

New light from Lebanon

David Tresilian, Saturday 18 Dec 2021

A new Paris exhibition adds to Lebanon's position as a major modern and contemporary art centre of the Arab world while another, at the Giacometti Foundation in Paris, drew connections between the Swiss artist and ancient Egypt.



Lumi res du Liban



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The last major international show of modern and contemporary Lebanese art took place in London in 1989, according to the notes accompanying a new survey exhibition of art from Lebanon that opened at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in September and runs until January next year.

That being so, as the notes also say, it is high time that there was another one, perhaps particularly because of everything that has happened in Lebanon in the interim, from the end of the Lebanese Civil War with the Taif Accord in 1989, the country's economic and political reconstruction, and then last year's Beirut Port explosions and the ongoing political and economic crisis.

Lebanon has changed almost beyond recognition from what it was in 1989, when some 15 years of civil war had reduced much of the capital Beirut to a burnt-out shell and much of the population was living in exile. And where better for a major retrospective of modern and contemporary Lebanese art to take place than in Paris? The close links between France and Lebanon go back centuries, and France is perhaps still the most important destination for Lebanon's extensive diaspora.

Opening on 21 September, *Lumières du Liban – Light from Lebanon* – brings together more than 100 works by some 55 artists representing the country's artistic scene from 1950 to the present. They are drawn from the Institut du Monde Arabe's own collection of modern and contemporary Arab art, the largest in Europe, as well as from a recent private bequest. Taken together, they provide an intriguing and thought-provoking introduction to the last 50 years of Lebanese art for European audiences.

The exhibition is arranged in reverse chronological order, with the final section, art from the period between 2005 and the present, opening the presentation. The Institut's basement exhibition spaces provide a neutral background, mostly beige in raw and polished concrete, and wall texts by the curatorial team led by Nathalie Bondil of the Institut's own exhibitions department are illustrated by reproductions of front pages from *L'Orient-Le Jour*, Lebanon's leading French-language newspaper, providing historical context.

Entering the exhibition, visitors come face to face with Yazan Halwani's 2020 canvas *Aéroport, Femme Dans l'Attente* (Woman Waiting in the Airport) presenting a single, anxious-looking woman seated in an airport departures lounge. It thematises one of the most salient aspects of Lebanese experience since the formation of the modern state at the beginning of the last century and even before in the shape of either temporary or permanent expatriation.

Born in 1993, and working on street murals since his early teens, Halwani has turned to acrylic on canvas in this impressive work in order to "deconstruct the myth of the Lebanese exception focused on the idea of the successful expatriate" who will contribute to the well-being of the society and economy at home, as the notes to the exhibition put it.

Elsewhere in this opening section of the exhibition other artists illustrate or comment on the character of that society, some of them touching on the history of violence and political or economic instability that may have caused many Lebanese to live abroad.

Abdul-Rahman Katanani, born in 1983 and like Helwani working first in street art before studying at the Lebanese University and then at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, provides a graphic reminder of some of that history in his *Tornade* (Tornado), a swirling mass of barbed wire that may recall his childhood spent in the Sabra Palestinian Refugee Camp in Beirut. Taghreed Darghouth, born in 1979 in the Lebanese coastal city of Saida (Sidon), is represented by her painting *L'Abime Apelle l'Abime* (The Abyss Calls the Abyss), a series of images of the craters left by exploded artillery shells.

Hala Ezzeddine, born in 1989, and another of the many women artists included in the exhibition, shows her large painting *Beyrouth 1*, also in acrylic, presenting a chaotic-looking take on the cityscape of contemporary Beirut.

In what may be a painting drawing directly on his own experience, Serwan Baran, born in Baghdad in 1968 and living in Lebanon since 2013, is represented by what seem to be three militia men, each holding a snarling dog, in his painting *Sans Titre* (Untitled) from 2021, once again using the qualities of acrylic to create smears of paint on the canvas and adding to an atmosphere of violent menace.

WAR AND BEFORE: These paintings all come from the last 20 years or so of Lebanon's history and so were produced at a time when the country as a whole was going through a period of sometimes feverish economic expansion.

With this expansion came the arrival of new sources of finance in the arts and the expansion of the Lebanese gallery scene to meet the needs of the many new Lebanese and foreign collectors taking an interest in the country's artists. However, as French art historian Thierry Savatier writes in the material accompanying the exhibition, this expansion has probably not been enough to restore the position the country occupied before the Civil War when "Beirut was the capital of contemporary art in the Middle East in much the same way that Paris was the capital of modern Western art at the beginning of the 20th century."

"The number of new actors in the arts has still been few when compared to the forces wanting to find expression," he writes. "As a result, more and more Lebanese and foreign collectors, for whom Beirut was once an automatic port of call, have been looking towards ambitious new art projects." The Beirut Port explosions in August 2020 and the economic and political crisis ended the private gallery scene, with many "artists now thinking of a new period of exile, notably in Europe."

In this part of the exhibition refer to Lebanon's history and the legacy of the Civil War, paradoxically this may be contained in the previous section, produced between 1975 and 2000 and thus for the most part made during the Civil War. Savatier says that the members of today's young Lebanese art scene have not had the luxury of choosing

either to treat the earthquakes going on all around them in their work or to put this off until later. "For the most part born during the Civil War, they have always only known chaos, with the return of peace offering them no guarantee for the future, aside from uncertainty," he adds.

For their elders, working during the war years themselves, there may have been a different attitude, what the exhibition describes as a desire "to collect documents and to gather testimony" from the destruction going on around them, while at the same time doing their best to keep forms of creativity and exhibition alive in the hope of better days to come. After 1975, "most art spaces no longer existed," the notes to the exhibition say, "and many artists had either left the country or died."

The Lebanese theatre director Roger Assaf, denied the use of conventional theatre spaces, "created a form of popular theatre, *hakawati*, that showed events from everyday life." A March 1978 art exhibition at the Beirut Arab University in solidarity with the Palestinians later became a kind of "museum in exile," while 105 paintings were loaded onto planes for London three days before the closure of Beirut Airport in time for the London exhibition of Lebanese art in 1989.

There is less drama in the artworks from this period shown in the present exhibition, with their artists perhaps focusing most on keeping the value of art alive. Khaled Takreti (born in 1964) is represented by his *Baluchons 3*, explained in the notes as referring to the objects Lebanese emigrants might take with them when they went abroad. Like Takreti, who lives in Paris, Zena Assi, born in 1974, is also a member of the Lebanese diaspora, this time living in London, and contributes two short expressionist animations, made with Amandine Brenan and Patrick Sfeir, effectively thematising emigration and displacement.

However, perhaps the overall tone of the exhibition, and certainly its title, is set not by these two sections, but instead is provided by the earliest section, the last in the presentation, which contains pieces by artists born or working in what the exhibition describes as Lebanon's "golden age" between 1943, the date of the country's independence from France, and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975. This was the period when the Lebanese arts scene was "unique, international and dynamic," in the words of curator Nathalie Bondil, "bearing witness to the particular complexity of Lebanon itself, being at once historical and political as well as inter-cultural and inter-confessional."

Beirut "incarnated an artistic and cultural climate made up of rich and often energetic debates between the different ideas of the period, among them various forms of nationalism, pan-Arabism and socialism," writes the Syrian poet Adonis in the exhibition material. There was a particular interest in language and in heritage, he adds, "the view that we have of it, the ways in which we understand it and gain inspiration from it, and its relationship to the Arabic language, to Arab culture and to the culture of America and Europe."

In the paintings exhibited from this period, there is a certain amount of reportage, with a reproduction of the front page of *L'Orient-Le Jour* for 14 April 1975 included in a wall text in the exhibition, sounding the knell of this period of Lebanese history by reporting the killing of Palestinians in Ain Al-Remmaneh that is often considered to be one of the triggers of the Civil War. Paintings by the Lebanese-Armenian painter Paul Guiragossian (died 1993) such as *La Fête* and *La Longue Marche*, large works in oil on canvas, thematise the condition of Palestinian and other refugees.

However, more often the paintings from this period are masses of light and colour that seem to reference Lebanon's Mediterranean climate, seen for example in Fatima El-Hajj's *Promenade*, a painting that seems inspired by the south of France and that celebrates "an ideal world of youth, art and the beauty of nature," as the exhibition notes put it. Light and colour are also supplied by the many canvases by Shafic Abboud (died 2004), among them the late work *L'Aube (Dawn)*, described as the artist's "aesthetic and spiritual testament," a celebration of the pleasures of the senses and a "manifesto for freedom, light and colour."

These works along with a series of lithographs by Mouna Sehnaoui, born in Egypt in 1945 but working in Lebanon, are reminiscent of the Mediterranean traditions of a certain strand of French painting, perhaps again referencing the close links between the two countries, in this case through design and vocabulary echoing work by Matisse.

Lumières du Liban, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, until 2 January.

The Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti had to wait until the last decade or so of his working life for international fame, but when it finally descended after World War II his trademark sculptures of emaciated human figures became widely recognised worldwide.

These strangely elongated statues, their stick-like limbs exaggeratedly extended, are typically presented alone, often striding purposefully forwards. They are made in Giacometti's favourite medium of coarsely knotted white-washed plaster moulded around a wire frame from which they are sometimes also cast in bronze. They look much like the matchstick figures drawn by children transported into three dimensions, apart from the emphasis given to the plaster's gouged and riven surface.

At first glance, there might seem to be little connection between these sculptures and those that have come down to us from ancient Egypt. Whereas Giacometti's sculptures pay no regard to the modelling of human flesh, replacing prestige materials like marble and bronze with wire and plaster, ancient Egyptian sculpture is all about solid volumes. The idealised bodies of the pharaohs are heavily carved when transported into stone.

They were also very often used to project human or divine power in human or animal forms, whereas Giacometti's sculptures have any public function – they certainly do not commemorate gods or kings – and though they can fill vast recessive amounts of space, they scarcely occupy much of it by way of volume.

While some of them are tiny, rather like ancient Egyptian ushabti figurines, few of them are monumental in the manner of much ancient Egyptian sculpture. It is hard to imagine Giacometti's sculptures being used to project the power of a governing regime – a standard use of ancient Egyptian sculpture – partly because of their fragility but also because of their anonymity. They seem to be intended as human figures in the abstract and not as representations of particular individuals.

However, according to an intriguing mini-exhibition at the Giacometti Foundation in Paris there are nevertheless important connections to be made between Giacometti's emaciated modern sculptures, most of them made between the late 1940s and the artist's death in 1966, and the much more corpulent, even stolid, sculptures of ancient Egypt made 2,500 to 3,500 years before.

Sometimes this has to do with particular postures, with the exhibition making much of the similarities between Giacometti's often striding figures, one leg stretched out ahead of the other, and a similar posture adopted by some ancient Egyptian sculptures. There is also the kneeling position adopted by some of Giacometti's figures, apparently one of the artist's favourites since he used it in the sculpture that eventually adorned his tomb, which recalls ancient Egyptian statues of seated scribes.

Sometimes it has to do with the treatment Giacometti reserved for the faces of his sculptures or the way in which their heads are set on their bodies, often jutting forward or somehow out of sync in their apparent desire for movement with the anonymity of the stripped-down bodily form. The exhibition is particularly suggestive on this aspect of Giacometti's work, tracing aspects of his formal practice back to the ancient Egyptian sculptors who worked on the Amarna period statues of the monotheistic pharaoh Akhenaten when the usual conventions of ancient Egyptian royal and public sculpture were temporarily overthrown.

Mostly, however, Giacometti's debts to ancient Egyptian sculpture seem to have been to do with the special atmosphere he wanted his work to create, as if his sculptures, like many of those that have survived from ancient Egypt, were not intended for human purposes at all. Instead, he may have wanted them to look as if they had somehow been retrieved from underground, as if they had been buried long ago in some ancient tomb.

Many ancient Egyptian sculptures, among them those found in the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun, were never intended to be seen by human viewers. It is something like this sense of enormous distance between statue and viewer, the exhibition suggests, that Giacometti hoped to produce in his other-worldly human figures, always somehow linked with human circumstances but necessarily abstracting from them and pointing to some other world beyond.

EGYPTIAN INSPIRATION: Even if ancient Egypt does not immediately come to mind when viewing Giacometti's sculptures, the exhibition reveals that the artist himself had a life-long interest in ancient Egyptian art and civilisation.

According to Director of the Giacometti Foundation Catherine Grenier writing in the exhibition catalogue, Giacometti early on made a habit of visiting both the departments of ancient and non-European art at the Louvre Museum and the Museum of Ethnography in Paris in search of different ways of rendering particularly the human figure to those available from European sculptural traditions.

In this respect, he was similar to many other artists working in Paris in the early decades of the last century, she says, among them painters like Pablo Picasso and André Derain and sculptors like Constantin Brancusi and Ossip Zadkine. However, unlike them, Giacometti was particularly drawn to the arts of ancient Egypt, copying forms and images into his sketchbooks as part of an ongoing search to "learn how to see."

Whereas many other such interests disappeared over the course of Giacometti's career, Grenier says, "Egypt remained his primary passion." Ancient Egyptian sculptures were "fully realised down to the smallest details, not a single shadow being too strong or too weak and not a single line being out of place," he wrote. While Giacometti's first introduction to ancient Egyptian sculpture seems to have come from photographs in books, this was enough to intrigue him even without seeing them in three-dimensional space. In fact, as French critic Thierry Pautot writes in the catalogue, "Giacometti's main source for the study and practice of copying from Egyptian models remained above all else books."

There are many such books in the exhibition, or rather leaves or pages torn out from them, very often with sketches by Giacometti in the margins or even overflowing across the text. The exhibition has tracked down surviving pages from Giacometti's copies of works such as German archaeologist Ludwig Curtius's *Agypten und Vorderasien* (Egypt and the Middle East), acquired by the artist in 1923, and the *Encyclopédie photographique de l'Art*, a guidebook series in monthly parts published in 1935, exhibiting leaves from them with Giacometti's sketches, often simply doodles, filling in areas of blank space.

Giacometti, one surmises, must have been a librarian's nightmare, or a nightmare to anyone foolhardy enough to lend him books, as in all likelihood they would have served not so much as reading material as supports for an ongoing visual dialogue between the artist and any images the books contained. The exhibition solemnly displays pages torn out from the *Encyclopédie photographique de l'Art* with doodles appearing beneath the images or cheekily popping up in the margins. Giacometti most often drew in pencil, but he also favoured blue ballpoint pen, this seemingly allowing him to achieve the dense masses of squiggled lines he liked to use to suggest

During Giacometti's lifetime and afterwards, have commented on the aura of distance and antiquity the exhibition notes, with these "inhuman" qualities connecting them particularly to the tomb art of ancient

They were also probably in large part responsible for the recognition Giacometti received in the last decades of attracting the attention particularly of major French intellectual figures from the post-war decades such as the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and the novelist Jean Genet. It was they, particularly the former, who draped the sculptures in

a sometimes rather heavy-handed philosophical vocabulary, connecting them to the existentialist preoccupations of much of continental Europe at the time.

Sartre says that Giacometti, “by accepting relativity, has found the absolute.” “He shifts the responsibility for breathing life into these inert simulacra [the sculptures] on the viewer; this seeker of the absolute ends up having his work depend on the relativity of the viewpoints from which it is seen.” However, he also comments on the great sense of distance and autonomy that many people find in Giacometti’s sculptures. They “can only be viewed from a respectful distance,” he says. “Each imparts to us the truth that man is not there primarily in order subsequently to be seen but is the being whose essence it is to exist for others.”

For Genet, visiting Giacometti’s Paris studio in 1957, the sculptures seem to emerge from the surrounding dust as if coming up for air from beneath the ground and invested with some mysterious life of their own. “I came across the most beautiful statue by Giacometti underneath a table when I was bending down to pick up a cigarette end off the floor. It was hidden in the dust, a careless visitor could have trodden on it,” he wrote. “Not only do the statues come at you as if from far away, but they also place themselves in such a way that however you find yourself positioned in relation to them, they make you feel as if you were somehow looking up at them from below.”

Whatever one makes of such comments, very redolent of their time, in drawing connections between Giacometti’s sculptures and the art of ancient Egypt, the exhibition successfully invites the visitor to look at both anew. The air of eternity, of distance and remoteness, surrounding Giacometti’s sculptures is related to the artist’s interest in the idea of immortality, French art critic Romain Perrin writes in the exhibition catalogue, also a special interest of the ancient Egyptians.

In drawing inspiration from ancient Egyptian sculpture, in however roundabout a way, Giacometti was seeking to create modern work that was not “made to be contemplated from the perspective of enjoyment,” Perrin says, probably one of the aims of at least some sculpture, but that could “play a part in some funerary rite.”

Giacometti et l’Egypte Antique, Fondation Giacometti, Paris, closed on 10 October 2021.

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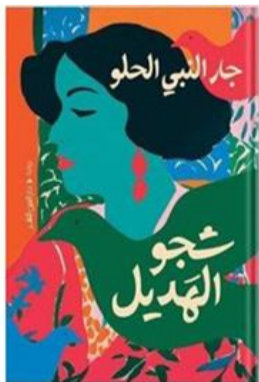
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