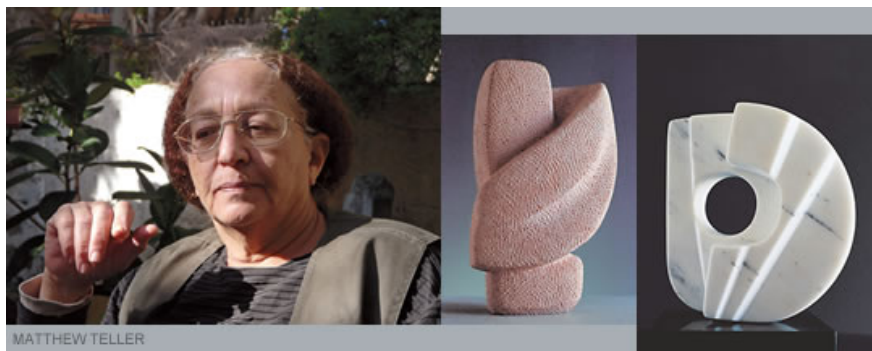




Finding the Essence

*Written by Matthew Teller
Photographs courtesy of Mona Saudi*



Above, from left: Mona Saudi in her garden. "For me, sculpture is an incarnation of poetry, touching on the invisible. It is the language of silence, of movement in stillness." "Lovers" (Jordanian limestone, 1993); "Illumination" (marble, 1990).

In west Beirut, Hamra Street's fashion boutiques and upmarket coffee shops form a strip of commerce that points toward the landmark Murr Tower on the edge of downtown. A block or two north, past clusters of auto workshops and convenience stores, lies the residential neighborhood of Jounblat. Here, on quiet, narrow America Street, you may find an unnamed dead end that snakes away between apartment blocks. Down an alley off an alley, reached by a side-street off a side-street, lives Mona Saudi, sculptor and poet.



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“I’m in the city,” she smiles, gesturing around her leafy, hidden garden, lemons hanging over cacti, “but as you can see—I’m also not!”

Still living in the modest 19th-century house she first rented in 1974 and later bought, Saudi surrounds herself with her work: Abstract sculptures of limestone and marble fill a modest terrace among the trees. All the sculptures look deceptively light: Some are graspable in two hands, while others soar above head height, their clean lines and graceful curves playing off the terrace’s natural disorder. They look graceful enough to fly, but most would require a crane to shift. Saudi places a hand on one as she explains how important it is for her to have space for contemplation, adding pensively, “I need seclusion. I need birdsong.”df

In a charming, unexpected haven in a city hardly known for tranquility, this ground-breaking artist has found both.

Mona Saudi was born in Amman in October 1945, when the Jordanian capital was little more than a village. She grew up in a family of eight siblings, and fondly recalls playing among the tumbled columns and blocks of a ruined Roman fountain, the Nymphaeum, near her home.

Early on, it was apparent that she was determined to make her own way. “From the age of six or seven, I wanted to be a creative person, free,” Saudi says. “My first feelings were toward being earthy.”

She was a voracious reader, frequently visiting Amman’s British Council library and absorbing T. S. Eliot’s classic poem *The Waste Land* at 14, “even before I started reading Arab poetry,” she says. Saudi names Colin Wilson’s 1956 study of alienation, *The Outsider*, as a key early influence. “Wilson examined so many artists and thinkers who broke with tradition: Nietzsche, Rilke, Joyce, Rimbaud. For me, this was the discovery of a global way of thinking,” she says.



The embrace-like interaction of spheres within semi-circles, her ability to draw organic, curvaceous warmth out of cold stone, and her expression of an inner, quintessentially female energy became hallmarks of Saudi’s style.



The magazine *Shi’r (Poetry)*, published in Beirut, helped Saudi connect with Arab literary traditions. As well as publishing western writers in translation, *Shi’r* showcased contemporary Arab poets such as Yousef al-Khal and Adonis. Saudi credits the magazine with inspiring her to begin writing her own poetry.

Such precociousness led to tensions at home: The artist’s younger sister Fathieh, today a published poet herself, laughs as she remembers family life being “war every day!” When Saudi was forbidden by her father to apply to the university, she took the momentous decision to drop out of high school and escape from Amman to the more progressive city of Beirut. As she wrote later in her monograph *Forty Years in Sculpture*, “That day my life began.”

Saudi recalls the Lebanese capital as “vivid... a large space of contemplation and continual movement,” and this made a lifelong impression. She hung out with the city’s artists and mounted her first exhibition—of paintings—at the Café de la Presse in Hamra.

The proceeds allowed Saudi to set her sights higher: She bought a ticket to Paris. “I went by sea,” she smiles. “I had been dreaming of going to Paris since I was a child, and to realize my dream, it seemed appropriate to travel through water.”

Even today, sipping tea on her terrace, remembering that epic voyage makes her laugh. After stops at several Mediterranean ports and an overnight train ride from Marseilles, Saudi arrived in Paris on a cold February morning in 1964. She went straight to the only address she knew—that of Lebanese artist Halim Jurdak, whom Saudi had met the year before in Beirut.

“It was early morning,” Saudi recalls. “He came down the stairs, so astonished to see this girl from Jordan on his doorstep. He took me to a small hotel in the Saint-Germain quarter. I remember it was unheated and cost four francs a night [about \$1].”

Paris’s famous School of Fine Arts accepted her, and there she began to experiment with sculpture. Her first work in stone, “Mother/Earth,” is dated 1965. A single block of limestone comprising two bulging volumes flanking a spherical form, it clearly announced themes and preoccupations that would mark Saudi’s career: The embrace-like interaction of spheres within semi-circles, her ability to draw organic, curvaceous warmth out of cold stone, and her expression of an inner, quintessentially female energy. All this is made explicit by the work’s title, a terse juxtaposition of words to which Saudi returned repeatedly in a series of “Mother/Earth” sculptures over subsequent decades.

One of the strongest influences on her style—pointed out by observers and acknowledged by the artist herself—has been the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), specifically his desire to sculpt “not the appearance, but the idea, the essence of things.” As Paul Richard of the *Washington Post* commented: “[Saudi’s] stone pieces, like [Brancusi’s], simultaneously suggest the ageless and the modern.”

“Mona Saudi begins with the modernism of Brancusi and Hans Arp,” says Mazen Asfour, assistant dean in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Jordan University in Amman, “lyric abstraction with touches of cubism—and she mixes it with humanism. She is looking for a dialogue [by using] dimensional tricks: the illusion of space within her sculpture. She draws the viewer in. She wants you to build her form with her.”

This “illusion of space,” influenced further by the English sculptors Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) and Henry Moore (1898–1986), is a key marker of Saudi’s style. In many of her works, pregnant bulges seem to swell from the stone, hinting at egg-like fertility as well as at interior voids. Saudi has her own way of describing this: “I start with a block,” she says, “and I have to open distances within it. I put time inside the stone by dividing it. This is what makes the mystery of sculpture.”

Though she stayed in Beirut after the outbreak of civil war, Saudi was eventually persuaded in 1983 to leave for the safety—and the family ties—of Amman. By then she was working in different stones, always local to the region: Syrian black diorite, Yemeni alabaster, honey-colored Lebanese marble and an extraordinary green-veined marble from the deserts south of Amman that Saudi has dubbed “Jordanian jade.”

A series of landscape works in this “jade,” including “Sunrise” (1980) and “Dawn” (1981), as well as later pieces such as “Nocturne” (2002), extends the solid/void juxtaposition: Saudi renders the sky in polished stone, with the earth and sun shaped as empty air. The Lebanese artist and critic Samir Sayegh describes Saudi “using the concept of geometry to express spirituality.”



Her most recent sculptures show a new sense of fluidity, and her Brancusi-inspired desire to sculpt “the essence of things” continues to guide her.



Saudi explored the same idea more overtly in her best-known work, “The Geometry of the Soul” (1987), a marble sculpture some three meters (10’) in height donated by Jordan to the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) in Paris, where it remains on

public display. Drawing together elements from the 2000-year-old art of the Nabataeans, builders of Petra, with wave-like undulations reminiscent of both sea and desert, curves that hint at the crescent moon and even the suggestion of a musical staff or the strings of an 'ud (lute)—“The Geometry of the Soul” expresses both calm and profundity. Critic Joseph Tarrab spoke of its being “rooted in the persistence of a state both primitive and definitive, the immutability of a basic, absolute permanence”.

Another landmark work of the 1980's was her “Variations on Arabic ‘N’ ”(1981), a marble piece later installed in the garden of the French Embassy in Amman. The Arabic letter (pronounced “noon”) is formed by a semicircle enclosing a point. It embodies Saudi's preoccupation with the embrace-like dialogue of line and sphere, and its sound also often denotes the feminine form of Arabic personal pronouns. Here, three of these volumes climb to form a figure that is at once totem-like and human, symbolic and figurative.

Despite her successes abroad throughout the 1980's and 1990's, including exhibits in Washington, London and Paris, Saudi felt cloistered and restricted in Amman. Several projects, including a plan to establish a sculpture center, foundered. In 1996, three years after receiving Jordan's National Honorary Award for the Arts from King Hussein, she returned to Lebanon.

The last decade has seen Saudi teaching off and on at the American University of Beirut and participating in high-profile exhibitions, including the 2006 inaugural sale of modern and contemporary art at Christie's in Dubai. She has published editions of her own poetry and has produced several series of ink drawings that combine poems by Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish and the French writer Saint-John Perse with representations of her sculptural forms.

Her most recent sculptures show a new sense of fluidity. Her series “Woman/River,” as well as individual pieces such as “Woman/Bird” (1998) and “Woman/Water” (2004), with their deployment of wavy silhouettes against solid-edged volumes, deepen impressions of the intangible bonds between the human and the natural world. Saudi's Brancusi-inspired desire to sculpt “the essence of things” continues to guide her.

One of the very few Arab women artists to pursue sculpture, Mona Saudi is acknowledged as a pioneer of Jordanian art, standing alongside figures such as Nabil Shehadeh, Salah Abu Shindi and the country's most prominent and successful painter, Mohanna Durra. She has also stuck tight over five decades to her independence and to what Joseph Tarrab has called her “strongly singular” vision, largely heedless of the ebb and flow of artistic fashions.

Durra—under whom Saudi trained in the early 1960's—recognizes the value of her perseverance. “Even back then,” he says, “I could tell she had a mind of her own. But that rebellious spirit is also a renovating spirit. I find her work uplifting. She broke taboos and went far beyond Jordan. Her achievement is great.”

Khalid Khreis, director-general of Jordan's National Gallery, concurs, calling Saudi “one of the most important Arab artists,” and emphasizing her universality and her modernist authenticity.

Yet her work, lacking both narrative symbolism and links to traditional Arab styles, is not easy to pigeonhole, and the question of her influence remains open. As Barbara Rowell, owner of the Jacaranda Gallery in Amman, notes, few contemporary Arab artists are drawing influence or inspiration from Saudi. Sculpture in stone, it seems, has become deeply unfashionable.

“Defending your obsession like this is not easy. Mona Saudi is one of a generation of artists who fought for art that is international but inspired by local sources,” says Saleh Barakat, owner of Beirut's prominent Agial Gallery and an expert on contemporary Arab art. “The legacy of Arab culture is within her. She is someone who did not make a career in Europe, but she has gone around the world, seen, absorbed, digested and produced. She is a lady of the Earth.”

“I began my life by dreaming, and I still dream today.”

Despite her youthful defiance, the artist eventually reconciled with her parents. She describes her father, Abdulmajid, as mystical. “He was a religious man, in a different world,” she says. “I respected his beliefs, but didn’t feel the need to ask his permission.”

By contrast, she found great inspiration in her mother, Yusra, a quiet woman who loved gardening and who, Mona’s sister Fathieh notes, often chose to be seen in public deliberately bareheaded, in contravention of social norms. “I feel her love even now,” says Saudi. “I feel her protection.”

Although married for a time to journalist Hassan Batal, who still writes a daily column for the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Ayyam* (their daughter, Dia Batal, is a professional designer), Saudi has long lived alone. She rarely cooks, preferring to order meals for delivery from the famous Barbar restaurant. She works in her little garden, accompanied by recordings of the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould playing Bach. (“Very abstract,” she smiles. “Bach reflects something geometrical in nature, and listening to Gould is like polishing a sculpture. Each line in its place.”) When not at home, she still often spends long hours at a studio she rents in the suburb of Ouzai, a neighborhood of auto-repair workshops, carpentry businesses and small factories.

“I’m a dreamer,” says the soon-to-be 65-year-old. “I began my life by dreaming, and I still dream today, of more sculptures, more exhibits, more discoveries. I don’t think of time as a burden. When I was 17, I felt much older than I do now. I still have a lot of things to do.”



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