

I saw the sea, I painted on the rocks . . .

Are you a man of the mountain?

Yes, I am. As a child, I used to watch the sunrise and the sunset. I miss that in Beirut.

Did you start to paint early on?

I painted on the rocks and on the walls in Hadtoun (in North Lebanon). I watched the clouds passing by and I drew them. I also saw the sea stretching in a semicircle, from Tripoli to Gebeil. I felt as if I was in an airplane. Even now I sometimes unconsciously draw the same rainbows I saw back then.

Were you trained as a painter in Beirut?

I enrolled as soon as Alexis Boutros opened his Academy of Fine Arts;¹ artists in my class were Chafic Abboud, Farid Aouad, Michel Basbous. We traveled to Paris together. Since then, I have sort of shuttled back and forth between Paris and Beirut. My first visit lasted four years.

Studies in Paris?

Yes, at the Quai Malaquais,² then in independent studios. I did the Latin Quarter hotels. I painted in hotel rooms. I had to hide my canvases. Making coffee was forbidden. Student life was hard, and the budget was meager.

Did you work closely with any of the greatest Parisian artists?

Between 1950 and 1954 I knew Zadkine.³ I used to work in his studio in Montparnasse. I attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.⁴ There were a lot of painters there! I often went over to Michel Basbous's, to interrupt his work.⁵ We were all radiant.

When you chose to become a painter, did you realize that there was not much interest in painting in Beirut at that time?

At that time, there were not even art books in Beirut. There were two art dealers: one very expensive, Sarrafian, and the other, cheaper, Itani. I went to the second. At the Fine Arts Academy there were at least a few books. A book about Cézanne arrived. I flipped through it. I came back to study it, and all the color reproductions had disappeared. Students were taking the color plates and were framing them for their homes. They had nothing else.

And your family?

At home, they thought that art was a job without a future. They wanted me to become a doctor or a lawyer. I told them I could only be a painter.

What were the reactions to your very first exhibition?

My first exhibition took place at Alecco Saab's. I showed female nudes. Female nudes are one of my favorite subjects. This was in 1957. It was a tremendous success. Alecco Saab told me that he had to call the traffic police to help the drivers get out of the traffic jam. He sent out 2,000 invitations. 3,000 people came. The heat was sweltering. I fled to the Horse-Shoe, which had just opened.

The Horse-Shoe seems to feature in your destiny.

The Horse-Shoe is not for me a "Mecca of the mind," do not worry. It is a restaurant. I meet my friends there. Some people imagine that it is the museum of modern art. Good for them! Since then, my exhibitions have followed one after the other: at the Carlton Hotel, at the Saint-Georges. I lived for a year in Italy and exhibited at the Galeria Margutissima, near the Piazza del Popolo (in Rome). Italy has the same sun as Lebanon. The same light, the same colors.

I saw your Univers exhibition at the Hotel Saint-Georges. What triggered it?

Myself, as a painter, I am part of the universe, I am not a star that orbits around the sun. I am more like a planet, and it is the sun that orbits around me, it obsesses me. I also see the relationships between the small, tiny, and the infinitely large. I believe that this is painting's secret: A painting is of necessity something partial, incomplete, but it also represents—or, rather, I should say, constitutes—a universe. Whether

it is beautiful or not, whether people like it or not, is secondary to its *raison d'être*.

Were you well received abroad?

I had an exhibition in Oxford, England, at the Ashmolean Museum. The museum bought two of my paintings for its permanent collection.

How do you work?

I outline my forms with my colors. The subject doesn't really matter. Whether abstract or figurative, it does not matter. I do not like to confine myself to one theme for a long time. Changing subjects does not mean changing personality. I like the paintings that I have not yet created. My joy is to paint.

Can you work outside of Lebanon?

The place does not matter. I carry a painting in me.

Are women important to you?

I always considered women important to me. A woman is, to me, a landscape. She is an element of nature: a rainbow, a bird. I always praise her in my paintings.

Who are the women who have posed for you?

A lot of women have posed for me. I particularly loved the very unaffected women who came and posed, without any preconceptions.

Which painters do you like?

I do not like any of them. I do not have time to see the paintings of others. I barely have time to work, to develop what I have to do. To go back to women: To me, a woman is like a still life. A subject. I am not talking about the women I know. That's quite another matter.

In an ideal world, what would be your desire as a painter?

To paint constantly.

Do you think that painting in that case would be a kind of neurosis?

No, painting is life, matter, color, the representation of the inner world. It is everything. After all, for Leonardo da Vinci painting was the most perfect expression man was capable of.

What are you currently working on?

I have reached the point where figuration and abstraction are blurring. Some critics think that I am "going back" to figuration, but that is a superficial observation. My present figurative work is absolutely different. It is blended, flat on the canvas. By working both figuratively and abstractly, I think that I have come to the point where all the *raisons d'être* of abstraction—at least as I see them—find themselves entirely, pictorially, in the figurative. In other words, if I paint a young girl, I am in the same state of mind as if I were painting a "universe." And this is transmitted, visible, if one knows how to look.

Do some reproach you for not being a committed painter?

My commitment is to art itself. A thing well done is as necessary (even for the so-called committed causes) as any other. Man has to remain universal if he wants to survive in the present. Everything is necessary, and everyone must do what he or she is capable of doing best.

Notes

1. With painter César Gemayel, Alexis Boutros opened the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut in 1943.
2. Khalifé refers to a dock on the Seine in the 6th arrondissement in Paris, an ironic substitute for attending the National Academy of Fine Arts nearby.
3. The Russian-born sculptor Ossip Zadkine (1890–1967) lived in France for most of his life.
4. The Académie de la Grande Chaumière is an art school in the 6th arrondissement of Paris.
5. Michel Basbous (1921–1981) was a Lebanese sculptor living in Paris.