

Regrets Too Few to Mention: Pat McDonnell Twair Visits Huguette Caland, the Woman Behind LA's Historic Sovereign Threads Exhibition of Palestinian Embroidery (See TME October 2006) at Her Unique Venice, California Home

Twair, Pat McDonnell, The Middle East

IF ARTIST HUGUETTE Caland had a theme song, it would have to be 'My Way'. The daughter of the first president of Lebanon, Bechara El Khoury, inaugurated in 1945 when she was 13, she broke family conventions in 1952 when she married Paul Caland, the nephew of the publisher of the pro-French daily Le Jour, a rival of her uncle's pro-independence daily, L'Orient. "It didn't matter," she states dismissively, "the papers eventually merged."

Caland studied art at age 16 with the Italian artist Fernando Manetti, but it wasn't until her daughter and two sons were born that she became a full-time student at the American University of Beirut in 1964, graduating four years later with a degree in Fine Arts.

It was a tumultuous period: the Arab world was recovering from the disastrous June 1967 war with Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians took refuge in Lebanon and the privileged Maronite Christian woman began to wonder about the homeless masses languishing in camps in her country. Who were they? How were they surviving? What were their stories?

It took hours of appeals, red tape and bending of regulations before the Office of Palestinian Affairs permitted Caland and other concerned wives of Lebanese leaders to talk to women in the camps.

"We had to gain the confidence of the Palestinians. We went to the camps in the morning and took sick people to hospitals and tried to set up kindergartens. In the afternoon, I worked at my art studio."

In 1969, Caland became the first president of INAASH, the Association for the Development of Palestinian Camps. This organisation continues to sponsor kindergartens and youth centres while setting up cooperatives in which women produce embroidery for international markets.

From the start, Caland realised the desperately poor refugee women needed to earn money for themselves and their families. The best way to achieve this, she reasoned, was for them to produce traditional Palestinian embroidery for wealthy people who appreciated the intricate handiwork. Asked how many Palestinian women were initially involved and how marketing of their embroidery was carried out, she dismissed the question with a wave of her hand: "I don't like numbers and I wasn't involved with those details."

She does remember the first efforts at reproducing regional embroidery designs were pathetic.

"These women were too traumatised or too far removed from their villages to reproduce traditional embroidery. The little samples we gave them to exercise on were disheartening.

"But," she proudly notes, "their progress grew by leaps and bounds as they began to earn money for their handiwork. Slowly these uprooted women gained self-respect and independence from their husbands." Lebanese society had for the most part shunned the Palestinian refugees. But in 1970, when Caland had a one-woman show at Dar El Fan,

an upscale Beirut cultural centre, she arranged for two buses to transport the refugees to attend her exhibition. It was, she remarked, probably the first time they had been invited to a Lebanese social gathering. In 1970, women's liberation was a movement rumbling throughout the West, but it hadn't lapped up on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. Nonetheless Caland was about to liberate herself from the confines of upper class Lebanese society.

Her first step was to abandon the haute couture Parisian fashions her French/ Lebanese husband preferred. Thenceforth, she wore only her signature garment, a kaftan she designed and often embellishes with sketches, faces, calligraphy or whatever strikes her fancy.

"The big drama was when I changed my look," she recalled. The kaftans almost prompted a divorce. It was then the artist told her husband she was leaving for Paris. She departed five days later.

At age 39, she left everything: "My life, three children and a beautiful home. ...

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