



MADE IN THE ARAB WORLD

FROM MEMORY TO HOPE

WITH A LANDMARK NEW MUSEUM PLANNED FOR BEIRUT, LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN ART COLLECTOR AND PATRON RAMZI DALLOUL HAS AMBITIOUS PLANS TO EXPAND THE GLOBAL REACH OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ARAB ART.

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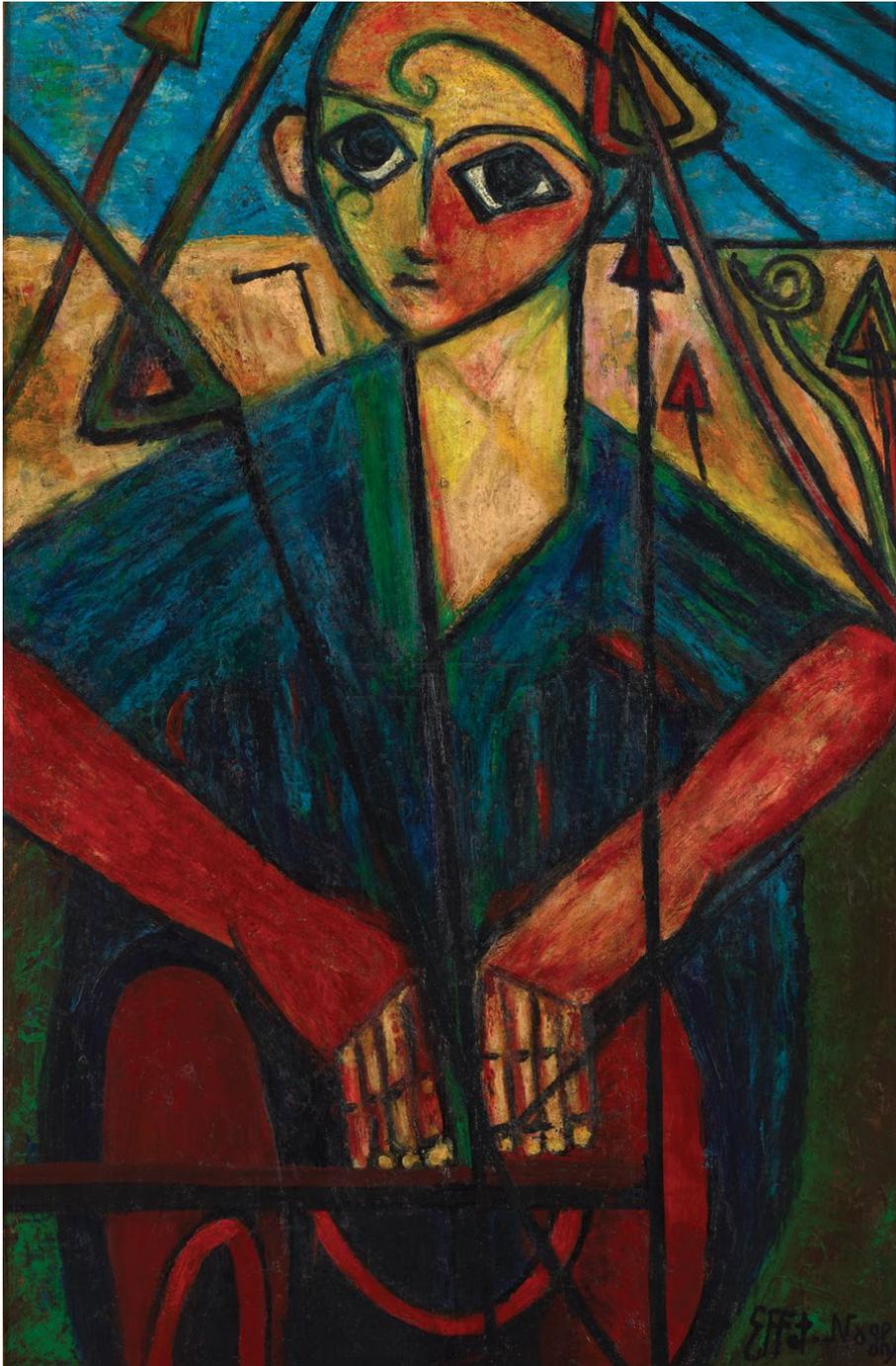
ABOVE | Mahmoud Said, *Bain des chevaux*, 1950. Oil on board, 66cm x 99cm.

Bain des chevaux is undeniably one of the most representative of Said's oeuvre. By using an amalgamation of art movements, Said transforms an ordinary daily scene into an idealized world, that lies between reality and illusion. Combining elements of Pharaonic style with a hint of cubism, Said depicts two naked workmen with statuesque postures surrounded by scenery rich in visual extravagance to create a grandiose act of legendary scale set in a fantasy world.

OPPOSITE | Georges Sabbagh, *Agnès: Portrait à la capeline bleue*, ca.1929. Oil on canvas, 100cm x 73cm.

A product of twentieth-century modernism, Sabbagh was labelled the 'son of the Orient' in Egypt and the 'palm branch of the *Ecole de Paris*' in France. The marriage of two great cultural influences and Sabbagh's obsession with freedom make him an unclassifiable but easily recognizable painter. Here, Sabbagh depicts Agnès Humbert, his wife and the primary reason for his decision to settle in France.





ABOVE | Ramsés Younan, *Untitled*, 1946. Oil on panel, 50cm x 68cm.

Acquired recently for USD 250,000, a world record for the artist, the present work is an outstanding and rare example of Ramsés Younan's surrealist period. This 1946 painting depicts an armless and headless female figure whose head lies on the ground. A metaphor for the position of women in society, the painting plunges the viewer into an anguished, dramatic setting depicting the seeping, hidden wounds of the subconscious. Younan felt that women were victims of oppression and patriarchy and relentlessly advocated for their emancipation and their right to education and equality.

LEFT | Salah Abdel Kerim, *The Bull*, 1961. Wood, 97cm x 53cm x 20cm.

Salah Abdel Kerim was one of Egypt's most renowned post-war artists. Carved out of one block of wood, *The Bull* is a stunning example of his extraordinary skills as a sculptor. In a striking cubist style, he flawlessly dissects the anatomy of his subject to depict the forcefulness of the animal and the sturdiness of the material. In 1961, Salah Abdel Kerim became the second Egyptian artist after Tahia Halim (1958) to be given the prestigious Guggenheim Foundation award.

OPPOSITE | Effat Naghi, *Untitled*, early 1960s. Oil on panel, 91.5cm x 56.8cm.

A couple of years ago, the Palestinian-born, London-based artist Laila Shawa put me in contact with a gentleman who, according to Shawa, sought to build an unparalleled collection of works by Arab artists that would surpass all existing collections. When we talked on the phone for the first time, the then 79-year old shared his dream of building a museum to house his vast collection. He wanted to tell the story of the political and social reality of the Arab world—free of bias, censorship or propaganda—using the richness of Arab art as his medium.



DALLOUL'S 3,500-PIECE COLLECTION WILL DEMONSTRATE THE DIVERSITY AND BOLDNESS OF CREATIVE RESPONSES BY ARAB ARTISTS TO THE COMPLEX REALITIES AFFLICING THE REGION.

In Dalloul's collection, Egypt plays a fundamental role in shaping the Arab narrative and has a steady budget allocated for acquisitions. Historically known for its culture, avant-garde thinking and religious tolerance, Egypt paved the way for the emergence of fine arts (or *fenoon gamila*) since the establishment of the *Ecole des beaux-arts*—the first in the Arab world—in 1908.

The earliest work by an Egyptian artist in the Dalloul collection is *Agnès: Portrait à la capeline bleue* (ca. 1929) by Georges Sabbagh. Depicting his wife, Agnes Humbert, the painting belongs to the phase of classicism when Egyptian artists applied European academic skills acquired through instruction by foreign artists or studies in Europe to draw on naturalism and transcribe the present. Seven magnificent nudes, characteristic of Sabbagh, singularize the collection.

Mohamed Naghi and Youssef Kamel are among the painters who represent 'al-rowwad' (the pioneers) in the collection. This term is used to designate the first generation of Egyptian artists who initiated an authentic Egyptian movement and fostered the cultural ideology of a pluralistic national identity inclusive of ordinary people. Ramzi Dalloul's collection includes the works *Bain des chevaux à Rosette* (1950) and *Le port de Beyrouth* (1954), two paintings by Mahmoud Saïd. Works by Saïd are the most expensive works by any Egyptian artist.

The collection also includes *Au bord du Nil*, a 1930s bronze sculpture by Mahmoud Mokhtar, Egypt's renaissance sculptor and the first Egyptian artist to go on a scholarship to Europe. Mokhtar's work demonstrates the pioneers' efforts to move away from pure stylistic borrowing and to mould a neo-Pharaonic Egyptian identity with an explicit sense of modernity whereby the female peasant (*féllaha*) is the central figure in the narrative of Egypt's modern history, personifying the land of Egypt itself.

Failure to achieve independence from the British and the striking socio-economic disparities between the minuscule westernized elite and the remaining bulk of the population influenced the second generation of Egyptian artists. These themes find resonance in the works of the rebellious artists of the Art and Liberty Group such as Ramsès Younan and



TOP | Hassan Soliman, *The Nuns*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 63.5cm x 48cm.

An independent, staunchly Egyptian painter known for boycotting the cultural establishment during the last part of his life, Hassan Soliman was instrumental in many of the innovations introduced into the visual arts during the 1960s and 1970s. He effortlessly celebrated the ordinary Egyptian woman, the present work being a stunning example. Dated 1957, *The Nuns* was painted before the artist turned 30 and depicts a mysterious yet serene and humble take on the piety of the two nuns against a mosaic of crosses in the background.

BOTTOM | Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, *Mould of Dervishes*, 1951. Charcoal on paper, 67cm x 98cm.

Dubbed the godfather of the symbolic movement, Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar is among the most important of all Egyptian artists and perhaps the most inventive. He felt closest to the oppressed classes of Egypt and shocked the existing bourgeoisie by painting the grotesque and the poor. This work belongs to the second period of el-Gazzar's career which reflected the influence of al-Sayeda Zeinab and where medieval traditions resisted all the winds of modern westernization. Behind the two androgynous faces, the wall is covered with folk decoration, most of which is indecipherable and creates a pervasive feeling of magic and mystery.

OPPOSITE | Self Wanly, *Untitled (People Celebrating)*, late 1950s. Oil on panel, 46cm x 66cm.

Dr Ramzi Dalloul, a Palestinian-born, London-based businessman whose second home is Lebanon, is set on challenging the dominant belief held by the West that the Arab world's modern-day cultural contribution lags behind or is insignificant. He wants to shatter the uninformed belief, or indeed the resentful satisfaction of some, that the region has been too absorbed and deeply marred by independence struggles, ethnic differences, social unrest, oppression, and religious extremism to produce or contribute anything of significance to the global canon of modern and contemporary art. If the 2011 Arab Spring failed to achieve its call for 'Bread, Freedom and Social Justice', it certainly shed light on the power of the Arab people. It also triggered a set of questions in the mind of Dalloul: How can we tend to that which unites us, rather than concede to that which tears us apart? How can we protect our fundamental identity against extremism, ignorance and external hostile forces?

While the idea to build a museum for modern and contemporary Arab art is not novel, Dalloul is blessed to be the sole decision-maker—one who does not shy away from pushing the envelope. He intends to build a museum that is uninhibited by the censorship, social taboos, governmental dictates or religious conservatism that shackle many existing

institutions—and publications, for that matter—in the region today. And herein lies his power: He can showcase and publish nudes and political works, both of which constitute a defining segment of twentieth-century Arab art by providing a holistic representation of the era not available elsewhere.

By tracing over a century of art production, the indefatigable Dalloul seeks to build awareness and pride amongst all Arabs. More importantly, he is determined to help negotiate a firm place for a united Arab world against a destructive narrative of radicalism and internal conflicts by expanding the international reach of Arab art. The establishment of the museum is a symbolic step to change the way we talk about the region. It will complement the laudable undertakings already in place and help shape an impartial understanding of an important aspect of our present-day cultural achievements. By providing a comprehensive survey of visual arts from the entire region—from Morocco to Yemen and everywhere in between—Dalloul's 3,500-piece collection will demonstrate the diversity and boldness of creative responses by Arab artists to the complex realities afflicting the region. In fact, it will prove that our regional struggles and suffering provide substantial—though at times uncomfortable—material that allows our artists to tower above those from other regions.



Ezéquiel Baroukh, as well as Inji Efflatoun— who was not a member of the group but rather a student while in her late teens of one of its founders, Kamel el-Telmissany. Represented in the collection by outstanding rare works, these three artists disregarded academism and used surrealism to explore the subconscious and to depict the ‘sick’ and ‘oppressive’ society of the 1940s. The short-lived, radical movement, in stark contrast to the pioneering first generation, would have major repercussions on the thinking and artistic styles of the third generation of artists, the Contemporary Art Group, represented in the collection by the stunning *Moulid of Dervishes* (1951) by Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and *Femme à la fleur* (1952) by Samir Rafi.

Independent artists such as Seif Wanly, Effat Naghi, Hassan Soliman, Gamal el-Sagini, Hamed Abdallah, Hussein Bicar, Mahmoud Moussa and Salah Abdel Kerim add to the amalgamation of styles that strengthen the Egyptian narrative. As the Egyptian collection continues to grow, it provides a comprehensive snapshot of the key movements and prominent artists of the modern era, and in turn advances and complements the collective Arab discourse.

While the collection of works by Egyptian artists is an intellectually coveted and well-timed initiative, it is also Egypt’s missed opportunity. On one hand, it revives the long-forgotten concept of grand scale private patronage at the service of the public that shaped the arts sector in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. It also provides long overdue recognition of Egypt’s role as the incubator of a pivotal intellectual movement, *al-nahda*, and its position as the Arab cultural centre *par excellence* until the 1960s.

On the other hand, it raises questions as to why the Egyptian Ministry of Culture continues to ignore the unparalleled patrimony that falls under its jurisdiction—much of which is currently in storage—and fails to recognize the potential of this treasure as a means of embracing global culture and advancing diplomatic relations. More distressing though, the choice that Dalloul made to establish his museum in Beirut and not in Cairo confirms that Egypt’s obscure regulations continue to alienate and push away potential investors. The ambiguous legislative framework, the excessive lead times and tariffs on importing and exporting, the fear of artwork confiscation as well as the crippling bureaucracy, constitute the most severe obstacles to setting up a private museum in Egypt. In contrast, Beirut, a city of over one million inhabitants, has been witnessing an impressive flow of cultural programmes in recent years. The opening of several privately-funded museums, a proliferation of non-profit and commercial art spaces and the recent renovation of a number of public museums are all initiatives that will cement an important place for Lebanon as an attractive cultural and touristic hub in the region.

Mahmoud Moussa, *The Worker*, undated. Terracotta (one of an edition of five), 90cm x 18.5cm x 25.5cm. Moussa created this statue in his signature Pharaonic revival style in recognition of the workers who perished during the digging of the Suez Canal. The fellah is depicted here, standing heroically, in a tribute to the struggle of the poor against the oppression of the elite.



ABOVE | Ezéquiel Baroukh, *Nu étendu*, ca.1952–1954. Oil on canvas, 60cm x 120cm. Alexandria-born Jewish painter Ezéquiel Baroukh was among the foreign artists who were unable to leave Egypt upon the outbreak of World War II. He became an active member in the Art and Liberty Group yet did not let himself fall into the vortex of the subconscious. Following a trip to Paris in 1946 where he met some of the founders of cubism, Baroukh shifted into a more personal style, where form took precedence over subject.



LEFT | Salah Taher, *Untitled*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas laid down on board, 68cm x 49.5 cm. Salah Taher graduated from the *École des beaux-arts* in Cairo in 1934 and belongs to the second generation of modern Egyptian artists. With an estimated 15,000 works produced over the course of eight decades, the prolific painter was a towering genius of abstract and non-representational Arab art, a music lover, a voracious reader of philosophy and sociology and a boxing champion. Overwhelmed by Sufi thoughts and philosophy and marked by his visit to the United States where he discovered the freedom of innovation, Salah Taher declared his rebellion, preferring free and undetailed movement over realistic proportions.

Ramzi Dalloul provides an alternative Arab narrative, reshaping it from one of extremism and oppression to one of creative and intellectual achievements. The planned museum will not just be a celebration of Arab visual memory, but rather, the recognition of our own identity and a reflection on a fragment of the multi-dimensional history of the region. And as his name implies—Ramzi comes from ‘ramz’, which means ‘sign’ or ‘symbol’—one expects the museum to be a symbolic legacy. ♦

All images courtesy of the ‘Dr Ramzi Dalloul Arab Art Collection’.