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Artist Spotlight: Saliba Douaihy

August 26, 2019

by **Lara Arafah**



Saliba Douaihy, *Untitled*, c. 1960s. Oil on canvas board, 19 3/8 x 23 1/2 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

Included in the NYU Grey Art Gallery's exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s* (on view January 14-April 4, 2020) are three paintings by Saliba Douaihy (1915-1994), a leading 20th-century painter of Lebanon. Born in 1915 in a mountainous town in northern Lebanon, Douaihy was first exposed to painting and art through the Maronite churches in his hometown. Due to his apprenticeship with Habib Srour at the age of 14, his style was initially realistic and figurative. Srour was a portrait painter of religious, social, and political Arab figures in Lebanon and taught Douaihy the techniques of drawing and painting. Douaihy later assisted Srour in large church murals.

In an interview, the artist revealed that during his time as Srour's student, he was not exposed to using color. Srour was a classical painter, and Douaihy reflected that his work was "rivalling the works of the most important Italian painters, but were parochial and of limited horizon."¹ This is the start of Douaihy's interest in developing his technique beyond what he was taught.

Through support from his father and community in northern Lebanon, Douaihy received a grant allowing him to participate in a cross-cultural exchange program between France and Lebanon. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris. During this time, his work was included in several prominent French exhibitions. While Douaihy was exposed to modern art in Paris, he was still painting in a classical style. "I mastered painting and drawing, but had no knowledge of, or preoccupation with, what was happening around me in terms of modern artistic trends. I used to visit art exhibitions with some of my colleagues, but our passion was purely for the classical style, and everything outside of it was, in our view, a waste of time... I remained wedded to the classical principles of visual art until my studies in Paris came to an end."²

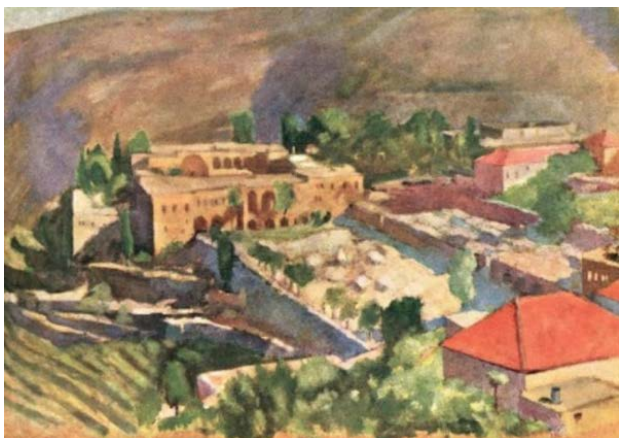
After graduating, Douaihy returned to Lebanon and opened his own studio. Producing rural and religious paintings, he was met with success and was commissioned to paint frescoes in the Maronite Church of Diman. He also painted secular works, moving between abstract and natural scenes. A blend of descriptive painting with minimalist twists, his art reflected his personal interpretations of the landscapes of Lebanon. Impressionist in style, these early works show his passion for landscape and his native land. Reading about modern art, he found that he enjoyed what was often defined as "ugly." His understanding and dedication

to modern art grew: “[He] painted a scene containing the sea, [and] used red instead of blue, on the basis that what mattered to [him] was not the scene, but the harmony of colours within the painting.”³

In 1950, at the age of 35, Douaihy was named Cultural Representative of Lebanon by the country’s president, who asked him to travel to the United States and Mexico to call attention to Lebanon as a cultural destination. Feeling that his work was lacking something substantial, and that Lebanon would limit him creatively, Douaihy intended to move to the U.S. to explore new trends in modern art. After moving to New York City, he settled in the loft of the Maronite Church of Our Lady of Lebanon in Brooklyn Heights. Initially, his job was to make stained glass commissioned by churches in New York, Massachusetts, and Lebanon. For example, in 1978, Douaihy produced sixty-five paintings on glass for the church of The Lady of Lebanon in Jamaica Plain in Massachusetts. A brief hiatus in his creative production was followed by a rebirth and a renewed sense of style. In contrast with the “minimalist art” that was becoming popular during that period, his style remained unique. In his non-figurative paintings, the main subject is secondary, with shape, color, and form as the dominant foci. His development didn’t follow any rigid lines, but rather reflected his desire to distance himself from Western culture and create a mode of artistic expression reflecting his own experience.

Exposure to art and trips to Europe and the U.S. influenced the various phases of Douaihy’s practice. He saw this exposure as crucial to his stylistic development, stating that his colleagues who stayed behind in Lebanon, without broadening their horizons, remained in “the same vortex.”⁴ His move to New York allowed him to develop toward minimalism. There he was exposed to many postwar modernist abstract artists whose novel forms of thinking and creating challenged his practice and prodded him to question his approach, pushing him to work on a larger scale. Meeting Mark Rothko, Hans Hoffman, Ad Reinhardt, and others made a deep impression on him. The writings of Immanuel Kant stimulated Douaihy to conceive a new formalist aesthetic. He never joined or identified with any particular group or movement, but this exposure inspired many works including his Hard Edge painting series—which includes most of the works he created between his arrival in New York and his death in 1994. His new style achieved expression through curves and lines, vast fields of color, and planes defined by color. Concepts of “flatness” and “infinite space” underpin his compositions, in which he used precise shapes and abrupt changes in

color to explore depth and space. Most of his abstract paintings include lines that represent the Mediterranean Sea. Douaihy considers the simplification of space in his work Arabic in nature, as in Arabic calligraphy.



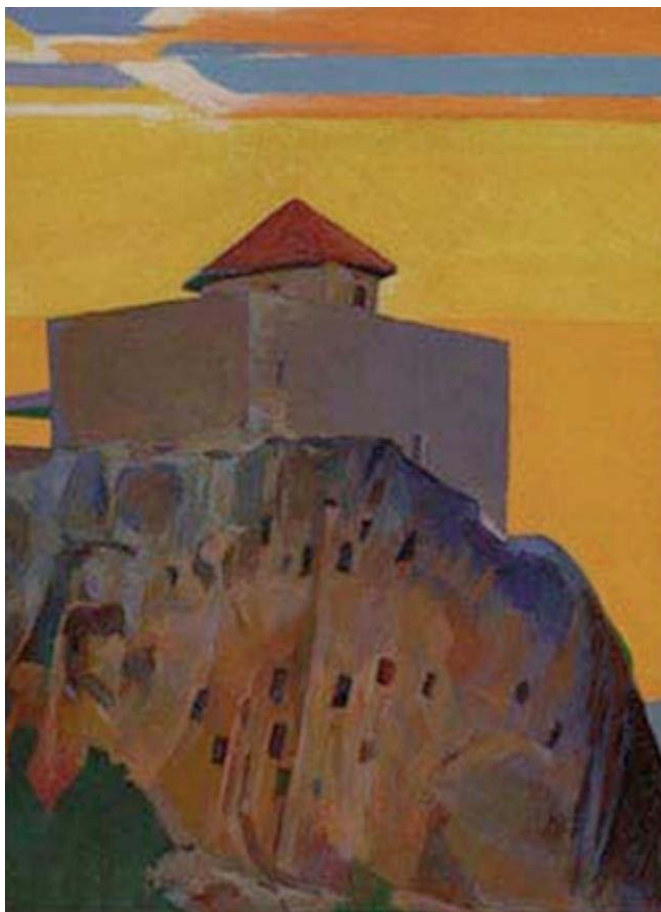
<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/5.jpg>

Saliba Douaihy, *Untitled* (Monastery of Mar Qozhayya, Lebanon), n.d. Photo: salibadouaihy.com

The transitions in Douaihy's style—his gradual process of growth, reduction, and simplification—may be traced through two of his paintings of Mar Qozhayya monastery. He first painted it in a realistic manner, while a second version contains the essence of his later abstract work. His "classic" period consists of impressionist-style paintings of his village, depicting valleys, houses, mountains, and farmers, to recreate the world of his childhood—a traditional

romance. His "nostalgic" period shows him revisiting those moments, longing for his homeland. In his treatment of the sky, one can see him moving toward the style of his later works, in which he arranged large flat planes of color.

Douaihy's painting *Untitled* (c. 1960s, seen at the top of this blogpost)—which is included in the Grey's exhibition *Taking Shape*—is one of these later works. Inspired by the work of Josef Albers, this painting is dominated by the color blue, which is flanked at the edges by asymmetrical, angular bursts of orange, yellow, and green. The shapes differ in size and color, creating dynamic foci around the painting's edges. This work's flat composition and geometric precision suggest a lack of perspective, but the vibrancy of its colors and positioning of its shapes suggest depth. In suggesting



space, this highly abstract image harks back to the artist's earlier depictions of Lebanon's landscapes.

<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/6.jpg>

Saliba Douaihy, Untitled (Monastery of Mar Qozhayya, Lebanon), n.d. Photo: salibadouaihy.com

In conclusion, Douaihy's paintings reflect the stages of his life and the inspiration he drew from his surroundings. He moved away from the academic style he had absorbed as Habib Srour's student in Lebanon, toward the radical modernist approach he developed during his time in New York. Working alone in his studio in the loft of the Maronite Church of Our Lady of Lebanon in Brooklyn Heights (now a cathedral), he left his mark in its stained glass windows and a mural of Our Lady of Harissa standing atop Lebanese mountains and looking down upon the seacoast. His abstract paintings from the late 1960s until his death in 1994 resulted from concentrated experimentation—he aimed for strict simplification in both form and color. Characterized by a minimalist aesthetic, his later style derives from a complex system of interrelationships among shapes, colors, and angles. His unique techniques and his vision of asymmetrical planes embody his notions of the sublime and infinite space. Through his art, he creates an illusion of a world, one that evokes tranquility and peace. His development and evolution make him one of the true pioneers of Arab modernism.



<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/ourladyoflebanon.jpg>

Saliba Douaihy, mural and stained-glass windows, Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Cathedral, Brooklyn Heights, New York

Douaihy's paintings may be found in the permanent collections of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Grey Art Gallery, New York University; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Lara Arafeh received an M.A. in Art Business from Sotheby’s Institute, London. In 2019 she was a visiting student in Art & Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, NYU, and a Graduate Intern at the Grey.

Notes:

¹ El-Hage, B. (n.d.). “Saliba Douaihy: Autobiography and Artistic Views,” in *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World*. Originally published in Nada Shabout, ed. *Forever Now: Five Anecdotes from the Permanent Collection*, exh. cat. (Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2012). Available at:

<http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/essays/Pages/Saliba-Douaihy,-Autobiography-and-Artistic-Views.aspx>

`<http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/essays/Pages/Saliba-Douaihy,-Autobiography-and-Artistic-Views.aspx>`

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

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