

Lebanese Treasures Finally Get Exposure

By NAZANIN LANKARANI JUNE 6, 2012 © 2019 The New York Times Company

PARIS — The Beirut art world is abuzz with anticipation this week ahead of the opening, on Sunday, of a rare show of works by early 20th century Lebanese artists.

The show, “Khalil Saleeby, 1870-1928, a founder of modern art in [Lebanon](#),” at the Gallery Space on the campus of the American University of Beirut, is earmarked to become the core of Lebanon’s first national modernist art collection.

The paintings are part of a collection donated to the university in November by Samir Saleeby, 87, a distant relative of the artist at the core of the show.

The collection, put together and conserved over 80 years, initially by the donor’s parents, and then by Mr. Saleeby himself, consists of 57 paintings and eight works on paper by some of Lebanon’s premier modernist artists.

It includes 33 works by Khalil Saleeby, a founder of modern art in Lebanon, and a selection of paintings by his friends and contemporaries including Saliba Douaihy, César Gemayel and Omar Onsi.

Modernist Lebanese art is mostly held in private collections and rarely shown in public, Rico Franses, associate professor of art history at the university, said by telephone from Beirut.

“This donation is an extraordinary thing for Lebanon,” Mr. Franses said. “People here are proud of their cultural heritage, but until now, there was no place to see it.”

To house the collection — and other works it hopes to secure in the future — the university is working on plans to refurbish and extend a wing of a heritage building on the campus which also is home to Beirut's Archaeological Museum.

The art museum, set to become Lebanon's first national gallery, is expected to open in 2020 and will be named the Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum, after Mr. Saleeby's parents.

"I have lived with these paintings all my life and wanted the collection to remain in Lebanon and be accessible to the public," Mr. Saleeby said by telephone from Beirut.

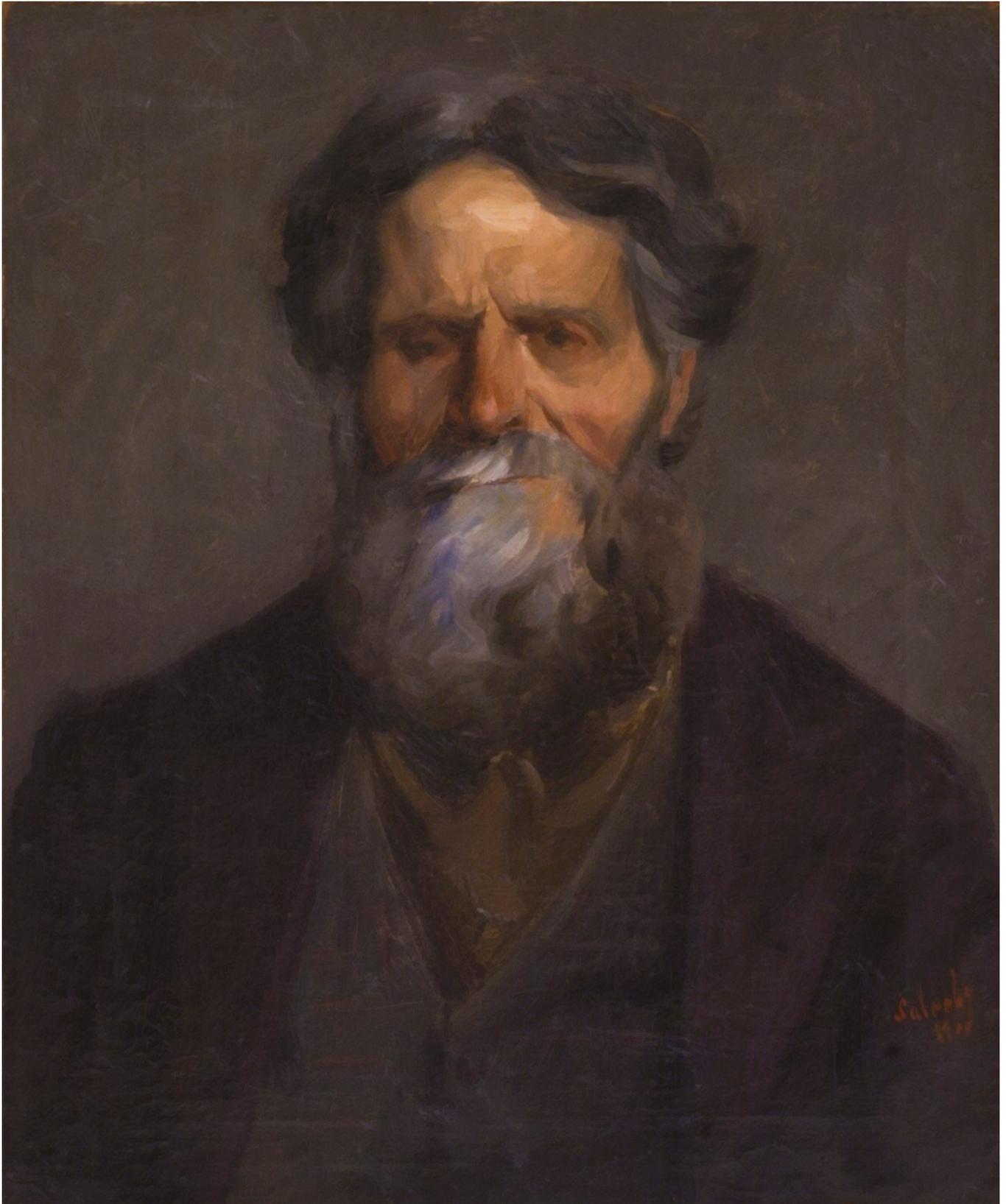
He said he had rejected many offers to sell the collection piece-meal, and had even toyed briefly with the idea of building his own private museum.

But, "given the political instability here, I thought a private museum would not be a safe place for my collection," he said. "It was critical that the paintings be taken care of by a trusted and respected institution and there was no better choice than the American University of Beirut."

Peter Dorman, the university's president, said by e-mail that the university "shares Dr. Saleeby's vision of making these paintings available to the people of Lebanon and all who have an interest in the art of the region."

"We are committed to preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Lebanon through teaching, research and public outreach," he added.

It is difficult to assess the importance of the Saleeby collection without taking into account both Lebanon's fragile politics since the mid-1970s and the paucity of museums dedicated to Arab art.



Dr. Simon Khoury painted by Khalil Saleeby in 1900. Ahmad El A. Itani / American University of Beirut

The university's own fine arts department closed in the 1970s as Lebanon descended into civil war, and did not reopen until 2005. The Nicolas Sursock Museum, a private museum in Beirut housing a collection of

Western and Arab art, has been closed for several years for a major renovation and expansion program.

“Many of our students have never stood before an oil painting,” Mr. Franses said.

On a regional basis, Arab art has received little institutional attention.

Mathaf, the first Arab museum of modern art, opened in Doha, Qatar, as recently as 2010. With a collection of more than 6,000 works drawn from every Arab country and ranging from the 1840s to the present day, it marked a pioneering step forward for the regional recognition of Arab art.

Already, the Saleeby collection has caused a flurry of research activity on the American University campus, much of it focused on Khalil Saleeby.

“Saleeby was one of the first professional artists in Lebanon, and a major influence on later painters,” Octavian Esanu, a curator recently hired by the university, said by telephone from Beirut.

“Though Saleeby is considered a major artist here, there is little written history about him,” Mr. Esanu said.

For the show, Mr. Esanu has put together a timeline to allow a better understanding of the artist’s life.

Saleeby knew some of the leading painters of his time, including John Singer Sargent, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. As a man of international culture, he met his muse and future wife in Philadelphia, but after returning to Lebanon, he and his wife were killed in 1928, reportedly in a feud over village water rights.

Examination of his works provides some tantalizing clues to his life.

“For the most part, the works are in excellent, original condition,” said

Lucia Scalisi, an independent conservator formerly with the Victoria & Albert Museum, who worked with Mr. Esanu on the upcoming show.

“Some of the paintings bear, on the back, the stamp of the Paris-based art supplier, Paul Foinet,” she added: “The question of how Saleeby obtained his supplies from Paris while working in Beirut at the turn of the century is unanswered for now.”

To whet international interest ahead of the Beirut show, the Institut du Monde Arabe, in Paris, is showing through July 15 four paintings by Saleeby in a group show titled “Le Corps Découvert, ” or The Body Uncovered. The show traces the representation of the human body in Arab art, a deeply sensitive subject in that culture.

Though Lebanon’s modernists may have been overlooked until now, the movers and shakers of Beirut’s booming contemporary art scene are strongly supporters of the move to bring them out of the shadows.

“I am highly enthusiastic about this donation,” Saleh Barakat, founder of the Agial Art gallery which specializes in contemporary Arab art, said by telephone from Beirut. “We need academic involvement so that our art history is not driven exclusively by the art market.”

“It is a turning point for Lebanon that a premier academic institution has agreed to research and write the history of Arab art and also dedicate an important space it,” he said.

Richard Brow, a vice president of the university, said the Saleeby donation had awakened interest among other potential donors.

“Since the Saleeby donation, we have been actively negotiating with other collectors,” he said during an interview from London. “There is real excitement here and we are confident we will be successful.”

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