

## Lena Kelekian: Geologist, Iconographer

*(Born in 1959, in Beirut; of Armenian and Greek Cypriot origin; currently living in Bois de Bologne [Matn]. Language: English, with some Arabic.)*

**M**y name is Lena Kelekian. I was born on the 18 of May, 1959, in Beirut, of Armenian parents. My father is Lebanese Armenian, my mother is Cypriot. I have one sister, two years younger than me, her name is Hilda. I went to an Armenian elementary school, where my parents put me to learn Armenian. Of course we also learned Arabic, English and French. Then I was at the British School, and later I went to the American University of Beirut. My passion was to become a geologist, a scientist like my grandfather. So I went into AUB to study geology, first to get a BS and then an MA. But I did not finish my thesis; I had to leave because of the war.

From when I was four years old, I used to collect rocks and minerals from all the countries I visited. At that age my grandfather told me what plate tectonics are. We used to have the map of the world in our dining room so we would learn the world while eating. That was my mother's indirect way of teaching us (laughs). My grandfather taught us how South Africa fits with South America. This really hit my brain. My mother was from the Royal School of Music (UK), she always encouraged us -- besides school studies, we had to have so many professors, because my mother didn't know Arabic we had to learn Arabic, our national tongue. In fact once we insisted on learning Greek instead of Arabic, but she said, "You are Lebanese you have to learn Arabic. I am Cypriot so I speak Greek. Now we are very fluent in Arabic.

When we were young, both of us were naughty. When I was six years old and my younger sister was four, we learnt the piano, and tennis and skiing as well. When I began to play the piano, from six years old, we used to give recitals at AUB Assembly Hall, which was really nice. The first time I stepped into AUB, I had to -- there was a banyan tree and I jumped all over its roots. I told my mother, "One day I'll come to this place and learn." And it happened (laughs). AUB was always part of my life. Our cousins didn't go to AUB, they went to the Imperial College in London, all the clan studied in London, but we, the Lebanese ones, went to AUB, although I continued later at the University of London. I was good at the piano then, I know all the journals used to write, "The little pianist", and "What will she become?" and I don't know what. Then, with the war, things changed, our piano teacher passed away, I entered

university, and we were always studying. Twice a week we had piano lessons, and at the weekend my father used to take us to the theatre or the cinema, whatever. During the summer, we had fun, my mother used to take us to see our friends, and sometimes we traveled. And then, as you know, I started geology at AUB, though my father wanted me to do business - because he's an industrialist. But I hate business with all my heart (laughs). So I kept on saying, "No, I want to become a geologist". So I kept on, and took my degree. I didn't get my minor degree, because in my time they didn't give you a degree as a minor, but I did all my electives, mainly archeology. I always liked ancient art. Once, while I was at the British school, I won the Fabiano prize for art.



Zeina: My sister won it too!  
Lena: Really? How nice!  
It's an encouragement. My mother used to paint before she became a pianist. My sister and I did it the other way round (laughs). It's all expression through the fingers, but in a different way. It is always art. While at AUB, I took theater courses because I always liked to combine science and art together. I love this

combination. Geology is the mother of all science, because in it there's biology, chemistry, physics, everything. And then combining, embellishing it with art, this is what I like. In 1981 I graduated with a BS. In 1982, I was doing my MA when there was the Israeli invasion, we had to leave the dorms, so I didn't finish my thesis.

Zeina: Where did you live?

Lena: We lived in Zalka, on the highway. That's too far to come and go everyday. So we had to live in the dorms. It was the first time that we lived away from our parents. Then in 1982 there was the invasion, and that's when I became a 'true believer'. It was because of the many events that were going on around us. Before this I wasn't a 'true believer', but that year I came to my senses, I became a 'true believer' through some miracles through which God helps us. I read the Bible and my mother helped me - she is a 'true believer' too - so I got to understand the meaning of life. Now I have my own view, my own way of thinking. Here, for example I make a triangle (she draws a triangle). On the three sides of the triangle you put 'theology', 'sciences', 'arts'. Let me tell you this, and then I will come back to my motto in life.

In 1982 I did some research on my own, because of the war I couldn't go back to AUB. First I did research on fur, then I decided to read the Encyclopedia Britannica, a volume each month. I stopped because the little letters were too hard for me (laughs). Then I started painting. I had taken extra courses at



AUB, you know, for example ceramics. I started painting first on plates, then I decided to paint icons. Part of our family is Cypriot, and we have British and Greek members. I had done Byzantine art and architecture in my archeology elective courses as I told you. But I couldn't find anyone to teach me. Then, you know, I used to pray everyday, it happens that whenever I ask something from God, somehow, somewhere, he gives it to me. It was then I read about Père Lammens visiting Lebanon. I said to myself, "Look at that! He is the best iconographer in the world!" So I tried to find him. He said, "You'll teach me geology, and of course I'll teach you iconography." Of course they choose whom they teach. I was his only student, and we used to go, my mother and me, to the convent. At that time he was staying for a couple of months in Lebanon - usually he's in Paris or Europe. Later I met him in Paris, and we continued. He told me, "Since you are a geologist and into mineralogy" - because my thesis was going to be on minerals, I have a big collection, you know that ancient peoples used to extract natural pigments from minerals - "You are the expert in minerals and I don't know anything about them. So I will teach you, and you will paint icons in the authentic Byzantine way." So he taught me the real way, step by step, starting from the wood, which took us several months, and I carried on with him and with other iconographers my grandfather introduced me to in Cyprus, Greece, and all over Europe. I went on for ten years studying icon painting and restoration. I was painting and creating things, and I continued my research in extracting pigments from minerals, also from vegetables and animals, though you can't compare them with minerals which have a much wider range. My professors at the University of London, where I continued later in restoration and conservation, told me that I have discovered new pigments. Wherever I went in the world I used to collect and exchange rocks with my geology friends - I am a member of the World Association of Geology.

Maybe God bestowed on me a talent for expressing myself in a different way, just to put the pictures in my hand, and spread the news to everybody. It's a way of preaching. So I started doing icons, they came out beautifully. I said to myself, "Why don't I take some courses in theology?" I went on and studied theology for four years, and I got a DST.<sup>1</sup> So during that time, I was doing my iconography research, and studying in Europe, and doing theology. By 1992, I had my DST, and had ended my studies in Europe, and was painting. They were nice pieces, I was happy with them. I used to go to art exhibitions. At one exhibition the lady owner asked me what I did. I said, "I and my sister Hilda, I paint icons and she paints parchment." Hilda had graduated from BUC in fine arts and interior design, then she moved into sacred art, Christian and Islamic. So we were both working in parallel expressing the same theme in different ways, mine, the old Byzantine style, hers is her own, but both are the renewing of old art. While I was at the University of London, where I did conservation and restoration, and later when I was in Italy, one of my professors said, "You have a different green, it's very rare, where did you find it?" This is how I found out that I have discovered new



pigments. I have eighty nine colors, up to the Renaissance they had forty three. So I had a bigger range, including undertones. It is very enjoyable to pick and extract pigments. It is science and art in one. All my icons are made from natural pigments. Now the University of London wants me to write a book on natural pigments. I started, but I have so many things to do. Then in 1992, this lady I was telling you about said, "Let me see what you do." So we said, "Fine, we will bring you some of our work." We always wanted to have exhibitions but we never thought it would happen.

Zeina: Where was it?

Lena: At the Station des Arts. I took some of my work that I had at home and Hilda took two of her parchments. We went to her office. Juliana Seraphim, a well known artist was there, she was surprised to see young people like us doing such good work. The gallery owner, Marlene, told me that she would open her new gallery with our work. So wow! That was good (laughs). The opening was under Monseigneur Audi's patronage. He is my spiritual father. It was a big success. We were two sisters, and everybody thought that we were nuns. From that day we started exhibiting together, Hilda and me. After that we prepared a brochure, like this [shows a brochure], which explains what an icon is, what a parchment is, also the cross, and the history of fresco. There are crosses



like this, these are symbolic. See – one, two, three points for God, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is an Armenian cross, this is Byzantine, this is Syriac. This is so people who get an invitation will be interested in reading it. People have been very encouraging. There is scientific research behind our work. We should always be humble, because this is not our work, it's what God gives us. I always combine theology and sciences together, it is very nice, especially in the US, I have many friends there.

In 1992 – because I had become a member of the Iconographers of the World in the USA – when I sent them an invitation, they gave it to Dr Billy Graham, and he wrote us a letter. I opened it and read it, it was Billy Graham writing to us, he wanted to purchase one of my paintings and one of Hilda's for his museum. So in fact we were encouraged by everybody, and our work was getting almost sold out. I did not want to sell all my icons, but my mother convinced us that we should spread their blessings to other houses. After that we had another exhibition. And that same year, 1992, we sent the icons to the Museum [Billy Graham's] and to the Salon d'Automne in Paris. It was the 90th anniversary. They accepted our work because it was new to them. We just sent one piece each, to be selected from among 3000 artists. From 3000 they select around 500, and we were among those. These were the first sacred art paintings to be chosen in the whole ninety year history of the Salon d'Automne. We carried on, and started exhibiting all over the world. We got invitations from London, Paris, from all over France, from Italy, from Stockholm. We were awarded a gold medal by the Association de Mérite et Dévouement Français. And there were other awards.<sup>2</sup>

Last year, several artist friends told me that there was a notice in the newspapers about the Judraniyat competition, as part of a project to beautify Lebanon. They said it had to be a mural painting to decorate the wall of the Sassine tunnel in Beirut. "And since you are a muralist ... !" I forgot to tell you that I did mural painting at the same time as restoration and conservation of icons at the University of London, and in several other countries – Greece, Italy, and Spain. We visited old churches, maybe more than a thousand, in remote islands where nobody lives. We went in rowing boats. Yes, on the borders of Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece, where nobody goes. So I said, okay, it's good something new is being done in Lebanon. I took an appointment and had an interview. I felt a bit overqualified, I didn't want to take anybody's place. They said, "No, anybody can enter the competition." There were rules. You can not – in the tunnel you have to have something that does not distract the drivers. I did thirteen designs, then I forgot about it because I was too busy with other exhibitions. Then the organizers called me, they said, "The deadline is in two days, don't forget." So I started working. I sat at the computer with friends who are better than me in graphic arts. I did two designs. One was with different types of trees found in Lebanon, with a sky like Lebanon's. It was fresh and nice. It so happened that a year ago I saw a painting of a tree, just one tree. I cut it out and put it up in my studio. I was looking at that tree for a whole year.

I always wanted to paint it. It was in my brain, so I used it for one of the designs. For the second design, I did a museum with the paintings of all Lebanese painters. It was as if you were walking into a museum in the tunnel. After a month, there was a jury, I was the winner of the first prize (smiles). The jury asked how come that I had shifted from icons. I said I hadn't. This could be my geological background coming out. I couldn't have put icons in the tunnel, no way! Now they want me to be in the Executive Committee. Judraniyat has a plan to embellish all of Lebanon, mainly tunnels and empty walls, to give a colorful touch to the grey cement that is everywhere. It will refresh people. Now I am working with the Judraniyat helping them to beautify Lebanon.

My sister is also involved, but now she has got married and is busy cooking (laughs). Now Hilda is the General Manager of our father's factory. It makes uniforms. She told me I should come and help. I gave it a try for six months. My God, I couldn't, I couldn't get there in the morning. I can't wake up before ten o'clock. I sleep late, and I enjoy it. If I'm not painting, I'm dancing somewhere. Believe me I have to socialize, or something happens to me. I had to try the business field and industry, but it didn't work out for me, I couldn't. I am back to sciences and arts, and to my prayers

Let me tell you what my motto in life is. There are several. First, the motto of the family is the verse in the psalms, "Be as clever as the serpent and as humble as the dove." This has always been with us. Then there is the triangle I told you about. This is the way I combine the scientific, the spiritual and the artistic. Just as we eat every day to nourish the body, so we should nourish the spirit so as to be in balance and have a happy life.

You can speak to God at any time you know, no problem. For example, in the morning I always pray. I have my own prayer, first praising God, then asking him to protect us and give me what I want. He will take care of you. At night I always read the psalms and pray. I light a candle and say my prayers, and then I sleep. Even if its four o'clock in the morning, I don't care how sleepy I am, I keep my eyes open, read the psalms, pray, and thank God. What I do is to make use of the sciences in art to praise God. I take pigments from the earth and I give them back to God in his image. Do you want me to say anything else?

Zeina: Say something about you as a person.

Lena: Ah, as a character too? Me, what should I tell you? I like to be with friends, I love my friends with all my heart, and I always like to make new friends. I am friends with scientists in NASA who are into theology, they're true believers.

Zeina: What exactly do you mean by 'true believer'?

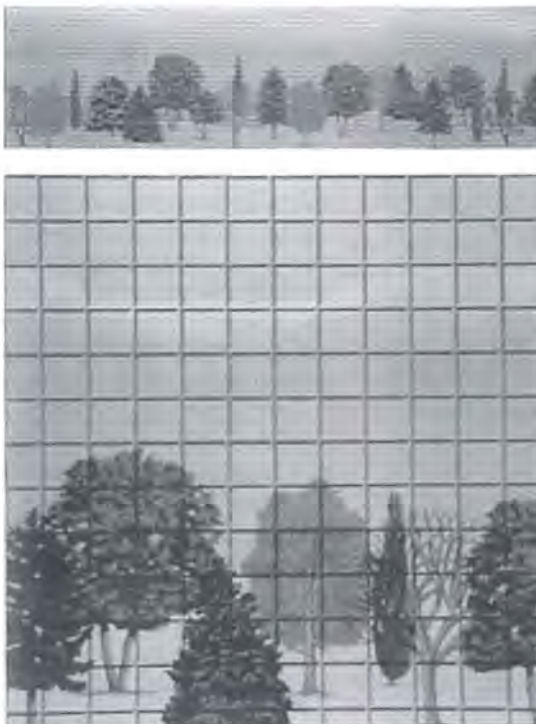
Lena: It is to believe in God, to believe in Jesus Christ, to believe in the Virgin Mary. To become a true believer you have to know who is God, omnipotent, omniscient. And Jesus is the son of God who came for us, was crucified for us, for our sins.



So if you believe in God through Jesus Christ. Then you have to pray always. This is as if you have your cellular always open to God. Okay? What I am saying is that you should always have contact with God. If you have this relationship, whenever you are in need he will always come to you and help you. Before I sleep, I say my prayers and say please tell me what you want to tell me. So I open the Psalms at any page. Then I read the page and He gives me His message. Always a different page. You just open anywhere and read. And then I have all those prayers against bad people, and I pray for all the poor on earth. Maybe I am preaching, no? (laughs) It is because you are asking me what I think inside. Usually I don't talk this much because I give my formula very scientifically to my friends. And to my surprise, most of my friends from AUB are true believers, and sometimes they look at me and say, "What's this, you are always dancing?!" I can go and dance every night, there is nothing wrong in it. It's as if, because I do icons, I should be saintly, and not go dancing until four in the morning. But if you know who you are, nothing can go wrong; you know where you stand, where your limits are. After all, I'm a normal person, a woman not a nun. I lead a normal life, and a believer life. I enjoy having fun, there is nothing wrong in it. Sometimes I give lectures to schools on iconography and how to behave in life, and I always tell them it's okay to have girlfriends and boyfriends. I don't have a boyfriend but it's because I don't want to, it would be a loss of time for me. It's alright if you find the right person. But if you don't find the right person, it's a waste of time. I have so many friends, we go out together, but I don't find myself bound to somebody. Maybe now I'm at an age when I should think seriously of -- (laughs).

Zeina: What about Lebanon, as being born Armenian ?

Lena: Ah, you know, they are very nice people, the Armenians. But I am not a fanatic Armenian. Some are fanatics. I never speak Armenian in front of anybody who doesn't understand the language. I don't have many Armenian friends, although I like them all. I have only one, maybe two, and they are like me. We don't mingle much with the secluded part (gestures with hands). I have nothing against them but I don't like their seclusion, 'Us' and 'You.' For me, it's all the world. Lebanon is my country, I am Lebanese but of Armenian origin. I could be Cypriot but, no, I feel Lebanese. No, it is the whole earth



that we belong to, we are human beings. I don't differentiate between people. I enjoy the intellectuals more, but I respect everybody (pause). What else can I tell you? Well, I love my parents too (laughs), and my sister, and my dog. I run to help anybody who wants anything from me. What else? I have bad habits. I can't wake early. I can't take orders from anyone. Nobody gives me orders. I only take orders from God. Not even from my parents. When we were young we used to get beaten (laughs), oh a lot. We were often punished. I was the lazy type. Ah yes, when we were really young, Hilda and I, Hilda is like that, if my mother asked her to fetch a glass of water she would go straight away, she was good. Me, no, I didn't go, so I ended up going fifty times to get them water as a punishment (laughs). And she would laugh at me.

What else? Oh, I am lazy, I don't fix my bed, I don't cook. It might be different if I got married, I don't know. I like to have breakfast in bed (laughs). I am getting spoilt here.

Maybe I have other vices, I don't know. What else? When I walk in the mountains I always have my eyes on the ground, and I always find things. Once we were in Cyprus, my uncle took us somewhere to a restaurant, the whole family. While we were walking, guess what I found in the parking lot -- jasper! It is a semi-precious rock. The whole parking lot was full of jasper. I love collecting, it is my passion. I like painting on walls too. Maybe I'll do something for 'Beirut 1999.' I like dancing a lot. It's exercise, it is real exercise, and it is creative. All your body moves. It's exercise with music. And I like to wear attractive things. I don't like to look messy. Because, as a woman, I feel you should be 'coquette.' I like wearing mini-skirts in hot weather so that they don't think I am a nun (laughs). But all this is within limits, within rules and limits. You must know where you are and where you stand, where your limits are. So you won't hurt anybody. One day I would like to write a book on sciences and geology too, and a book on icons, the rules and everything, painting, restoring the symbols.

Recorded and translated by Zeina Misk

## End Notes

1. Diplome Supérieure en Théologie, a course given by the Université Saint Joseph and the Université du Saint Esprit de Kaslik.

2. Lena Kelikian lists exhibitions she and her sister have participated in and awards they have won: the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, in museums and galleries in Stockholm, Copenhagen, New York, California, Muscat, Qatar, Kuwait, Malta. Also listings in international artistic Who's Who and Yearbooks. Lena is also member of many local cultural associations such as Beirut Patrimoine and the Movement Culturel of Antelias.