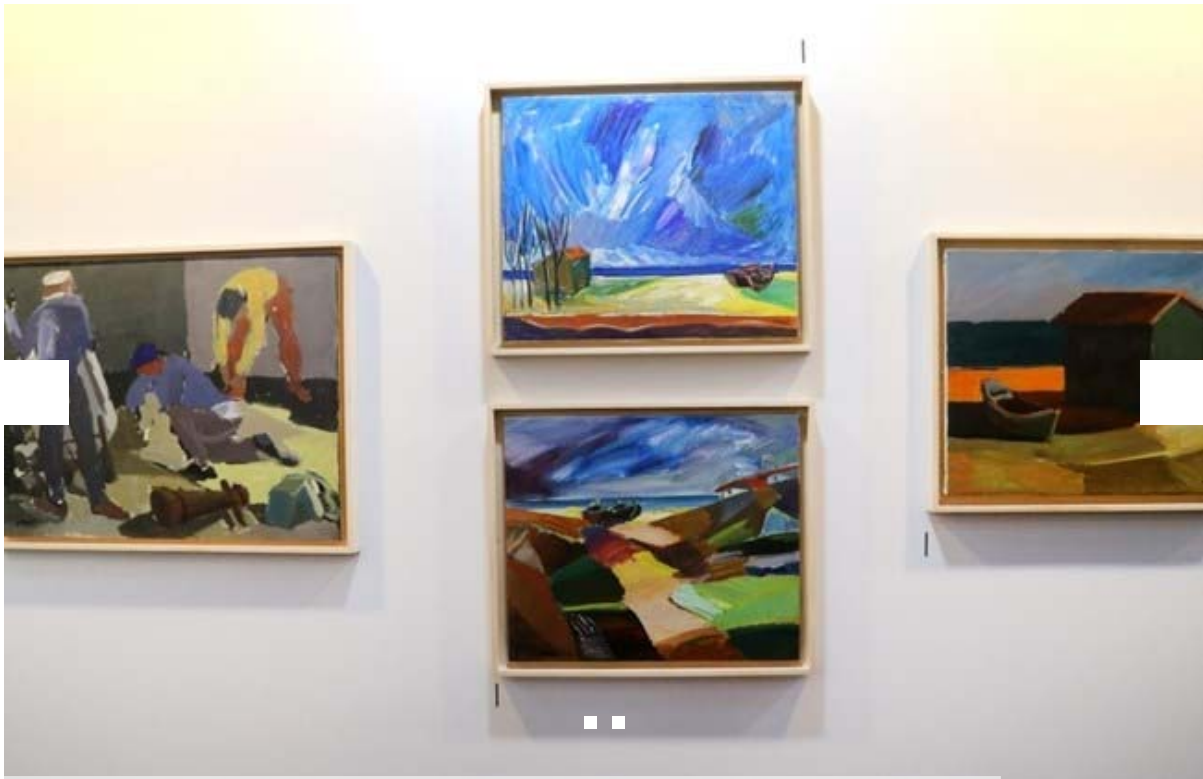


Beirut Art Fair contrasts past and present



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👤 Maghie Ghali | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The 10th edition of Beirut Art Fair is focused on the future, while centering itself on the past. Up at the Seaside Arena until Sept. 22, BAF is showing work by 380 artists, many of them new faces little known outside their countries.

The fair has chosen to explore Lebanon's art history with two shows.

The 50 never-before-exhibited pieces in "Lebanon Modern: Unexpected Trove - The Unseen Works of Hussein Madi" delve into the artist's production during his studies at Rome's Accademia di Belle Arte.

"It's an exhibition that covers the work of Hussein Madi between 1964 and 1970," curator Abed Al Kadiri told The Daily Star. "As soon as he arrived in Rome he began to paint landscapes of the Italian countryside.

"These landscapes for him were a way to connect with nature," he added, "and after

understanding the forms of nature, he could learn to abstract them.”

The exhibition is in two parts. Half is comprised of rural landscapes, while the other half shows abstract works Madi developed in his Rome studio.

“There are a lot of surprises in the exhibition because most of these paintings have never been seen before. They were in storage in Rome all this time,” Kadiri said, noting they’d been bought from Madi and sold to an antique dealer. “It took over 40 years for Mazen and Loulia Soueid to find them, buy them and bring them to Lebanon.”

The exhibition also includes old photos of Madi, documents and snippets of his Rome journal.

“My memories of Rome are hung up on the walls,” Madi said. “Artists don’t change the way they paint but the subjects they paint and the messages they’re sending out do, influenced by the places they visit.

“In Lebanon I don’t go out to paint,” he said. “If you go to paint, straight away someone will find something to ruin it for you. They’ll ask who you are. Why you’re here and painting. Is there a political message? I went to Rome to bring myself peace of mind.”

Staged with the patronage of the Italian Embassy with Christie’s auction house, the Madi show is an example of an ongoing culture exchange that Italian Ambassador Massimo Marotti says still sees about 360 Lebanese students enroll in Italian educational programs.

“Madi represents for us now what Rome represented for him several years ago,” Marotti told The Daily Star. “It’s fascinating for us to see how his artistic soul grew and developed in Rome ... a single episode in the long history of Italian-Lebanese artistic and cultural discourse.”

“A Tribute to Lebanon: An Orientalist Voyage,” BAF’s second historical exhibition, draws on non-Lebanese artists’ take on the territory that became the Lebanese Republic.

Curated by Gaby Daher, the show comprises over 100 artworks and artifacts from the Philippe Jabre Collection, dating from the 18th to the 21st centuries.

“Philippe Jabre and I have been working for 30 years to collect views on Lebanon by foreign artists and we now have about 300 works,” Daher told The Daily Star, “most by famous French artists. They often depicted the mountains and the sea in the same painting or the ports. They used to come through Lebanon to get to the Holy Land.”

Orientalist paintings of Mount Lebanon and coastal cities, as well as rare works by

artists such as Andy Warhol, David Hockney and photo-journalist Don McCullin are on display. Dolls, mother-of-pearl furniture, movie posters and decorations are also on show.

Some of the most eye-catching pieces are bronze lamps with colored glass, showing scenes of oriental bazaars, elephants and beautiful mosques, lit from within.

"These were a unique product of Vienna, created towards the end of 19th century by about 50 factories specialized in these lamps," Daher said. "All the ones we have here were by a company called Bergman ... Each one can be sold for 30-40,000 euros and were madly fashionable at the time."

Contrasted with the loud and sometimes puzzling art by contemporary artists, BAF's central exhibitions offer both a reprieve and a new perspective on local topics, seen through the lens of outside influence.

For more info on BAF, see beirut-art-fair.com