

# THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Print

## The delights of graphic art

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Are you interested in printmaking and its techniques? Would you like to have a panoramic view of what Lebanon's artists have produced in this field? Then don't miss Graphic Art in Lebanon at the Lebanese American University.

Organised by the Alumni Association of LAU, it includes 120 examples of printmaking by 54 artists, beginning chronologically with Georges Cyr in 1950 and ending with Mohammad El Rawas in 1997. There are engravings and etchings, lithographs and serigraphs, woodcuts, linocuts and monotypes representing just about all the techniques and materials, both traditional and modern, that go into the art of printmaking.

It is, on all counts, an exceptional show. Rare in thematic content and excellent in presentation, it is made even more outstanding by the comprehensive scope of its exhibition catalogue, made possible by the philanthropic assistance of the Arab Bank. In addition to full-colour reproductions and detailed biographical information on the artists, it contains two introductory essays that tell you all you need to know about printmaking in Lebanon or otherwise.

In one, art critic Joseph Tarrab outlines the history of graphic art in Lebanon. It is, to my knowledge, the first studied effort of its kind. Basing his information on careful research, he takes us through the past five decades of printmaking, from artist to artist, from atelier to atelier and from exhibition to exhibition.

We learn that most artists, at one time or another work in graphics, but that only a few become permanently (although not exclusively) involved in the medium. Among those who continue this involvement along with their production in painting and other media are these well-known names in Lebanese art: Chafic Abboud (the first Lebanese to enter the field), Assadour Bezdikian (internationally known for his prints), Halim Jurdak, Hussein Madi, Krikor Norikian and Mohammad El Rawas.

We also learn about the gradual establishment of the different ateliers and schools in Lebanon that introduced artists to printmaking. The first among them, in the mid-forties after the second world war, was the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, which installed a huge press and hired refugee Polish artists to provide instruction.

In the second essay, artist and AUB professor of graphics Mohammad El Rawas provides us with a quick but highly instructive course on the process, techniques and materials of printmaking. Included also, both in Arabic and English, is a helpful glossary of main technical terms that spells out, for example, the difference between an aquatint and a mezzotint.

Especially of interest to the layperson are these observations El Rawas makes on the differences of approach between painting and printmaking:

"Painting as a technique is usually used spontaneously and allows the painter to concentrate more directly on what he is actually painting. The printmaker or graphic artist, on the other hand, is always at a point of visual and technical choice because of the many options he is offered. The printmaker does not construct his image directly on the paper, but on a separate support (plate, wood block, stone or screen), which is then inked, and the image transferred to the paper.

This indirect procedure puts the artist in a state of 'delayed visual experience' in contrast to the instant results perceived when he is painting. The result is that printmaking channels the creative process in a unique route of patience, imagination/anticipation, coupled with lengthy atelier procedures".

All of which prompts me to share with you my one and only attempt at printmaking, which occurred in 1968 at a six-month graphic workshop given by the American artist Paul Lingren at the Kennedy Center. The image I chose was simple a 'hilled' horizon with a full moon hanging in the left-hand corner of the sky and, as instructed, I etched the varnished metal plate, dipped it into acid and prepared it for printing.

What came out of the press, to my stunned surprise and consternation, was a reverse image.

The full moon was no longer hanging on the left but on the right. I realised then and there that printmaking was not for me, that essential to my interest in producing art was my own constant, direct engagement in the process itself.

My mind cannot conceptualise reverse imagery, nor do I have the patience for "lengthy atelier procedures". I prefer the brush to the burin, the smell of paint to that of acid and ink, and immediate creative sensation to "delayed visual experience".

Reasons such as these may be why many artists tend to drop out of printmaking. Decidedly, the graphic process, coupled with its great variety of techniques and materials, imposes its own expressive potentials; and it takes a special temperament and much persistence to succeed in directing those potentials to fulfill creative intention. This may also explain why many of the prints in the show, although fine works of art in themselves, bear little resemblance to the artist's trademark style as a painter.

The exhibition is the eighth in a continuing series of similar annual events, each of which has focused on one specific aspect of Lebanese art. Every year since 1991, the LAU Alumni Association has been choosing a theme the landscape (1991), the portrait (1992), the still life (1993), pastels (1994), abstract art (1995), the human figure (1996) and LAU alumni artists (1997).

Expertly organised by Afaf Osseiran Saidi, who spent long months and great effort in putting the collection together and preparing its catalogue, this year's show admirably succeeds in forming "an introduction to the fine art of printmaking in Lebanon, leading to further study and appreciation of this important medium".

That it remains on view for only two weeks, until the end of the month, is regrettable. Such shows and the harried Lebanese public deserve a longer run.

*Lebanese American University, Sheikh Zayed Hall, Beirut Campus, until April 30. Open daily from 10am to 6pm Sunday from 10am to 1pm*

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