

## H.R.H. Princess Wijdan Ali of Jordan

The National Gallery of Jordan celebrated its fifth anniversary on the 7th of February 1984. Founded in 1979 by the Royal Society of Fine Arts, the Gallery's main objective is to be a pioneer of the arts not only in Jordan but also in the rest of the Arab world.

The president and founder of the Royal Society of Fine Arts is H.R.H. Princess Wijdan Ali, an eminent artist herself.

Born in 1939, Princess Wijdan completed her graduate studies at Beirut College for Women (Beirut University College today)- in history and politics. Since the 1960's her canvasses have figured in both group and one-person exhibitions in many European, Arab, and Third World countries.

Her paintings are distinguished by strength, tranquility, brilliance and intensity. Her favorite subject is the desert which she has been painting for the last 4 years and which she finds always fascinating.

During the winter holidays, our co-editor had the opportunity to meet Princess Wijdan at her office in the Gallery and recorded with her the following interview.

Q: Y.R.H., who was behind the idea of creating a gallery of Fine Arts in Jordan?

A: This idea has been with me for a long time, since 1970. In 1972, the Royal Council of Fine Arts was formed. Our plans were very big and our main aim was to create the National Gallery.

We first had a "Fine Arts Week" with a jewelry exhibition, a mosaic exhibition, a fine arts ball, a play in Jerash where the mosquitos attacked all the spectators and a folklore evening at the Amphitheatre, all to raise funds. But no matter how hard we worked it was hard to get the necessary money. I realized our plans were far too grandiose to be implemented then and there, so these things were left alone until 79.

Q: What happened in 1979 so that it was possible to implement your idea ?

A: In 79, we founded the Royal Society of Fine Arts and this time I had learnt my lesson. We started very soon and rented this building. We had a collection of works that the Society



owned at the time of the opening. The rest of the works were on loan from the Pakistani Government, because the main collection of the Gallery is of contemporary Islamic artists. Soon we were able to expand very rapidly. In 1982, our collection had grown from 70 to over 100 works.

The Gallery officially opened in 1980 and despite all the difficulties, mainly financial, we have been growing. We've built the 2nd floor last year and since the opening we were able to hold over 30 exhibitions, some of them international ones.

Q: What were these exhibitions?

A: We had a contemporary French works exhibit, all originals (dating 1960-1980). The Minister of Culture at that time (under President Giscard d'Estaing), told me they had never sent such an exhibition to any 3rd World country. We had a Turkish exhibition on the history of modern Turkish art in the 20th century. It was held to commemorate the centennial anniversary of Kamal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

We had a wonderful Iraqi exhibition. The Iraqi

government was kind enough to donate half the exhibited work (16 pieces) to the Gallery. We also held a Tunisian exhibition, a British sculptor's exhibition with Henry Moore's work. Barbara Hepworth's work was also among the works that came here.

Q: How would you describe this Gallery?

A: This is a museum, don't look at the size. It is a small museum and it's unique in its kind in any Third World Country. It is the only collection of modern contemporary Islamic artists work in this part of the world and we refuse to accept any second rate exhibit.

Q: What do you mean by Islamic works?

A: When we say Islamic countries we mean in the cultural and geographical sense, as it used to be before.

Many people come here and expect to see Islamic works in the classical sense. What we would like to have is a collection of work coming from countries where Muslims live, like Indonesia, Malaysia. Our aim really is to have a Third World Gallery, a National Gallery for Third World artists because this does not exist anywhere.

Q: How do you go about collecting the works. Do you do it in person?

A: I do it myself and the director of the Gallery, Mr. Suheil Bisharat,<sup>(1)</sup> does it as well. Believe me, I don't pass any opportunity without getting good works for the Gallery. There are different methods.

The main one is that I know very many artists through my travels and contacts. Some of them I don't know personally but I know of their work. So I contact them by letter. Most of them donate one work for the Gallery, others donate one and we buy one. Very few really only sell their work.

Q: What are the criteria of your choice of paintings for the Gallery?

A: The Gallery being a museum, I have to forget first of all my personal likes and dislikes.

This is a museum and it has to show the best. In some countries where there is an established arts movement it is not difficult to choose because the good artists are well known. In other countries where the arts movement is only beginning to flourish, I buy the best of what exists.

Q: Do you have many women artists' work in the Gallery?

A: We have a very big number of women painters in our collection. There is Suha Nursi, Samia Zaru, Mona Saudi (Jordan and Palestine), Naziha Selim and Suha Youssef (Iraq), Helen Khaal and Juliana Seraphim (Lebanon). We also have women artists from Pakistan.

Q: As a woman artist, how do you view the state of the arts in Jordan and in the Arab World in General?

A: I don't believe there is a woman artist and a man artist. There are good artists and bad artists. This is what I believe in regardless. Like a writer, there is a good writer and a bad writer. I don't believe in putting dividing lines between female and male criteria. As for the scene in the Arab World, it's really accelerating very fast and I predict that in ten years time Arab artists will have quite an impact internationally. Unfortunately Third World artists are not usually recognized internationally until they leave their country and adopt a Western country as their own. But in 10 years time this scene has got to change.

Q: As an artist how did you start, why did you want to be a painter?<sup>(2)</sup>

A: I don't know why I wanted to be a painter. Actually it is a difficult question. I used to come to Jordan on holidays from Beirut where I was studying history and politics. I had a teacher at high school who was French, she was a painter too. She suggested we should have conversation in French then try painting. Since then I found I was more at ease painting than doing anything else. Anyway, I discovered quite late in life that if one can, one should do what one wants to do, not what your family, society or friends want you to do.

I was a business woman. I sold my business and gave all my time and energy to art and I'm happy this way. I'm not making money but I'm happy.

Q: How do you manage to do all the things you do? To be the President of the Royal Society of Fine Arts, a painter, a wife, a mother and ... a princess?

A: I'll tell you how I manage. I am not a socialite. I have no social life as such. I get up early in the morning and paint from 7:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Normally, when my husband comes home at 2 p.m., I'm with him and the children till 7 p.m. I have four children. I help them, especially my young son, with their homework. We have an early dinner and I write at night after the

children go to bed. The person who has really helped me a lot is my husband. He's a rare specimen among oriental men. He doesn't impede my work and respects my privacy.

Q: You mentioned writing. What kind of writing is it?

A: Being the President of the Royal Society of Fine Arts, I've been asked to give several conferences on art, Islamic art especially. I usually prepare my papers for that. Now, I'm working on a series of books on Islamic Civilisation for Children. It takes lots of research work and you have to give children the facts as they are without trying to direct their taste or way of thinking.

I also just completed a research in Arabic on the "Rights of Women in Islam" It has not been published yet.

When I finish with the series of books for children I intend to join Istanbul University to complete my post-graduate studies in Islamic Art History.

Q: Back to the Gallery now. In what direction would you like to see it going?

A: I would like a bigger building and a bigger

collection and to have space and means to expand what we have put down on paper.

I would like to expand our Reference Library on Art and Architectural Books, give more lectures at the Gallery, have more art educational programs for children and to send more of our local artists to study abroad through scholarships. I would also like to see a housing project, a small village for artists where they can live there. They would pay for their houses on a soft-loan sort of program. I would like to see social security given to artists. I've talked to the Minister about this and he's promised me that within two years this would be achieved.

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- (1) **Suhail Bisharat** is a prominent Jordanian artist who developed a highly original and individual technique. He uses a mixture of coffee and gold to paint with. His works can be seen in the Gallery too.
  - (2) Some of Princess Wijdan's work can be seen in the Gallery. The technique she uses is one she has developed herself. She works with a palette knife in vertical and horizontal movements in layers of colours. Most of her canvasses are big and depict the desert at different seasons and moods.