

A Unique Photographic Exhibit of Cultural Life in the Beka'a Region —

Presented by Dr. Aida Kanafani

The Lebanese war, by reducing many parts of Lebanon into heaps of ruins, has aroused in the population a strong desire to save what has been left and to revive traditions and art work threatened by disappearance. Plans for post-war reconstruction include research work and investigation projects, particularly in rural regions where the traditional cultural heritage is supposed to be better preserved than in urban regions. The Arts and Crafts Associations (artisanats) have been diligently working on the revival of local crafts. For this purpose they have created several centers and organized impressive exhibits of their works.

The exhibit presented by Dr. Aida Kanafani, November 18-30, 1981, at Epreuve d'Artiste gallery, Beirut, is a unique achievement, because it introduces, through a collection of enlarged, color photographs, the outstanding features of a cultural heritage that grew in a relatively ignored district, the Beka'a valley of Lebanon, and is now on the verge of disappearing. The exhibit includes also specimens of locally made household articles and metal work. But, says Dr. Kanafani, the characteristic of the exhibit is that it tries to express the soul and the particularities of the Beka'a village. It brings out a way of life, a native culture growing from the soil like flowers. The photographs try to capture the beauty and talent represented in these products of human energy and initiative.

First come the housing arts, with a vineyard on top or in front, the wooden ceiling which gives warmth in winter and coolness in summer; the mud roof with the stone roller, the wooden ladder standing against the outside wall; the carved wooden doors with semi-circular arched tops and, inside the house, the alcove, the wall closets, the round windows piercing the tops of the wall, the home-made chimney, the goat-skin and sheepskin covering the floor.



Besides the housing arts, the photographs also present the important culinary arts performed by women: preparation of «Kishk», the delicious food made of fermented laban and wheat; «Burghul», boiled and crushed wheat, used for «Kobbeh» and «Tabbouleh»; the large tender «markouk» loaves, baked on a large domed tray, over a stone fireplace.

The Bedouins of the Beka'a have their share in the exhibit. Besides original photographs of Bedouin girls, of sheikhs fingering their beads, of women pounding coffee, there is a display of beautiful reed screens covered with woven colored wool.

The exhibit also contains specimens of pottery in varied forms, copperware, tiny household articles, women's cosmetics and so on.

How did Dr Kanafani get interested in such a project?

She says that, after specializing in sociology at the Lebanese University, she was sent on a scholarship to Texas University, U.S.A., where she got a Ph.D. in anthropology. Another scholarship from the Lebanese University permitted her to make an ethnic field-study of people in the Arab Emirates; this study will soon be published in a book. Her experience there aroused her interest in making a similar study in Beka'a, Lebanon. The artistic photographs are the fruit of a 14 months' research in that area.

• Did you take special courses in photography?

— No, but I practiced it as an amateur. In the States, I won the Nikon prize in a photography contest.

About the aim of the exhibit, Kanafani says: It is my wish that it will help to awaken people's interest in the esthetic and historical value of this heritage and lead them to study the possibility of preventing its dying out, because they would discover that it is worth keeping and reviving, in its present form or in an improved one. Such an interest should cover not only Beka'a but every part of Lebanon. Research will show that the Lebanese districts, in spite of physical differences, have a common cultural heritage which must be preserved.