

ARTS

Saloua Raouda Choucair, Early Exponent of Abstract Arabian Art, Dies at 100

By WILLIAM GRIMES FEB. 17, 2017

Saloua Raouda Choucair, a Lebanese artist and one of the first abstractionists in the Arab world, whose sense of line and form — derived from Islamic art — brought a new idiom to modernism, died on Jan. 26 at her home in Beirut. She was 100.

The death was confirmed by her daughter, Hala Schoukair.

It was not until she was in her 90s that Ms. Choucair (pronounced shoo-CARE), who lived and worked nearly all her life in Beirut, gained recognition outside Lebanon as an unsung hero of the modernist story, a distinctive, eloquent artist relegated to the margins of a traditionally Western narrative.

Out of place in her native country, too, for many years, she worked in obscurity — persevering through Lebanon’s civil war in the 1970s and ’80s, filling her apartment with small-scale geometric paintings and modular, interlocking sculptures that reflected a distinctive, highly refined understanding of line, form and materials.

In 2013, the Tate Modern in London organized a retrospective that came, as the critic Laura Cumming wrote in *The Observer*, as “a bolt from the blue.”

She added, “Saloua Raouda Choucair is an extraordinary new name.”

Two years later the CRG Gallery in Manhattan organized Ms. Choucair’s first solo show in the United States. Profoundly affected by Alzheimer’s disease, she was

unable to attend either one or enjoy her belated success.

“All the timings were wrong with my mother, so I’m not surprised this happened so late,” her daughter told *The International Herald Tribune* (now the international edition of *The New York Times*) in 2013. “She started with abstraction when people in Beirut were just discovering Impressionism. In the ’60s, no one was paying attention to her, and then when they started paying attention, the war started. Even if there was some good attention, something always went a little wrong.”

In an effort to redraw the art-historical map, Jessica Morgan, now the director of the Dia Art Foundation in New York, organized the Tate show after chancing upon a work by Ms. Choucair in 2009 at a Beirut gallery. Speaking to BBC television in 2013, she said, “Her work is highly experimental, and she continued throughout her life to produce an extraordinary body of sculpture and painting that in many ways allows us to rethink abstraction.”

She was born Saloua Raouda in Beirut on June 24, 1916. Her father, Salim Raouda, was a landowner and pharmacist. He died of typhus soon after being conscripted into the Ottoman Army during World War I, leaving his wife, Zalfa Najjar, to raise their three children. The family, which was well off, belonged to the often persecuted Druze sect, a non-Islamic religion.

Saloua attended the progressive Ahliyyah School for Girls and took painting lessons with the nationalist landscape artists Moustafa Faroukh and Omar Onsi. She studied biology at the American Junior College for Women and philosophy and history at the American University of Beirut. An extended trip to Cairo in 1943 exposed her to Islamic art and architecture.

She helped found the Arab Cultural Center in Beirut and in 1947 exhibited at its gallery in what was often cited as the first showing of modern abstract art in the Arab world.

That year she left for Paris to study at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, whose traditionalist training she supplemented with classes at the more freewheeling *Académie de la Grande Chaumière*. After hearing the painter and sculptor Fernand Léger speak at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, she spent time at his studio before coming

into her own as an early member of L'Atelier d'Art Abstrait (the Studio of Abstract Art), led by Edgard Pillet and Jean Dewasne.

She developed a series of jewel-like small paintings of interlocking geometric forms that she exhibited with the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, founded by Sonia Delaunay and Nelly van Doesburg. In 1951 she had a solo show at the Galerie Colette Allendy before returning to Beirut, where she married Yusif Choucair, a journalist.

In addition to her daughter, she is survived by two granddaughters.

Ms. Choucair's approach was rigorously reductive and purist.

"Arabs are the most sensitively sophisticated of peoples in understanding art, and that is why they broached the subject at its abstract essence," she wrote in her 1951 manifesto, "How the Arab Understood Visual Art." The goal, she added, was "the eternal essence that is defined neither by time nor space."

In the early 1960s she shifted her focus to sculpture, producing modular works that could be disassembled or reassembled into squares, rectangles and towers with an architectural feel. Le Corbusier's modular housing project in Marseille, France, which she visited in 1949, made a deep impression on her, and she developed ingenious variations on the modular principle in her "Poems" series of the 1960s and '70s.

Ms. Choucair worked in a variety of materials, including wood, aluminum, brass, terra cotta and tufa stone, with a pared-down elegance and sensuous touch that sometimes recalled Brancusi. Her biomorphic wood sculptures, typified by the "Screws" series of the 1970s in particular, radiated warmth and simplicity.

One of her most extended projects was the "Duals" series of the '70s and '80s, two-part interlocking forms in aluminum, brass, fiberglass, wood and other materials.

Ms. Choucair worked steadily through Lebanon's civil war, which began in 1975. It left a visible imprint on her painting "Two = one," made during her Paris years, when a bomb hit her building, ripping holes in the canvas and embedding glass shards in it.

She struggled to find an audience. “She was an avant-garde who was inspired by the principles of Islamic art, but without any visual references to what people were accustomed to seeing in that art,” her daughter, Ms. Schoukair, told The Wall Street Journal in 2013.

“There was no correlation to calligraphy or Arab-esque patterns,” she said. “Her style is pure abstraction of form and line, just like a mathematical equation. Therefore my mother was often misunderstood, pushed aside, ignored, and left to be on her own.”

Attention gradually came her way. In 1974 the Lebanese Artists Association sponsored a retrospective of her work at the National Council of Tourism in Beirut, and in 2011 her dealer, Saleh Barakat, and her daughter organized a retrospective at the Beirut Exhibition Center. In recent years her work has been seen at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the Whitechapel Gallery in London and the Haus der Kunst in Munich.

“A critic once told me that my work has a European influence,” Ms. Choucair told one interviewer. “I object. It is a universal influence. What I experience, everyone in the world experiences, and, in fact, all of the rules I apply to my sculpture are derived from Islamic geometric design.”

Correction: February 26, 2017

An obituary in some copies last Sunday about the Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair misstated the given name of an artist with whom she was associated. He was Edgard Pillet, not Edgar.

A version of this article appears in print on February 20, 2017, on Page B4 of the New York edition with the headline: Saloua Raouda Choucair, 100, Lebanese Abstractionist.