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edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan

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The Museum as an Egalitarian Space?

Women artists in Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1960s and 1970s

Abstract

This article discusses the role of the Sursock Museum as a platform for the emancipation of women, and to what extent the Museum's Salon d'Automne constituted an egalitarian space. Etel Adnan took part in two Salons, in 1964 and 1974. This paper will provide some context for the Beirut art scene in which she worked. The general institutional framework for women artists is highlighted before discussing the situation of women artists in Beirut's Sursock Museum exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s, the years Etel Adnan participated in the Salon. Brief portraits of four women artists show us that women artists were neither considered alike nor singled out for their gender. They treated very diverse subjects and styles, came from different social backgrounds and generations, and were often pioneers in their fields.

Keywords: Beirut, Sursock Museum, women artists, Arab apocalypse, Art Salon

A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun
a [drawing] sun A sun [drawing] a [drawing] blue a [drawing] red a [drawing] blue
a blue yellow sun a yellow red sun a blue green sun a
a yellow boat a yellow sun a [drawing] red a [drawing] red blue and yellow
a yellow morning on a green sun a flower flower on a blue blue but
a yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun²

These are the opening lines of Etel Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), the writer-cum-artist's series of illustrated poems evoking the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). According to Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, the 59 poems emulate the 59 days of the siege of Tall al-Za'tar in 1976, in which Palestinian civilians were killed by Christian militias.³ The sun is ever-changing, and in the course of Adnan's poems becomes a symbol of colonialism and imperialism, as it has been argued by Caroline Seymour-Jorn.⁴ The catalogue covers of the Sursock Museum's Salon d'Automne in 1982 and 1984, not long after *The Arab Apocalypse* was first published in French under the title *L'apocalypse arabe* (1980), show a large sun rising behind the Sursock Museum.

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² Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), 7 (opening paragraph).

³ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Breaking the Silence: Etel Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose and The Arab Apocalypse," in *Poetry's Voice – Society's Norms: Forms of Interaction Between Middle Eastern Writers and Their Societies*, ed. Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winkler (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2006), 207-8.

⁴ Caroline Seymour-Jorn, "The Arab Apocalypse as a Critique of Colonialism and Imperialism," in *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), 37-49.



Figure 1: Catalogue cover (Arabic side) of the 10th Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, 1982.

A green sun in 1982, a yellow sun in 1984. They are based on the poster the artist Saad Kiwan designed for the 10th Salon d'Automne in 1982, the first group exhibition that took place in the Sursock Museum during the Lebanese Civil War after an interruption of eight years. It was held in a spirit of hope, during a temporary halt in hostilities when some believed the war to be coming to an end. "We are at the beginning of a new period of Lebanon's history. After dark years and long nights, we rediscover hope and light," proclaimed Victor Cassir, President of the Sursock Museum Committee. "In the great tradition of the Museum Nicolas Sursock, here, with the return to peace, this 10th Salon d'Automne" is how Lutfalla Melki, curator of the Museum, presented the exhibition⁵. The Salon took place in the autumn after the expulsion of the Palestinian leadership from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in June 1982. The hopeful tone and the statement that now peace had returned clearly inscribes the Museum into the – right-wing, largely Christian – camp that blamed

⁵ 10th Salon d'Automne catalogue (Beirut: Sursock Museum 1982).

the Palestinians for the war. Unlike Adnan's negatively connoted sun in *The Arab Apocalypse*, the sun on the catalogue cover was considered a symbol of this hope and light.

Politically, Adnan and the Museum thus did not see eye to eye at the time. However, the politics of the Museum were never openly debated, and are not the focus here. This article discusses the role of the Sursock Museum as a platform for the professional emancipation of women artists, and to what extent the Museum's Salon d'Automne constituted an egalitarian space. Whereas Etel Adnan took part in only two Salons, this paper will provide some context of the Beirut art scene in which she worked. Etel Adnan participated with three works (*Le Tigre à Bagdad au printemps*, *Composition en long I*, *Composition en long II*) in the last Salon before the outbreak of the war, the 9th Salon in 1974. She had previously been part of the 4th Salon in 1964, with two works (*Manuscrit arabe* and *Chasseur d'images*). Before we delve into a discussion of women artists at Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1960s and 1970s, the years that Etel Adnan participated in the Salon, and whether the Museum can be considered as a platform for emancipation, some general institutional framework for women artists should be highlighted.

Women Artists in Lebanon's Art World

It is well known that women artists are underrepresented by art institutions worldwide. A study published in the United Kingdom in 2017 shows that of the top-selling one hundred artists at auction in 2015, only one was a woman. The highest value item sold at auction that year was Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* for 160 million USD, the highest value work of a woman artist sold was Louise Bourgeois' *Spider* for 25 million USD. The study also shows that between 2007 and 2014, London's Tate Modern granted female artists solo exhibitions only 25 per cent of the time, and New York's Museum of Modern Art only 20 per cent of the time⁶. An article in the Guardian in February 2017 picks up on the topic. Entitled "How the art world airbrushed female artists from history," it starts with the following:

Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Caravaggio, Botticelli, Titian, Nelli. All were once greats of the Renaissance, though if the last name on the list doesn't ring a bell with you, you could be forgiven. Like those of her male contemporaries, Plautilla Nelli's Biblical paintings were masterful works of beauty, but, in a tale as old as patriarchy itself, she was written out of every Renaissance history book, dismissed as just another nun with a paintbrush.⁷

The article illustrates how women artists have been overlooked by art history, and argues that this inequality is systemic.

Art historian Tamar Garb, in her article on the French union of women painters and sculptors in the late nineteenth century, analyses the role of institutional framework for women artists in Paris. The union, founded in 1881, lobbied for women artists' participation in art academies and exhibitions. It was a product of its time and could not have been created without the economic and social developments in the Paris art world that were based on a changing notion of women's roles in society. However, while women artists did become more visible, their roles and the spaces they exhibited in were still gendered. This is perhaps best illustrated by two paintings shown in the 1885 Paris Salon of male and female juries: the painting depicting a male jury (*Une séance du jury de peinture* by Henri Gervex) shows men judging paintings in a public space, while the one portraying a

⁶ Artfinder. *The Artfinder Gender Equality Report 2017*, accessed 21 February 2019; <http://bit.ly/artworldsexism>.

⁷ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "How the art world airbrushed female artists from history," *The Guardian*, 6 February, 2017, accessed 21 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/feb/06/how-the-art-world-airbrushed-female-artists-from-history>.

female jury (*Un jury* by Alberto Vianelli) takes place in an intimate private setting. Women were also generally less frequently recognized by the Salon jury.⁸

In a study on women artists in Lebanon undertaken in the mid-1970s and published in 1987, the Lebanese-American artist and writer Helen Khal underlines that a third of the leading artists in Lebanon were women. In Lebanon, women artists and sculptors were present from the beginning of the development of modern art. According to Khal, the main challenge women artists faced in Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s was the conflict between their careers and their role as women, wives and mothers; in their role as women they were confronted by society's expectations, in their role as artists they had their own identities free from preconceived limitations.⁹ While the image of women in mid-twentieth century Lebanon continued to be formed by traditional gender roles, women artists experienced success from the beginning. How can this be explained? Could the lack of strong institutional framework and gatekeepers account for this?¹⁰ Lebanon seems to provide a useful case-study for the claim that strong institutions can prevent women (and other groups who do not hold power) from creating great art.¹¹ There was no equivalent of the dominating Parisian Académie des Beaux-Arts with its annual Salon exhibition, and institutions like the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts or the Sursock Museum were only just establishing itself. A 1974 Unesco report on contemporary art in Lebanon underlines that art at the time was still considered as a hobby rather than a serious subject of study or education, and that this lack of seeing art as a profession favored women becoming artists.¹² Khal quotes a review of the first group exhibition of contemporary art at the Ecole des Arts et Métiers in 1931, in which the author states the following:

Another observation is that the only local painters who succeeded in being very good, who have done interesting things and remain original, are the women. The best painters of the exhibition are: Mesdames Bart, [Marie] Haddad and [Gladys] Shoukair. We say this without hesitation. These ladies are superior to all the scholarship-grantee (*boursiers*) specialists and professionals in this art.¹³

This implies that while in the first half of the twentieth century women were not counted as professionals in the field, their art was appreciated. Khal names a number of reasons why women artists in post-independent Lebanon received more recognition than elsewhere, including that it was not difficult to find exhibition spaces, Beirut having become the cultural hub of the region and mounting around 150 exhibitions per year; that cultural activities were widely reviewed; and that critics generally did not differentiate between men and women in their coverage, which we will elaborate on below.¹⁴

In their interviews with Khal, critics emphasized that women were more daring, experimented with diverse techniques and materials, and researched new ideas; she gives the examples of Saloua Raouda Choucair who is often considered the first abstract artist, Nadia Saikali as the first kinetic artist, and Juliana Seraphim and Hugnette Caland as the first artists exhibiting explicitly erotic art in Lebanon. All four of these artists exhibited at the Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum from

⁸ Tamar Garb, "Revising the Revisionists: The Formation of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs," *Art Journal* 48/1 (Spring 1989): 63-70.

⁹ Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987), 21.

¹⁰ This essay constitutes only an initial reflection on this question, which will be further investigated in the forthcoming research project LAWHA – Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943.

¹¹ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? (1971)," in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Linda Nochlin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 145-169.

¹² Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'Education, la Science et la Culture. *Consultation collective sur les problèmes contemporains des arts arabes dans leurs relations socio-culturelles avec le monde arabe*. "Les styles de l'art contemporain au Liban." Hammamet, Mars 1974, 5.

¹³ R.C. in *Tout* (Beirut, January 1931), as quoted in Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 26.

¹⁴ Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 32.

the beginning, and we will look at three of them in more detail – Saloua Raouda Choucair, Nadia Saikali and Juliana Seraphim – as well as a fourth artist, Sophie Yeramian. First, however, it may be useful to share a few words about the Sursock Museum and its Salon d'Automne.

Beirut's Sursock Museum and its Salon d'Automne

Beirut's Sursock Museum, a museum for modern and contemporary art in Lebanon's capital, re-opened its doors to the public in October 2015 after an extensive renovation and expansion of its building. The Sursock Museum was originally set up as an endowment under the supervision of Beirut's municipality. Born into a wealthy Greek-Orthodox family, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (ca.1875-1952) bequeathed his mansion and art collection to the city of Beirut, to be held in a *waqf* (trust-fund) under the guardianship of Beirut's municipality upon his death. The house was to be turned into a "public museum for ancient and modern art from Lebanon, other Arab countries or elsewhere," as well as an exhibition hall where works by Lebanese artists were to be exhibited.¹⁵ Although after his death in December 1952 the villa was initially used as a guesthouse for visiting heads of state, eventually the will had to be honored and a committee was appointed to transform the mansion into a museum. In 1961, the Museum opened its doors and presented its first exhibition from November 18 – 28, its 1st Salon d'Automne. The Museum soon became known for this annual Salon, a group exhibition of contemporary art in Lebanon. The Salon was launched at a dynamic period for contemporary art in Lebanon and quickly became a symbol of the Museum.¹⁶

The Salon strove to guide both the artist and the public, and to institutionalize Lebanese contemporary artistic production. The selection process of works through a jury appointed by the Museum committee was crucial in this endeavor. In all thirty-three editions that have taken place between 1961 and 2018, there has been a rigorous selection process by a jury appointed by the Museum committee. These juries have been dominated by men. The first woman to participate in the Sursock Museum's Salon jury was Aimée Kettaneh, the former president of the Baalbeck International Festival (1956-1969), for the 10th Salon in 1982-83. Following this Salon, women regularly participated in the jury – in particular the Sursock Museum's curator Sylvia Agemian and long-term board member Hind Sinno –, although it continued to be dominated by men until the 1990s. Nevertheless, women artists made up around one third of the selected artists at the Salon, a percentage that stayed more or less consistent in the first twelve Salons under review here: between 1961 and 1986, 226 female artists exhibited compared to 455 male artists. The quality of their works was also recognized: the jury awarded them prizes from the beginning. Saloua Raouda Choucair was the only artist who won prizes in four consecutive Salons (5th to 8th Salon). The overall ratio of prizes awarded in the 4th to 8th Salon¹⁷ showed that the jury slightly preferred works by male artists, as only one quarter of awarded prizes went to women. However, they received nearly one third of the first prizes.¹⁸

Who were these women artists? In the following, I will give a short portrayal of four selected artists who exhibited in the first twelve Salons.

¹⁵ Lutfalla Melki, "Nicolas Sursock: l'homme et son musée," in *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre* (Beirut: Chemaly & Chemaly, 2000), 19-23.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public? The Salon d'Automne at Beirut's Sursock Museum," in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, ed. Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), 253-280.

¹⁷ The first three Salons awarded no prizes, nor the 9th up to the 12th Salon.

¹⁸ Data gathered from the Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne catalogues. Beirut: Sursock Museum.

Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017)

Saloua Raouda Choucair, best known for her sculptural work, exhibited twenty-four works in ten Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 12th Salon in 1986, and is one of the most exhibited and recognized artists by the Museum's Salon. Her work was awarded many prizes by the Salon juries. Choucair is often considered the first abstract artist in Lebanon, inspired by her interest in Islamic art and her studies of the natural sciences. She underlined in an interview with Helen Khal that she was an artist and worked as a *person*, not as a woman or a man. Choucair started painting in the 1940s, taking classes in the ateliers of Lebanese artists Omar Onsi and Mustafa Farrukh. She went to Paris in 1948 where she studied at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts with a brief sojourn in Fernand Léger's studio, returning to Lebanon in 1952. Allegedly she did not sell any of her works until her 1962 exhibition in Beirut's Unesco Palace¹⁹, one year after the 1st Salon d'Automne in which she exhibited three works. This might suggest that the Salon played a role in making her work known and valued. Today she is one of the best-known Lebanese artists, one of the few of her generation who have achieved international recognition with solo exhibitions at London's Tate Modern (2013) and Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (2015).²⁰

Nadia Saikali (b. 1936)

Nadia Saikali exhibited seventeen works in nine Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 10th Salon in 1982, and received the Sursock Museum Prize in the 8th Salon in 1968 for her painting *Rampant Sun*. Saikali's work is characterized by her interest in light and movement; she became a pioneer of kinetic art in which mechanical movement becomes an essential part of the work of art. She explains:

Physically, I need to move; and my paintings must move too, whether figurative or abstract. But this movement can be either an inner movement or an actual one. [...] This sense of movement in life, of cosmic energy, grows out of me, enters the painting, and becomes a separate, living entity.²¹

Her Beirut exhibition at the showroom of *L'Orient* newspaper in 1970 is considered the first exhibition of kinetic art in the Middle East. Saikali's first Paris solo exhibition took place at Galerie Jacques Lacroche in 1973. Etel Adnan wrote the preface to the catalogue, in which the symbol of the sun that we have discussed in the introduction comes to the fore again:

Electricity now carries the sun. The circle and the square are no longer geometrical forms, but moving forms at times coming to life, at others, reaching for self-destruction. This battle of the matter and the mind happens now over the fields proposed by works such as the ones you will see, leading us beyond the extreme boundaries of what can be possibly expressed.²²

Saikali experimented with her art between 1968 and 1975, and moved from oil painting to three-dimensional art, in which colors, light and movement are produced organically, before returning to painting.²³ Having first studied at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in Beirut (1953-1956), where she also taught art (1962-1974) as well as at the Institute for Fine Arts of the Lebanese University (1965-1974), she moved to Paris in 1974 where she had already studied for two years at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière (1956-1958). She continued her education at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (1974-1978), with a scholarship from the Lebanese

¹⁹ Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 55-61.

²⁰ For an analysis of Choucair's work, see Kirsten Scheid's work on the painter such as her chapter in *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, ed. Jessica Morgan (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), and "Toward a Material Modernism: Introduction to S.R. Choucair's 'How the Arab Understood Visual Arts,'" *ARTMargins* 4/1 (2015): 102-118. Also see Ari Akkermans, "Reconsidering the Work of a Lebanese Female Artist Who Deserves a Closer Reading," *Hyperallergic*, March 13, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/362341/reconsidering-the-work-of-a-lebanese-female-artist-who-deserves-a-closer-reading/>.

²¹ As quoted in Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 63.

²² Etel Adnan, "Préface," (Paris: Galerie Lacroche, 1973), as quoted in *Saikali* (Paris: Somogy Editions d'art, 2011).

²³ Gérard Xuriguera, "Préface," in *Saikali* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2011), 6.



Figure 2: Nadia Saikali receiving the Sursock Museum Prize in the 8th Salon in 1968 for her painting *Rampant Sun*. Courtesy of the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum.

University granted in view of expanding its Institute of Fine Arts and developing its teachers' skills. She focused on traditional mural arts techniques and took a studio at the Bateau-Lavoir in Paris.²⁴ As art critic Joseph Tarrab writes about her art:

Nadia Saikali's paintings appear as a subtle and playful counterpoint between the enigma of seemingly foreseeable, controllable space, and the mystery of the unforeseeable, uncontrollable time. Both the best and the worst can emerge at any moment: evenings of happiness and mornings of catastrophe, and thus the wars, tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes are depicted in the Space to be worked upside-down.²⁵

She explains herself that her paintings – specifically her series *Self-Portrait Imprints* – are expressions of her abandoning herself to painting, whether in its joy or suffering, rather than following a political agenda.²⁶ She takes inspiration from her experiences and life in general, drawing on her Lebanese roots; Saikali considers light and movement as integral parts of her heritage.²⁷

²⁴ Nadia Saikali, "Milestones," in *Saikali* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2011), 116. Also see her "Biography" in *Saikali*, 119 and César Nammour and Gabriela Schaub, eds. *Resonances: 82 Lebanese Artists Reviewed by Helen Khal* (Beirut: Fine Arts Publishing, 2011), 278-281.

²⁵ Joseph Tarrab, "Enigma of Space – Mystery of Time," in *Saikali*, 75.

²⁶ Nadia Saikali, "Empreintes: Autoportraits," 1986, as quoted in *Saikali*, 62.

²⁷ Nour Salamé Abilama and Marie Tomb, *L'Art au Liban. Artistes modernes et contemporains 1880-1975*, Tome 1. (Beirut: Wonderful Editions, 2012), 328.

Juliana Seraphim (1934-2005)

Juliana Seraphim exhibited twelve works in six Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 10th Salon in 1982. She was born in Jaffa in Palestine and came to Lebanon in 1948 at the age of 14, where she attended a Catholic boarding school in Saida. As the eldest child, she had to contribute to the family income after finishing school. At the age of 18, she thus started working as a secretary at UNRWA in Beirut. Seraphim was known to have a strong urge to express herself. It was a family friend, Camille Aboussouan, who later became the curator of the Sursock Museum, who convinced her to start painting. She first took classes with the artist Jean Khalife, and later at the atelier of the Beirut-based French painter Georges Cyr. From the beginning, she was interested in human forms in a dream world, in mysticism and surrealism. Against the will of her family, who did not consider it appropriate for a girl to travel alone to Europe and give up her work that helped support them, she took up a scholarship to study in Europe. Seraphim studied first at the Fine Arts Academy in Florence and then became a student at the Academy San Fernando in Madrid and at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris, before returning to Beirut.²⁸ Her work deals with desire, eroticism and femininity, and is deeply sensual. In an interview with Khal she explains:

The images in my paintings come from deep within me; they are surreal and unexplainable. Consciously I want to portray a woman's world and how important love is to a woman. Few men understand the quality of love a woman seeks. I try to show them.²⁹

Seraphim was one of the first Lebanese artists to earn a living from her painting.³⁰ While she struggled financially at first, her mind was set on becoming a professional artist. She was also driven by the need to support her family.³¹ Juliana Seraphim established herself within the Beirut art scene and exhibited in the leading art spaces of the 1960s and 1970s.³²

Sophie Yeramian (1909-1984)

Sophie Yeramian exhibited twenty-two works in eleven Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 12th Salon in 1986. She was born in Ankara and came to Beirut in 1915 in the wake of the Armenian genocide. Yeramian was a self-taught painter, and started late in life. She took up painting in the late 1950s, after her husband had become blind, in order to financially support her husband and son. Her very first exhibition was at the Sursock Museum.³³ After her participation in the first Salon d'Automne, she held regular exhibitions until her death in 1984 at institutions including Beirut's Carlton Hotel (1963), Unesco Palace (1964, 1966, 1968), l'Orient newspaper (1965), College Palandjian (1969), Hotel Vendôme (1970, 1972) and the Hotel St Georges (1969, 1974), as well as in Brazil (Sao Paulo, 1969) and in France (Salon du Grenier à Sel, Orléans, 1971).³⁴ Known for her naïve paintings, her work abounds with movement and life. Her canvases usually depict simple daily life village scenes, such as village feasts, picnics, dances, *dabke*, weddings, nature, modest village houses, fruit trees, fountains, people in action, animals, and flowers. She believes that "art imitates life... and not that life imitates art."³⁵ The quality of Yeramian's work was recognized by the Sursock Museum's Salon jury. She received the second prize for painting in 1968, the three first prizes going to Nadia Saikali, Khalil Zghaib and Levon Moumjian. Alongside the artist Khalil Zghaib,

²⁸ Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 72-78; Salamé Abilama and Tomb, *L'Art au Liban*, 291.

²⁹ As quoted in Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 71.

³⁰ Salamé Abilama and Tomb, *L'Art au Liban*, 291.

³¹ Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 77.

³² Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art From 1850 to the Present* (Beirut: Saqi, 2009), 151.

³³ "Sufi Yeramian aw 'al-khafir Rousseau' al-lubnaniyya". Undated newspaper clipping, archives of Richard Chahine Gallery at the Sursock Museum.

³⁴ Exhibition invitation card, archives of Richard Chahine Gallery at the Sursock Museum.

³⁵ Nuha Samara, "Lawhat al-rasm fi itar al-kharif," Undated newspaper clipping (from 1963), archives of Richard Chahine Gallery at the Sursock Museum.

Yeramian became one of the best-known naïve painters in Lebanon, although she has been completely overlooked by art historical accounts.³⁶

In the reviews of the Salon exhibitions published in the French-language press in the first decade of the Salon in the 1960s, Yeramian is always mentioned together with Khalil Zghaib. Whereas Yeramian started exhibiting at the Salon d'Automne, Zghaib was already known as a naïve painter before participating in the Salon. Nevertheless, the two of them are always mentioned in one breath. In a review of the first Salon in 1961, *Le Jour* mentions them only briefly – “There are also the ‘naïves’ with Khalil Zghaib [sic] and Yeramian.”³⁷ *L'Orient Littéraire* goes into more detail:

Three naïves are presented at the museum. Two certainly deserve some attention. To each gentleman all honor: Khalil Zgaib [sic], the most famous hairdresser, whose submission resembles (naturally) that which he does not cease to produce since many years, and Sophie Yeramian, a newcomer of undeniable class. This latter proposed café scenes composed in a very original way and painted by uniform and opaque touches, in a *papiers collés* technique. The proportions are more respected than with Zgaib, but perspective and rational structure are inexistent. The “naïvety” of Sophie Yeramian is less immediate, and maybe even less altered. Naïve art does not stop surprising, provoking our sympathy.³⁸



Figure 3: Exhibition detail of the 7th Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, 1967-8, with Sophie Yeramian's work on the left and Khalil Zghaib's work on the right. Courtesy of the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum.

³⁶ In Helen Khal's work on women artists, her name is listed under “other artists”, but she is one of the few artists without any bibliographical statement. It simply says “no statement available”. Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 162.

³⁷ “Il y a aussi les ‘naïfs’ avec Khalil Zghaib et Yeramian. Gladys Chami, “Beyrouth possède enfin son foyer d'art: Le Musée Nicolas Sursock,” *Le Jour*, November 17, 1961, page numbers unknown.

³⁸ “Trois naïfs se sont présentés au Musée. Deux méritent certainement de retenir l'attention. A tout seigneur tout honneur: Khalil Zgaib, le plus célèbre des coiffeurs, dont l'envoi ressemble (forcément) à ce qu'il ne cesse de produire depuis de longues années, et Sophie Yeramian nouvelle venue de classe indéniable. Cette dernière propose des scènes de café composées de façon très originale et peintes par touches uniformes et opaques, dans une technique de papiers collés. Les proportions sont plus respectées que chez Zgaib, mais la perspective, la structuration rationnelle sont inexistantes. La ‘naïveté’ de Sophie Yeramian est moins immédiate, et peut-être même moins altérée. L'art naïf ne cesse pas d'étonner, de surprendre, de provoquer la sympathie.” Jalal Khoury, “Aujourd'hui, jour 1 du Musée Sursock,” *L'Orient Littéraire*, November 18, 1961, page numbers unknown.

Le Soir emphasizes a potential rivalry between the two. "The naïves. Khalil Zghaib was king in this field. Sophie Yeramian, new recruit, outdoes him through her freshness and organization of space. She can become a dangerous rival, if Zghaib does not try to shake himself."³⁹

In subsequent salons, the two of them continue to be mentioned together. "Our two naïves" (4th Salon, 1964), who are seeing "their own innocence" (5th Salon, 1965).⁴⁰ "In the kingdom of the naïves, Khalil Zgaib [sic] divides his brush between rural and urban sketches; Sophie Yeramian remains faithful to her fairground characters" (6th Salon, 1966).⁴¹ The two are the constant ones in the Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum, "neither more nor less naïve than usual: two marvelous benchmarks to measure the multiple transformations of successive Salons" (7th Salon, 1967).⁴² We can see that they are both treated in the same manner, even though Khalil Zghaib is generally named first. There is no differentiation between the two artists based on their gender. They are not only discussed together, but also hung side by side in the exhibition space, which of course can also influence the way they are reviewed.

Conclusion

We have seen that the Salon exhibitions at the Sursock Museum in the 1960s through the 1980s provided an important platform for women artists. As for many male artists, the Salon enabled them to become known. As art critic Cesar Nammour wrote in 2015, looking back at the Salon: "There was a lot of enthusiasm to exhibit. (...) If you were accepted by Sursock, you'd reached a certain standard." Etel Adnan equally praised the value of the Sursock Museum's Salon, stressing that it helped many artists to become renowned and was thus especially relevant for emerging artists.⁴³ Often artists had individual exhibitions after exhibiting at the Salon; as with the Paris Salon, exhibiting at the Salon elevated the status of artists and their works, and gave prestige. The short portrayals of four women artists who exhibited regularly at the Salon in the first two decades show us that women artists were neither a homogenous group nor singled out for their gender. They treated very diverse subjects and adopted various styles, came from different social backgrounds and generations, and were often pioneers in their fields – Saloua Raouda Choucair as an abstract artist, Nadia Saikali in kinetic art, Juliana Seraphim in exploring erotic themes, and Sophie Yeramian not as a pioneer but as one of the country's two main self-taught naïve artists.

In conclusion, we can say that the Salon d'Automne provided an egalitarian space, meaning that gender played no role in the selection of artists. However, this was no exception in Beirut from the 1960s up until the 1980s. The growing number of exhibition spaces in the city were open to both male and female artists. The Museum as an exhibition space was an important vehicle through which to form public taste, both during the temporary Salon exhibitions and through its permanent collection displays by which it marks its place in Lebanon's art history. After the Museum reopened in October 2015, the permanent collection displayed on its second floor included many female artists and works by all four artists discussed above. When the Museum rearranged the display of its

³⁹ "Les Naïfs. – Khalil Zghaib était roi dans ce domaine. Sophie Yeramian, nouvelle recrue, lui dame le pion par sa fraîcheur et son organisation de l'espace. Elle pourrait devenir une dangereuse rivale, si Zghaib n'essaye pas de se secouer." Y. A., "L'Exposition d'œuvres de peintres et de sculpteurs libanais du Musée Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock," *Le Soir*, November 23, 1961, page numbers unknown.

⁴⁰ Nazih Khatir, "Salon d'Automne 1964: Trois prix... et des problèmes," *L'Orient*, December 20, 1964; Mirèse Akar, "Salons d'Automne: Au Musée Sursock : Le savoir-peindre libanais," *L'Orient*, December 5, 1965, page numbers unknown.

⁴¹ Mirèse Akar, "Hier soir, ouverture du Salon d'Automne au Musée Sursock. Le paradis officiel de l'art libanais," *L'Orient*, December 29, 1966, page numbers unknown.

⁴² "Seuls Khalil Zghaib et Sophie Yeramian paraissent immuables, ni plus ni moins naïfs que tantôt: deux repères merveilleux pour mesurer les multiples transformations des Salons successifs." Mirèse Akar, "Hier soir, au Musée Sursock, ouverture du 7^{ème} Salon d'Automne: Une Diversité Dynamique," *L'Orient*, December 13, 1967, page numbers unknown.

⁴³ Conversation with Etel Adnan, Paris, September 2017.

permanent exhibition between September 2017 and September 2018, one room was dedicated to Etel Adnan.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ They also included a tapestry that she had drawn between 1963 and 1964 that was produced in 2016 (entitled *Playground*) in another room focusing on tapestry.

Biography

Nadia von Maltzahn is the Deputy Director of the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), currently on parental leave. Her publications include *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, co-edited with Monique Bellan (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013/2015), and other publications revolving around cultural practices in Lebanon and the Middle East. She holds a DPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from St Antony's College, Oxford. Nadia's research interests include cultural policies, artistic practices and the circulation of knowledge. Her current research project deals with cultural policies in Lebanon, in particular cultural institutions and their role in the public sphere. In October 2020 she will start a new research project entitled "LAWHA – Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943," funded by the European Research Council (ERC).
