

# Lebanese women artists' modern approach to art

The Beirut Art Fair showcased works by 13 groundbreaking artists who defied conventional norms in Lebanon with their modernist art.



Petite Bédouine by Marie Hadad. Courtesy Agop Kanledjian

In 1989, the Guerrilla Girls, a collective of anonymous feminists in New York devoted to highlighting and combating sexism within the art world, surveyed the public collection at the city's Metropolitan Museum of Art. They found that less than five per cent of the artworks in the Modern Art section were by female artists. By contrast, 85 per cent of the nudes on show were women. In response, they released a now iconic poster that demanded to know: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?"

At the heart of the seventh edition of the Beirut Art Fair – a three-day event at the Beirut International Exhibition & Leisure Center that concluded on Sunday – was a display of privately owned works that

sought to put female modernist artists in the spotlight.

Curated by the fair's artistic director, Pascal Odille, *Lebanon Modern! Women Artists in Lebanon 1945-1975* surveyed 13 artists who made a significant contribution to the advancement of the modernist movement in Lebanon.

While these artists were constrained by social expectations – as the daughter of former Lebanese president Bechara El Khoury, Huguette Caland was subjected to particularly stringent scrutiny, while Cici Sursock was initially forbidden to paint by her wealthy mother-in-law – Odille stresses that female artists in Lebanon were in a unique position to produce experimental and pioneering work.

“When the Lebanese University of Fine Arts opened in 1937, 50 per cent of the students were women,” he says. “These female artists usually came from high society ... They wanted to show the work but the idea was not to sell. That's the big difference with the men, because if they wanted to get married and have a family they needed money. Their work needed to be saleable. That wasn't the case for the women, so they became more avant-garde. They tried things that the men didn't.”

Odille chose to exhibit works by Yvette Achkar, Etel Adnan, Blanche Lohéac-Ammoun, Huguette Caland, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Laure Ghorayeb, Marie Hadad, Helen Khal, Seta Manoukian, Nadia Saikali, Juliana Séraphim, Cici Sursock and Bibi Zogbé.

While several of these names are today internationally recognised, his mission was primarily one of rediscovery. At least half of the artists on show are all but unknown, even to the Lebanese public.

“They were famous at the time,” Odille says, “but then we had the civil war, and after the civil war, they were part of the older generation. People are always more interested by the new generation, so they have been completely forgotten”.

Among these forgotten artists are Hadad, a talented portrait artist who

became a favourite of influential French critic Louis Vauxcelles while exhibiting in Paris in the 1930s, and Lohéac-Ammoun, who started out as an illustrator before moving to France in the late 1940s, going on to produce stunning figurative and later abstract works that were among the highlights of the fair.

The surreal work of Séraphim attests to the progressive attitudes of Lebanese high society in the 1960s and 1970s. A series of colourful, incredibly detailed paintings were accompanied by sketches dealing with various themes, including feminine identity and the female body. Overall, the exhibition served to highlight the sheer inventiveness and diversity of the work produced by Lebanon's female artists in the early to mid-20th century.

"The idea was to show the evolution between abstract and figurative, and to have artists who never did the same thing," says Odille.

Taking up 300 square metres of exhibition space at the heart of the hall, the display was ringed by commercial gallery booths but designed so that from the inside it was completely isolated from the surrounding hubbub of the fair.

Odille's scenography took the form of a rough spiral, with the earliest artists on the inside and those still living on the outside, their work rubbing shoulders with the contemporary pieces on sale nearby.

The layout implied a form of continuity, encouraging visitors to seek links between *Lebanon Modern!* and the nearby exhibition *Revealing*, a collection of works by 27 contemporary artists. In reality, however, the work of these 13 female artists exists in a vacuum, cut off from a younger generation of Lebanese artists by the long civil war.

It would be naive to imagine none of these women desired to sell their work or build a professional career. Caland, in particular, felt so constrained by expectations placed on her by the statuses of her father, husband, brother and children that she moved to the United States as

soon as she was able, in search of artistic freedom. By persevering in spite of the odds, however, these 13 artists helped future generations of Lebanese artists to tackle a plethora of themes without gender entering into the equation.

“The idea was to try to make people understand that it is not because one is a female artist that one doesn’t have that force of temperament, that energy and that avant-garde spirit,” says Odille, “because for a long time, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, women’s artwork was seen as a hobby.

“It wasn’t. We have the proof. So the idea was really to change that vision of things.”

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