**Women’s Agency in Arab Art: Kinship, Education, and Political Activism**

*Curated by Wafa Roz*

Text written by Dr. Boushra Batlouni

Content Edited by Wafa Roz (Director of DAF)

***Introduction: Main Curatorial Theme***

The exhibition *Women’s Agency in Arab Art* investigates women’s contributions to the Arab art world through the lenses of kinship, education, and political activism. It sheds light on their capacity to make individualized choices and take actions that reflect their genuine needs, desires, and perspectives within their specific contexts. Despite their varied historical and geographical circumstances, these women challenged the limitations imposed by society and culture on their gender, believing in the power of art, education, and non-violent resistance.

*Women’s Agency in Arab Art* focuses on women artists born between 1905 and 1948. Some were wives or siblings of renowned artists or daughters significant political figures; their family ties often shaped, influenced, or informed their artistic production and engagement across political discourse and action. The exhibition features women artists from, or connected to, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Morocco.

Arab women artists played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of visual arts, using it not only as a reflection of their time but also as a powerful tool for enacting change. Many of these women were foundational figures in the art education sector. Others contributed to or witnessed the emergence of significant modern art movements and collectives in the Arab world, such as the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, the School of Casablanca, Art et Liberté, the Contemporary Art Group in Egypt, the New Vision Group in Palestine, and the Hurufiyyah movement.

Their personal journeys and artistic practices provide an essential perspective on the affordances and limitations faced by Arab women, primarily during each country's post-independence and post-colonial nation-building periods, and highlight how the challenges they have faced continue to resonate within the contemporary environment. The broader significance of their contributions becomes clear through the intersections of the artists’ personal relationships, societal status, political activism, and educational roles. This exhibition serves as a reminder to acknowledge their agency and activism as they forged unique paths and helped shape the modern Arab art world.

The text below highlights the achievements and paths of some women artists featured in this exhibition. It shows how their relationships and choices were shaped by their context, the relationships they prioritized, and how these affected the development of their artistic and personal journeys.

***Women’s Agency: Literary Foundations to Arab Feminism***

The mid-20th century saw dramatic social and cultural shifts driven by anti-colonial struggles, independence movements, rising nationalism, demands for public participation, expanding education, and the emergence of both global and Arab feminist movements. Women’s organizations and feminist pioneers linked their causes to the nationalist narratives of the time. In tandem, cultural and artistic movements flourished as sources for forging new national identities and progressive social ideals.

Feminist movements were central to the discourses surrounding anti-colonialism and nationalism during the *Nahda* or Arab Renaissance period in the late 19th and early 20th century. The pursuit of modernization, which was developing across the Arab world, included vibrant intellectual debates regarding feminist thought and women's rights – debates that both men and women engaged in as they discussed the role of women in modern society. In Syria and Lebanon, writers such as Butrus Al-Bustani, Mary Ajami, and Naziq Al-Abid prioritized women's empowerment, especially in education, as key to the nation's development.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In Lebanon, the early feminists of the 1920s-1940s were of the elite, wealthy class, and their activities focused predominantly on creating charitable organizations that prioritized access to education and vocational training.[[2]](#footnote-2) After gaining independence from the French mandate, the organization Lebanese Council of Women (1952) succeeded in pressuring the government to grant Lebanese women voting rights in 1953. The period after that saw the rise of several leftist organizations, such as Women's Democratic Gathering and the League of Lebanese Women's Rights, but much of their activity was curtailed due to the Civil War (1975-1990).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In Egypt, intellectuals such as jurist and Islamic modernist Qasim Amin (1863-1902), novelist Aisha Esmat Taymur (1840-1902), and feminist Malak Hifni (1886-1918)[[4]](#footnote-4) were some of the first to champion the liberation and empowerment of women against the traditional gender dynamics. Unless Egyptian women were impoverished and forced to support themselves – often through unpaid work as farmers, shopkeepers, or merchants alongside their husbands – they were confined to the seclusion and isolation of the house in the harems. However, the anti-colonial nationalist movement brought many of the women – usually belonging to the upper class of society – out into the public as they took part in protests against the British.

Iconic feminist figures such as Huda Shaarawi emerged during this period as resistance against colonialism heightened in 1919. She was the wife of the vice president of the nationalist party Wafd and created the Women's Wafd Central Committee, which the wives of party members and other upper-class women attended.[[5]](#footnote-5) Dissatisfied with Wafd’s lack of support and progress, after the death of her husband in 1922, Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) to provide women with access to work and education, raising the minimum age for marriage and abolishing polygamy and prostitution.[[6]](#footnote-6)

After returning from participating in the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance in Rome in 1923, Shaarawi and fellow feminist activist Saiza Nabarawi were greeted by a crowd at the station, where they would both remove their face veils or ‘niqab’ – a cloth that covered their faces to great applause.[[7]](#footnote-7) This act was a profound gesture, becoming “a symbolic image for feminist and nationalist collective memory.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The EFU had a significant role to play in the feminist movements of this period, with many notable feminist activists, such as Inji Efflatoun or Doria Shafik – founder of the Daughters of the Nile Union (Bint al-Nil) in 1948 – having connections to the organization.

In 1953, after the end of the British-controlled monarchy, the EFU was dismantled as all social organizations became directed by the Ministry of Social Affairs.[[9]](#footnote-9) Women in Egypt were granted the right to vote in 1956, during Gamal Abdel Nasser’s rule (1954-1970). Under Anwar Al Sadat’s rule, women had attained most of their economic rights. However, male dominance prevailed under both presidents’ rulings. Anwar Al Sadat’s reign in the 1970s saw an improvement in women's political rights, such as the reformation of women’s personal status law, the establishment of the National Council for Women, an increase in seats for women in Parliament, and an allocation of a percentage of positions in government exclusively for women. However, Sadat’s government also suppressed independent civil society feminist groups and non-governmental organizations.[[10]](#footnote-10)

One notable example is the feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, imprisoned for her activism in 1981. During her stay in prison, she founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA). She was the editor of its publication Al-Nun, both of which were forcibly closed down by the government in 1991.[[11]](#footnote-11) Throughout her life, El Saadawi faced continuous accusations and legal challenges from political and religious opponents.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Moreover, In 1981, El Saadawi was imprisoned because she criticized Anwar Al Sadat’s falsely claimed democracy. During her two months stay in prison, she wrote her most popular book, *Mudhakkarāt fī sijn al-nisāʾ* (Memoirs from the Women’s Prison, translated by Marilyn Booth in 1984), where she describes women’s struggle in prison. On another note, the book shed light on women's resistance to state violence and the formation of women's communities. El Saadawi describes how women and political prisoners united to demand the state for better conditions. While in prison, she founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA). She was the editor of its publication Al-Nun, which the government forcibly closed down in 1991. El Saadawi, known as Egypt's 'creative dissident' throughout her life, faced continuous accusations and legal challenges from political and religious opponents.

Morocco's history of feminism is also imbricated with the anti-colonial fervor of the mid-20th century. The elite and urban women and relatives of members of the Democratic Party of Independence created the first women's association, *Akhawat Al-Safaa*, or 'Sisters of Purity' in English. The association focused on promoting women's education and offering charity to martyrs’ families.[[13]](#footnote-13) Following them, the pioneering generation of feminists was mainly educated, upper-class women who engaged in the broader discourse on nationalism and feminism through scholarship, journalism, and political activism, demanding legislative reforms.

The end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s saw a significant shift, with the rise of an authoritarian regime, oppositional politics, and violent clashes between the two. This period's feminist movement moved gradually from male-dominated and hierarchical leftist parties to feminist associations and non-governmental organizations.[[14]](#footnote-14) This shift also “marked the birth of women’s activism in the public sphere.”[[15]](#footnote-15)As evident in the broad overviews above, early Arab feminists sought gender equality by challenging the domestic-public divide, using tactics such as writing, political activism, and, in the case of many artists featured here, creating literary publications to break into the male-dominated public sphere.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Literature was of significant importance to Arab feminist movements. The increased publication of newspapers and periodicals aided the rise of fiction writing in the Arab world.The origins of esteemed Arab women writers and poets can be traced to pre-Islamic Arabia, a period when women actively participated in public discourse alongside men. For instance, Al-Khansa of the Mudar tribe was among the most renowned figures in the 7th century; her poetry is a landmark in Arabic literary heritage. During the Umayyad period (661–750), Sukaynah Bint Al-Husayn pioneered the first literary salon, a tradition that re-emerged in the late 19th century amid transformative changes in the Ottoman Empire and rising European influence. By the 8th century, women like Rabia al-Adawiya produced mystical poetry. Also, during the Abbasid period (750-1258) talented women poets of the court in Baghdad rose into acclaim including Ubaida Al-Tamburiya, and Queen Zubaida bint Ja’afar. They were celebrated for their literary exchanges with Caliph Harun al-Rashid.

The growth of fiction became a vital outlet for Arab feminist expression. For instance, scholar and political figure Bouthaina Shaaban,[[17]](#footnote-17) underscores in her book Voices Revealed that literature has been the primary space where Arab women have consistently established their identity and demonstrated literary excellence. During the 19th century, intellectuals like Lebanese novelist and playwright Zaynab Fawwaz (1846-1914) and writer Maryam Al-Nahhas (1859-1888) compiled biographical dictionaries that highlighted the achievements of historical Arab women intellectuals. Zaynab Fawwaz called for Gender equality in education, and work.n 1892, she republished her articles in her book Rasa’il Zaynabiyya (Zainab’s Letters). In 1899, she compiled a historical biographical dictionary that highlighted the achievements of notable Arab women intellectuals titled *al-Durr al-Manthur fi Tabaqat Rabbat al-Khudur,* and published Husn al-‘Awaqib aw Ghadat al-Zahirah.

These works aimed to inspire and reclaim women's contributions to society. The rise of education for women during the two *Nahda* periods or the Arab cultural renaissance (1860s-1910 and 1920s-1940s) further nurtured literary exchanges. It was a period widely marked by the emergence of modern Arab literature and wide-scale publications. Feminism was embedded in the reformist agenda of the Nahda thinkers, such as the Lebanese scholar and writer Butrus Al-Bustani (1819-1883), Egyptian Jurist, and Islamic modernist Qasim Amin(1863-1902), Syrian poet Mary Ajami (1888-1965), and Palestinian-Lebanese essayist May Ziadeh, Lebanese Warda al-Yaziji, and Lebanese novelist and playwright Zaynab Fawwaz (1846-1914), among others.

It is within this context that many of the women featured in this exhibition have emerged. Most of these artists, who came from aristocratic classes, had the chance to engage in private tutoring lessons, the possibility of international travel, and access to a broad range of cultural influences. However, their engagement with their local contexts has shaped much of their political leanings, their art, and, of course, their ties to their families and relations. Notably, participation in leftist political movements often put them at odds with their families’ expectations, and in some instances, their politics led them to direct confrontation with the authorities.

Some of these women's roles in relation to the societal transformations underway during this time were influenced by their personal choices and the environment they grew up in, especially concerning their families. As the following explorations will show, kinship often functioned as a way in which artists connected to past generations, the narratives being told, and the legacies being built.

While literary production and feminist advocacy opened new horizons for Arab women’s participation in public life, familial ties proved equally decisive in shaping the trajectories of many artists. Building on the social, political, and cultural transformations highlighted above, the following section explores how kinship – whether supportive or constraining – profoundly influenced women’s artistic development, political engagement, and entry into the public sphere.

***Women’s Agency: Kinship Support and the Shift from Private to Public***

For instance, in the case of Effat Naghi, her relationship with her brother Mohammad Naghi was central to her development as an artist. She looked up to him and sought his highly regarded opinion on her early works. Mohammad Naghi was a pivotal figure in the evolution of the Egyptian modern art scene, part of the Al-Ruwwad movement, or the Pioneers, and considered the first Egyptian modern artist during the early 20th-century Nahda period. Caught in the spirit of independence that defined the early 1920s and fueled the Nahda era, Mohammad Naghi and his peers in Al-Ruwwad advocated for developing nationalist art rooted in folklore and Egyptian cultural heritage influenced by recent archaeological discoveries. The works of this period reflected the transformations of the Nahda, highlighting the interactions between Egypt and Europe, as these artists incorporated a myriad of styles and techniques into their nationalistic depictions of the *fellah* (peasant) and Ancient Egypt.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Naghi family's aristocratic social status opened up many avenues for networking and travel – Mohammad Naghi was a diplomat and cultural attaché between the 1920s and 1930s, which allowed him opportunities for extensive travel across Europe and Africa. Effat Naghi also had ample opportunities for growth and development beyond her own milieu. She received a scholarship to study in Italy and traveled extensively across Europe from a young age. Through her brother, she would meet the French cubist painter and teacher André Lhote, who would introduce her to cubism and fauvism, which profoundly influenced her stylistic use of color, form, and shape. In addition to her brother, another major influence was Effat’s husband and teacher,[[19]](#footnote-19) Saad Al-Khadem, a historian, social anthropologist, and painter, whom she married in 1954. The two were a 'power couple,' with Effat helping her husband with his research on Egyptian "folklore, traditional rituals, practices, and esoteric religious beliefs."[[20]](#footnote-20)-[[21]](#footnote-21)

The same cultural awakenings profoundly influenced Effat as much as her brother and, later, her husband, and they, in turn, supported and encouraged her interests. Effat Naghi's passions were rooted in exploring and studying Egypt's heritage and developing modern Egyptian art. Between 1941 and 1946, Naghi traveled across Egypt as part of her work at the Red Crescent in Alexandria and used this time to paint the scenes she encountered. After she met her husband, Saad El-Khadem, her subject matter and style shifted as she began incorporating many of the motifs she discovered in her research and collaboration with her husband. While Naghi had learned much from both of these artists, her work was unique in its clear departure from academic painting, instead developing her own visual language. Effat Naghi created her own distinctive modernist style through experimentation with different mediums and styles and exploring diverse subject matters.

Family support was vital in paving the way for these women to participate in the cultural scene. In the case of Egyptian artist Gazbia Sirry, the support of her female family members, who encouraged her to actively pursue her passion, paved the way for her. Born into a family of aristocratic descent, she would come of age within a predominantly female environment with her two sisters after her father had passed away, with her widowed mother and divorced grandmother taking care of her and supporting her interest in the arts. Encouraged by her mother, Sirry benefited from a privileged education in fine arts, earning a diploma from Cairo's Higher Institute for Young Women in 1948 before furthering her studies in Paris, Rome, and London under renowned instructors. As a young girl, her paternal uncles played an important role by taking Sirry to the theatre and introducing her to their vast libraries. This dynamic reflects the way male relatives often facilitated women's access to the public sphere and cultural life, while female kin supported them from within the private sphere through personal encouragement.

A similar dynamic was present in Egyptian artist Tahia Halim's early life. Her grandmother was a professional violinist and artist, and her mother was a skilled musician and oud player. Her father, an admiral, and was not physically present during her childhood, as he was stationed in Sudan while the family lived in Cairo; therefore, Halim's mother took on all household responsibilities, including taking care of her children. When Halim began showing artistic inclinations at a young age, her mother provided her with painting tools and requested that her daughter study art with professional artists. Tahia did not attend secondary school; instead, her family preferred to have her home-schooled, but she had private art instruction for two years with Youssef al-Traboulsi. In 1941, she met artist Hamed Abdullah, who would become her mentor and then her husband in 1945. Her parents disapproved of this marriage due to Abdullah's different social class – he was the son of an illiterate *fellah*. But the marriage went through, and together, the couple would organize joint shows and later travel to and live in Paris from 1949 to 1951, where Halim attended the École de Paris and developed her techniques and style. Halim and Abdullah influenced each other as they learned and developed together during the years until their separation in 1956.

***Women’s Agency: Political Activism***

Political activism took different forms for the women in this exhibition. The women mentioned earlier, Effat Naghi, Gazbia Sirry, and Tahia Halim, all produced works that directly reflected the events and shifts that were underway. Effat Naghi’s works were politically engaged, offering a critical lens for understanding and preserving a lost heritage. Tahia Halim's early works nostalgically explored the daily lives of Egyptians in Cairo. Still, they would later evolve into a deeper and more emotional exploration of Nubia and its people. Within the Egyptian framework, the revolution of 1952 was a pivotal and transformative moment that was filled with hope for the future and would be central to the evolution of most of the Egyptian female artists in this exhibition.

For instance, Gazbia Sirry’s works reflected the period’s – especially between 1919 and 1952 – engagement with feminist issues and women’s role in Egyptian society. She did not shy away from controversial topics such as polygamy, resistance, and gender norms.[[22]](#footnote-22) She would merge various aesthetics by drawing on Egyptian cultural heritage and practices – Coptic textiles, Ancient Egyptian painting, Islamic art, patterns, etc. – as she wove them together in her pieces. Sirry’s themes often revolved around the liberation of the Egyptian woman and her full participation in both public and private life.[[23]](#footnote-23) Indeed, Her and her husband’s roles within the broader cultural field were not without consequence. During the massive roundup of leftist intellectuals by the government, she was arrested for a few days, and her husband (Adel Thabet) was imprisoned for three years.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Another highly influential figure who exemplified how that period's political and social shifts affected women artists was journalist and artist Inji Efflatoun. Born into a privileged family, Efflatoun became involved in left-wing politics and the women's rights movement during her youth. In 1942, she joined *Iskra[[25]](#footnote-25)*, a communist youth party, and later became a key figure in Egypt’s feminist movements. In 1945, Efflatoun represented Egypt at the Women’s International Democratic Federation in Paris, where she joined global feminist leaders in advocating for peace and women’s rights. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, she was active in various political organizations, pushing for women’s participation in Egypt’s anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements.

Like Gazbia Sirry, her activism was cut short when she was imprisoned during the crackdown on communist intellectuals under President Abdul Nasser. Her husband, Mahmoud El-Badawy, a lawyer and prosecutor, was also imprisoned and died in 1964, most likely due to the torture and brutal beatings he received in jail. Efflatoun used her art to reflect the resilience of women prisoners and the broader struggles of the Egyptian working class: “Efflatoun’s activism was threatening precisely because it gave equal weight to issues of gender and class, and because she was an artist from a privileged background who was able to bridge the gap and work in and among poor, rural communities in the Egyptian countryside.”[[26]](#footnote-26) After her release in 1963, she withdrew from active political involvement but continued to champion feminist ideals through her art.

Another case of women artists’ direct engagement with political transformations would be the Moroccan artist Latifa Toujani, whose work addresses the continuing struggle for liberation against oppression, especially in relation to women's rights. The period between the 1960s and 1980s was known as the Years of Lead, a time of great oppression, human rights abuses, and repression of leftist dissident voices and activists in Morocco. Toujani’s work is important because of the themes and context it engages in, reflecting the active struggle of her countrymen (who were often the targets of state suppression) while also prioritizing the suffering of women in this situation by depicting them standing together in defiance. It is important to note that Toujani’s uniqueness comes from her move away from the celebrated craftsmanship that Moroccan art is renowned for and her pioneering experimentation with a more modernist approach.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Toujani produced politically engaged art centered on themes of resistance and women's rights. She collaborated with renowned Moroccan feminist writer and scholar Fatima Mernissi, whose works focused on the role of women in Islam and the creation of a civic, democratic society where the gendered distinctions between the public and private spheres are dissolved.[[28]](#footnote-28) Toujani also participated in a pan-Arab art event in solidarity with Palestine. Her support for the cause is evident in one of her most renowned works, which is part of this exhibition. Two intertwined human figures are seen holding up the victory sign.

***Women’s Agency: Foreign European Wives - Modernist Arab Artists***

In instances where familial kinship is unique in its diversity, such as foreign nationals becoming part of their spouse's environment, we also see the effects of having male kinship ties on access to the public and cultural spheres. In Iraq, artists such as Lorna Selim, Lisa Fattah, and Suzanne El-Cheikhli (all foreigners) benefited significantly from their relations with their husbands and, by extension, the affordances that both their relationships and outsider status allowed them in terms of navigating and integrating into a culture that was not necessarily their own.

In the case of British-born Lorna Selim, her artistic production was aligned with the nationalistic discourse of the time, reflecting art’s central role in shaping national identity. For example, through her renowned husband, Jewad Selim, who founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, Lorna Selim also became a member of that group. She played a role in shaping modern art in Iraq by integrating ancient Mesopotamian and traditional Iraqi cultural elements with modern artistic techniques.

Their work was a creative synthesis of Iraq's historical and cultural heritage and an eager expression of an evolving national identity.

Lorna Selim would play an essential role in overseeing the completion of the Freedom Monument, a major sculpture commissioned by the Iraqi government from her husband in 1959 for Baghdad's city center, which he could not finish as he had passed away in 1961. Interestingly, she was not invited to the unveiling of the monument; however, she continued to live and work in Baghdad for another decade so that her daughters could grow there and become familiar with their culture and legacy. During this period, Lorna Selim created many architectural drawings of old Baghdad homes and alleys before they were demolished, playing a major role in preserving the visual memory of this lost heritage.

She taught drawing classes at Baghdad University’s Department of Architecture, where she would take her students to sketch the structures surrounding the Tigris, allowing her students to immerse themselves in their architectural history and, in the process, influence their perspectives on Iraqi design. While she was not a political activist in the sense of organizing movements or engaging in protests, she was deeply attached to Baghdad and the Iraqi culture, taking it upon herself to document the city’s historical architecture. The development of her style and aesthetic shows the influence of the Iraqi artistic movements of the time – particularly the effect of her husband’s style. However, it has also evolved to show Selim’s own take on her surroundings, especially in the way she incorporated the pared-down geometric aspects of Baghdadi architecture that hold her immobilized subjects in the works shown in this exhibition.

German-Swedish Lisa Fattah, Ismail Fattah’s wife, would develop her own approach in a way that diverged from the Iraqi discussions on modernism and visual heritage. Unlike artists such as Lorna Selim, much of Lisa Fattah's work reflected a sense of isolation from her surroundings and her interest in the internal psychological state of her subjects. Her husband refrained from including his wife in the Iraqi artistic milieu, possibly going as far as isolating her from its vibrant dynamics.[[29]](#footnote-29) Lisa Fattah’s works have an anxious feel to them and a strong thread of engagement with the psychological conditions of womanhood that highlights a sense of separation, loneliness, and pain – especially in her later years when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her oeuvre also reflects her own tendency to isolate herself from her Iraqi surroundings and a strong inclination to keep her voice separate from those around her, kin or otherwise.[[30]](#footnote-30) Her art reflected a more psychological investigation of women's lives and, to a lesser extent, some exploration of themes of nationalism and conflict, especially in relation to how they affected the individual.

Other foreign-born Iraqi nationals, such as French-born Suzanne El-Cheikhli, had the full support of her husband, Ismail El-Cheikhli, and would often showcase her works in exhibitions alongside him. Their works took on the social and cultural aims of the art movements in Iraq at the time, and Suzanne El-Cheikhli’s pieces highlight her lifelong focus on the exploration and preservation of Iraqi collective memory as she painted Iraqi houses, Baghdadi homes, Bedouin tribes, and general Iraqi daily life. She would pass on her skills and passion to students as she taught art in local Baghdadi schools for over three decades.

***Women’s Agency: Beyond Kinship – Art as a Path to Freedom***

Not all women artists actively participated in the creation of distinct nationalistic artistic visions. The Lebanese case is unique in that a minimal overarching patriotic narrative converged around artists' practices. Until the 1960s, there was a divide between the country's sociopolitical and cultural evolution. [[31]](#footnote-31)The 1950s and 1960s in Lebanon were a vibrant cultural “golden era” before the civil war, marked by burgeoning modern art, new galleries, and greater social freedoms – especially for women of the educated classes​.[[32]](#footnote-32) Women artists like Helen Khal, Huguette Caland, Yvette Achkar, Samia Osserian, and Afaf Zurayk emerged as significant figures during this time. They navigated a complex intersection of tradition and modernity: on one hand, enjoying opportunities afforded by Lebanon's relatively liberal atmosphere (women gained suffrage in 1952 and had broader access to education than in many neighboring countries), and on the other hand, still contending with patriarchal norms in their personal and professional lives​.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Helen Khal, a contributor to and dedicated witness to the evolution of the Lebanese art scene, had a complicated past in relation to her family and the constraints imposed by patriarchal society.[[34]](#footnote-34) Born in the United States to Lebanese-American parents, Khal moved to Lebanon in the 1940s to continue her art education. She married renowned poet and writer Yusuf Khal in 1947 and, through him, became part of the country’s intellectual scene. In 1963, Khal and her husband opened the first gallery in Hamra, Beirut, called Gallery One. The gallery often hosted a literary salon named '*Jeudis de Shi’r*, which included European luminaries such as the English poet and novelist Stephan Spender and the French poet and art historian Yves Bonneffoy. Gallery One was the first permanent gallery in the country and influenced many other Lebanese women to open and run their own galleries. Her relationship with her husband grew increasingly turbulent, and they divorced in 1967, after which he retained custody of both her sons and ownership of Gallery One.

Although she was not necessarily a feminist activist in the sense of street protesting or organizing a movement, Khal’s influence was seen through her engagement with culture. In her writings, she describes how simply by becoming an artist, a Lebanese woman in that era could subtly challenge gender norms: “Through her presence, she creates a certain change in public opinion regarding the capacities of women,” Khal wrote, noting that art could be “a step on the road to liberation” – a window opening in the “wall of the harem” that had long confined women.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indeed, by living her life as she did, she provided a living example that women could do "other activities than traditional child-bearing, food preparation and housekeeping."[[36]](#footnote-36)

As a chronicler of the evolution of the Lebanese art scene, Khal wrote one of the first books on Lebanese women artists, titled *The Women Artists in Lebanon*. She highlighted the opportunities explicitly offered to middle and upper-class Lebanese women, noting how their background afforded them social mobility, education, and close contact with Western influence, particularly France, explaining why Lebanese women artists were disproportionately higher in number compared to their regional counterparts.[[37]](#footnote-37)

One such woman was the remarkably unique Lebanese artist, once a student and close friend of Helen Khal, Huguette Caland. Caland was the daughter of Lebanon's first post-independence president, Bechara el-Khoury, effectively marking her as part of the country's aristocratic class. Moreover, Caland's aunt is the Lebanese painter Marie Hadad, who was well-known in French artistic circles. This differs from the trajectories of someone like Helen Khal, who came from a modest background and needed to work for a living. Caland's elite upbringing offered her many advantages, such as wealth and education. Still, strict expectations were imposed upon her from an early age, especially in relation to how she was expected to behave and appear in society.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Caland showed a keen interest in the arts, and her family provided her with private art lessons. However, a rebel since her youth, by age 20, she married Paul Caland, the French nephew of one of her father's political rivals, Georges Naccache, the owner of an opposition newspaper.[[39]](#footnote-39)-[[40]](#footnote-40) By her early 30s, she had three children. She and her husband fell out of love quickly enough, and both openly took on lovers.[[41]](#footnote-41) When her mother died, Caland took care of her aging father, and after he passed away in 1964, she was essentially freed from the confines of family and the piling duties she was forced to take on, regardless of her own ambitions.[[42]](#footnote-42) Caland was 33 years old when she pursued art education at the American University of Beirut. In 1970, during an opening at her studio for works by her and Khal, she declared that she was leaving her husband and children and moving to Paris to pursue her art. This move would strip away the pressures of society and all the pressures of decorum and control imposed, especially on women from her social and economic class. Her works celebrated a vibrant, sensual, and playful eroticism, sometimes showcasing her own sexual exploits during this period.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Caland’s personal life choices intersected with feminist liberation as she enacted the very freedom that women’s movements worldwide were championing in the late ’60s. She reveled in the excess, from her own body (she was an unapologetically large woman) to the way she chose how to live, revolting against every societal or familial restraint as she seemed to be driven by a singular force: not accepting being told how to live her life solely to fulfill the expectations and tastes of others. Caland remained a freedom seeker till the end of her life, never apologizing or seeking forgiveness for anything she did.

Another prominent Lebanese artist is Afaf Zurayk, born into one of Beirut’s prominent intellectual families, which profoundly shaped her trajectory. Her father was Dr. Constantine Zurayk, a renowned historian and Arab nationalist thinker who served as acting president of the American University of Beirut (AUB) and was a leading figure in the Arab National Movement Family. She grew up in a distinctly intellectual and supportive environment, which offered her opportunities not available to others. At the age of 15, she would take private lessons with Helen Khal, who profoundly impacted her perspective and approach. She would study at the American University of Beirut (again taking courses taught by Khal), then go on to get her Masters in Islamic Art History at Harvard University in the 1970s.

This elite education equipped Afaf with a rich dual perspective: a grounding in her own heritage (Islamic art history) and direct experience of Western academic and artistic discourse, including the feminist and civil rights movements active in the U.S. during her time there. She grew up in a closely knit, academic, and intellectual family that was open to giving room for their daughters to thrive as individuals. In her work *My Father, Reflection*, Zurayk investigates how her father's larger-than-life presence impacted her artistic imaginings and personal growth. Zurayk taught at several institutions, including the Lebanese American University and the American University of Beirut. In Washington, D.C., she taught in continuing education programs at Georgetown and the Corcoran College of Art, sharing Arab art and perspectives with American audiences.

While the Lebanese women's artistic scene tended to be more insular and aristocratic, it highlighted how belonging to a specific social and economic class can shelter the individual enough for them to forge their own path. As Helen Khal notes, “the Lebanese artist likes to be individualistic and does not believe in the regionalist mentality (iqlimi).” Yet, this did not mean that they isolated themselves from the events around them; instead, their activism revolved around creating and preserving culture. For instance, Huguette Caland founded INAASH in 1969, an NGO that focused on providing work for Palestinian women embroidery artisans and, in the process, maintaining that heritage.[[44]](#footnote-44)

***Women’s Agency: Education and Institutional Legacy***

Many of the women in this exhibition took on leading roles as educators and, in doing so, have shaped the artistic foundations and practices of future artists. One of Helen Khal's most significant legacies was her role as a teacher and mentor. She joined the Fine Arts faculty at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1967, teaching painting there until 1976. In that span, she taught many students who went on to prominence, such as Huguette Caland and Afaf Zurayk. She wrote weekly art reviews in The Daily Star (an English-language Lebanese newspaper) and other venues, where she constructively highlighted emerging artists.[[45]](#footnote-45) This allowed her to champion newcomers and shape Lebanon's modern art history narrative. Importantly, Helen used her voice to ensure women artists received due recognition; for example, in her reviews and later in her book, she profiled female peers like Saloua Raouda Choucair, Etel Adnan, Yvette Achkar, and Huguette Caland, affirming their equal place in the canon. Through teaching, writing, and curating, Helen Khal arguably did more than any other individual of her time to nurture a new generation of Lebanese artists and to validate the work of women among them.

Jordanian artist Princess Wijdan Ali’s trajectory also reflects the affordances of belonging to an aristocratic family and the opportunities it provides to help develop the art scene. Her Royal Highness Princess Wijdan Ali, born in 1939 in Baghdad, Iraq, is a painter, art historian, and curator. She grew up in Amman and was originally named Wijdan bint Fawwaz Al-Hashemi, with the title “Sharifa,” meaning noble. Her parents, Sharif Fawwaz Muhana and Sharifa Nafi’a bint Jamil Ali, are descendants of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Princess Wijdan was previously married to Prince Ali bin Nayef of Jordan.

Beyond her paintings, Princess Wijdan is a pioneer in modern Islamic art, merging artistic practice with scholarship, curation, and education. She has played a key role in institutionalizing modern Arab art, founding the Royal Society of Fine Arts (1979) and the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts (1980). As an educator, she established the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Jordan (2001), shaping a new generation of artists while advocating for the integration of traditional Islamic art into contemporary discourse.

Palestinian artists' works naturally reflect the recurring shifts and catastrophes shaping their experiences. Palestinian artist Vera Tamari's work explores the relationship between the Palestinian struggle and land through symbols of clay, the Mediterranean, and olive trees, incorporating these references and motifs across her art. The land becomes intimately connected to the relations with ancestors and with generations just past. She was also one of the founders of the Palestinian New Vision Movement, which promoted the use of natural materials from the land, like leather, henna, mud, natural dyes, and wood, as inventive alternatives to imports. Her work expanded beyond her artistic practice, and she was an instructor at Birzeit University, organizing exhibitions and inviting other known artists to these events. She also helped establish the Birzeit University Ethnographic and Art Museum in 2005 and created a website to promote contemporary Palestinian art. Her artistic practice is an ongoing journey in cultural resistance, as she continues to create and curate around the theme of the Palestinian struggle.

***Conclusion***

The different trajectories these women have taken in their art practices reflect their agency and how their perspectives diverge. It highlights the diversity of experiences and developments across several Arab countries and brings to light the importance of understanding the evolution of modern Arab art through a variety of lenses, including often sidelined but foundational elements of the broader culture, including often-overlooked dynamics such as kinship. Most of the artists explored belonged to the upper class of society, and through the privileges afforded, such as wealth, connections, private education, and travel, they could grow and, in turn, shape their own context.

Kinship in relation to women's agency takes on varying shapes and modalities. However, the dynamics of kinship in the instances explored did not emerge out of nothing but are a product of the evolving politics across the region and how that intersects with what it means to be a woman in often deeply patriarchal contexts. Many of the women artists explored engaged in direct political activism; some became prominent educators, shaping new generations of artists. However, all of them used their art to make their voices and opinions heard and to forge new perspectives on the multitudes of meanings ascribed to womanhood.

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