

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Print

Rafic Charaf's art reflected his own life and his country's history

Feb. 08, 2003 | 12:00 AM

Ramsay Short

With the death of Rafic Charaf last month after a prolonged battle with lung cancer, Lebanon lost one of its most colorful and pioneering artists.

Inspired by Western expressionism and working in a deeply Lebanese expressionism himself, Charaf was perhaps the one among his generation of painters whose art reflected the most autobiographical emotional journey.

Born in 1932 to a close-knit Baalbek family, the blacksmith's son became a regular personality among the Beirut intelligentsia from the 1960s to the 90s. The tale goes that as a boy he was nicknamed "the black plague" because his face was always sooty from his father's furnace. His pockets bulged with lumps of charcoal which he used to draw on anything that could pass for a canvas. It is said he spared no wall or door in the whole town.

It was by chance that celebrated Lebanese poet Loutfi Haidar stumbled across a drawing on the wall of the first bookshop in Baalbek, and asked who drew it. He was told it was the son of the blacksmith whose forge was next door.

"My father found the blacksmith and told him that the then-16-year-old Charaf must go to Beirut to study," says Azza Haidar, who became a close friend of Charaf.

Through Loutfi Haidar's connections with the director of the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, Charaf enrolled at the academy on a full scholarship in 1952.

His talent was recognized internationally. In 1955 he was invited by the Spanish government to study for two years on scholarship at the San Fernando Royal Academy in Madrid. This was followed in 1960 by a sojourn at the Pietro Vanucci academy in Perugia courtesy of the Italian government.

Charaf never forgot Loutfi Haidar's patronage and the two became close friends. One of his most important paintings adorns a wall in the writer's Baalbek home.

A Feast of Fish, as the piece is called, shows a family at table. The style is clearly reminiscent of Picasso. Art historian and critic Faisal Sultan has called it Charaf's Guernica after Picasso's 1937 depiction of the agonies of noncombatants during the Spanish Civil War.

Charaf went through a number of overlapping and evolving phases in his career. In the early 50s he was deeply inspired by the struggles of the poor in his native Baalbek. He used to draw many of these in charcoal, and his expressionism evolved out of the poverty he witnessed.

According to friends and critics alike he was sensitive to both the human struggle and his country's struggle, and this was reflected in his work. The paintings were linked by the inclusion of a small red spot, a symbol of rebellion that would become common in many of Charaf's works.

His paintings from that time were very much about hardship. Art historian Edouard Lahoud in his 1976 book Contemporary Art in Lebanon, describes them as "a black 'accusation' and a still blacker protest against a miserable social situation."

The influence of Spain and Western expressionism stayed with Charaf all his life he was rarely seen without his trademark Castillian beret.

One portrait from 1955, *The Guitar Player*, is a piece in charcoal on paper. It is a beautiful and moving depiction of a suited musician in his Spanish chapeau in mid-song.

In a 1996 interview in the Arabic cultural journal *Direction*, Charaf stated that "modern Arab art is mostly influenced by the different schools of art in the West, but there are some characteristics that are related to our own milieu. I tried not to be inspired by Western artists and their styles but by our heritage and cultural history."

Charaf often painted birds. Initially they were dark, black, dying and miserable one interpretation being that they expressed a freedom in death from the misery of life.

Some critics have seen the dead birds as an expression of Charaf's own internal suicide and that of the Arabs in the 1960s and 70s. Others see it as prescient of the coming civil war in Lebanon.

Many of his paintings in the late 1960s and 70s saw him work only with simple flattened forms, again reflecting an almost overwhelming pain.

Oiseau (Bird), depicts a sky-colored background which radiates melancholy and depression. A bird of iron, drawn simply with a horizontal brush stroke for the body and a vertical one for the wings, speeds fast as sound above a desert plain.

Sometimes these paintings are parted with a wire, what Lahoud calls "a symbol of the lost freedom." At other times they are spotted with a fire and a blood-red stain.

"He was a man very attached to his country and to the region," says Azza Haidar, "he expressed the different political eras in his work."

Charaf was indeed active in political discussion, according to many who knew him, believing in the peaceful integration of all ethnic groups.

He was a Shiite married to a Maronite. He was deeply bothered by the oppression of Palestine and the Arab defeat in 1967. He created posters for Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

The poor boy from Baalbek became a highly regarded intellect in Hamra's cafes where he was known for not suffering fools gladly. But for those who were his friends, writes *L'Orient Le Jour* critic Joseph Tarrab, he was the most sociable, impressionable, engaging and happy of men.

Charaf was a versatile painter with the ability to shock. He was the first man to exhibit nudes of men in the 70s and his charcoal depictions of the Civil War are caustic.

Beginning in the 60s he became influenced by folk poetry and art, orally recounted tales glorifying the hero this being the source of his interest in Antar and Abla, the mythical pre-Islamic hero and his romantic love.

Overlapping with this phase was his period of the plains particularly the northern Bekaa Valley, the fields of Baalbek and Hermel.

Simultaneously he mixed Koranic calligraphy with his heroic paintings. In the mid-70s calligraphy combined with traditional Arab talismans, charms and symbols became his subject. Although deeply personal in style, they are reminiscent of Spanish expressionist Miro.

Later he experimented with many different mediums wood, mixed-media and gold leaf. In the early 80s he began a series of what he called 'Byzantine icons.' Some of these were exhibited in the United States as part of a move toward Islamic-Christian dialogue.

The Antar phase is one of Charaf's most important. Based on the paintings of Abu Subhi al-Tinawy a popular artist whose folkloric drawings on glass can still be found in

Damascene souqs Charaf was a pioneer in transforming traditional handicraft into high art.

Originating after the 1967 war, they were a response to the Arab world's feelings of defeat. Charaf wanted to show the heroism of past ages.

"I wanted to raise the spirit of victory by getting inspiration from the image of the folk hero who is never defeated," Charaf said in Direction, "and the waiting in our people for a hero to come and redeem them."

In this Charaf reflected reality. Gamal Abdel-Nasser, Hafez Assad, Saddam Hussein all played on the mythology of the Arab hero. Antar has even been interpreted as an icon for the Palestinian martyrs.

The heroic myth is also expressed in titles like The Arab Hero on the Red Steed, which show a pictorial density, a clever use of a simplified line, pure and transparent color. His controversial drawings of nude lovers represented the idea of Arab men and women breaking the chains, overcoming their faults.

Many of Charaf's loveliest paintings are of the Bekaa plain, perhaps because they reflect a nostalgia for his childhood and a passion for the earth. In these, using greens and yellows he tried to build a new type of landscape painting based on a poetic rather than a realistic approach.

Rafic Charaf was a Lebanese icon. His paintings, are an autobiography of his life and the history of his people and his region. A stylistic and intellectual pioneer for his generation, his work is exhibited throughout the world.

The legacy of the blacksmith's boy from Baalbek should not be underestimated.

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08/02/2003
