2024. Its scenography was entrusted to Carl Gerges, an architect and a Lebanese musician of the iconic band Mashrou' Leila. All the elements of the exhibition's scenography were produced in Lebanon, transported to Paris and assembled by Lebanese technicians. Even the color of the walls, made from Lebanese earth, shows our solidarity with Lebanon.



Zena Assi, Hanging to a Thread, mixed media on canvas, 190 x 280 cm PHOTOY COURTESY OF IMA

What were the main challenges of making this exhibition?



We did not want to end with the current situation, an unprecedented political and economic crisis, aggravated by the cataclysmic explosion of 2020. We wanted to convey a message of hope in spite of everything. Lebanese artists, coming to Lebanon or leaving Lebanon, have gone through so much hardship over the past decades that their art shows great maturity and depth. Their art is a lesson that goes beyond their history and borders to touch us all, wherever we live. The exhibition therefore follows an original path following an inverted chronology to contextualize from the current crisis: the history of this country in perpetual reconstruction (2005-2021), through the years of lead (1975-2005) to the nostalgia of a golden age since independence (1943-1975). Two iconic works introduce and conclude this time machine: as a bit satirical introduction, *The End*, a monumental painting by Ayman Baalbaki, to the very last one with a universal *Self-Portrait and Shadow*, a sculpture in corrugated steel sheets with a mirror effect by Abdul Rahman Katanani.





Mona Saudi, Géométrie de l'Esprit, Institut du Monde Arabe, 1987 PHOTOY COURTESY OF IMA

Who is the target audience of *Lumières du Liban*?

Lumières du Liban is intended for all audiences. I believe that quality art is universal: it is not created for specific audiences. The artists are therefore our lights, our universal messengers. Follow me on [LinkedIn](#).



Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle

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