



## In This Issue

### Keepers of Lebanon's Light

*Written by Lynn Teo Simarski*

*Photographed by Christopher D. Salvo*

We chose artists who produced some of their most creative works during the past troubled years in Lebanon," explained Ramzi Rihani, one of the show's organizers. The exhibition included works by several internationally acclaimed painters, including Paul Guiragossian, Wajih Nahlé and Hrair, and several of the artists accompanied their paintings to the show's opening at Washington's Myriam Ancient Art Gallery.

"It's a tremendous act of faith - a celebration of a side of Lebanon that few people know or care to know," said one Lebanese-American visitor to the gallery. The show is the latest effort by Platform International, founded by Rihani - formerly a music critic in Beirut - and his sister May Rihani, to counter America's distorted image of Lebanon by bringing Lebanese artists, singers, and dancers to stages and galleries in the United States.

"When people talk about Lebanon today, you only hear bad news - you're told to keep away from the country," Rihani said. "But there's also worthwhile art and culture still coming out of Lebanon."

One goal of the show, admittedly but a small sampling of the Lebanese artists working inside and outside the country, was to portray the wide scope of Lebanese art. "The artists represent all kinds of schools of art - abstract, surrealist, expressionist, and decorative - and different media: oil, watercolor, mixed-media painting, and also sculpture," Rihani said.

The works on view suggested the artists' great receptivity to outside influences from both East and West, but also their ability to absorb and temper rather than imitate. If there is a distinctive school of Lebanese art, a principal attribute must be that very variety. At one pole, for example, stand the opulent ornamental works of Hrair - full of fantastic, highly-stylized horses, women, and flowers, formed of paint so thick it is almost sculpted. In complete contrast are the dreamy, abstract Lebanese landscapes of George Akl; the painfully sharp, almost photographic visions of surrealist Samir Abi Rashed; and the etched, metallic nudes of Halim Jurdak.

Some of this stylistic individuality must spring from the diversity of Lebanon's heritage - a melange of religions, sects, and ethnic groups. In the show, for instance, the huddled groups of robed women by Lebanese-Armenian artist Paul Guiragossian evoke Byzantine art, particularly in their strong shapes and their definition partway between figurative and abstract. Hrair, also of Armenian extraction, refers even more overtly to religious icon painting in the elaborate decorative borders around his paintings, the staring frontal postures of his haloed women, and the mosaic-like texture of his paint. His subjects reinforce the allusion: one of his paintings in the exhibition portrays a fanciful Annunciation scene, while another suggests a Last Supper with only female diners.

The stylistic restraint of Guiragossian and Hrair is replaced by exuberant swirls of light and color in the paintings of Wajih Nahlé, who, delving into his own tradition of Islamic art, has become famous for his use of Arabic calligraphy. "Arab writing becomes transcendent through Nahlé," writes critic Andre Parinaud. "His paintings make words explode.... Even when one does not know the meaning of the words Nahlé paints, one feels their power, because Nahlé's faith is true and his art is marked by a powerful poetry." The artist has transformed the ancient and dignified elegance of the Arabic alphabet, often portraying the essence or elements of letters or words without realistically depicting them - a "liberation," as Parinaud puts it, from the long artistic tradition of employing Arabic calligraphy as decoration.

Nahlé, whose paintings appear to be executed without an unintended stroke, speaks with the same energy and confidence that mark his works. "When I was young," he recalled at the Washington show, "my teacher told me, 'You are in the East with a very long tradition, and you must find that tradition - go.' And I went to visit all the museums in the Eastern and Arab countries, and I found the tradition in Arabic calligraphy. I developed it and I went to the root of the calligraphy - nobody did this before."

Movement and drama continue to characterize Nahlé's paintings of whirling dancers, as well as more abstract subjects, that have evolved from his earlier calligraphic inspiration. Islamic designs and techniques are evident in much of his exceptionally broad repertoire - immense tapestries, murals, and mosaics that include a meticulous ceiling of enameled ceramic made for a royal palace in Riyadh.

Lebanese artists weave a multitude of strands into their art, but whether their work is abstract, realistic, or decorative, all reveal a central concern for color that stamps their paintings as distinctively vivid within the wider world of Arab art. The paintings of Iraqi artists, for instance - among the Arab world's most sophisticated - show strong, disciplined forms and somber, rugged colors that contrast greatly with Lebanese art.

"Lebanese artists can see more colors than other artists can," said Adel Zagher, himself a well-known Lebanese artist now living in the United States. And Hrair added, "Our colors are still very bright, not very refined." Some artists attribute the spectrum of the Lebanese palette to the varied local landscape, brilliant between mountains and sea. "The local color is very fresh, and the Mediterranean color is particular," Zagher said, "with light blues, light greens, turquoise ... and the bright sunlight with ochres, yellows, oranges - even bright Venetian reds. The colors of Lebanon vibrate more - they are less inhibited, richer." In another artist's view, Lebanon's mountains "shimmer" in the moist air and brilliant sun, shifting through many shades from orange to purple at sunset, and even changing in the light of the moon.

"We in Lebanon have this light that's sometimes so powerful, so strong, that it hits us, and maybe that explains our colors," said Souleima Zod, whose abstract landscapes displayed perhaps the most striking and unusual colors in the exhibition. "Unconsciously, it's that light that comes out in our paintings," she said.

Hrair recalled that his own colors changed during a year's stay in Brazil, and that during seven years in Paris, he was not able to paint as well as at home. "I need Lebanon to be able to work," he said. "I need the light of Beirut - it inspires me."

A number of artists in the exhibition showed an interest in depicting the Lebanese landscape, following a tradition of landscape painters going back several generations. Lebanon's hills, villages, red-tiled rooves and stone houses were portrayed in the show through a whole gamut of styles from "realistic to abstract." "The olive trees, the hills, and the houses are still there, but the old Lebanon, the way we lived, is not there anymore," one visitor to the exhibition sighed. "Artists turn to these landscapes to portray a remembered world; people buying their paintings are buying those memories."

Mohamad Kaissi's peaceful pastoral scenes, washed in cool pastels, were the most realistic landscapes in the show, and many are named after the villages he depicts. Kaissi has remarked that his paintings preserve customs and architecture that are disappearing, but he seems to aim equally at capturing the lost serenity of the Lebanese countryside. "Nature, the wind and the sun, have a curative power which washes away your sadness," he said.

Slightly more abstract are Jacqueline Jabre's delicate landscapes and village scenes, with graceful olive trees that almost dance across the hills. Her works show the influence of a long stay in the Far East, where she learned to paint on rice paper. Critic Gabriel Merret believes that Jabre's fresh landscapes, painted amid the tumult of Lebanon, exemplify the Lebanese caprice of "smiling in the face of hostile destiny."

Much more ambiguous in outline, but equally serene, are the landscapes of George Akl, called the "master of color" in Lebanon for his diaphanous pastels, particularly greens and blues backlit with an ethereal light. He accents many of his paintings with sudden splashes of warm, bright color drawn from the village - the reds of tiled rooves, the yellows of café tables. "My medium is color more than form," Akl said. "I aim for the

colors that express the emotions I want to convey." Grays and purples represent wars of the past, while the brighter hues denote new life, with yellow and orange in one painting symbolizing the return of people to their abandoned village.

Akl believes in a gentle rural world, as reflected in such paintings as "Village at Dawn," "Sunny Oasis," and "Village at Noon in the Spring." "Civilization and modernization, as represented by the city, have fallen down in war," he said. "The city has not been destroyed by an earthquake or tornado, but bombed, destroyed by the modern machinery of war. But the village, the mountains, and the human beings -those all remain."

Urban landscapes, however, are the realm of Hassan Jouni - an ordered, traditional world in which a wide-eyed bride is bedecked with flower garlands, and children run hand-in-hand past a house of golden stone. Jouni is particularly known for his traditional café scenes, which immortalize a man's world of *nargila* (water-pipe) smokers, newspaper readers and backgammon players. His everyday scenes are revitalized by touches of brilliant color, with men's fezzes and waiters' jackets accented a startling red, and brass pipes a bright gold.

People are also the inspiration for Alfred Basbous, the only sculptor in the exhibition, but in his case it is the harmony, curves, and solidity of the human body that inspire. Basbous, who did not formally study art, is one of three brothers who became sculptors, and their village of Rashana, north of Beirut, is an outdoor museum of their works. Basbous's 14 sculptures at the Washington show were fashioned from a variety of materials, including brass, olive wood, cedar, ebony, limestone, and pink and rose marble. Both his long lithe figures and round squat shapes evoked the human form, and his interest in the balance of human pairs was evident in such sculptures as "Couple," "Mother and Child," and "Lovers."

Some artists in the show who seemed untouched by Lebanon's upheaval may in fact be expressing their reactions more subtly. Helen Khal, a Lebanese artist and art critic living in Washington, has observed that a number of artists who formerly did abstract work returned to figurative artwork during the war, a change that she interprets as fulfilling a "need to touch something real" on the part of the artists, who can no longer afford the "luxury" of abstraction.

Of the artists in the exhibition, Samir Abi Rashed's surrealist paintings display the starkest response to Lebanon's chaos. In "Veiled Memory," the window of a traditional house, torn from its setting, is hung in the sky. Images of destruction - toppled columns and walls - recur in other paintings, while baskets and urns - symbols of traditional life - are flung about like parts of a dismembered body. Abi Rashed brings a new twist to the landscape tradition in "Remains of the Past," in which a bullet-shattered, arched portico opens onto a remembered dream of misty hills and red rooftops. Far off in the depths of a puddle on the floor lies a vision of the city of Beirut, curved around its placid Mediterranean bay.

Other artists have deliberately barred the war from their works. "I don't want it in my paintings, I don't want to be influenced by it," said Hrair, who some years ago painted huge "crying cities," as he called them, that appeared to be drowning. Now he has abandoned such subjects for bright, flowery myths - what Rihani calls "kingly art," not only because much of it is done on gold leaf, but also because it has been bought by such famous figures as Jordan's King Hussein, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, and Queen Elizabeth II.

"I want to give this message: joy, love, beauty. Not hate, not problems, because people want to escape from those things," said Hrair. "I want to give them something - even if it's five minutes - to rest their feelings, their imaginations, their dreams. I will not trade on the misery and the destruction of my country. I see what is happening, and it's breaking my heart, but I will not let it dominate my paintings."

Souleima Zouad and George Akl also seem to have reacted to the war by creating their own transcendent worlds. Akl has more to mourn than many of his colleagues, for in 1975 about 1500 of his paintings were destroyed in the fighting. His art, however, conveys a quiet, firm optimism in the face of adversity. "The war and the difficult economic and social conditions have not broken my spirit, my urge to paint," he affirmed. In many of his paintings ghostly, transparent human figures float above the earth or linger near fallen stone houses. "Whatever is destroyed can be brought back," he said. "The will to survive

is stronger than the destruction."

Zod's paintings, larger and more sweeping than those of Akl, venture even farther into a luminous imaginary world. On both acrylic panels and paper, she has used mixed media of undisclosed makeup to create astonishing colors, including rich ruby red, satiny aquas, and deep twilight blues that, particularly on the acrylic, becomes as transparent as the Mediterranean. She recalled the surprise that greeted her colors at a show in Paris: "They did not expect to find such warm, vivid colors, because nature in Europe is so sad and gray," she said.

The waves and whirls of motion in her works suggest the currents of the sea, even the spinning of the solar system. "The source is my sensations about ancient civilizations, the old worlds, but my paintings are also about the beyond, that other world," she said. "I run away from the war and I go to that world, another planet, another space."

Her other world, however, echoes the shapes and colors of her native land. "I don't mean to do Lebanese landscapes," she said, "but maybe the resemblance comes from my memory, my subconscious. I'm searching for another world, but it may resemble something I know."

The wider world of Lebanese art encompasses a number of painters and sculptors who have moved elsewhere, some of whom have reacted to exile by breaking with the past, while others have sharpened their concentration upon the heritage they left behind. Viewers of the Washington show mentioned a Lebanese artist living in France for decades who still retains the colors of Lebanon in his work, as well as another whose Parisian street scenes could be those of a French painter. Adel Zaghir, who has lived in the United States for 15 years, watched traditional elements emerge in his art to a greater degree after he left Lebanon. "The ethnic forms became much clearer and stronger in my painting - more connected to my heritage," he said.

Although some artists have lost their homes, others their works, and some even their lives in their country's turmoil, the Washington show demonstrated that Lebanon's artists are very much among her survivors. Art critic Helen Khal spoke of a sculptor in Lebanon who still climbs, every morning, to the studio on the top floor of her house. There she continues to work, even during periods of shelling, beneath what flimsy protection a Lebanese tiled roof can afford.

**Lynn Teo Simarski** is a Washington free-lance writer specializing in the culture and politics of the Middle East.

**This article appeared on pages 26-33 of the March/April 1989 print edition of Saudi Aramco World.**

Copyright © 2004-2015 Aramco Services Company. All rights reserved.