

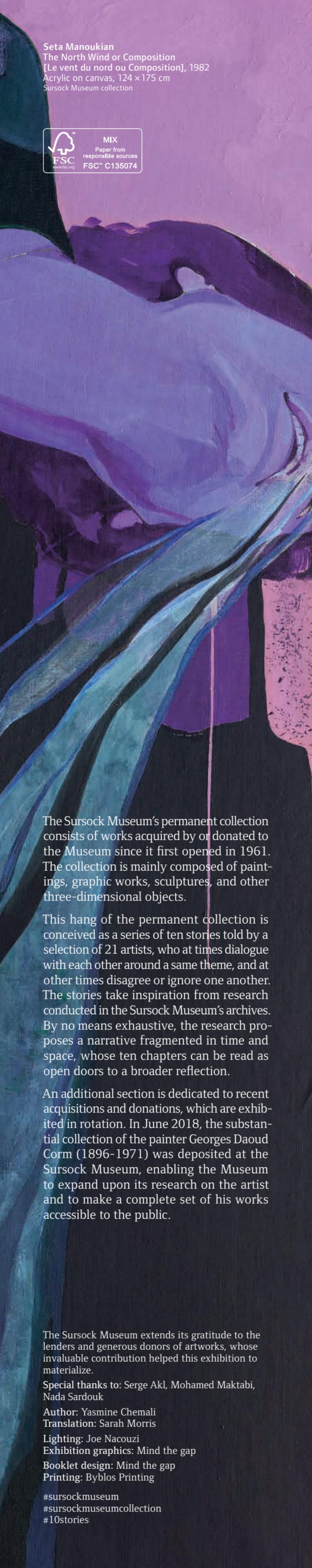
# Stories

from the Sursock  
Museum Collection  
1923 – 2016

متحف  
سرسوق



Sursock  
Museum



**Seta Manoukian**  
The North Wind or Composition  
[Le vent du nord ou Composition], 1982  
Acrylic on canvas, 124 x 175 cm  
Sursock Museum collection



The Sursock Museum's permanent collection consists of works acquired by or donated to the Museum since it first opened in 1961. The collection is mainly composed of paintings, graphic works, sculptures, and other three-dimensional objects.

This hang of the permanent collection is conceived as a series of ten stories told by a selection of 21 artists, who at times dialogue with each other around a same theme, and at other times disagree or ignore one another. The stories take inspiration from research conducted in the Sursock Museum's archives. By no means exhaustive, the research proposes a narrative fragmented in time and space, whose ten chapters can be read as open doors to a broader reflection.

An additional section is dedicated to recent acquisitions and donations, which are exhibited in rotation. In June 2018, the substantial collection of the painter Georges Daoud Corm (1896-1971) was deposited at the Sursock Museum, enabling the Museum to expand upon its research on the artist and to make a complete set of his works accessible to the public.

The Sursock Museum extends its gratitude to the lenders and generous donors of artworks, whose invaluable contribution helped this exhibition to materialize.

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#sursockmuseum

#sursockmuseumcollection

#10stories

## Thoughts on Naïve Art

Khalil Zgaib, Sophie Yéramian, Willy Aractingi

The annual Salon d’Automne, organized by the Sursock Museum, was an opportunity for many artists to present a work they had produced during the year. In its embrace of abstract and figurative art, the Salon often became a battleground for abstractionists and their figurative counterparts. Meanwhile, as if left untouched by such debates – through lack of interest or oversight on the part of art critics – a so-called “naïve” art took shape, with Khalil Zgaib (1911-1975) and Sophie Yéramian (1915-1984) as its central figures.

An “undisciplined art,” whose “inexpert” pictorial representations evoke a childlike universe, naïve works respond neither to academic pictorial codes nor to the Western rules of perspective in use since the Renaissance. Naïve scenes tend to reflect popular culture, depicting folkloric festivities and countryside landscapes often inhabited by animals. Blocks of bright, uniform color, flattened perspective, and a great attention to detail are all characteristic features of naïve art. Like other artistic currents that have suffered a lack of recognition by the canons of art, the naïve movement can be likened to art brut in its origins among autodidacts, including hospitalized patients, and its spontaneity, to folk art in its ethnic repertoire, and to primitive art through its use of simplified strokes. As free art, these currents stand in contrast to the established forms of Western art.

Khalil Zgaib was a hairdresser and self-taught artist. He began painting in the 1940s and came to the attention of Henri Seyrig, a French art amateur and director of the French Institute of Near-East Archeology. Zgaib was subsequently supported in his painting career by Maryette Charlton, who headed the Fine Arts department at the American University of Beirut. It has been said before that naïve art is by no means an art of ideals. Yet Zgaib’s portrayal of rural Lebanese life, as well as his paintings of urban scenes in Beirut and historic events, demonstrates quite the opposite.

Willy Aractingi (1930-2003) has been called a naïve painter. Whilst his paintings do clearly show a fondness for depicting animals and folk stories, in their sense of scale and absence of intricate detail, they resist easy categorization.

## To Paint, One Needs a Subject

Shafic Abboud

According to his father’s wishes, a career as an engineer had awaited Shafic Abboud (1926-2004). But in parallel to his studies, Abboud attended the Académie libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) and was taught by César Gemayel, a well-respected artist at the time.

Flouting the career path than had been drawn up for him by his family, Abboud left to France in 1947. It was to become his adopted country. In Paris, he attended the studios of André Lhote, Jean Metzinger, Othon Friesz, and Fernand Léger. Meanwhile at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, he encountered a whole generation of artists that had been marked by neo-cubism and lyrical abstraction. Abboud took part in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, representing French art internationally alongside the likes of Dufy, Hartung, Sugai, and Zao Wou-Ki. The artist probed abstraction, looking to invent a new form of figuration. In Abboud’s works, figures remain deconstructed whilst also being a subject of narration. The subjects he explores are familiar to us; the settings are domestic, such as a view of his studio, or from a window. To paint, one always requires a subject with which to interact in terms of form, color, light, and matter.

Absorbed in his pictorial technique, Abboud experimented extensively with mixing, emulsions, and varnishes. His studio notebooks resemble logbooks, containing all the painter’s formulas and impressions: “This canvas has become too heavy and does not make a strong enough impression, despite the intensity of the tones.” Abboud either reworked his paintings or acclaimed them, but would above all monitor them to see how they aged.

A complete artist, Abboud also tried his hand at the art of tapestry. His archives have so far revealed several pieces woven by the artist. The first of these is probably one commissioned by the Lebanese Tourist Office in Paris, and produced

at the Atelier du Marais in 1967. Abboud took a liking to weaving and began producing tapestries using a vertical weaving loom, in the manner of Ramses Wissa Wassef. Modern tapestry in Lebanon had been flourishing since the end of the 1950s, under the instruction of Roger Caron at his Ainab studio, and in the traditional workshops in Zouk Mikael run by Georges Audi and the Saade brothers. Abboud, like Etel Adnan and Aref El Rayess, was marked by the tapestry production of the Egyptian village of Harrania, which was guided by Wissa Wassef. In his Letter to Shafic Abboud (1974), Sami Karkabi recalls that the art of tapestry depends on the balance of masses, the choice of colors, and the tension of the picks; these many technical aspects limit the possibilities for composition and define the art of painter-weavers.

## Towards an Oriental Abstraction

Stelio Scamanga, Mounir Najem, Adel Saghir, Saïd Akl

In the 1960s, Beirut was buzzing with galleries, exhibitions, and new artistic initiatives, including the Salon d’Automne at the Sursock Museum, inaugurated in 1961. This thriving scene sparked many public debates across the press. The popularity of abstraction – the chosen mode of expression at the time for a number of international artists – pushed art critics to reflect on its place in a Lebanese context. Needless to say, the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Frank Kupka, and Piet Mondrian had opened the way to a direct art, derived from an inner necessity to render emotion.

In 1964, the painter Stelio Scamanga (b. 1934) wrote the manifesto, *Vers un nouvel espace: La perspective de l’abstrait* [Towards a new space: The abstract perspective], which he presented during an exhibition of his work at the Beirut gallery, L’Amateur. The manifesto was influenced by byzantine icons and Islamic art, and also inspired by the painter Saïd Akl’s (1926-2001) reflections on spatial abstraction. Scamanga proposes a theory of spatial representation in two dimensions, in contrast to the three-dimensional Western definition. The text associates the artists Scamanga, Mounir Najem (1933-1987), and Adel Saghir (b. 1930), who would come to represent what the artist and critic Samir Sayegh in 1971 named “Oriental abstraction.”

According to the artists, the Eastern origins of Sufism meant that only those from the East were able to penetrate the surface, completely abandon the material and physical dimension, and devote themselves to mystical elevation. In their view, Westerners perceived the world as their eyes presented it to them and rendered this material reality, whereas Eastern artists abandoned all control over the mind and instead went in search of their deeper identity. The world is thus invisible, impalpable, and symbolic.

## Playing with Form

Saloua Raouda Choucair

A pioneering figure of the Lebanese abstract movement, Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017) turned to the essence of Islamic arts: the infinite, in which divine presence merges with material reality. Choucair was perfectly in tune with this artistic tradition, which seeks out pure, harmonious form. At the end of the 1940s, she dedicated herself to an artistic practice with a scientific logic based on geometry, mathematical laws, and quantum physics. From the 1960s, in the full maturity of her thought, Choucair’s sculptural work exemplified the originality of her art.

Wood, stone, terracotta, metal, Plexiglas, and fiberglass were just some of the materials that Choucair shaped in modules, assembled, superimposed, or set apart from one another. With *Composition* (1965), these modules, which she called *qa.sā’id* and *mu’al-laqāt*, or poems, become veritable constructions whose carefully controlled, repeated rhythm lead us towards the notion of unity.

Of limitless creativity, Choucair was not able to bring all her ideas for water, sculptures, lamps, and other inventions to fruition; only their fragile models in painted wood and terracotta remain as traces of her intentions.

## A Fragmented World

Seta Manoukian, Paul Guiragossian, Jean Khalifé

In 1986, Seta Manoukian (b. 1945) was quoted in *L’Orient-Le Jour*: “The problems of this era are to be found at the heart of the city, not in the countryside... on the most emotional surface in the world: the human face.” Encouraged by the artist

Paul Guiragossian (1926-1993), then Jean Khalifé (1923-1978), Manoukian quickly established her vision of Man, beset by anxieties and troubles. She depicts an unstable world, whose precarious equilibrium threatens the city of Beirut. Beirut and urban street scenes are leitmotifs in the artist’s work. The faces she paints are deformed, as though blurred at the moment of a camera’s shutter release. Can one recognize in her works the influence of Guiragossian’s exploration of exile and identity in Lebanese society, or Khalifé’s lamentation of the imprisonment of man and his profound solitude?

Born to a family that had survived the Armenian genocide of 1916, Guiragossian moved to the Armenian area of Bourj Hammoud, Beirut, in the 1950s. Family, groups, maternity, and childhood are among the subjects most dear to him. With their stretched silhouettes, the women in these paintings are reminiscent of those of Jean Khalifé and Georges Guv.

As President of the Association of Lebanese Painters and Sculptors from 1967 to 1969, Khalifé played an important role in raising the profile of modern Lebanese art. He studied at the Académie libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA), followed by the École nationale des Beaux-Arts and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. On returning to Beirut, he showed an interest in abstract art and a taste for colors straight out of the tube, that he would deposit on his canvases with a quick, decisive touch. In Khalifé’s work, the female body, and particularly the face, disappears under rapid brushstrokes, as if to express his concern for the future of his country. Khalifé who was deeply affected by the Lebanese Civil War, fills his canvases with figures appalled by the horrors of war.

## For a Humanist Art

Georges Daoud Corm

Georges Daoud Corm (1896-1971), the son of the painter Daoud Corm, was born in Beirut in 1896. He attended the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and the Académie Julian. Mostly composed of portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes, his œuvre demonstrates his skill at depicting different subjects and his avant-garde spirit, through his use of a variety of techniques including watercolor, pastel, sanguine, pencil, charcoal, and oil on canvas or on masonite board.

Corm lived in Egypt from 1928 to 1956, but made regular visits to Lebanon in the 1940s. Commissions for portraits of Lebanese and Egyptian religious and society figures enabled Corm to earn a living and follow in the footsteps of his father.

In 1966, Corm published *Essai sur l’art et la civilisation de ce temps* [The Art and Civilization of this Era], a manifesto in which the painter advocates a humanist art in which the figure of Man is placed at the center of artistic and intellectual expression. The artist also critiqued the march of modern art towards abstraction and called for the preservation of a realist pictorial aesthetic not subject to the influence of the art market. An accomplished artist, Corm greatly contributed to the development of the arts and humanities in Lebanon and left behind a significant œuvre, now housed at the Sursock Museum.

## The Challenge of Landscape Painting

Georges Daoud Corm, Saliba Douaihy

In a recent interview (July 2018), Etel Adnan recalls the particular difficulty of painting the Lebanese landscape “due to the intensity of the light, which saps the colors and renders everything gray.” Many Lebanese artists have come up against this problem. Omar Onsi and Mustapha Faroukh have produced remarkable watercolors, but the challenge of oil painting is an immense one. Gibran Khalil Gibran tried his hand, but often used landscape in a decorative function for other scenes. Saliba Douaihy (1912-1994) succeeded in the challenge by transposing and interpreting the landscape as lines of force, as a mental landscape, and by not adhering to its “real” colors and details. Yet with his impressionist touch, he could also portray the entrance to a mysterious cave, bathed in sunlight.

Georges Daoud Corm (1896-1971) studied the Lebanese mountain and sketched it from life. Dramatic, jagged, and full of surprises, the mountain takes shape through shadow play and changing contours, as in the touches of orange that turn to a deep pink. In addition to his landscapes, Corm’s seascapes are also imbued with a mysterious and austere radiance. Like Paul Cezanne’s favored Sainte Victoire mountain, the Lebanese landscape is both massive and unreal, and a challenge to be overcome.

## Cici Sursock’s Portraits of Artists

Assadour Bezdikian, Juliana Seraphim

Cici Tomazeo Sursock (1923-2015) made a name for herself as a talented painter of icons and portraits. Sursock’s sitters – young and old, men and women – are all beautiful. With a quasi-mono-chrome palette, her portraits would hardly look out of place on magazine covers.

Known society figures such as Fairouz and Nadia Tueni sat for Sursock in her studio, where she would paint them from life, wide-eyed and youthful with smooth skin and an almost animal presence.

From 1996, Sursock, who was popular with the Lebanese public, partnered with Paul Guiragossian, Olga Limansky, Mounir Najem, and Assadour Bezdikian for “portrait days.” Launched by Odile Mazloum’s gallery, L’Amateur, the concept was a simple one: every year, in Montmartre style, the artists sketched visitors for the modest sum of 25 L.L. for a charcoal sketch that took thirty minutes, or 100 L.L. for a pastel drawing completed in two hours. These intensive portrait sessions continued until 1976, by which time the Lebanese Civil War was already raging. Without exception, Cici Sursock’s subjects – including Hrair, Assadour Bezdikian, and Juliana Seraphim – are portrayed with doe eyes, coupled with relatively angular features.

Through the use of repeated signs and geometric elements, Assadour’s (b. 1943) works evoke the chaos and fragility that characterize the human condition. Figures with simplified outlines sometimes inhabit these two-dimensional landscapes. Assadour’s surrealist, motile compositions dialogue with those of Seraphim (1934-2005), whose fantastical universe blends symbols relating to femininity, the animal kingdom and architectural forms. In their almost mechanic musicality, Assadour’s etchings echo the sensual poetry of Seraphim’s drawings.

## Beyrouth appelle les générations futures

Laure Ghorayeb

Laure Ghorayeb (b. 1931) is a writer, art critic, and full-time artist. Alongside her writings, Ghorayeb has produced many paintings, which she began to disseminate in the 1960s. In her work, writing and painting are closely intertwined, and chronicle the different periods of her life in Lebanon.

In *Beyrouth appelle les générations futures* [Beirut calls to its future generations] (2010-2011), Ghorayeb fills her compositions with myriad details, drawings, calligraphic lines, superimposed found objects, press cuttings, and items from photographic archives. Assembled on the same support, these elements evoke fragments of her personal life, but also aspects of contemporary Lebanese history. In this room, her story is told in three chapters: 1920-1960, 1960-1975, and 1975-1990.

## New Additions to the Permanent Collection

Since the reopening of the Sursock Museum in 2015, over a thousand works have entered its permanent collection as donations, acquisitions, and long-term loans. Among them are 224 paintings by Willy Aractingi (1930-2003) illustrating *The Fables* of La Fontaine and offered to the museum in 2016, and 828 oil paintings, pastel works, and charcoal and sanguine drawings by Georges Daoud Corm (1896-1971) that illustrate the artist’s entire career.

The collection also includes individual works offered to the Museum, such as *Florilège* [Anthology] (1960) by Saïd Akl (1926-2001), which represented Lebanon at the Paris Biennale of 1960/1961; etchings by artists including Assadour (b. 1943) and Etel Adnan (b. 1925); and artist portraits by Cici Sursock (1923-2015).

These new additions deepen our understanding of modern Lebanese art. Donations by contemporary artists including Ali Cherri (b. 1976), Simone Fattal (b. 1942), Samar Mogharbel (b. 1958), and Nabil Nahas (b. 1949) demonstrate their support of the Museum. The works on display in this section are rotated on a regular basis.