

Art

Saloua Raouda Choucair obituary

Advertisement

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Lebanese artist whose work was inspired by her Arab heritage



📷 Sculpture With One Thousand Pieces, 1966-68, by Saloua Raouda Choucair, on show at Tate Modern, London, in 2013. Photograph: Ray Tang/Rex/Shutterstock

Saloua Raouda Choucair was 97 when she was given a show at Tate Modern - and it was her British debut. Indeed, it was the first major exhibition outside her native Lebanon for Choucair, who has died aged 100; even there, her shows were few and far between. As late flowerings go, it will be hard to beat.

What made her story all the more extraordinary was that the Tate exhibition revealed Choucair to be an artist of international stature. The 150 or so works in the show, drawn from a 70-year career and mostly stored in their maker's Beirut flat, had an elegance and rigour that had critics reaching lovingly for their pens. Yet few of them had previously heard of Choucair. Nor had the visitors who flocked to the Tate in such numbers that the gallery was forced to extend her show's run.

The clue to the reason for this ignorance lay in Choucair's name. With few exceptions, the canon of western art is made up of western artists; Choucair was an Arab. In a region where gender remained problematic, she was also a woman. Added to that, she was a Druze, from an embattled religious minority. The surprise was less that she had taken so long to be recognised than that she had become an artist at all.





📷 Saloua Raouda Choucair in the mid-1970s. Photograph: Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

She was born in Beirut to Salim Raouda, a landowner and pharmacist, and

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his wife, and cousin, Zalfa Najjar. [Lebanon](#) was then part of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, at war with Britain and France. Shortly after his daughter's birth, Salim was conscripted into the Ottoman army; he died of typhus a year later, leaving Zalfa to raise their three children.

Happily for Saloua, her mother was strong-minded, comfortably off and educated. She sent her daughter to the progressive al-Ahliyya National School for Girls, then to painting lessons with two of Lebanon's most distinguished artists, Moustaffa Faroukh and [Omar Onsi](#). After that, Saloua studied natural sciences at the American Junior College for Women, then philosophy at the [American University of Beirut](#), earning her keep at the latter by working as a librarian. Lebanon had been under French mandate from 1920 to 1943; like most bourgeois Beirutis, Zalfa was a keen francophile. In 1948, her younger daughter left for Paris and the [École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts](#).

The following year, Saloua entered the studio of [Fernand Léger](#), an experience that would both shape and haunt her. In 1943 she had been to Cairo; it was there that she first became aware of Arabic art. In her 1951 manifesto, [How the Arab Understood Visual Art](#), she set out to rewrite western orientalism from an oriental point of view. "The Arab never took much interest in visible reality," Choucair noted. "Rather, he searched for beauty in the essence of the subject, extracting it from all the adulterations that had accumulated since the time of the Greeks."



📷 [Composition in Blue Module, 1947-51, by Saloua Raouda Choucair on show at Tate Modern, London, in 2013. Photograph: Ray Tang/Rex/Shutterstock](#)

This partisan claim echoed her new political beliefs. Back in a recently independent Lebanon, Choucair had joined the nationalist [Arab Cultural Club](#), a group aimed at debunking the assumption that western art was inherently superior. At a time when geometric abstraction was coming into its own in Europe, Choucair annoyed the French by pointing out that Arabs had beaten them to it. A year before leaving for Paris, she had already begun making modular paintings of her own, entirely abstract and based on Arabic, rather than western, traditions and forms.

A small exhibition of Choucair's work at the [Arab Cultural Gallery](#) in Beirut in 1947 is considered to have been the first of modern abstract painting in the Arab world. In Paris, she would show with the [Salon des Réalités Nouvelles](#), a group co-founded by [Sonia Delaunay](#) and [Nelly van Doesburg](#) and which represented the further end of the avant garde. Nonetheless, as an Arab and a woman, Choucair was quickly pigeon-holed as a follower of Léger.

This, understandably, infuriated her. In old age, she would recall a Parisian critic telling her with approval that her work "showed European influence".



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“No!” Choucair had shouted. “It’s a universal influence. What I experience, everyone in the world experiences.” One of the things that had annoyed her about Léger was his insistence on abstracting images from reality, a practice that Choucair, the more abstract of the two, considered impure. Experiences such as these sent her back in 1952 to Beirut, where she hoped to find understanding among kindred artistic spirits.

In this, she was only partially successful. Her Paris show had been visited by the Lebanese ambassador to France. “Your work is curious, Miss Raouda,” he had purred. “Have you not got any Lebanese paintings for us?” By this he meant paintings that looked as a European might imagine Lebanese art should. Most Lebanese people felt the same way.

Undeterred, Choucair went on making work that was both modern and Arabic, her particular interest lying in interlocking forms. At first, these appeared in paintings such as *Composition in Blue Module* (1947-51), whose constituent parts, like the lines of Arab verse, could be read singly or collectively. In the early 1960s, Choucair moved increasingly into sculpture.

A decade before, in Marseille, she had seen Le Corbusier’s new *Unité d’habitation*, a building whose modularity had strong social and political underpinnings. Instinctively leftwing, Choucair began to build modular sculptures that drew on, but did not depict, the Beirut tower blocks about her. Works such as *Structure With One Thousand Pieces* (1966-68) suggested repair, rebuilding, a bringing-together of parts; after the Lebanese civil war began in 1975, this mood took on a new urgency.

For the next 16 years, Choucair worked on in her flat in conditions that were often dangerous. One canvas in the Tate’s show, a modular painting from the 40s, was embedded with glass shards blown into it by a car bomb exploding outside. Only in her 90s, and suffering from *Alzheimer’s disease*, did Choucair finally stop making art.

In the early 50s, she married Yusif Choucair, a journalist; in 1957, the couple had a daughter, *Hala*, herself now an artist. It was she who cared for her mother in her last years, and who survives her.

Saloua Raouda Choucair, artist, born 24 June 1916; died 26 January 2017

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