

# Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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SAIFI VILLAGE  
THE CREATIVE HEART OF BEIRUT

FESTIVAL SEASON  
IN LEBANON  
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# collecting art for a wider audience

ramzi saidi  
discusses his colourful collection



TEXT BY NADA AL-AWAR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANSOUR DIB AND  
COURTESY OF RAMZI SAIDI

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Main picture: A unique painting from the late 1940s by Saliba Doueihy of Jounieh Bay on loan from Mr and Mrs Hisham Nasser. 3.5 x 2m.

Right: Ramzi Saidi relaxes surrounded by his impressive collection.

Saidi's collection includes an inlaid marble table designed by the late Sami El-Khazen, upon which stand: Two wood sculptures by Salwa Raouda Choucair, an iron bird by Hussein Madi, a work in marble by Chawki Choukini and one in ceramics by Nada Raad. The coloured ceramics are from Istanbul, Jerusalem and Fes in Morocco.

R

amzi Saidi is as colourful and complex as his magnificent art collection. A passionate and determined man - these are, after all, attributes that no serious collector can do without - Saidi also embraces a wide variety of interests that include photography, environmental protection, local politics in his native town of Jwayya in south Lebanon, and farming in Zambia, among many others. His love for art, however, began very early.

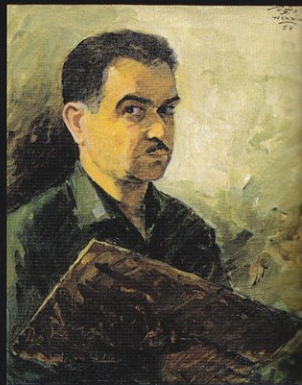
"When I was a boarder at Broummana High School in the late 1950s, I used to buy reproductions, mostly of works by impressionist artists, and frame them and hang them up in my room", says Saidi. "I suppose I was just born with a passion for art because although my parents were open-minded and emphasised the importance of education, they had little particular interest in art. Still, they appreciated my inclinations and encouraged me whenever I showed interest in cultural pursuits."

Saidi's spacious home in the Ramlet Al-Baida district of Beirut, which he shares with his wife Afaf and three of his four grown-up children, is literally brimming with 20th century paintings, sculptures and precious artifacts mainly from Lebanon. They adorn all the walls, cover every available surface and are stacked behind protective curtains on wooden frames in bedrooms and backrooms and every other available space. But rather than prove overwhelming, the overall effect of this apparent surfeit of beauty is enriching: there is a surprise to behold at every turn, an abundance of colour and form, and a satisfaction at the thought that, in this place at least, quality art is getting its due.





# Self



Self portrait of Fadi Barrage  
in mixed media.

Self portrait of Paul  
Guiragossian.

Oil self portrait of Omar Onsi  
in his youth, late 1930s.

A pastel self portrait of  
Hussein Madi from the  
Rome period.

An oil self portrait of Rachid  
Wehbe dated 1958.

# portraits



A coloured woodcut depicting a self portrait of Jamil Molaeb, dated 1982.



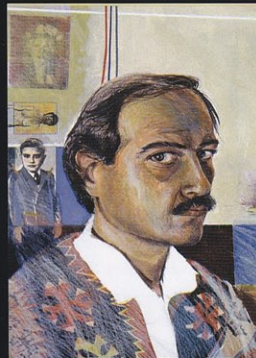
Self portrait in water colour of Omar Onsi in his later years, mid-1960s.



A charcoal drawing showing a self portrait by H. Madi done in Rome, dated 1978.



Self portrait of Ghada Jamal in watercolour.



Detail from a self portrait of M. El-Rawas in oil and mixed media dated 1987.

During our conversation, Saidi cradles and caresses a small model of a sculpture in wood by Salwa Raouda Choucair, a pioneer of abstract Arab sculpture and art. He stretches out his arm and urges me to examine closely the intricate internal work sculpted inside the hollow space of the cube. "It's called 'The Temple'", Saidi says with clear admiration before drawing his arm back again. "I believe that sculpting is the most complex and demanding form of art. Since it is three-dimensional, no aspect can be ignored in a sculpture. You have to examine it from every conceivable angle and any defects or lack of proportion can be very easily detected. Sculptors have to work very hard to render their composition or construction perfectly balanced." Saidi stands up abruptly and leads me into another room. He points to a piece in metal in the shape of a bird that stands on a marble coffee table in the centre of the room. "That work is by Hussein Madi. I watched him make dozens of models of it in cardboard before he was finally satisfied to execute it in iron."

On the other hand, continues Saidi, while form is all-important in sculpture, it is colour that makes all the difference in a painting. "If the colours used in a painting are not inspired by nature then it may fall flat in the eye of the viewer. The many shades of blues of the sky, the subtle greens of grass and trees, the different shades of brown in the earth, must be studied and digested so that a painting may relate to these creations of nature; and for people to associate with the work when they view it. Very often this is a talent that painters are simply born with since it is not a skill that can be easily learned. However, artists need to study the basics and elements of colour which are taught at art schools. Still, some people just don't have the talent for creating harmonious and balanced colours."

Again, Saidi stands up to point to an abstract by Chafic Abboud hanging on a side wall. "See this part here?" he asks. "The grey and beige and brown bit looks exactly like the spots one would see on a tiger. That's why, although the painter is not depicting a tiger, the colours feel right when you view them." A graduate in Economics from the American University of Beirut,

Saidi was working in Zambia when the civil war in Lebanon broke out in the mid-1970s. He returned to Lebanon in 1979, and despite frequent visits to Saudi Arabia for business since then, thoughts of Lebanon and the violence that was tearing it apart were always heavy on his mind. "There was a feeling of cultural loss, memory loss and heritage loss that the war was creating", says Saidi. "This is what made the interest to collect and preserve art from Lebanon even more urgent. There was something one wanted to hold on to or protect because you were afraid that this heritage may not survive."

The largest part of Saidi's collection of over 600 works, was obtained between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. It covers drawings, graphics, prints, sculptures and almost every known technique and medium of painting. It also includes an impressive number of self-portraits by some of Lebanon's most celebrated artists, such as Omar Onsi, Mustapha Farroukh, Rachid Wehbe, Hussein Madi, Amine El-Bacha, Hassan Jouni, Paul Guiragossian, Fadi Barrage, Mohammad Rawwas and Ibrahim Marzouk. A fauve-influenced striking portrait by Amine El-Bacha of the artist Jean Khalife sitting in the once famous Café La Palette in downtown Beirut, is a particular favourite. Another is by Hussein Madi, entitled The Chess Players. "Madi has used a wide brush normally used for house paint", explains Saidi, pointing to the bold strokes of black that make up the two chess players' bodies. "Each movement in the painting is a single stroke. You can't afford to make any mistakes when you're using this kind of technique."

While Saidi argues that his vast collection "falls far short" of being representative of 20th century art from Lebanon, there is little doubt that it is an extremely valuable testimony to the art movement in this country during that period. Yet Saidi is a self-taught connoisseur who says he has merely read a great deal about art over the years and at times has consulted with serious art critics such as Joseph Tarrab, Samir Sayegh and Faisal Sultan, among several others. "I'm not an art critic or a museum curator. I'm a free agent acquiring art for my collection, which I personally feel to be significant. I have not



"I believe that art should be shown and enjoyed and learned from by the greatest possible number of people".



always been right in my selection, but I have tried to ensure that the collection be as representative as possible", he says. "In the final analysis, I almost never buy anything I don't really like." And that, Saidi continues, is the primary criterion on which a collector can base his or her choices. But this should not exclude research, study and other criteria of objective evaluation. "It is at once very simple and very complex. I always tell people, when they want to know what art they should acquire, to ask themselves if the piece in question is something they can take home with them, if they are prepared to live with it and see it everyday. This is the personal and human view of art. Art is something that you should love and be at ease with, something that creates emotions in you and which you feel passionately about."

While the collection is constantly evolving, Saidi says that there are many works appearing on the art scene in Lebanon today that he does not feel are of particular significance, despite

some very important exceptions of pieces by young artists. "I'm not, after all, an institution, and adding to such a collection now needs more research and great resources. I no longer have the capabilities on my own to make this collection more representative. There are many important works that I don't have." But Saidi's efforts are commendable, not only because he has brought together so many important works of art in one collection, but also because he has been careful about making a record of both the works he owns as well as many others that are significant to the history of the art movement in Lebanon. On shelves in the study are stacks of files overflowing with slides of paintings and CVs of artists that Afaf Saidi has painstakingly put together. "We have worked hard on these archives. For example, in certain cases when there's an important retrospective for a Lebanese artist, I ask a photographer friend to take slides of all the paintings so that a record of them can be kept for future generations.



For instance, we did that around ten years ago for 200 works by Farid Awwad that were exhibited in Beirut after his death in Paris."

Pieces from Saidi's collection have also been included in exhibits in Lebanon and abroad. While making choices for a major exhibition covering more than 100 years of art in Lebanon held in London and Paris in 1989, organised by the British Lebanese Association, international critics selected over 100 works from the Saidi Collection. Many other works from the collection were selected for various artists' retrospectives, held at the Sursock Museum in Beirut during the 1990s.

Ramzi Saidi's wife Afaf, whom he describes as the "real curator" of the family's collection, was actively involved in the Lebanese American University's *alumni* association and was instrumental in organising several exhibitions there of works that represent different aspects of art in Lebanon, such as graphic art, abstract art and still life in art. These

exhibitions included some paintings from the Saidi collection. Saidi also serves on a committee that is working to create an art centre at his *alma mater*, the American University of Beirut, where the art department played a great role in the country's art movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The committee is still working to raise the necessary funds and to garner support for an art center and for the old department's full revival. The centre, is envisaged as an interactive institution to serve many aspects of art and may include a permanent exhibition space for the university's art collection which has been rediscovered, with many significant pieces found in different buildings around the campus and at the AUB library. "I believe that art should be shown and enjoyed and learned from by the greatest possible number of people", says Saidi. "I mean it's good to collect art for its own sake, but it's not good enough because in order for art to fulfill its objectives in society, it should be widely disseminated." □



Facing page  
A composite still life oil painting  
by Amine El Bacha in his  
distinctive cubist style, 1984.

Left: Oil and mixed media  
are used in a painting by the  
young artist Dima Hajjar,  
dated 2001 (detail).

THE MOKBEL  
ART COLLECTION