

# EL-RAYESS, Aref (1928 - 2005)

## THE SIGNS OF CADMUS, 1958

Wool tapestry (Editor- Loggia), signed and dated "Rayess 1958" lower left

160 x 382 cm

Date of entry at UNESCO January 1959

Country of origin Lebanon

Donating country Lebanon

Donation made to UNESCO by the Lebanese government in January 1959.



© Photo: UNESCO/R. Fayad

Hala Aref El Rayess

The tapestry "The Signs of Cadmus" by the Lebanese artist Aref El-Rayess was commissioned by the Lebanese government in 1958 and offered to UNESCO.

The composition used for this tapestry is representative of El-Rayess's desire to give rhythm to his works through a play of vertical and horizontal lines. The dimensions and composition of the work insist upon the horizontality of the space. The stylization of the drawing along with the use of patterns emphasizes the idea of rhythm. The richness of the palette gives a powerful brightness to the work, culminating with the

brilliance of the sun, at the center of the composition.

The title of the work, "The Signs of Cadmus" refers to an episode of Greek mythology having as its central character Cadmus, or Kadmos, a prince from Phoenicia (current-day Lebanon) who, according to the estimations of Herodotus, would have lived around 2000 B.C. A semi-mythical character, and legendary founder of the city of Thebes, he is also known for having introduced the Phoenician alphabet in Greece. The tapestry abstractly narrates the story of Cadmus and his adventures. The different elements of the composition – the half-horse, half-fish-like dragon, the choice of Phoenician characters, etc. – like signs, evoke various parts of the story.

El-Rayess kept a 'constant' in his oeuvre thanks to a force expressed in his works emanating from his "inner voice". According to Nicole Malhamé Harfouche (Dean of the Lebanese School of Fine Arts, University of Balamand, Lebanon), it consists of "a work that is thought-out and felt before being created". Rich with meaning and symbols, his tapestry reflects a subtle blend of painting and poetry.

### Artist Biography

Aref El-Rayess was born in 1928 in Aley (Lebanon). A self-taught artist, his first individual exhibition took place at the American University of Beirut in 1948. He lived in Paris from 1950 to 1957, where he frequented the studios of Fernand Leger, André Lhote and Ossip Zadkine, and attended the "Académie de la Grande Chaumière" in Montmartre. His journeys to Senegal also play a significant role in his art, and it is there that he learned how to sculpt wood and stone.

El-Rayess returned to Lebanon in 1957 but, receiving a grant from the Italian government, left again in 1959 for Florence and later Rome, until 1963. During this time he exhibited his work in both these cities. He later taught at the Institute of Fine Arts of the University of Beirut, and was nominated President of the Association of Lebanese painters and

sculptors in 1973. At the beginning of the war in Lebanon in 1975, El-Rayess left for Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) and became the city's "Art Advisor". From then onward he received many commissions from Saudi Arabia, such as the 27 meter high sculpture erected on the square of Palestine in Jeddah.

"The Signs of Cadmus" is one of many commissions El-Rayess received from the Lebanese government. He won numerous awards throughout his career, such as the UNESCO Spring Fair prize (1957) and the first prize for sculpture from the Ministry of Public Works of Lebanon (1963). Aref El-Rayess passed away on January 2005, at the age of 77.