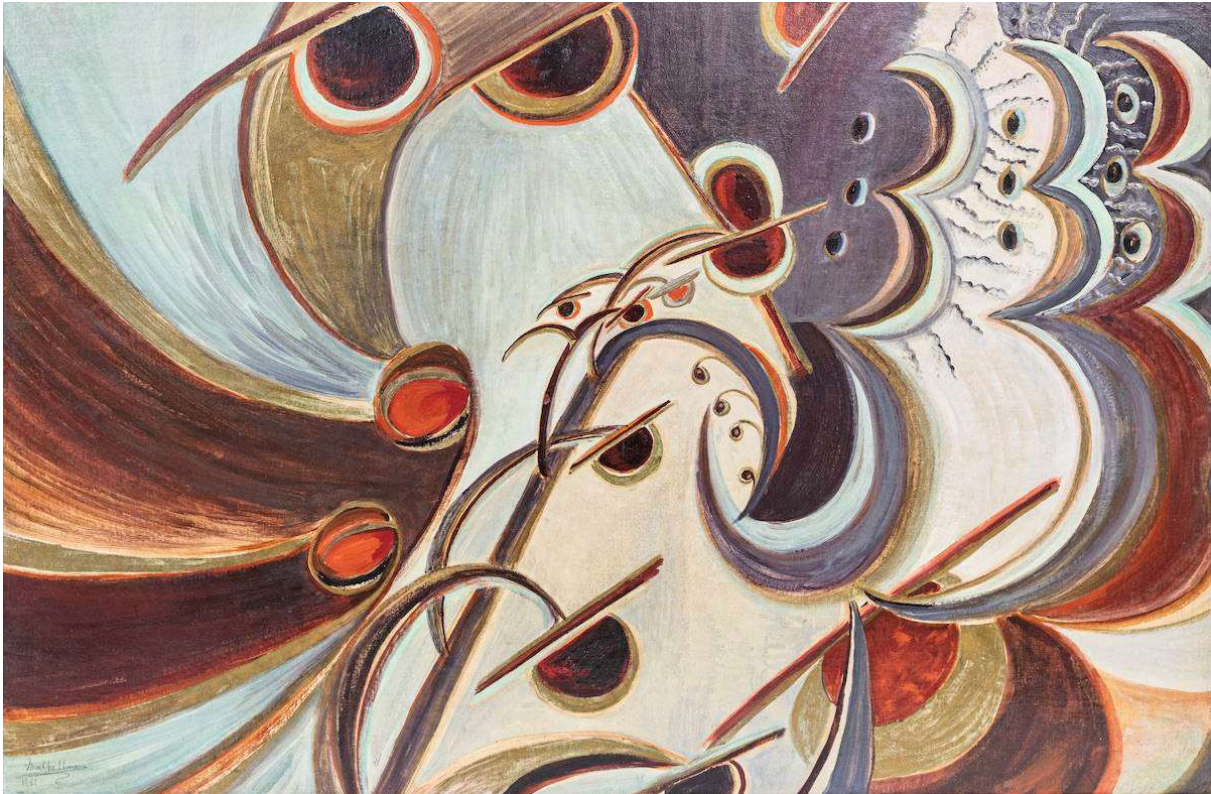


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Lebanese artist Nadia Saikali and Beirut as the centre of abstract art

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Nadia Saikali and Her Contemporaries show at Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah

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The show “Nadia Saikali and Her Contemporaries” at Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah until 2 August is dedicated to pioneering abstract artist Saikali, and the influence that she had on modernism in the Arab world and beyond.

The idea of art centres versus the peripheries of art is slowly crumbling, as Western art history subsides as a unitary truth, leaving space for a multitude of parallel narratives. Some of these came from the Arab world.

What we are witnessing today is that institutions like the Louvre in Abu Dhabi or the Mathaf in Doha are rewriting art history from the lens of what used to be east of the art epicentres of Paris or New York, and is today one of the many viewpoints to look at the development of art movements. In these institutions figures that were previously neglected are finally being recognised, and the genealogies amongst them are being retraced.

The Maraya in Sharjah is taking part in the conversation, which revolves around one striking singular figure, Lebanese artist Nadia Saikali. The “Nadia Saikali and Her Contemporaries” show is supported by the Barjeel Art Foundation.

For those familiar with so-called Arab abstraction, this name is not at all new. Born in Beirut in 1936, Saikali is recognised widely as a trailblazer in the realm of abstract art. Not only is she known for her innovative use of materials and distinctive approach to colour, but she has also championed the international art trend in the region, favouring the evolution of abstract art in the art world.

So, while Saikali’s work — characterised by its dynamic interplay of form, light and hue — is at the heart of the exhibition, the display also celebrates the broader context of abstract art by women practitioners in Beirut during the 1960s and 1970s.

Saikali’s approach to abstraction is presented alongside the work of notable contemporaries, as well as other artists whose contributions from outside Lebanon highlight the position of Beirut as a regional hub for artistic exchange and the development of cultural discourses in the Arab world.

The audience will come to realise that, far from being an art periphery, Beirut was actually the epicentre for abstract painting and sculpture, attracting artists from across the Arab world, and the unique declination that abstract art would take when interacting with local values and way of looking at art and reality.

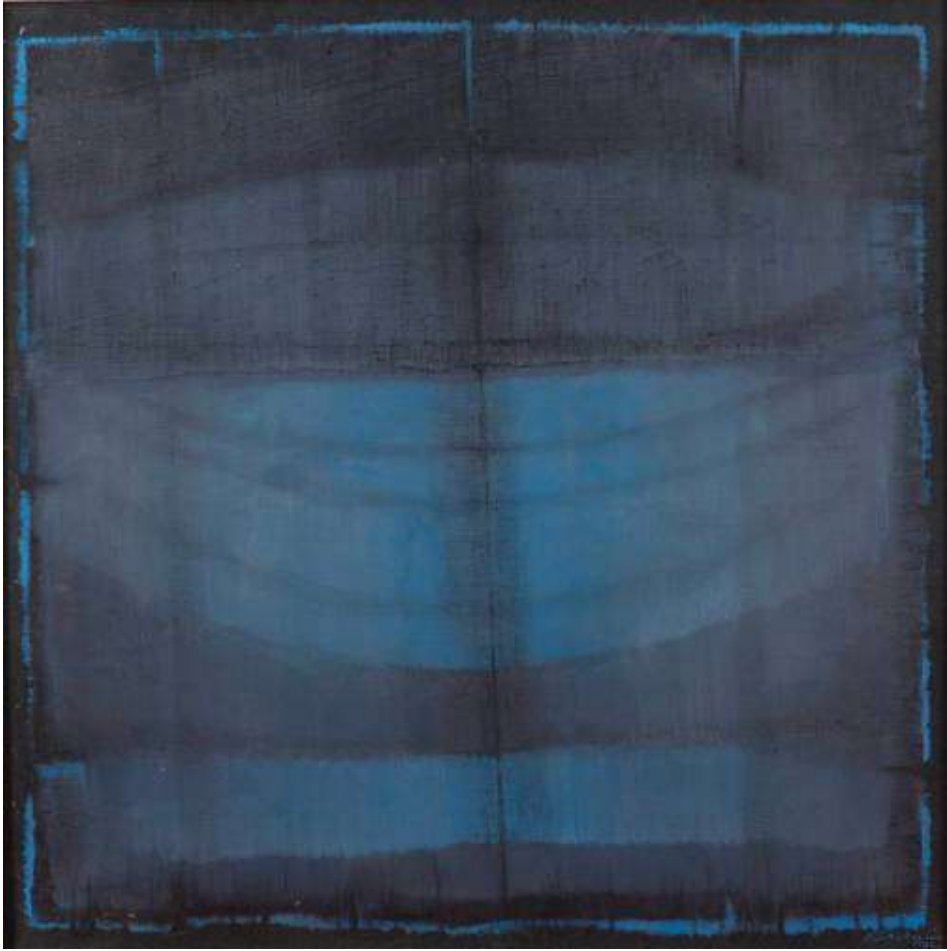
Born into a Franco-Lebanese family that valued art and culture highly, Saikali was encouraged early on to dedicate herself to drawing, painting and ceramics, music, dance and theatre. Growing up, she nourished her poetics through a multitude of interests, from astronomy, geology, philosophy, spirituality and the natural world, a testament to the fact that innovation often comes not from specialisation in a particular field, but rather from connections between different disciplines.

Saikali went on to get her formal art training from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, continuing her studies at L’Académie de la Grande Chaumière and L’Ecole des Arts Decoratifs in Paris in the 1950s. Her artistic influences, however, extended far beyond her formal instruction.

At the time of the French Mandate in Lebanon (1920-1943), Saikali was a young woman who could take advantage of a diverse socio-cultural society and a thriving artistic community, which led to the development of a burgeoning contemporary art scene in Beirut. “She was a teenager when Beirut’s modern art scene began flourishing with figures like Helen Khal, Chafic Abboud and Aref El-Rayess,” said the show’s curators Suheyra Takesh and Rémi Homs. “All of these factors informed various facets of her later practice as an artist.”

We can’t forget that the mid-twentieth century was a moment of great change in the Arab world, one marked by decolonisation and shifting political and cultural structures. This milieu fostered reciprocal exchanges between the Arab region and the rest of the world.













“It was a time when increasing numbers of Arab art students trained in Western European, American, Soviet, Chinese and Indian institutions, among others,” explained Takesh. “It was also an era when travelling exhibitions were on the rise and served as a medium of transnational cultural exchange.” The curator feels that Saikali’s work embodies all of these diverse instances, creating a synthesis within a specific framework of Arab modernism.

As the artistic centre of the Middle East, Beirut provided many spaces where artists could exhibit their work and form galleries, cultural centres, educational institutions, entertainment venues and even corporate establishments. After her graduation in 1956, Saikali participated in an exhibition at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut in 1957, followed by one in 1959 at the Beirut French Cultural Institute.

During her one-year stay in France in 1956, she worked in the studios of engraver and painter Henri Goetz, and art brut sculptor Michel Durand.

While her early artworks were inspired by French modernism, especially Cezanne, towards the end of the 1960s Saikali was inspired deeply by Japanese Zen Buddhist philosophy, and her canvas started becoming increasingly minimalist.

Upon her return to Beirut, she began teaching at the two leading universities for the arts in Lebanon, ALBA University and the newly established Institute of Fine Arts and Architecture at the Lebanese University (LU). She remained at both institutions until 1974.

Throughout the exhibition, photographs, press clippings and archival documents reflect the dynamism of Beirut’s art scene in the 1960s and 1970s.

The most prominent place in the exhibition is reserved for the work of Saikali, drawing attention to the multifaceted nature of her artistic career. The other sections — occupied by the work of Saikali’s contemporaries — are informed by the difference in approach, medium and, at times, certain historical considerations.

Among her pioneering explorations, is that of kinetic art in the Middle East and quite possibly in the Arab World. In 1973, she was invited to showcase her designs at the Galerie Laclouche in Paris, with the preface of her catalogue written by Lebanese poet and artist Etel Adnan, whose works are also present in the Maraya show.

“Apart from being a practicing artist, Nadia Saikali also served as an educator in Beirut, directly impacting a younger generation of Lebanese artists, including figures like Odile Mazloum, Chaouki Chamoun and Hassan Jouni,” explained Homs.

Artworks from all these figures are presented alongside Saikali's in a conversation, to emphasise how she influenced her Lebanese contemporaries, including peers, colleagues and even her students.

Just as Saikali's influence extended beyond Lebanon, the show also presents works from other parts of the Arab world, by abstract artists who either lived, trained or exhibited in Beirut. These include figures like Munira Al-Kazi from Kuwait, Madiha Umar from Iraq, Mona Saudi from Jordan, Asma Fayoumi from Syria and Maliheh Afnan from Palestine.

A particularly interesting fact about the show is that all of the artists presented are women, as the curators felt that many of them haven't had their rightful place in history recognised yet. The show is intended to try to correct that imbalance.

Takesh and Homs hope that visitors will walk away with increased curiosity about Beirut as a vibrant cultural epicentre that attracted artists from across the Arab world, as well as about individual artists whose work is on display: "We hope that the exhibition will serve as a node in the growing field of modern Arab art histories, and spark further conversations around the work of individual artists presented in the show," they concluded.