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Alfred Basbous (1924-2006): Legacy of Three Brothers Turns Lebanese Village of Rachana into a Global Center of Sculpture

By Nancy Linthicum

The name Rachana originally resonated only with this coastal Lebanese village's population of less than 1,000 inhabitants; now, however, for people around the world, Rachana immediately calls to mind the Basbous brothers – Michel, Youssef, and Alfred – who were amongst Lebanon's finest sculptors and the source of Rachana's fame. As Alfred Basbous once said to writer Yaqzan al-Taqi, who like so many others had come to witness the renowned sculptures on display in Rachana, "Much sculpting is taking place here and it is being felt at an international level. Rachana will be remembered in 200 years, 300 years, even 1,000 years."

Alfred died at the age of 82 on January 1, 2006, after a long battle with cancer. His brothers, Michel and Youssef, had died in 1981 and 2001, respectively. No clear successor to their talent has emerged in Lebanon, and Alfred's vision of Rachana's status as an international center of culture for years to come will most likely be realized.

It was in 1994 that Rachana, and not just the artists who hailed from this small village in northern Lebanon, first captivated an international audience. That year, Alfred and Youssef, carrying on their brother Michel's vision and spirit, hosted the first Rachana International Sculpture Forum, inviting artists from around the globe to display their works in an open-air exhibition. This forum became an annual tradition that continued through last year with the same passion with which it began. In 1997, UNESCO declared Rachana a global village of sculpture housed in the open air, and just last year, this annual forum attracted dozens of world artists, allowing Alfred to glimpse the future success he had predicted for his village.

Alfred Basbous, the middle brother, was born in 1924 and grew up using his hands and working with stone. He first became interested in sculpture through his older brother Michel, whose abstract style was a source of inspiration for Alfred. Alfred Basbous' abstract style "is not a stylistic journey and a meaningless thing in a vacuum, but rather is creation in a vacuum," writes art critic Lor Ghareeb in An Nahar newspaper on January 2, 2006. In Al Mustaqbal (January 3, 2006), Yaqzan al-Taqi also recognizes the strong influence of the Basbous family on Alfred and claims that Alfred's "exceptional" family had instilled in him a love of and curiosity about the challenging Lebanese stone from an early age. Indeed, al-Taqi finds "the spirit of the village, the people and the world" in all of the Basbous brothers' works. According to al-Taqi, Alfred in particular was "a man of madness in his love for sculpture and stone."

Alfred began creating his own sculptures in 1958 and took part in his first private exhibition in 1959 at Alecco Saab's Gallery in Beirut. He earned international recognition just a few years later, in 1961, when his works were featured in the International Exhibition of Sculpture at the Rodin Museum, Paris. This exhibition took place one year after Alfred received a scholarship from the French government to attend L'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts.

According to art critic Muha Sultan, writing in Al Hayat, January 2006, Alfred was also influenced by modernist European sculptors, including Auguste Rodin, Henry Moore, and Hans (or Jean) Arp, as well as by his fellow countryman, the acclaimed sculptor Youssef Hoyeck. Hailing Alfred as "the sheikh of Lebanese sculpture," Sultan describes Alfred's artistic journey and how, early on, woman emerged as a central theme and figure in his works.

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Mahmoud Charaf also comments on Alfred’s obsession with woman in An Nahar newspaper in January 2006. Charaf recalls Alfred’s comments on his first experience of carving the figure of a woman into stone: “One day, I saw a picture of a naked woman in a magazine. I molded her figure into stone with liberty. I placed a snake beside her and an apple in her hands.” This, the first of many sculptures in which Alfred intimately portrays the body and spirit of woman, supports many art critics’ claims that Alfred’s father, who served as the village priest, greatly influenced his son’s view of woman. Continuing his discussion of Alfred and woman, Charaf clearly states that Alfred was not haunted by just one woman. Rather, Charaf argues, Alfred saw woman as a “symbol of creation; it is her body that carries within it the seed of new life,” another Biblical allusion to Eve.

Shifting to a discussion on style rather than content, Charaf notes that in his portrayal of woman, Alfred skillfully gives the illusion of softness and malleability despite the hard stone. It is as if the chisel did not have to break away unyielding pieces of stone to make such forms appear, Charaf asserts. He continues, saying that this illusion “is a symbolic gesture to the feminine nature, which is distinguished above all else by its softness and tenderness – this softness and tenderness that draws us in and that never left Alfred ambivalent in the face of beauty.”

Alfred created his own “austere, aesthetic world” of art “with the simplicity of peasants and the skill of builders,” comments Maroun Hakim on Alfred’s abstract and feminine style in An Nahar, January 2006. In an article in Al Mustaqbal, January 2006, editor and poet Paul Shaoul focuses neither on the specific forms in Alfred’s works nor on his use of woman, but rather on the transience in his work. “Alfred is a sculptor of passage; he goes from obsession to obsession, from illusion to illusion, from adventure to adventure, from beautiful madness to beautiful madness, from birth to birth,” Shaoul asserts. Though many, like Sultan, see clear influences on Alfred and his works, Shaoul believes that Alfred was a free spirit who did not follow any pre-existing theories or ideologies.

Alfred’s modernist style and his pure passion of molding stone into art earned him much recognition in Lebanon and abroad. In addition to the fame he earned for himself through the annual Rachana International Sculpture Forum, Alfred also received an award from L’Orient newspaper in Lebanon in 1963, the Alexandria Biennial in 1974, and upon his death, Nassif Qalosh, the governor of northern Lebanon, awarded Alfred Lebanon’s Order of Merit.

Alfred Basbous’ works continue to be displayed in exhibitions around the world and, of course, stand as a lasting tribute in Rachana.

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