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Helen Khal

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Born in 1923 in Allentown, Pennsylvania, to Lebanese parents Thomas Joseph and Salma Shayboub, Helen Khal (1923-2009) became known as an artist, art critic, author, educator and a significant figure in the Beirut art scene during the city's golden age. Initially, Khal wanted to become a writer as she was an avid reader and passionate about literature, but her plans changed after spending six months in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-two. During her recovery, Khal took on drawing and painting, and afterwards enrolled at weekly afternoon art classes at the Baum Art School in her hometown. In 1946, Khal travelled to Lebanon for the first time in her life in order to attend **Académie libanaise des Beaux-Arts** (ALBA) where she studied until 1948.

In 1947, Khal met **Yusuf al-Khal** (1917-1987), a Syrian-Lebanese modernist poet and journalist. The two married in 1948 and moved to New York where Khal continued her

education in the fine arts at the Art Students League from 1948 to 1949. Next, the Khals relocated to Libya for two years before returning to New York again in 1952. In 1955, the couple settled down in Lebanon with their two sons. In 1958, Khal's poet husband Yusuf founded *Dar Majallat Shi'r*, a publishing house, and a quarterly modern poetry magazine *Shi'r*. Khal supported her husband and designed the magazine's cover. From 1961 until 1967 Khal worked as a part-time secretary at the Jordanian Tourism Bureau in Beirut before joining the Fine Arts Department at **the American University of Beirut (AUB)** as a part-time painting instructor in 1967. At the same time, she started to publish weekly art reviews in **The Daily Star** newspaper, and art columns in the **Monday Morning** magazine.



Helen Khal, courtesy of the AlSharekh Art Collection.

The couple established Beirut's first permanent art gallery, aptly titled **Gallery One**, in 1963. The inaugural exhibition organised by Khal displayed artworks from several emerging artists including **Michel** and **Alfred Basbous**, **Nadia Saikali**, **Yvette Achkar**, **Hrair Diarbekirian**, **Assadour Bezdikian** and **Mohammad Sakr**. Gallery One also hosted a literary salon, *Jeudis de Shi'r*, as well as concerts, literary readings and book signings. The gallery became an important hub for the Beirut intelligentsia and exhibited several later canonised Lebanese and Arab artists including the likes of **Fateh Moudarres**, **Ismail Fattah** and **Gazbia Sirry**. The history between Khal and her gallery, however, turned out to be ephemeral.

Unfortunately, the Khals divorced six months after the opening of the gallery and Khal lost the custody of her children and gave up the gallery to her ex-husband.

Although Khal was an active participant in the Beirut art scene, at first she was not keen on exhibiting her work. Persuaded by her lifelong friend and mentor, a fellow artist **Aref Rayess**, Khal's first solo show took place at **Galerie Alecco Saab** in Beirut in 1960. Afterwards, she would exhibit regularly both in Lebanon and abroad, including **Galerie Trois Feuilles d'Or** (1965, Beirut), **Galerie Manoug** (1968, Beirut), Kaslik (1970) and **Contact Art Gallery** (1972, 1974 and 1975, Beirut).



Helen Khal, 'untitled' (1970). Courtesy of the Dalloul Art Foundation.

Khal's artistic practice is characterised by the dialogue between figuration and abstraction. During the mid-1950s and early 1960s, the artist developed her quasi-cubist style depicting still lifes, fruits, flowers and portraits. And although she did not produce much during this period as her children were still small, this era was a period of experimentation for the artist. Khal's experimentation with abstract expressionism started after her divorce and painful separation from her children as the artist was trying to navigate in the midst of a tremendous loss. From quasi-cubism to expressionism, Khal found refuge in figurative-abstract depictions portraying landscapes, seascapes and people. She became well-known for her ability to use colour in an emotive way: meditative, colourful abstractions arguably reflect her signature style of geometrical forms such as circles, rectangles and squares.

In addition to her artistic practice, Khal was also a cultural activist and a spokesperson for the artistic field in Lebanon. In 1975, she travelled to the United States on a two-month tour to give lectures on contemporary art in the Middle East. In 1987, Khal published a seminal monograph on Lebanese female artists presenting her biographical research she had carried out in 1976. Initially, she had researched thirty-nine female artists, but the book *Woman Artist in Lebanon* focuses on twelve, including **Etel Adnan**, **Yvette Achkar**, **Huguette Caland** and **Saloua Raouda Choucair** – all of whom are firmly placed to the Lebanese canon of modern art.



Helen Khal, 'Untitled'. Courtesy of Mark Hachem Gallery.

After the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Khal returned to the United States in 1976, and remained there for two decades, visiting Lebanon only occasionally. In the USA, she worked as a consultant to the Jordan Information Bureau in Washington from 1967 to 1996. She continued her artistic practice and participated in some exhibitions, but could not sustain a living from her practice. In 1996, Khal returned to Lebanon where she remained until her death in 2009. During the 200s, she continued her columns for the Lebanese newspapers and worked as a copyeditor for different publications. At first, she lived in an apartment near the sea in Beirut before moving to Fatqa, Mount Lebanon, to live with her son Tarik.

As a tribute to Khal, her dear friend and art historian, Cesar Nammour, along with Gabriella Chaub, compiled the art reviews that she had written over four decades into a volume entitled *Resonances, 82 Lebanese Artists Reviewed by Helen Khal*, published in 2011. In total, Khal's reviews covered the works of eight-two Lebanese visual artists. During her professional life, Khal witnessed some of the most significant periods in the history of modern art in Lebanon as well as the golden days of Beirut in the 1960s and 1970s before the Civil War. After a productive life, the artist passed away in Lebanon in 2009 in the aftermath of a stroke. Her legacy as a pioneering woman in a multitude of fields remains and continues to inspire a new generation of intellectuals and writers.

Tags: Lebanon



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