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PIONEERING LEBANESE ARTISTS BY MOSTAFA FARROUKH

“In a lecture published in the September issue 1947 of *Les Conférences du Cénacle*, Beirut-born painter Mostafa Farroukh (1901-1957) traces history of art in Lebanon from its birth, elaborating on the interaction between artists and their environment and the importance of government involvement in promoting art as a fundamental tool to educate the masses and chasten the public taste. In his lecture, Farroukh sheds light on a number of the pioneers of art in Lebanon who worked for the sake of art and beauty. Below are some excerpts of his lecture:

“..It can be said that the harbingers of Lebanon’s literary and artistic *nahda* (revival) arose in the nineteenth century when the mind awoke and the *nahda* was launched, powerful and teeming with a spirit of sincerity, seeking literature for literature’s sake and art for art’s sake much like every leap propelled by psychic forces, 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 identify it and describe its style and approach. The father of modern art, Auguste Rodin says of the qualities of the true vanguards of art in the introduction to his book *L’art*, “Art is sincerity and attachment to nature. It is attention and wisdom; volition and labor.” Those are the main qualities that art requires from artists and those were 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 addition to his erudition, Abdallah Zakher was an artist who left a number of paintings, including a self-portrait. I visited the Catholic Saint John monastery near the town of Choueir and examined the printing press Zakher had created with the help of monks as well as the woodcut letters and inscriptions he had sculpted and used to print the first-ever book in Lebanon. **Kanaan Dib Dib** from Dlehta was another self-taught painter who left paintings that bore marvelous sensuality and mysticism. Also noteworthy were painters **Najib Youssef Shukri** from Deir el-Qamar (1897). **Najib Fayyad** and **Ibrahim Serbay** from Beirut (1865), as well as **Dimashqiyah**, **Said Merhi** and **Ali Jamal**. Most of these artists devoted their art to paint boats, natural scenes and the sea.

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 the one that portrayed the reception of Emperor Gallium at the bustling port of Beirut. As for **Dimashqiyah** who was no less skillful than his colleague, his most popular painting was the one that depicted the famed sinking of the battle ship *Victoria* off the coast of Tripoli. **Merhi** was the most audacious among his fellows as he attempted to paint portraits, which subsequently forced him to leave for the US. Finally, Ali Jamal, whose passion for painting the sea and its waves and boats led him to leave for Constantinople where he joined the Naval School and graduated as naval officer.

It is worth mentioning that the above mentioned artists restricted their art to landscapes associated with the sea and boats due to the mentality of their times. Other *nahda* pioneers included **Salim Haddad** from Obay who practiced art and gained popularity in Egypt and **Najib Bekhaazi** who headed for Russia. Unfortunately though, little can be spoken of their paintings as we did not have the opportunity to see their works.



Mostafa Farroukh

We move now to the second group of pioneers who travelled to Europe and studied art from its greatest artists. **Artist Raif Chedoudi** was interested in portraying people and was worthy of admiration for the power, the abundance of color and the clarity manifested in his works. His most celebrated paintings included two 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 destined to travel in 1865 to Italy, the cradle of arts, where he visited several museums and art institutes and stood pondering the masterpieces of geniuses of art such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Veronese to name but a few. El-Qorm was influenced by Raphael's sensualist school and his art was imbued with emotion, gentleness and sentimentality. **Shukri** was one of El-Qorm's contemporaries. His few remaining paintings attest to substantial improvement in the translation of colors and the Lebanese ambiance teeming with light, breeze 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 for Maronites in Rome is considered a veritable art feast in the capital of arts. It is noteworthy that I dropped by his atelier one day and found him, as I knew him, absorbed in painting a small branch that bore withering leaves. I was 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 had dazzled me in this dry branch".

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

Another talented artist in whom Lebanon takes pride is **Khalil Salibi (1870-1928)**. Salibi studied in the US, England and Paris. His adeptness and brilliance were on a par with his colleagues'; yet, the colors of 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 society and vented his criticism openly. His honesty cost him his life as he was killed together with his American wife in Beirut in 1928.

Although better known for his literature than his brush, **Gebran Khalil Gebran (1883-1928)** studied painting as a boy and was a pupil of Habib Srour, a piece of information I learned from Srour himself. He later moved to Paris, then to the US where he completed his art studies. Gebran left us subtle symbolic and Sufi-spirited 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 a young 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 artist **Makarov Fadel**, a young promising artist who had barely begun rising into the Lebanese art scene when destiny took him away."