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# Pioneering Lebanese Artists- Mostafa Farroukh

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"..It can be said that the harbingers of Lebanon's literary and artistic nahda (revival) arose in the 19th century when the mind awoke and the nahda was launched, powerful and teeming with a spirit of seeking literature for literature's sake and art for art's sake much like every leap propelled by passion which, after suppression, spring in full force like a stream of purity and life...

..Before I proceed to talk about the members of this noble league, it would be particularly useful to describe its style and approach. The father of modern art, Auguste Rodin says of the qualities of the vanguardists of art in the introduction to his book *L'art*, "Art is sincerity and attachment to nature, and wisdom; volition and labor." Those are the main qualities that art requires from artists and t

evidently the qualities that characterized the members of this caravan.

We start out with one of the forefathers of the nahda, scholar Abdallah Zakher (1684-1748) . In his erudition, Abdallah Zakher was an artist who left a number of paintings, including a self-portrait of the Catholic Saint John monastery near the town of Choueir and examined the printing press Zakher created with the help of monks as well as the woodcut letters and inscriptions he had sculpted to print the first-ever book in Lebanon. Kanaan Dib Dib from Dlebta was another self-taught painter whose paintings that bore marvelous sensuality and mysticism. Also noteworthy were painters Najib Youssef from Deir el-Qamar (1897). Najib Fayyad and Ibrahim Serbay from Beirut (1865), as well as Dirwan Said Merhi and Ali Jamal. Most of these artists devoted their art to paint boats, natural scenes and landscapes. Serbay's works remind us of the paintings by Canaletto of Venice who dedicated his life to painting magnificent scenes of the canals and gondolas of the city. Serbay's most popular painting was that which portrayed the reception of Emperor Gallienus at the bustling port of Beirut. As for Dimashqiyah who was less skillful than his colleague, his most popular painting was the one that depicted the famed steam battle ship Victoria off the coast of Tripoli. Merhi was the most audacious among his fellows as he refused to paint portraits, which subsequently forced him to leave for the US. Finally, Ali Jamal, whose preference for painting the sea and its waves and boats led him to leave for Constantinople where he joined the Ottoman Navy School and graduated as naval officer.

It is worth mentioning that the above mentioned artists restricted their art to landscapes associated with sea and boats due to the mentality of their times. Other nahda pioneers included Salim Haddad who practiced art and gained popularity in Egypt and Najib Bekhaazi who headed for Russia. Unfortunately, little can be spoken of their paintings as we did not have the opportunity to see their works. We move now to the second group of pioneers who travelled to Europe and studied art from its masters and artists. Artist Raif Chedoudi was interested in portraying people and was worthy of admiration for the abundance of color and the clarity manifested in his works. His most celebrated paintings included portraits for Mr. Masaad and his son. Chedoudi died of anguish at a young age, leaving behind only a few paintings.

Daoud El-Qorm (1852-1930) was the first to chart a path towards mature art among us. He was the first to travel in 1865 to Italy, the cradle of arts, where he visited several museums and art institutes and was pondering the masterpieces of geniuses of art such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Veronese to name a few. El-Qorm was influenced by Raphael's sensualist school and his art was imbued with emotion and sentimentality. Shukri was one of El-Qorm's contemporaries. His few remaining paintings demonstrated a substantial improvement in the translation of colors and the Lebanese ambiance teeming with life and dimensions. Given the limited scope of art in our country, Shukri migrated to the US where he gained prominence.

Habib Srour (1860-1938) studied art in Rome in 1870 and demonstrated such a high degree of skill that he was able to outperform his peers there. Srour's painting of Patriarch John Maron in the School of St. Luke in Rome is considered a veritable art feast in the capital of arts. It is noteworthy that I dropped by one day and found him, as I knew him, absorbed in painting a small branch that bore withering

stunned and exclaimed: "What!?" He looked at me smiling, his glasses bouncing around the bridge of his sharp nose, and said "Oh Mostafa, if only I could faithfully paint the accuracy and beauty that haunts me in this dry branch".

"Everything is ephemeral. The worth of life resides in its values and ideals. The ideal life lived by their peers and the pain that touches their souls are the greatest and most significant factors in the lives of intellectuals and the value of their works." He returned to his painting and added "He who does not feel pain, does not know god."

Najib Qiqano lived in the same era as Srour but could not work much in the field of art because of poor health.

Another talented artist in whom Lebanon takes pride is Khalil Salibi (1870-1928) . Salibi studied in England and Paris. His adeptness and brilliance were on a par with his colleagues'; yet, the colors in his paintings recited the most graceful poems and music, thanks to their vividness, harmony, strength, and liberation. Salibi was a vocal rebel and harbored great desires within. He was discontent with the status quo and vented his criticism openly. His honesty cost him his life as he was killed together with his American friend in Beirut in 1928.

Although better known for his literature than his brush, Gebran Khalil Gebran (1883-1928) studied in Paris as a boy and was a pupil of Habib Srour, a piece of information I learned from Srour himself. He moved to Paris, then to the US where he completed his art studies. Gebran left us subtle symbolic and profound paintings that reflected the spirit and philosophy of the East and added magnificence to his writings. Finally, we mention Moussa Ayyoub, an artist we hardly recognize for he left for Great Britain at an early age and was able to advance to the forefront of British artists. I had the chance to see some of his paintings and found them to be satiated with the British school which combines the reality and the soul.

I would not have wished to conclude my talk with a calamity but I cannot help mentioning the late Makarov Fadel, a young promising artist who had barely begun rising into the Lebanese art scene when his destiny took him away."