

“The Woman Artist in Lebanon”(1)

By Helen Khal

The author is a painter and art critic who, in 1976, was requested by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World to undertake research on women artists in Lebanon. Mrs. Khal up-dated the manuscript in 1987 and it was published by the Institute in 1988.

The present book, through which the research project came into existence, handles an unexplored field of study in a volume of 200 large sized pages, provided with illustrations and photographs. It opens with an introduction of 20 pages analyzing the status of the

Lebanese woman as woman and as artist, followed by interviews with a selected group of 12 women pioneers in the plastic arts which include painting, sculpture and ceramics. In selecting this group, the author relied on the recommendations of well-known Lebanese and foreign art critics from both sexes. Later on, she added to the group of twelve, 24 other women artists who had achieved distinction in their field but, in dealing with this second group, she limited her criticism to an analysis of one specimen of the work of each, to which she added statements given by these women regarding their art and the influences that directed their development. Finally, the book contains 10 pages of biographical data collected from special interviews with the 39 artists included in the study and a preview of women artists in other Arab countries.

Aim of the Book

Students of the contemporary artistic movement in Lebanon noticed the flourishing of the plastic arts in this country during the second half of the 20th century and the growing participation of women in these arts. The initial purpose of the research upon which the book was based was “to trace the development and document the present role of women artists in Lebanon with special reference to those artists who had achieved prominence in their careers”.

Investigation regarding the conditions and incentives of women's artistic activity encouraged the execution of the project and brought out the following facts:

First, during the seventies of this century there existed in Lebanon the largest number of women artists to be found in any one country of the Arab world.

Second, in proportion to the total number of artists in Lebanon, the percentage of women professionally active in the field was higher than in any other country, not only in the Arab world, but in the West as well. Almost 25 percent of the members of the Lebanese Association of Painters and Sculptors were women.

Third, in listing the twelve leading artists in Lebanon, it was found that one third of them were women.



(1) Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987. Design: Leila Musfy, Camera ready art: Bettina Mahfoud and Maha Hasouna. Calligraphy: Zeina Skaff. Printing and typesetting: Catholic Press, Araya, Lebanon, 1988.

Here it might be argued, says the author, that the initial choice of the 12 leading artists depended more on general appreciation than on a thorough study of their works. But the agreement of critics on including at least 4 women in the list of prominent Lebanese artists of both sexes, proves that proportion is true and that artistic success and not only public recognition directed the choice.

How do we explain this phenomenon?

Helen Khal gives the following answers which she based on experience and investigation:

First, most of these women belong to cultured and well-to-do families whose daughters are not obliged to start working for a living early in life.

Second, teaching art is obligatory in Lebanese schools. It reaches a high level in some of them and forms a good background for an early discovery of talents.

Third, painting and other plastic arts may be studied at home and meet no opposition from parents and family.

Fourth, the study of art does not require a long period as, for example, music or medicine.

In addition, we must remember that the Lebanese woman has always enjoyed more freedom of choice than her other Arab sisters. Since painting is a new art in our country, particularly for women, it was natural for her to be attracted to it as a substitute for *croché* and needle work, which absorbed our mothers' and grandmothers' time during the 19th and the early part of the 20th century.

Critics add that the standard of art is lower in our country than it is in the West. As a result, distinction in this field may be achieved more easily among women as among men. It is a fine art which receives appreciation from the general public, even when it is not thoroughly understood or criticized. Its study is available to many people, due to the large number of public and private art centers in Lebanon and the multiplicity of art exhibitions and galleries which arouse the interest of men and women students in improving the quality of their work.

How influential is a woman artist in her environment?

There is no doubt, says the author, that a woman artist receives appreciation from her environment for her venture into a new field.

Through her presence, she creates a certain change in public opinion regarding the capacities of women. She can convince them that a woman is able to perform other activities than traditional child-bearing, food preparation and other house-keeping chores. Art is for her a step on the road to liberation. It is a window open to her in the wall of the harem where she has been confined. Many find in art an opportunity for self-support or for increasing their income through the private lessons they give or through teaching.

Woman's production is characterized by subjectivity because she is less involved than men in social problems and abstract ideas. She is generally, not particularly, lyrical and emotional, even when her art is inspired by science or mathematics. In the future, she is expected to find more opportunity for complete dedication to art and more independence and self-reliance so that she may achieve full equality with the other sex.

Helen Khal tells us about her art experience which started with her love for reading, her force of expression in words and her dream of becoming a writer. Then she took drawing as a hobby and succeeded in drawing the house of her father in Shedra (Akkar, Lebanon) where he lived before emigrating to the States where he was established with his family. After returning to Lebanon and marrying Yusuf el-Khal, she studied art at the Lebanese Academy, exhibited her work which won appreciation. In her art, she was first attracted by form and subject then she concentrated on color. Her writing talent prepared her to practice art criticism in articles which were published by local and foreign papers and magazines, while she continued to develop her painting ability. Her critical talent shows in the analytical introduction and the study which follows about the woman artist in Lebanon. It is also evident in the effort she spent on documentation, on the choice of the illustrative materials, on the organization of interviews, and on the questionnaires she prepared. Her talent particularly shows in her profound analysis of the pictures contained in the book where she interprets the contents, analyzes the style and reveals the secrets of technique in each work.

With the keen eye of an art critic she can discover significant weight in negative spaces and interpret obscure forms, (p.130, nos, 84 & 85). She avoids sweeping statements and emotional exaggeration. All through her study, she remains faithful to the objective attitude and scientific treatment that she acquired from her experience as artist and art critic.