

Saloua Raouda Choucair

Saloua Raouda Choucair is the undisputed doyenne of abstract art in the Arab world, a pioneer who followed her artistic vision with passion and self-determination. A prolific artist with an oeuvre of astounding breadth and depth, she remained largely unknown outside of a small circle of art lovers until a 2013 exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, which showcased more than 160 of Choucair's works and earned her enormous public and critical approbation.



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Saloua Raouda was born in Ain El Mreisseh, Beirut, in 1916 to Salim Raouda, an herbalist, and Zalfa Amin Najjar. Her father died in Damascus in 1917 as a conscript to the Ottoman Army. She studied at the Ahlia School, later at the French Secular School, and finally at the American Junior College for Women, (currently the Lebanese American University,) where she concentrated on science. Moving with her parents to Iraq in 1937 she taught drawing, a talent that came naturally to her, and science. Her interest in science and math later came to inform her art in profound ways. She admired the absolute and concrete nature of these subjects, able to see mathematical truisms in the forms she chose for her art pieces.

Returning to Lebanon, she studied with the celebrated painter Omar Onsi for a period. Her interest in abstract expression grew substantially during a trip to Cairo in 1943, where she was impressed by the sophistication and interconnection of lines and forms in the Islamic designs and architecture she saw. While studying philosophy at AUB (1945-47), she was told by one of her professors that Greek art is superior to Islamic art because Islamic art lacks human images. This was the catalyst for Saloua to commit to the pursuit of artistic expression she found so essential.

Writing in *Al-Abhath* academic journal (1951) she said, "Arab artists did not care to depict visible, concrete reality as perceived by human beings. Rather, in their quest for beauty, they reached into the essence of the subject...The Arabs dealt with the spirit in the abstract. Their art did not need to be associated with any other art form in order to be complete." Choucair has sought consistently, in the diverse and vast collection of her works, to express the spiritual body of Islam.

Dedicated as she was, her work was not truly appreciated in Lebanon at that time, where it was lauded as valuable as decoration, but not considered to be significant. In 1948 she made a trip to Paris, intending to stay for only a few months. She stayed for more than three years, studying sculpture, lithography, and fresco techniques, among others. Her involvement with the *Atelier de l'Art Abstrait* provided stimulation and exposure to other abstract expressionists. She recalls, "Those were fantastic years for me." The works of Delauney, Kandinsky, Vasarely, Duchamp, and Mondrian became part of her every day. She worked and grew, exhibiting her work where it was acclaimed for its power and originality.

Returning to Lebanon, and marrying in 1953, she and Youssuf Choucair started a family. Their only child, Hala, was born in 1957 and has said of her mother: "Growing up with her was fun because she was always playing, but everybody respected her passion." Saloua obviously enjoyed being a mother, but never stopped her pioneering work; vitally looking to the future and finding inspiration in modern life and the scientific developments that have always fascinated her.

Her paintings are noteworthy for their playfulness and sense of condensed energy, and she is also an accomplished tapestry maker and jeweler. But Choucair is best known as a sculptor where she embraced all kinds of media in her works. Sometimes employing the help of local workshops, but largely doing the carving and casting herself, her intricate sculptures use wood, metal, glass, wire, clay, stone, fiber glass, plastic, stainless steel, and even water, as some of her works were fountains.

Her most celebrated sculptures are those made of interlocking pieces that can be taken apart and re-ordered, as in a Sufi poem. She infrequently named her works, and seldom signed them, but they were always an expression of specific, deliberate thinking. In a review for a 1952 exhibition of Choucair's work, fellow artist Georges Cyr gave some advice to visitors: "do not look for the subject

of the painting for there isn't one. There are lines and surfaces (forms) and relationships between these, in other words, a symphony of qualities, colors and plains. Listen to this symphony with your eyes as you would listen to a concerto with your ears."

Over time her works began to receive critical notice and her significance appreciated. She exhibited in Paris and Washington, DC, and won numerous prizes. In 1963, she was awarded the National Council of Tourism Prize for the execution of a stone sculpture for a public site in Beirut. In 1974, the Lebanese Artists Association sponsored an honorary retrospective exhibition of her work at the National Council of Tourism in Beirut. In 1985, she won an appreciation prize from the General Union of Arab Painters. At AUB, in 1986 she lectured in the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture. In 1988, she was awarded a medal by the Lebanese government, and a retrospective exhibition was presented at the Beirut Exhibition Center in 2011.

The 2013 Tate exhibition was a landmark in her achievements. Tate curator Jessica Morgan said that the exhibition's purpose was, "to begin to focus international attention on her work as she takes her rightful position as a significant figure in the history of twentieth-century art." Extended due to its popularity, this marked the first solo show at the Tate for an Arab artist. The world is beginning to appreciate this remarkable artist.

Regrettably in failing health now, it may be hard for her to appreciate the enormous honor being paid her life's accomplishments. But her daughter Hala is optimistic: "I know that she is happy, and that she's happy that we are enjoying her art." Although it has been a long time in coming, Choucair is finally being acknowledged as one of the most important artists in the modern Arab world.

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