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Artist Spotlight: Saloua Raouda Choucair

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By **Géranne Darbouze**

I shall be supplied with whatever I need; and, if I have not everything I desire, I may conclude it is either not fit for me, or I shall have it in due time.

—Matthew Henry

As they say, life has a strange way of making things work out in the end. To be a painter at 95 years of age, toiling away in a Beirut studio, and only recently “discovered”—many humans would have given up, discouraged by the minimal interest, scant communication, and paltry reactions to their work, but this was not the case for Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916–2017).

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Choucair displayed precocious artistic talent from an early age. Yet as we look back on her career, she seemed to be constantly in the wrong place at the wrong time, in terms of developing a reputation as an artist. Her daughter, Hala Schoukair, told the *New York Times*, “All the timings were wrong with my mother,” continuing, “She

started with abstraction when people in Beirut were just discovering Impressionism. In the '60s, no one was paying attention to her and then when they started paying attention, the war started."^[1]

As a young woman, Choucair studied at the American Junior College for Women (now the Lebanese American University), the American University of Beirut, and the École Nationale des Beaux Arts in Lyon, where she not only honed her art but also pursued natural science, history, and philosophy. She also worked in the studios of Omar Onsi in Lebanon in 1942 and Fernand Léger in Paris in 1949, for three months each. While she has been quoted saying that her art was "innate," she was also fascinated with the calculable aspects of creation, an interest that also fed into her love for architecture. Later in life, this love led her to craft intricate sculptures often bearing striking resemblances to her paintings of several years earlier, as if she were popping her pictures off the canvas and into the third dimension.



<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/installation-view.jpg>

Installation view of Choucair's exhibition at CRG Gallery, New York, 2015

Like many of the works in the Grey Art Gallery's current exhibition, *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, Saloua Choucair's paintings and sculptures are rooted in abstraction, tenets of Islam, and principles of geometric design. This includes her sculpture *Interform* and her painting *Composition in Yellow*, which are both on view in the exhibition (see images below). She became fascinated by these elements when, during a visit to Cairo in 1943, she was able to visit several mosques but, due to wartime closures, could not gain entry to museums or galleries. Throughout her life, Choucair rejected Eurocentric worldviews. She consistently denied suggestions that she was strongly influenced by European modernism, saying, "No, it's a universal influence. What I experience everyone in the world experiences."

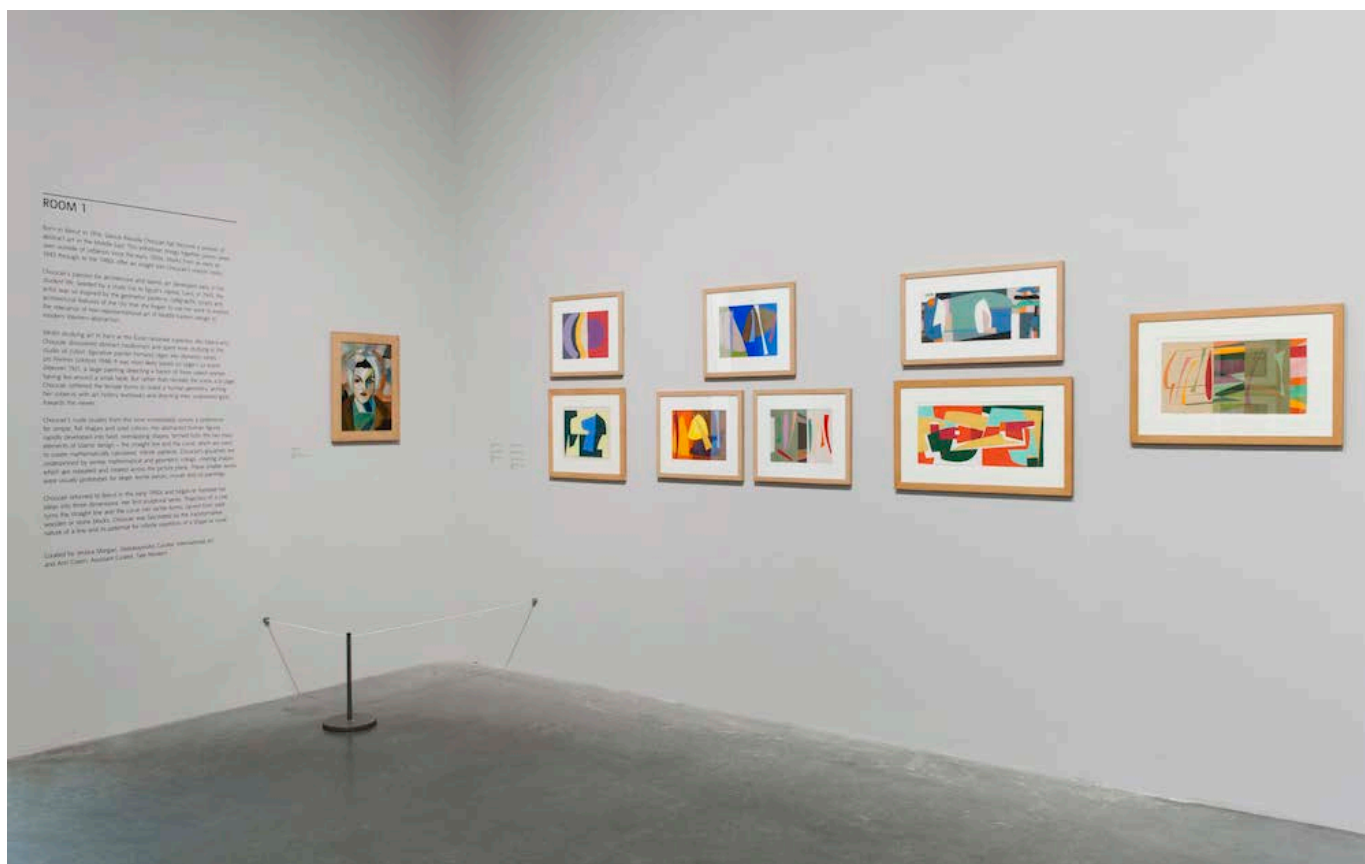


https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/choucair_double.jpg

Left: *Interform*, 1960. Wood, 23 5/8 x 12 5/8 x 4 1/2 in.; Right: *Composition in Yellow*, 1962–1965. Oil on fiberboard, 20 1/4 x 32 in. Both collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

Although *Interform* and *Composition in Yellow* are two distinct pieces, from the two main artistic periods of Choucair's career, they both showcase not only her interest in abstraction, architecture, and geometric design but also how her approaches to sculpture and painting often overlap. Made in 1960, *Interform* is a wooden sculpture that employs the basic elements of straight and curved lines to create a dynamic form that draws the eye in. It is one of the first pieces Choucair made after deciding to dedicate her practice to sculpture, yet in many ways it resembles her painting *Composition in Yellow*, which was made five years later. In *Composition in Yellow*, she employs the same geometric and organic principles to

conjure up the illusion of light refracted through an object to create dynamic forms and shadows. Although this work is two-dimensional, her use of three distinct yellow tones imparts a sense of depth. I like to think of Choucair sitting with *Interform* and turning it over and over, examining its cast shadows on a wall, and being inspired to create *Composition in Yellow*. Both pieces have a mechanical feel to them. *Interform* resembles a dock or frame of some kind, designed for other forms to flow through and click into. To me, it looks like a smaller part of a whole; technology camouflaged in a natural skin. *Composition in Yellow* also blends natural and mechanical aesthetics. Some of the Grey’s visitors told me that they thought the painting looks like either an insect or a satellite, or other outer-space object.



https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Choucair_053.jpg

Installation view of Choucair’s retrospective exhibition at Tate Modern, London, 2013

Fortunately Choucair did enjoy some fame even before she received her comprehensive retrospective at Tate Modern in 2013. By then, she had already had major exhibitions at the Beirut Art Center in 2011, Maqam Art Gallery in 2010, and Al Nadwa Gallery in 1993. She was also well known for her academic writing. Despite this, as an Arab woman, she did not receive the spotlight she deserved until her rather late “discovery.” In other words, Choucair was not truly unknown—but rather waiting to receive proper recognition and a public platform of the kind enjoyed by so many male artists before her. So, when we

contemplate timing and fate, there is perhaps no better life to examine than that of Saloua Raouda Choucair, a woman whose thirst for learning, whose art practice, and whose love of life could never be quelled.

[1] William Grimes, "Saloua Raouda Choucair, Early Exponent of Abstract Arabian Art, Dies at 100," *New York Times*, February 17, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/arts/saloua-raouda-choucair-dead-lebanese-artist.html> <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/arts/saloua-raouda-choucair-dead-lebanese-artist.html>>

Géranne Darbouze is an undergraduate intern at the Grey Art Gallery who is majoring in Film and Television Production and minoring in Art History and Religious Studies. She expects to receive her BFA in May 2021.

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