

Equipping Arab children with the tools of art | Raya Al-Jadir | AW

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LONDON - In the Middle East, a region plagued by war, corruption, economic struggles and social issues, art is seen as a luxury for people whose main aim is to survive and ensure a stable future for their children. But architect and art education advocate Reem Najjar believes that art is a means of expression and reaction to war, corruption and economic depression.

She says art helps people cope with the dire circumstances in which they live, thus emphasising the importance of art as a catalyst for change that should be introduced in regular education.

After more than a decade working in architecture, Najjar decided to follow her passion and focus on the arts. The result is a planned book series with the first highlighting the work of Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair. It quickly won Najjar the Best Book for Children Award at the Arabic Book Fair in Beirut in 2011. The second book in the series was dedicated to Lebanese painter Shafic Abboud.

“I am fascinated by how these artists used their culture and their history as tools for modernity. But a very small niche of people, mainly those interested in the arts, knew about these important artists, thus the need to introduce them to a wider audience,” Najjar said.

“I wanted to introduce the younger generations to artists from the region in a fun and interactive way. The book series invites the children to the artists’ universe and make the artworks more accessible.”

Najjar said she chose Choucair as the focus of the first book “because she

represented what modernism in the Middle East aspires to be.”

“Choucair,” she explains, “used basic geometric forms inspired by her research on Islamic art as well as her interest in the European tradition of avant-garde abstraction as her artistic language. She was able to combine the synthesis of Arab cultural traditions and modernist methods.”

“Qassida,” Najjar’s first book, focuses on a small wooden sculpture — just 33cm tall — that is composed of five carved wood pieces arranged one on top of the other to create a vertical sculpture. The rhythm in the sculpture visually recreates the rhythm in Arabic poetry. This is a recurrent theme in Choucair’s work, as she has created numerous sculptural poems.

“This piece,” Najjar said, “illustrates Choucair’s concepts and represents her ideas. It is also one which some readers may have come across, as in 1998 it was enlarged ten times and placed in a public garden in downtown Beirut.

“The important aspect of the book series is to choose an artwork that is accessible to the public: part of a museum collection (not in a private collection) or located in a public space.”

The book has two sections; interactive and educational. Najjar said she worked closely with graphic designer Bassam Kahwagi “to create a fun and playful activity such as drawing, colouring or cut-outs. This activity channels the children to begin their discovery of the featured artwork.”

The positive feedback that “Qassida” gained and the impact it had on children encouraged Najjar to create the book series showcasing multiple aspects of the visual arts in the Middle East.

Her second book, “Abboud,” covered oil painting: composition, theme, stages and technique.

Shafic Abboud, on whose life the book is based, was born in Lebanon and

lived in France. “He was a storyteller,” Najjar explains. “He narrated stories from his beloved Lebanon, from his childhood, from his village, details from his daily life, from the countryside and from Paris.”

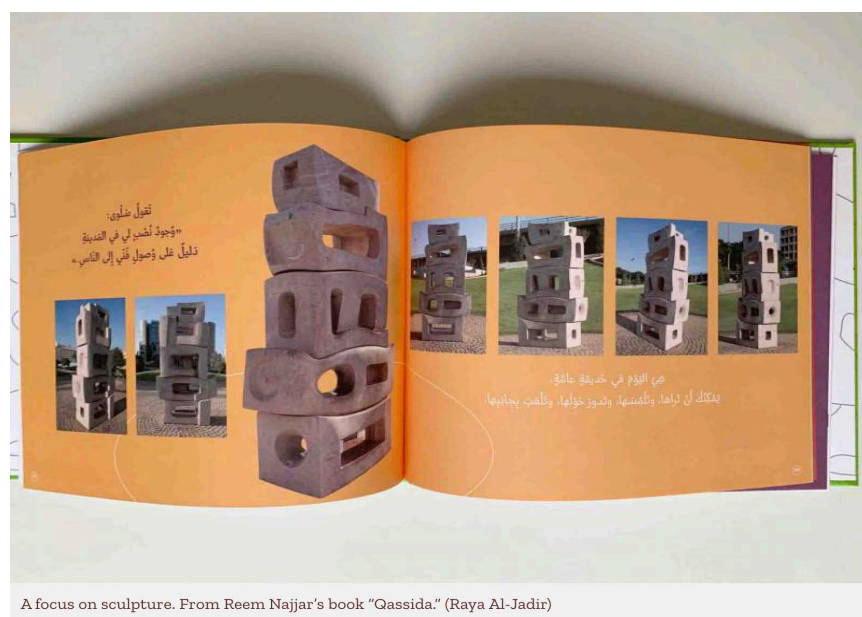
“Les Lumières du Zeyer” (The Lights of Zeyer), the artwork that inspired the book, centres around a cafe that Abboud frequented. Najjar chose this painting because cafes were important to Abboud’s work and he painted a series of coffee shops in Paris and in Beirut. Najjar also wanted to highlight the importance of a public space where you can be part of a community yet you are on your own.

“It is very interesting to connect the dots and to discover the parallels between these artists. To realise that even though they had shared experiences and concerns they each responded in their own individual artistic language,” Najjar explained.

Najjar said she wants to equip children with the power of art, to enable them to grow and learn to be tolerant and artistic.

Through the book series, Najjar said she hopes “to instil the notion that artists are important citizens in our society, and that they play an important role in change and in documenting our times.”

Raya Al-Jadir is a London-based freelance writer.



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A focus on sculpture. From Reem Najjar's book "Qassida." (Raya Al-Jadir)