

# Women: Children and Artists

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In art history and criticism the margin for interpretation is wide. But underlying issues and the themes of some artistic phenomena and events become lucid and explicit when presented in a perfect arrangement of time and space. The Lebanese public was offered this "perfect" moment in Beirut on the 20th of March. Two halls, within short distance of one another, exhibited paintings and sketches by over fifteen generations of Lebanese artists, both adult and school children. The Agial Art Gallery had sketches by 66 artists of whom 17 were women. Across the street, the AUB Alumni Club hosted Mu'assassat Inma's drawing exhibition by 300 elementary students in Beirut of whom 130 were little girls. The children's drawings came from a competition, whose theme was "A Drawing to Cheer Up a Friend in a Hospital". But it was not the number of children and women artists which triggered the "historical sense"; it was the manner in which these works stood out from the rest in both exhibitions.

The exhibition inspires us to examine the modes of expression in which the male and the female artists portrayed the same theme. The theme has little aesthetic significance but sociologically speaking, when it recurs in a certain period or group, it becomes an indicator of the scope of the vision of the artist as an individual and serves as a system of classification of the art and artist. Furthermore, the public and sometimes critics, tend to attribute



By Bashir Sinno (9 years old)

artistic differences to gender thus classifying women's art according to "naturally feminine patterns" of vision and expression. In other words, these "feminine patterns" have never been viewed as matters which transcend the arts, although they are clearly expressed in the arts most of all.<sup>(1)</sup>

The women and schoolgirls' choice of a limited number of subjects was indeed a phenomenon which justified our transition to extra-artistic inquiries. The theme at the Agial were harem scenes, feminine nudes in self-centered, theatrical and erotic poses, fruits, flowers, flower pots, few poor landscapes, "naive" interiors, abstract-geometrical designs, etc. In the children's exhibition, the theme of happiness was materialized with images of

house-parties (with elaborate tables meticulously arranged with recognizable party-food), decorations, ribbons, festive clothes, coiffure, butterflies, and flowers. There was little or negligible reference to the subject of hospital. While most boys drew scenes from the street, hospital-room, school, nature, beaches, picnics, football and other sports, girls seemed to find refuge in fantastic environments; many had the drawing of a large girl in an elaborate costume. All of those who had resorted to divine help (prayers, icons, verses) were girls. Even when the child had explicitly copied from children's books or cartoon strips, while the choice of subjects by boys fell on the comical, the girls chose the decorative, the classical-conventional designs (like hearts, roses, Christmas cards). In





by Aida Sallum. In the Women's exhibit.



A little girl's drawing: Juliana Abdel Khalek (12 years).

the case of both the artists and the children, there was little sense of drama and reality in general; instead, there was an overflow of fantasy (visual and libidinal) often expressed in many details.

Still in the context of themes, there were several absentees in the works of the schoolgirls and Lebanese women artists in general. The greatest of these is the male figure. Men occasionally appeared, but only after some metamorphosis, i.e., as babies, little boys, knights, and often as silhouettes in dreams or nightmares. The male figure was rarely part of the "natural environment". The artistic exclusion of men had automatically pushed the feminine subject (as artists and persons) into some form of exile, seclusion or into a self-made world. The omission of the normal male figure as an extra-artistic phenomenon reflected, in my opinion, a degree of social and cultural alienation, perhaps a mass schizophrenia in the socio-cultural structure.

If we were to examine the female in the works of Lebanese male artists, we find a surprising degree of

difference. There the feminine figure has evolved from bedouin woman, to studio model, to the next-door girl, to lover, to nude, to housewife at "subhiyyeh"<sup>(2)</sup> (or at some house-work), to sheer abstraction of feminine curves, etc. Thus, the boys at the children's exhibition had drawn girls as classmates and/or older women (as mothers, teachers, passers-by, etc.). A certain form of social alienation was rarely detected and on the whole, urban or rural settings were present including a mixed human population, not to mention domestic animals. This approach was very rare among girls. There were (and have been) many women artists who had chosen urban and rural landscapes but presented them with a very high degree of stylization (i.e., elements of nature or constructions treated as needle-work or intricate patterns).

As we mentioned earlier, the thematic peculiarities do not define the aesthetic value of the work of art and the greatness of the work transcends these matters. On the other hand, the socio-cultural ambiguities which surround and accompany the development of women artists have practically

affected the aesthetic level of their work. Women artists, young or accomplished, cannot remain spectators of other worlds, which however broad and seemingly free, are lesser worlds •

Footnotes and References

- (1) For information on the women artists in Lebanon see: Lahhoud, Edward, *L'Art contemporain au Liban*. Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq, 1974. The book covers the history of Lebanese visual arts.
- Khal, Helen. *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*. Beirut: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World - BUC, 1986.
- (2) A Subhiyyeh is a social gathering that women hold in the morning. It is a coffee drinking visit during which they exchange hospitalities, with emphasis on generosity and housekeeping, cooking and serving skills and whereby they discuss the latest social news.

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