



Lebanese artist Alfred Tarazi's exhibition is an anchor in a sea of uncertainty

► Tarazi's show at the National Museum of Beirut is dedicated to keeping his family and national heritage alive



Alfred Tarazi's installation on the steps of the National Museum of Beirut. All photos: Maghie Ghali for The National

Feedback

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Oct 28, 2022



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Lebanese artist Alfred Tarazi's new exhibition *Hymne à l'amour* spotlights [Lebanon's](#) often overlooked heritage of craftsmanship, though the lens of his own family's artisanal legacy.

Split into two components, the exhibition, which opened on Sunday, begins on the steps of [The National Museum of Beirut](#) with a large-scale installation and continues in a nearby derelict warehouse.

At the warehouse, thousands of handcrafted decorative heritage pieces made by the Tarazi family — including 19th-century carved wooden doorframes, Baghdadi ceiling panels, copper and brass vessels and coloured glass lanterns — have been displayed, many in varying states of decay.

"This is my family [heritage](#). My family has been a family of craftsmen and antique dealers for four generations and I inherited a very large stock of leftovers that take a lot of space and require a lot of effort to be maintained," Tarazi tells *The National*. "These objects are obsolete — they tell us about a time that has waned; a time when people took the time to create beautiful things and to embellish their lives.

"You're talking about works of copper and wood that are extremely strenuous and detailed in their creation. In other countries, all of these works have found their ways into museums, either of decorative arts or Islamic art," he adds. "In Lebanon, unfortunately, this heritage has been completely overlooked. I want to share them with the general public."

The show seeks to shed light on the neglect this type of heritage has endured, with no museum or institution to house, conserve or safeguard these magnificent pieces. The Tarazi collection has survived due to the Yared family allowing the pieces to be stored for free at their own storage spaces.



Alfred Tarazi at the National Museum of Beirut. Photo: Maghie Ghali for The National

On the museum steps, Tarazi has created a scale replica of the palatial French Embassy residence, Residence des Pins — which Tarazi says was initially designed as a casino in 1914. He says this piece was based off an earlier scale model he inherited from his father and grandfather. .

“[The original model] is an object I would like to see in a museum, but it's not, so we reconstructed the rest of the building to the scale of the model.

“[The show] is called Hymne a l'amour or The Hymn of Love because we're talking about the love of crafts, the love of doing things, the love of working with these materials, of working with your hands. And that's what these objects are about — labours of love.”

In 1962, Dimitri Tarazi and his family first opened an antique furniture shop in [Beirut](#), specialising in Oriental craftsmanship. As the family expanded, its sons took up the profession and opened their own showrooms, spreading from Beirut to Jerusalem, Damascus, Cairo and Rabat.

The Tarazis are responsible for some of the most detailed pieces adorning the halls of Sursock Palace, Villa Linda Sursock By Le Bristol and the Sursock Museum, as well as hundreds of Ottoman-era buildings around the region. To this day, the family is still active in the field, with architect Camille Tarazi working on

the restoration of the doors and wooden elements of Sursok Palace — originally crafted by the family — that were damaged during the 2020 port explosion.

Staged as part of Institut français du Liban's Art & Territory programme, the exhibition is held in partnership with Umam Documentation and Research, the Ministry of Culture and the General Directorate of Antiquities (DGA).

To mark the launch, a concert took place at the installation on the museum steps, performed by Charbel Haber, Sary Moussa, Fadi Tabbal and Serge Yared, who then guided viewers through the music-filled streets to the warehouse. Tarazi says the installation's location is partly a tribute to his late mother, who worked for the DGA.

One of the songs performed, written by Moussa and named *Grey Midas*, is inspired by the story of King Midas, whose touch turned everything into gold. The track tells the story of a contemporary Midas, who turns everything into concrete, and plays like a funeral march for Beirut, which has had so much of its heritage replaced by concrete.

"In the warehouse, there are thousands of pieces and some of them have tragic stories," he adds. "For example, we have a lot of Damascene doors that were taken from Damascene houses that were demolished in the mid 1950s, so there are a lot of broken pieces too."

"The first piece you see when you enter the hangar is a door and it's technically a continuation of the installation on the museum steps — it's the model door of the French Residence," he adds. "This is a very contemporary piece [on the steps], which is really the key to the exhibition of much older works. Every story needs a door and this is it."

Inside the warehouse, hundreds of ornate door frames have been layered for visitors to climb through — tarnished copper ornaments are piled in corners and several decorative covings and parts of ceilings cover the space and hang from the rafters. The experience is akin to stepping back in time to a treasure trove.

Tarazi's work often deals with themes of heritage, forgetfulness and obscure historical narratives that still have an impact on modern Lebanon.

The Tarazi collection is only one example of heritage that will one day be lost. As most of the items are made of old wood and about 150 years old, they're already deteriorating rapidly without proper conservation and museum-level care — destined to one day decay.

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Tarazi hope that this project will create awareness about the issue, but when asked about the future

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of the collection, he expresses there is only uncertainty, much like the rest of Lebanon's fate.

"This is the question, and I think it's a question that pertains to a lot of Lebanese because it's a question that we're all asking," he says. "We don't know what's going to happen about so many things, not just our heritage."

Updated: October 28, 2022, 3:25 PM

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