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Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz:
The Shaping of a Cultural Identity in Lebanon

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All translation from Arabic and French into English are mine except where otherwise noted. For the sources in Arabic, I have based my method of transliteration on the system adopted by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*.

Arabic names are cited here in their Latin-script versions only as in the Lebanese context, Latin spellings are widely used in both official and everyday practice. For this reason, and in keeping with local usage, no parallel transliterations from Arabic are provided.

Ashraf Osman reviewed and edited my Arabic transliteration. I am extremely grateful to him for his dedicated work. Any remaining mistakes are my own.

List of Abbreviations

ALBA Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts

AUB American University of Beirut

LAAPS Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors

LU Lebanese University

PSP Progressive Socialist Party

USJ Université Saint Joseph

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Introduction

This thesis examines the role of institutions in shaping cultural identities, focusing on Dar el Fan w-al Adab [House of Art and Literature], one of Beirut's most significant cultural centres during the 1960s and 1970s. Initiated in 1967 by art-advocate and activist Janine Rubeiz (1926-1992),² Dar el Fan was committed to the advancement of culture in its multiple and interdisciplinary forms, and it organised an expansive programme that included art exhibitions, film screenings, music concerts, theatre performances, as well as lectures, panel discussions, and debates on urgent social and political questions of the time. It was active as a centre until 1975, when the outbreak of the Civil War halted its activities.

Rather than seeing identity as something merely reflected in these activities, this study investigates how it was actively produced through them. It explores how the discourse, curatorial frameworks, and the aesthetic and intellectual labour fostered by Dar el Fan contributed to the shaping of a shared imaginary. The centre is thus approached not simply as a mirror of identity, but as a space where such identity was constructed, negotiated, and at times contested.

While a comprehensive account of Dar el Fan's full programmatic range lies beyond the scope of this thesis, the analysis centres on artistic production as a key site through which broader cultural and political dynamics can be apprehended. However, art is not treated in isolation but in relation to the centre's wider discourse and practices. By positioning Dar el Fan as an active participant in the cultural field, the study attempts to trace the intersections of artistic

² Biographical data are provided upon first mention of each artist or cultural figure, and collected in Annex A at the end of the thesis.

expression, intellectual debate, and socio-political engagement, in order to assess its role in shaping a sense of collective identity at a specific historical juncture.

In western academia, interest in modern and contemporary art from the SWANA region (South West Asia and North Africa)³ is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the first academic publications on the subject emerging only in the late 1990s. To date, a systematic academic study of the art history of the region across the twentieth century remains largely absent. Popular cultural production has attracted more scholarly interest, with several studies having been conducted on cinema, music, and theatre⁴ and on the influence of personalities such as, for instance, Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum.⁵

Within this landscape, where systematic academic research remains limited, a number of monographs on key twentieth-century artists do exist. However, these are often the result of major exhibitions or retrospectives rather than scholarly studies. I am referring here to the catalogues produced for the 2013 Tate Modern retrospective on Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair (2013) or the one for Huguette Caland at the Hammer Museum (2019), and Dia al-Azzawi's retrospective at Doha's Mathaf (2016), to name only a few. Academic publications have engaged more substantially with the artistic production tied to national frameworks, such as the seminal volumes *Contemporary Egyptian Art* by art historian Liliane

³ Throughout the thesis, this definition will be used in place of "Middle East", which retains a Eurocentric, colonial legacy. The term Arab (as in Arab region, Arab world, Arab art etc.) will also be used when highlighting the relation to a specifically Arab identity, or claimed as such.

⁴ I am referring here, for instance, to Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa. A Postcolonial Outlook* (Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2013). Other volumes on specific cultural areas include Laudan Nooshin, *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia* (Routledge, 2009); Nada Saab and Robert Myers, *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant, a Critical Anthology* (Brill, 2019); Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (IB Tauris & co Ltd, 2007).

⁵ See Laura Lohman, *Umm Kulthūm: Artistic Agency and the Shaping of an Arab Legend 1967–2007* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

Karnouk (1995)⁶ and *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* by artist and art critic Kamal Boullata (2009). Moreover, certain artistic movements, particularly surrealism, have attracted considerable interest and generated a growing body of literature.⁷ Other movements and artistic constellations, however, have only recently begun to receive sustained scholarly attention. Notable examples include Anneka Lenssen's exploration of the intersection between art and politics in Syria.⁸ As for Lebanon, the recent volumes by Zeina Maasri⁹ and Sarah Rogers¹⁰ are fundamental for the analysis of the formation of an aesthetic that illuminates transnational connections and dynamics.

These studies reflect a growing academic interest in situating modern Arab art within its broader socio-political and transnational contexts. Earlier foundational work laid important groundwork for this shift. In *Modern Islamic Art*, Wijdan Ali offers one of the earliest comprehensive studies of the emergence of modern art in the Islamic world.¹¹ Tracing developments from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth, Ali examines how artists in various Muslim-majority countries engaged with traditional Islamic aesthetics while responding to the challenges of colonialism, nationalism, and modernisation, highlighting the significance of an indigenous twentieth-century artistic tradition. Instead of approaching modernity as a rupture, she emphasises continuity, arguing that many modern artists sought

⁶ The volume *Modern Egyptian Art 1910-2003* (American University in Cairo Press, 2005) by the same author followed this.

⁷ See for instance Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *Art et Liberté. Rupture, Guerre, et Surréalisme en Égypte (1938-1948)* [Art and Freedom. Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)]. Catalogue of the exhibition (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2016); Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (IB Tauris, 2017); Monique Bellan and Julia Drost, *Surrealism in North Africa and Western Asia: Crossings and Encounters* (Orient Institut Beirut 2021).

⁸ Anneka Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* (University of California Press, 2020).

⁹ Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Sarah Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut. Drawing Alliances* (Routledge, 2021).

¹¹ Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (University Press of Florida, 1997).

to reinterpret classical Islamic forms, calligraphy, and motives within new, often Western-influenced, artistic languages. Building on and moving beyond this framework, Silvia Naef's *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (In search of an Arab modernity) examined the emergence of modern art in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq, analysing how artists negotiated the notion of modernity in relation to specific cultural and political conditions.¹² Rather than viewing modernism as a Western import, Naef highlights the internal debates and aesthetic strategies through which artists in the region sought to localise and redefine modernity on their own terms. Her work challenges essentialist readings of Arab art and calls attention to the multiplicity of modernisms across the region. By foregrounding the historical and institutional conditions that shaped these artistic developments, Naef offers a foundational framework for thinking about art as a space of negotiation between tradition and innovation, colonial legacy and new national identity. Naef's work marked an important turn toward localised art histories and critical reflection on the ideological stakes of modernism in the Arab world. Similarly, Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art* builds on this trajectory by critically engaging with the construction of a modern Arab aesthetic in the aftermath of colonialism and in the context of pan-Arabist ideologies.¹³ Shabout explores how artists engaged with questions of identity, heritage, and authenticity, particularly through the incorporation of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic visual traditions into modernist forms. Her analysis is especially attentive to the ideological and institutional forces that influenced artistic production, including the role of state patronage and cultural policy. Like Naef, Shabout emphasizes that modern art cannot be understood outside of its political and intellectual milieus, and she calls for a decolonised art history that incorporates perspectives from the region and its actors. Together, these works have been

¹² Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe : L'évolution des arts plastiques en Égypte, au Liban et en Irak* [In search of an Arab modernity : The evolution of plastic arts in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq] (Slatkine, 2000).

¹³ Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (University Press of Florida, 2007).

instrumental in establishing the theoretical and historical foundations for the study of modern and contemporary art of the SWANA region. However, the institutional infrastructures that supported, shaped, and at times contested these developments alongside their role in identity formation remain largely understudied.¹⁴

Aims and Objectives of the Research

This gap is precisely where the present study situates itself. While there is growing literature on the active role of exhibitions, biennials, and museums,¹⁵ few to no studies have addressed the cultural centres, clubs, and informal or independent spaces that animated the region and shaped its debates around artistic practices between the 1950s and the 1970s, despite their significance in fostering cultural development.¹⁶ The scarcity of literature on this subject poses a critical obstacle in our understanding of how these places contributed to the sociopolitical dynamics of the region. Further research into the operations, impact, and challenges faced by these centres would provide valuable insights into the role they played in promoting cultural exchange, fostering national identity, and influencing the region's broader narratives. At the

¹⁴ Jessica Winegar has conducted a pioneering study of the politics of culture in the SWANA region in her volume *Creative Reckonings. The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford University Press 2006).

¹⁵ I am referring here, for instance, to the exhibition *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity and Museums in Exile*, curated by Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti (2018), a research-based project that explores forgotten exhibition histories, particularly the International Art Exhibition for Palestine (Beirut, 1978). Alternatively, the ground-breaking volume *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (MoMA, 2018), eds. Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers which includes documents and curatorial statements from key exhibitions across the Arab world and provides context for the institutional histories of art movements and artist-run exhibitions.

¹⁶ It has proved difficult to reconstruct a map of independent cultural spaces active in the Arab region at the time. The Cairo Atelier, for instance, could represent the Egyptian counterpart of Dar el Fan. Established in 1953, it became the headquarters for its namesake Cairo Atelier Society, founded by prominent modernist artists Mohamed Naghi, Ragheb Ayad, Sidqy el-Gabakhany, Gabriel Boctor and others. It is still located on Karim el-Dawla Street in Cairo's city centre and it features exhibitions, theatrical productions, lectures, conferences, and other events on a more or less regular basis. The Iraqi Cultural Centre in London has played a vital role as a space to raise awareness and knowledge on Iraqi culture since 1977.

core of this study lies the idea that such spaces should not be understood merely as passive “responses” to historical contexts, but rather as active agents in their own right, and participant in shaping those very contexts. Through their programming of exhibitions, performances, lectures, and debates, centres like Dar el Fan helped cultivate not only cultural but also socio-political awareness. They served as laboratories of thought and creativity, facilitating dialogue and engagement at the intersection of cultural practices and civic life.

Therefore, a critical point of departure for this study is the decision to focus on Dar el Fan as a site of cultural production. As scholarly analyses of this centre remain absent,¹⁷ a comprehensive examination of Dar el Fan and its broader impact is indispensable for understanding how independent institutions, particularly in Lebanon’s context, strive to shape the politics of culture. Such an analysis promises to shed light on the nuances of the centre’s role in navigating the complexities of cultural representation within the Lebanese society.

Dar el Fan cannot be understood as an ‘institution’ in the conventional sense. Structurally, it represented a departure from state-led or museum-based models: it was neither a national museum nor a governmental centre, but rather an independent platform. Therefore, it operated outside the logic typically associated with formal state institutions. This autonomy enabled it to operate with a certain degree of flexibility, cultivate experimentation, welcome emerging practitioners, and maintain a responsive approach to programming. In this respect, its practices aligned more closely with an independent cultural space than with the institutionalised cultural discourse. Yet, despite this informality, Dar el Fan quickly assumed an

¹⁷ On Janine Rubeiz and Dar el Fan see Nadine Kassab, ed., *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan. Regard vers un patrimoine culturel* [Janine Rubeiz and Dar el Fan. Views on a cultural heritage] (Dar an-Nahar, 2003). This commemorative volume brings together a series of essays and the recollections of artists who collaborated with Dar el Fan, along with an almost comprehensive list of the centre’s activities throughout its years of operation. See also Khalida Said, “Dār al-Fan w-al-adab: Al-thaqāfa kanasij al-ḥayāt” [Dar el Fan w-al-Adab: Culture as a Structure of Life] in *Yūtūpya al-madīna al-muthaqqafa* [Utopia of an intellectual city] (Al Saqi, 2012), pp. 181-199. In both cases, these are not scholarly publications.

institutional *role* in Beirut's cultural life. It became a cultural authority — a place that shaped taste, set conversations in motion, and served as a major point of reference to which artists, writers, and audiences turned for orientation, critical engagement, and cultural guidance. In this thesis, therefore, when Dar el Fan is occasionally referred to as an 'institution,' the term is used to designate the centre's institutional function as a key cultural reference and a guiding space within Beirut's artistic landscape.

Beyond its institutional positioning, what renders Dar el Fan particularly significant is its stated ambition to contribute to the definition and expression of what it termed a "personnalité Libanaise" (Lebanese personality). The use of the term "personality," repeatedly invoked in Dar el Fan's discourse, invites careful consideration. Rather than treating the concept of Lebanese identity as fixed or offering a singular definition of what it meant to be Lebanese, Dar el Fan appears to have embraced a more open-ended approach to subjectivity. Unlike "identity," which often carries connotations of coherence, fixity, and essential belonging typically framed in national, religious, or linguistic terms,¹⁸ "personality" seems to suggest a more fluid and evolving construct — apt to the diverse context of Lebanon. Thus, this thesis considers how such a "personality" was formulated, what cultural and ideological work it was meant to perform, and in what ways it was articulated through the centre's programming. While championing leftist, feminist, and Third Worldist ideologies, it engaged with a vision that was

¹⁸ A monolithic or essentialist definition of identity has been thoroughly critiqued and deconstructed across multiple disciplines, including cultural studies, anthropology, and postcolonial theory. Rather than viewing identity as fixed, unified, or innate, scholars have emphasized its constructed, relational, and historically contingent nature. Particularly relevant to this field is the work of Stuart Hall, whose influential essay in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996) argues for understanding identity not as a stable essence but as a "production," always in process and shaped through difference, discourse, and power relations. Hall's formulation has been foundational in shifting the focus from identity as a pre-given category to identity as a site of negotiation formed through representation, institutional structures, and the interplay between the local and the global. This theoretical reorientation is especially useful when examining cultural spaces like Dar el Fan, which functioned not merely as spaces of representation but as arenas where competing visions of self, nation, and community were actively articulated and contested.

layered and dynamic—attentive to the multiplicity of experiences and to the contingent nature of cultural formation, shaped by historical circumstances and by the tensions between local, regional, and transnational affiliations. Through this lens, Dar el Fan is best understood as a site of experimentation, wherein the very meaning of subjectivity remained open to redefinition and to the exploration of the modalities through which “Lebaneseness” could be understood.¹⁹

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into five chapters, each addressing a distinct dimension of Dar el Fan’s activities and significance. Together, they offer an analysis of the centre as both a site of cultural production and a reflection of shifting political, social, and aesthetic currents in Lebanon and beyond.

- **Chapter 1** establishes the historical and conceptual foundations of the study. It situates Dar el Fan within the broader cultural history of Lebanon, tracing its foundation in 1967 and providing an overview of its mission, structure and early programming. The chapter adopts a dual lens, approaching Dar el Fan both as a cultural platform and as a network of individuals whose personal trajectories shaped its evolution.

¹⁹ It is crucial to underscore that the idea of the Lebanese nation was already established by the time Dar el Fan was founded in 1967. Lebanese independence had been secured in 1943, and a set of national narratives structured around sectarian accommodation, linguistic diversity, and regional positioning, had taken root. Dar el Fan’s significance, therefore, does not lie in contributing to the foundational construction of the nation, but rather in its efforts to reconfigure the cultural imagination through which that nation could be interpreted, contested, and reshaped.

- **Chapter 2** examines the leadership and vision of Dar el Fan’s various presidents, with particular attention to the role of women as cultural agents and tastemakers. Through an analysis of individual presidencies and two key case studies, the solo exhibition of Cici Sursock and the Month/Week of Women (also known as “Feminist May”), the chapter explores how women at Dar el Fan contributed to feminist discourses and helped shape the cultural landscape of the time. Importantly, what emerges from this discussion is not a universal or imported feminist model, but a locally situated practice that was attuned to the specific historical, social, and political conditions of Lebanon. These interventions reflected both solidarity with global feminist movements and a responsiveness to local concerns around gender, cultural production, and political agency.
- **Chapter 3** investigates the different forms of political commitment articulated within Dar el Fan’s programming. This involvement operated on two interrelated levels: globally, through solidarity with liberation movements and critiques of colonialism and imperialism, particularly in response to postcolonial struggles and the anti-imperialist discourse associated with the Palestinian Cause, the Algerian War of Independence, and the broader Third Worldist movements. Locally, in relation to the specific historical tensions that shaped Lebanon during the early 1970s. As the country moved increasingly toward the outbreak of a fifteen-year civil war, Dar el Fan became a space where the fragility of the Lebanese social fabric and the urgent questions of national identity, sectarianism, and civic engagement were explored and negotiated. The chapter considers how these global and local themes were expressed both aesthetically and ideologically, through exhibitions, debates, and institutional collaborations.

- **Chapter 4** turns to Dar el Fan’s engagement with international movements and cultural flows. It analyses how it navigated artistic and political relationships with the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, and the Arab world, situating itself within the broader dynamics of Cold War politics. Rather than reflecting a top-down model of influence imposed by dominant powers, the chapter foregrounds a more rhizomatic understanding of culture—one marked by fluidity, negotiation, and multidirectionality. In doing so, it contributes to current efforts to complicate and enrich prevailing narratives of the Cold War period, moving beyond the reductive logic of binary opposition to reveal how cultural and political solidarities were forged, contested, and reimagined across ideological divides.
- **Chapter 5** focuses on the period of the Lebanese Civil War, examining the efforts of Janine Rubeiz to sustain Dar el Fan’s mission during a time of national fragmentation and violence and after its building became inaccessible. During this stage, her curatorial practice acquired a profound social dimension, functioning not much as a platform for artistic expression but rather as a form of cultural resilience and communal care. The chapter analyses how Rubeiz’s programming responded to the crisis by fostering spaces for collective reflection, dialogue, and emotional solidarity, thereby continuing the centre’s broader project of shaping a Lebanese “personality” under radically altered and precarious conditions.

Methodology

Sources

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on approaches from art history, cultural studies, and sociology. At its core is a sustained engagement with archival

material, which forms the primary foundation of the study. The official archives of Dar el Fan were dispersed during the Civil War, when the militias bombed the building of the centre. Some documents from the period 1967-1975 survived and were retrieved,²⁰ and are now preserved at the Galerie Janine Rubeiz, alongside a quite exhaustive documentation of Rubeiz's activities after 1975. Despite such substantial loss, a significant body of primary sources (such as programme dossiers, annual reports, exhibition catalogues, press clippings, photographs, and internal correspondence) has been meticulously gathered and analysed during the fieldwork between 2022 and 2024.

To interpret and contextualize these archival findings, the study relies on a broad range of secondary sources. Beside those already discussed in the first part of the introduction, a particular attention was devoted to the study of present secondary sources on modern and contemporary art in Lebanon to help situate Dar el Fan and its work.²¹ Scholarship in art history, history of Lebanon, Cold War-era cultural politics, and history of feminist movements in the region, has been essential in grounding the archival material and framing the centre's significance within wider intellectual and geopolitical contexts.

A third methodological component is represented by oral history. The fragility of such history poses additional challenges, as the passage of time has limited the availability of key informants

²⁰ These consist of press releases, annual reports, list of members and contacts, brochures, reports, handwritten texts, etc. Based on what has been preserved, it can be inferred that Dar el Fan used to maintain a remarkably precise archive and had an excellent ability to document its events, especially for such a small cultural platform.

²¹ For an overview of the history of art in Lebanon in the twentieth century, see e.g. Joseph Abou Rizk, *Regards sur la peinture au Liban* [Views on painting in Lebanon] (Ministère de la Publication Nationale, 1956); Edouard Lahoud, *L'Art contemporain au Liban* [Contemporary art in Lebanon] (Dar el Mashreq, 1974); *Cent ans d'art plastique au Liban 1880-1980* [One hundred years of plastic art in Lebanon] (Chahine Gallery, 1982); The British Lebanese Association ed., *Lebanon: The Artist's View. 200 Years of Lebanese Painting* (Hillingdon Press, 1989); Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de la peinture au Liban* [Dictionary of painting in Lebanon] (Éditions de l'Escalier, 1998); Cesar Nammour, *Al-naht fī Lubnān* [Sculpture in Lebanon] (Dār al-Funūn al-Jamīlah, 1990) and *Amām al-lawḥa: kitābāt fī-l-rasm* [In front of the painting: Writings on drawing] (Dār al-Funūn al-Jamīlah, 2003); Frieda Howling, *Art in Lebanon 1930-1975. The Development of Contemporary Art in Lebanon* (LAU Press 2005); Nour Salamé Abillama and Marie Tomb eds., *Art from Lebanon. Modern and Contemporary Artists*, vol. 1 (Wonderful Editions, 2012); Silvia Naef, *À la recherche*.

such as founders and early members of Dar el Fan.²² Interviews were conducted with a younger generation of people involved with the centre, whose age is now comprised between early seventy to early eighty years old. They demonstrated interest toward my research and were keen in preserving a history on the verge of disappearance. They also shared archival material that proved fundamental in reconstructing the programming and the activities of Dar el Fan. However, their accounts, though valuable, can be susceptible to individual biases and the malleability of memory. Moreover, some interviewees, having been closely associated with Dar el Fan or Janine Rubeiz, may bring a subjective perspective to their recollections, highlighting the delicate interplay between personal connections and historical narratives. Thus, these oral histories are approached not as objective accounts but as situated, subjective narratives shaped by memory, positionality, and the passage of time. In order to mitigate the risk of adopting a solely subjective perspective, a comparative approach was employed. By collecting and analysing testimonies from a range of informants, the study identifies patterns, divergences, and points of convergence across accounts. Additionally, oral histories are cross-referenced with external sources, particularly contemporary press articles, which serve as an important layer of corroboration or counterpoint. This triangulated methodology allows for a more nuanced reconstruction of events and a deeper understanding of the cultural and political dynamics at play.

Research Process and Fieldwork

The first phase of the research was focused on building a foundational understanding of Lebanon's modern history as a complex yet essential framework for examining how cultural

²² Among the closest friends of Janine Rubeiz, who were involved in the founding of Dar el Fan, was artist and poet Etel Adnan (b.1925), who passed away in 2021, and artist Yvette Achkar, (1928-2024) who refused to release an interview during the last years of her life.

institutions operated within such a context.²³ Parallel to this, a broad survey of twentieth-century art history in the SWANA region was conducted, in order to grasp the larger dynamics that shaped artistic production. One of the main challenges in this phase was the limited availability of publications and archival resources on the region's modern art in Italian academic libraries.

This foundational work was complemented by a first period of fieldwork in Lebanon (February–July 2022), during which I was an affiliated researcher at the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), as I was for the full duration of my doctoral contract. This fieldwork enabled access to the library of the Sursock Museum, which houses an extensive collection of books on Lebanese and regional art,²⁴ as well as the archives of both the Sursock Museum and MACAM (Modern and Contemporary Art Museum). These visits allowed the collection of primary material on Dar el Fan and on the artists who exhibited or collaborated with the centre.²⁵

A second fieldwork trip (February–July 2023) proved essential to refining the methodological approach to archival and oral sources, as well as to deepening key aspects of Lebanese history and modern art history. This period was particularly important for accessing the archives of local newspapers, which proved crucial for tracing the public life and programming of Dar el Fan. The archives of *L'Orient-Le Jour*, *An-Nahar*, *As-Safa*, *La Revue du Liban*, *Mulhaq An-Nahar*

²³ On the history of modern Lebanon, see Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2007); Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (IB Tauris & co. 1988); Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (University of California Press, 2010); Farid el Kahzen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon: 1967-1976* (IB Tauris, 2000). See also Lindsay Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations. Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine* (Routledge, 2018).

²⁴ See footnote 21 for an overview of the consulted sources.

²⁵ The Sursock Museum, in particular, holds a collection of artists' folders with CV, press clippings and other ephemera related to their careers. I selected the folders of the artists who either exhibited at Dar el Fan, collaborated with the centre and/or were close to Janine Rubeiz.

and *Monday Morning*²⁶ for the period comprised between 1967 and 1975 were consulted.²⁷

Most significantly, I was able to access what remains of Dar el Fan's internal archives, thanks to a relationship of trust built with Nadine Begdache, daughter of the centre's founder, Janine Rubeiz, and current custodian of the material.

Further fieldwork had originally been planned for the period April-June 2024. However, due to the escalation of violence between Israel and Lebanon, this trip was cancelled. As a result, the research plan had to be partially restructured, marking the end of in-person archival access and the possibility of conducting further interviews.

Throughout my doctorate, findings of my research were presented, most notably, at the workshop of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA) at the University of North Texas, at the LAWHA Conference at the Orient-Institut Beirut and at the SeSaMO (Società Italiana per gli Studi sul Medio Oriente) annual conference.

A Few Clarifications

This research has encountered challenges that need to be acknowledged. Situated along the Demarcation Line (the frontline that divided West and East Beirut during the Civil War), the building of Dar el Fan was destroyed in early 1976, and most of its archives were lost in that tragic event. As mentioned, the documents that survived are collected in disorganised boxes and folders, uncategorised and unindexed, let alone digitised. As a result, the task of retracing

²⁶ I thank Abbudi Bou Jawde for his generosity in opening his personal archive of *Mulhaq an-Nahar* and *Monday Morning*, and for having shared with me his material about Dar el Fan.

²⁷ Some of them, however, did not cover the entire span of time of my research, mainly due to gaps in the collection, or to discrepancy between their years of activity.

and reconstructing the centre's history relies heavily on secondary archival sources such as newspaper articles, press clippings, and ephemera from single individuals, galleries and museum exhibitions. The Civil War created severe and lasting obstacles to the collection and preservation of material from that period. Today, only a limited number of newspapers have been digitised or made accessible through searchable online databases. This implies long, uncertain searches through physical volumes, without any guarantee of what qualitative or quantitative material can be recovered. Moreover, these sources are often scattered across institutions whose holdings contain significant chronological gaps, particularly for the years leading up to and during the war. For instance, MACAM—Modern and Contemporary Art Museum hosts one of the most substantial archives on Lebanese art, though its collection remains largely uncatalogued.

The fieldwork took place within a broader context of instability. Lebanon is currently facing a profound economic and political crisis, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating Beirut port explosion in 2020. The World Bank has described this crisis as one of the most severe globally since the mid-nineteenth century. Daily life has been significantly affected: availability of electricity is limited and the prices of essential goods fluctuate dramatically. Cultural institutions operate under immense strain, with reduced capacity, understaffed teams, and chronic shortages of funding.

These conditions also partly shaped my interactions with interviewees. Some expressed hesitation or fatigue when asked to revisit what is often nostalgically or ambivalently referred to as the “Golden Era” of the 1950s to 1970s, a period that contrasts with the present state of the country. In one case, this reluctance stemmed also from concerns about extractive

research practices, particularly because it was felt that their²⁸ memories were being mined for sheer academic purposes. In other cases, however, younger people were keen on preserving a history that would otherwise be lost—especially in light of the conditions Lebanon is currently experiencing.

Finally, it has been profoundly difficult to continue working on this thesis since October 2023, when Israel launched a devastating military campaign in the Gaza Strip in response to Hamas' attack. What began as retaliation has since escalated into an ongoing and unprecedented wave of violence, widely described by scholars, legal experts, and human rights organisations as a genocide of the Palestinian people. Maintaining focus on academic work became a daily challenge, especially as I worried for friends with family in Gaza, and for others living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This emotional strain deepened further when the conflict extended into Lebanon, a country that has been central to my research, has become part of my own life, and where many friends and colleagues reside, including my supervisor, Professor Nadia von Maltzahn and her family, and my friend and PhD colleague Ashraf Osman.

What allowed me to persevere, despite the heaviness of this moment, was the conviction that even academic work can carry ethical and political significance. When an entire population is being targeted for erasure, the destruction of its cultural heritage becomes part of a broader attempt to silence its history, deny its presence, and negate its right to exist. In such a context, engaging with the region is not just an intellectual task; it becomes a form of resistance. When culture is deliberately destroyed as a way of denying a people's existence, I believe our work as academics must take a stand. That is where I have chosen to place mine.

²⁸ I use the third plural pronoun here to preserve the gender identity of the interviewee.

Chapter I. Setting the Stage: 1960s Beirut and The Cultural Currents That Shaped Dar el Fan

The history of Dar el Fan cannot be disentangled from the particular moment in which it emerged. Beirut in the 1960s stood as a microcosm of Lebanon, where diverse ethnic and religious communities including Muslims, Christians, and Druze, intermingled alongside multiple other Arab and European nationalities, creating a vibrant social fabric. The city was alive with artistic energy, yet marked by structural gaps where networks of personal relationships often substituted for institutional infrastructure. Against this backdrop, the first section of the chapter sketches the historical and cultural landscape of Beirut in the decade preceding Dar el Fan's creation. The narrative then moves to the years immediately before Dar el Fan opened its doors, tracing the conversations and initiatives that served as its prelude. This includes the role of key figures (artists, writers, and patrons) who began to imagine the possibility of a space that could act as a gathering point for Lebanon's artistic community. Letters, personal encounters, and collaborations of the early 1960s reveal how the idea of such a centre took shape gradually, nurtured by individuals with complementary visions and a shared belief in the arts as a vital component of national life. From there, the chapter turns to the formal foundation of Dar el Fan. It examines its mission, dedicated to promoting the arts and letters. Attention is also given to the association's organisational and financial structure, as outlined in correspondence and legal documents, and to the acquisition of its historic building—both practical and symbolic steps in transforming an idea into a functioning cultural space. The final section explores Dar el Fan's first two years of activity, when the centre began establishing itself as a focal point for the visual arts in Beirut. These initial programmes positioned it as a site for experimentation, where new forms, ideas, and approaches could be tested within a wider conversation about the role of art in shaping Lebanese cultural identity.

1.1. Beirut: Profile of a Cultural Ecosystem

By the 1960s, Beirut had firmly established itself as a leading cultural capital of the Arab region, standing alongside Cairo as a central stage for artistic and intellectual production. Both cities represented distinct poles of an Arab intellectual revival whose roots lay in the *Nahda*, the cultural and literary awakening that had spread across the Ottoman Arab provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its early decades, Cairo had been the uncontested epicentre of this effervescence, nurturing modern Arab thought, literature, and aesthetics. Yet, by the mid-twentieth century, the political transformations set in motion by then-president of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser's (1918-1970)²⁹ nationalisation policies³⁰ and the increasing state control over cultural institutions had begun to erode Cairo's cultural hegemony. It was in this shifting landscape that Beirut rose in prominence, asserting itself as a "cultural capital" where regional and international ideas converged, and where the art world played a decisive role in sustaining this dialogue.

The roots of Beirut's artistic infrastructure, however, were laid much earlier. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists such as Daoud Corm (1852–1930) and Habib

²⁹ The second president of Egypt, Nasser is regarded as a central figure in the modern history of the Arab world. He became emblematic of Arab nationalism and pan-Arab unity, positioning Egypt at the forefront of regional politics during the Cold War. His policies combined state-led modernisation and social reforms with a strong anti-imperialist stance, most famously manifested in the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. Nasser's vision of Arab socialism and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement made him a central figure not only in the Arab world but also in broader global geopolitics.

³⁰ Nasser's project of nationalisation was conceived as a strategy to consolidate state sovereignty and to dismantle the entrenched power of foreign capital. While it enabled rapid industrialisation and the expansion of public education, it also imposed a strong state monopoly on cultural production. For the Arab intellectual and artistic field, this meant that the earlier liberal pluralism of the *Nahda* (nurtured by private presses, salons, and cultural associations) was increasingly subordinated to state-led narratives of Arab socialism and pan-Arab unity. The result was an ambivalent legacy: nationalisation broadened access to culture and literacy, but it simultaneously curtailed the independent spaces of experimentation and debate that had characterised the *Nahda's* intellectual ferment.

Srcour (1860–1938), who studied in Paris and Rome, or Khalil Saleeby (1870–1928), who studied in Edinburgh and later in the United States, returned from Western academies carrying not only technical expertise but also aesthetic ideals grounded in European academic traditions. Through their teaching and production,³¹ they did more than transmit skills: they shaped an initial institutional framework for art in Lebanon. They opened studios and workshops, mentored younger creatives and launched a generation of artists such as Moustafa Farroukh (1901-1957), Rachid Wehbi (1917-1993) and Saliba Douaihy (1915-1994), starting to position Beirut as a node within a broader cultural network linking the Eastern Mediterranean to Rome, Paris, and beyond. This period marked the first articulation of a professional art world in the country, even as the idea of the artist as a full-time professional remained difficult to fully conceive in a society where artistic production thrived but was not yet recognized as a stable career.³²

Beirut's eventual rise as a cultural hub was far from accidental. The French Mandate, established in 1920, laid the groundwork for a multilingual and cosmopolitan³³ urban identity. It had deliberately shaped the city as “the capital of the French Mandate and the showcase for French ideals”³⁴ in the Levant. This colonial project entrenched a policy of “frenchification,”

³¹ Their work focused primarily on portraiture for the upper middle class, a genre regarded as more elegant and refined than photography. See Naef, *À la recherche*, 135.

³² *Ibid.* 136.

³³ The nuances of cosmopolitanism in Lebanon are shaped by its particular political, sectarian, and historical context. Rogers (2021) has shown how this very notion of cosmopolitanism was politicised within Maronite and Francophone nationalist discourse, where it was mobilised to assert a civilizational distinction between Lebanon and its Arab neighbours. I approach cosmopolitanism as a discursive field, one that reflects and refracts the geopolitical pressures and ideological transformations of the period. My understanding of cosmopolitanism draws especially on the work of Maasri (2020). She argues that cosmopolitanism in Lebanon was not a stable or ideologically neutral category; rather, it shifted in meaning depending on the political conjuncture. Lebanon could be imagined, at one moment, as the “Switzerland of the Middle East”, and at another as an “Arab Hanoi”, a site of anti-imperialist solidarity and Third Worldist alignment. Cosmopolitanism, then, becomes a strategic and contested term, invested with competing ideological projects.

³⁴ Kassir, *Beirut*, 280.

particularly among the Lebanese Maronite elites, while marginalising parts of the Muslim population who felt more closely tied to an Arab and Muslim cultural heritage. The Mandate invested in culture and education as part of its civilizational mission.³⁵ Art historian Edouard Lahoud, requoted in the work of Silvia Naef, underscores that the French authorities were “keen to emphasize the cultural and civilising dimension of French policy.”³⁶ Public exhibitions in Beirut began to multiply, including artists such as Georges Cyr (1880-1964),³⁷ Rachid Wehbi and Moustafa Farroukh.

The institutionalisation of art education further consolidated these developments. The founding of the *Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts* (ALBA) in 1937³⁸ by engineer Alexis Boutros, a cello player and art-lover, and the opening of its art department in 1943, provided Lebanon with a formal academy modelled on French *beaux-arts* traditions. With impressionist painter César Gemayel (1898-1958) as the art department’s first director, ALBA championed aesthetic values rooted in Western culture.³⁹ While its early orientation stood somewhat apart from Arab artistic traditions, the institution also sought to reconcile Western and Islamic influences in an effort to forge a local aesthetic language. In Alexis Boutros’ vision, ALBA was not only to serve as a training ground for generations of Lebanese artists but also to “foster national unity and promote cultural coherence”.⁴⁰

³⁵ Naef, *À la recherche*, 140.

³⁶ Lahoud, *L’art Contemporain au Liban*, p. XII, quoted in Naef, *À la recherche*, 140.

³⁷ French-born painter Georges Cyr left France in the early 1930s, initially for an extended trip to the East following a personal tragedy. Upon arriving in Beirut, he chose to make it his home. His studio in Ain Mreisse became a vibrant meeting point for artists, often described as an informal art school. See L’Or Iman Puymartin, *Georges Cyr*, Dalloul Art Foundation. Available at <https://dafbeirut.org/en/georges-cyr> [last access 29.07.2025].

³⁸ The Academy was founded as an art association in 1937, under the name of Association of Amateur Musicians (AMA), and formalised as Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts in 1943.

³⁹ Naef, *À la recherche*, 122.

⁴⁰ See Wafa Roz, *The Inception of Fine Arts Institutions in Lebanon: Establishment of a National Public Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University*, Dalloul Art Foundation. Available at <https://dafbeirut.org/en/articles/Fine-Arts-Education-in-Lebanon-Part-1> [last access 29.07.2025].

By the time Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, Beirut had already evolved into a crossroads of global and regional exchange, shaped by its strategic position on the Mediterranean, its mercantile history, and its multilingual, multi-confessional social fabric.

The post-independence era ushered in rapid economic growth and the so-called Golden Age of Lebanon, marketed as the “Switzerland of the East,” where prosperity and glamour blended with entrepreneurial ambition. Yet beneath this heterogeneous cosmopolitan surface, political fault lines were quietly forming. The city’s intricate tapestry masked simmering economic, social, and religious tensions, emblematic of the broader challenges faced by the entire nation. The coexistence of various religious groups was intricately tied to the country’s unique political structure, where power-sharing arrangements were largely delineated along sectarian lines. Each major religious community—namely Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Druze—had its own designated political representation, reflecting the National Pact established in 1943.⁴¹ This delicate balance aimed to distribute power proportionally, yet it also sowed the seeds of potential discord. As each religious sect sought to protect its interests, political representation often became synonymous with sectarian identity, contributing to both the stability and fragility of Lebanon’s sociopolitical landscape during this period.

Within this framework, Beirut’s cosmopolitanism appears as much a performance as a lived reality, and its celebrated openness often concealed simmering tensions that were deliberately suppressed.⁴² This delicate balance was further complicated by regional dynamics, with

⁴¹ An unwritten agreement, the National Pact was formed by President Bechara el Khoury (1890-1964) and Prime Minister Riad al Solh (1894-1951) following the end of the French mandate. It lays the foundation of Lebanon as a multi-confessional state.

⁴² Kassir, *Beirut*.

Lebanon becoming a crucial piece of the broader chessboard of the “Middle East”⁴³ in the aftermath of World War II.

The 1950s and 1960s marked a high point in the city’s cultural life, yet this developed at a time of deep historical and political transformation both on a global and on a local scale. From 1948, the *Nakba*⁴⁴ provoked the forced displacement of approximately 700.000 Palestinians, with many finding refuge in Lebanon. Exiled Palestinian intellectuals played a particularly vital role in enriching Beirut’s cultural fabric, as did political dissidents fleeing authoritarian regimes in their home countries. Their presence fostered an atmosphere of solidarity, resistance, and ideological plurality.

In the years that followed, throughout the 1950s and, above all, the “long 1960s”,⁴⁵ Beirut became an increasingly vibrant (yet fragile) magnet for artists, writers, and intellectuals from across the Arab world, a multifaceted milieu in which modern Arab identity was actively negotiated through the circulation of different ideas. Complex and often contradictory conversations around pan-Arabism, anti-colonialism, and a range of nationalist ideologies animated the city’s intellectual circles. This cultural scene unfolded against the wider backdrop of decolonisation struggles, Third Worldist solidarities, and the polarised dynamics of the Cold War, which positioned Beirut as both a crossroads and a testing ground for competing political imaginaries. The *Naksa* (Setback) of 1967, when Arab armies⁴⁶ suffered a shocking defeat in

⁴³ An area that presents great diversity in the political, historical, social, religious, and cultural realms and is to be understood as far from being homogeneous and monolithic.

⁴⁴ This term, which translates the Arabic “catastrophe”, refers to the foundation of the State of Israel, which resulted in ethnic cleansing and the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages. Occupation, destruction and genocide in Palestine at the hand of Israel continue until today.

⁴⁵ With the expression “long 1960s”, historians describe a period that extends beyond the strict calendar decade, encompassing the broader cultural, political, and social transformations that began in the late 1950s and continued into the mid-1970s. Rather than being confined to the years 1960–1969, the “long 1960s” refers to an era marked globally by decolonisation, the rise of new social movements, and shifting geopolitical dynamics shaped by the Cold War.

⁴⁶ Primarily the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

the war against Israel, deepened regional disillusionment with existing nationalist projects and spurred a wave of ideological rethinking that reverberated through artistic practices. This moment of cultural efflorescence was ultimately shattered by the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War of 1975. A devastating 15-year long conflict, the Civil War violently fractured the country's social fabric and brought many initiatives to an abrupt halt. The political dimensions of this period will be introduced in Chapter 2 and discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3, but it is important here to underline the historical context in which Beirut's artistic life, and Dar el Fan, took shape.

The city's dense network of intellectual and artistic spaces reflected this vitality.⁴⁷ Publishing houses, salons, clubs, and universities cultivated a vibrant public sphere where freedom of expression and assembly thrived. The American University of Beirut (AUB), alongside the Saint Joseph University (USJ) and the more recently established Lebanese University (LU)⁴⁸, trained generations of thinkers and artists, enabling interactions with both Western and regional currents. An expanding publishing sector supported not only daily newspapers and periodicals, but also intellectual and literary journals such as *Hiwar*,⁴⁹ *Shi'r*,⁵⁰ and *Al-Adab*,⁵¹ each redefining the contours of modern Arab thought.⁵²

⁴⁷ On the cultural life of 1960s Beirut, see Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *Beirut and the Golden Sixties: Manifesto of Fragility* (Silvana Editoriale, 2023); Aya Khalil and Candice Raymond, eds. *"Mondes intellectuels beyrouthins (années 1950- années 1980) / Beirut Intellectual Worlds (1950s-1980s)*, *Biens Symboliques 15* (Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2024). See also Maasri, (2020) and Rogers, (2021), and Nadia von Maltzahn, ed. *Artistic Hubs in and of the Arab Region* (Orient Institut Beirut, forthcoming).

⁴⁸ While AUB was founded in 1866 and USJ in 1875, the Lebanese University opened its doors only in 1951.

⁴⁹ Published in Beirut between 1962 and 1967, *Hiwar* was edited by Palestinian poet Tawfiq Sayigh and designed as a publication dedicated to modern Arabic poetry. It was later discovered to be financed by the CIA within the Cold War cultural diplomacy.

⁵⁰ Founded by literary figures Yusuf al-Khal and Adonis, *Shi'r* was published between 1957 and 1970. It was an avant-garde and modernist literary magazine with a focus on poetry.

⁵¹ Established in 1953 by Souhail Idriss, *Al-Adab* was a literary and cultural magazine dealing with political thought, cinema, poetry, theatre and general culture in the Arab world.

⁵² On modernism on Arabic poetry, see Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

Within this cultural landscape, art underwent rapid professionalization. French-model art salons had been held in Beirut since the late 1930s and gained traction through the 1940s and 1950s, meeting the growing appetite for artistic and intellectual engagement, amid weak governmental cultural policy. In the early 1950s, a group of contemporary artists (many of them ALBA graduates) came together to found what would become a cornerstone of Lebanon's artistic life: the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS). Established in 1952 and officially registered in 1957, the association, later known as "The Painters and Sculptors Society," maintained close ties to ALBA while extending its reach beyond academic circles. LAAPS played a crucial role in professionalising the art scene, acting as a bridge between institutional frameworks and the emerging independent gallery network, as well as between artists and the wider public. In 1952, the group launched, in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts,⁵³ the annual Salon du Printemps (Spring Salon) at the UNESCO Palace (opened in 1948) in Beirut. The Association also advocated for the creation of an Institute of Fine Arts within the newly established Lebanese University,⁵⁴ and supported young talents through scholarships and awards. Its founding members included some of Lebanon's leading modernist figures such as Moustafa Farroukh, Cesar Gemayel, Saliba Douaihy, Rachid Wehbi, and Omar Onsi (1901-1969). Alongside these, we find a younger generation composed by Jean Khalifé (1923-1978), Shafic Abboud (1926-2004), Elie Kanaan (1926-2009), Farid Aouad (1924-1982), Yvette Ashkar (1928-2024), Michel Basbous (1921-

⁵³ Notably, a Ministry of Culture did not exist as such in Lebanon until 1993. Debates on the creation of the ministry were held throughout the 1970s. See von Maltzahn, "Ministry of Culture or no Ministry of Culture? Lebanese Cultural Players and Authority", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 38, no.2, 2018, 377-390.

⁵⁴ The Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese university opened only in 1965.

1981), Mounir Eido (1920-2014), and Aref el Rayess (1928-2005), who collectively laid the foundations for a more organized, interconnected, and publicly engaged artistic community.⁵⁵ In parallel, AUB established its Fine Arts Department in 1954, introducing a distinctly American pedagogical approach to the city's cultural landscape. The programme was shaped by photographer and filmmaker Maryette Charlton and painters George Buehr and Margo Hoff. The department offered a counterpoint to ALBA's French-oriented academic model, diversifying the artistic training available in Beirut.⁵⁶

The opening of the Sursock Museum in 1961 added a vital platform for contemporary art. Established in the private villa of the Lebanese aristocrat Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock after long controversies,⁵⁷ the Sursock Museum followed an uneven trajectory that hindered its establishment as a stable reference point for the country's cultural scene. Nevertheless, it offered a vital platform for exhibitions, contributing to the visibility of Lebanese artists at the international level. Starting 1961, the Museum organised its Autumn Salon, a group exhibition of artists in and from Lebanon that would arguably become a canonical annual art event in the country.⁵⁸

Cultural clubs such as the Arab Cultural Club and the Cénacle Libanais further shaped intellectual life, hosting debates and conferences that reflected the period's political and

⁵⁵ On the establishment of LAAPS, see Wafa Roz, *The Inception of Fine Arts Institutions in Lebanon*.

⁵⁶ The Department remained active until 1976, when the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War forced its closure. On its establishment and the role of Maryette Charlton, see Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut*, ch. 2.

⁵⁷ Following his death in 1952, Nicolas Sursock left his villa to the city of Beirut with the intention that it be turned into a public museum. This transformation was delayed by a presidential decree that temporarily designated the building as a state guesthouse for visiting dignitaries. It was not until 1957 that efforts resumed to honour Sursock's wishes, with the formation of a committee tasked with establishing the museum. In the years preceding its official opening in 1961, the museum operated nomadically, holding its first exhibition in 1957 at the UNESCO building in Beirut. On the establishment of the Sursock Museum see Ashraf Osman, "The Rise of the Sursock Museum. The Power of the Image to Create an Image of Power", in *A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power*, Quaderni di Venezia Arti 7, 287-305 (Edizioni Cà Foscari, 2023).

⁵⁸ von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public? The Salon d'Automne at Beirut's Surosock Museum", in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region. Politics of Taste Making*, Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan, eds. (Orient Institut Beirut, 2018), 253-280.

cultural pluralism. Established in 1946 by intellectual Michel Asmar, the Cénacle quickly became one of Beirut's most influential spaces for intellectual exchange, serving at once as a debating forum, cultural salon, and publishing house. Active until 1984, the Cénacle sought to present itself not only as an "expression of Lebanese consciousness," but also as a laboratory for ideas, fostering an attempt to define and systematise the study of Lebanon's historical, cultural, and political specificity.⁵⁹ The Arab Cultural Club, founded in 1944 and active until today, is most famous for organising the renowned Beirut International Arab Book Fair since 1956.⁶⁰

Private galleries also proliferated. Although the first galleries opened at the beginning of the 1940s,⁶¹ their number grew rapidly and between 1955 and 1975, roughly forty were active – though not all simultaneously – exhibiting both local and foreign artists.⁶² Among the most influential were Gallery One, founded in 1963 by poet Yusuf El Khal (1917-1987) and artist and art critic Helen El Khal (1923-2009),⁶³ which championed Lebanese and Arab artists, and later Contact Gallery, initiated in 1972 by Iraqi artist, writer and designer Waddah Faris (1940-2024) and art critic César Nammour (1937-2021), which displayed local and regional talent.

⁵⁹ On the Cénacle Libanais, see Amin Elias, *Le Cénacle libanais (1946-1984) : une tribune pour une libanologie inscrite dans son espace arabe et méditerranéen* [Le Cénacle Libanais (1946–1984) : A platform for a Lebanonology situated within the Arab and Mediterranean sphere] PhD Thesis in History, Le Mans Université, Université Saint-Esprit. See also Elias, *Le Cénacle Libanais (1946-1984) : Une tribune pour une science du Liban* [The Cénacle Libanais : a forum for a science of Lebanon] (L'Harmattan, 2019).

⁶⁰ The Arab Cultural Club produced two publications about its history and activities on its 50th and 75th anniversary. See *Masīrat al-khamsīn 'āman. Al-Nādī al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī 1944-1994* [Journey of fifty years. The Arab Cultural Club 1944-1994] and *Al-Nādī wa-l-Madīna. Khamsah wa-sab'īn 'āman 'alā ta'sīs al-Nādī al-Thaqāfī al-'arabī 1944-2019* [The Club and the City. 75 years from the establishment of the Arab Cultural Club].

⁶¹ Naef references André Bercoff regarding the opening of the first gallery exhibiting Lebanese artists in May-June 1939, although no further detail is provided. See Bercoff, « Vingt ans de peinture libanaise », *L'Orient littéraire*, no. 1, 29.10.1960, 1 in Naef, *À la recherche*, 142

⁶² Rogers, "Galleries and Cultural Centres in 1960s Beirut, a Brief History." *Perspective #1 – Saradar Collection*, 2018 <http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/essays> [last access 29.08.2025].

⁶³ On Helen Khal and Gallery One, see Carla Chammas, Rachel Dedman and Omar Kholeif, eds. *Helen Khal. Gallery One and Beirut in the 1960s* (Sternberg Press, 2023).

At the time, Beirut's artistic intelligentsia gravitated towards Hamra Street, the beating heart of Ras Beirut, where artists of diverse nationalities mingled in cafés, galleries, cinemas, and theatres. Leftist-leaning cafés such as La Palette (an early artist-run space) and the iconic Horseshoe Café served as crucibles for debate and creative exchange.

No fewer than seven foreign cultural centres also operated in the city, acting as instruments of cultural diplomacy and adding further layers of competition and influence to the ecosystem.⁶⁴

It was within this dynamic, competitive, and fertile environment that cultural advocate Janine Rubeiz would lament the lack of public sector support for the arts and of a stable and coherent structure to sustain and valorise culture as an element of national cohesion. Confronted with these gaps, she began envisioning an alternative model: a space not limited to the display of artworks but designed to foster dialogue across disciplines, ideologies, and audiences. A place, in her own words, where artists and intellectuals alike could “feel at home.”⁶⁵

1.2 Prelude to Dar el Fan? The *Atelier Porte Ouverte* and the Search for Collective Representation

As the previous section sought to illustrate, Dar el Fan did not emerge in a vacuum. Its foundation must be understood as part of a wider environment and a longer, evolving dialogue within the Lebanese artistic community, where a network of exchanges, debates, and attempts at shaping and self-organising the career predated the centre's official founding. These largely developed in the absence of clear, state-driven cultural policies and mainly around private-led

⁶⁴ Among the countries that established such cultural centers in Beirut were the USA, USSR, France, Great Britain, Spain, Italy, and Germany.

⁶⁵ Kassab, *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 20.

initiatives. Therefore, while being often unruly and spontaneous, they simultaneously allowed space for self-definition and collective agency.

As this section will examine, artists had already envisioned a representative space that could serve as a common point of assembly. Throughout the early 1960s, and particularly between 1964 and 1965, a group of artists and intellectuals convened to explore the creation of an association that would be run *by and for* artists. This initiative, which ultimately remained unrealised, tried to imagine a platform capable of collectively representing the interests of the artistic community. This project, known as the Atelier Porte Ouverte, a name that reflects its spirit of openness and collective creation, brought together artists Shafic Abboud, Munir Eido, Farid Aouad and Amine el Bacha (1932-2019), and modernist architect Wassek Adib (1926-2014).⁶⁶ Abboud, Eido, Aouad, and el Bacha, who would all later emerge as central figures in the history of modern Lebanese art, shared the formative experience of studying in Paris at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts during the 1950s and 1960s, a common trajectory that likely shaped and intersected their artistic visions.⁶⁷

They clearly articulated the project in documentation that outlines the cause that shaped its origin, its core principles and aspirations, demonstrating that this was not merely a casual exchange of ideas among peers, but rather a more structured initiative. These materials are key not only to understanding the artistic ambitions of the time but also to grasping the political and professional stakes at play. In one of the documents, we read that “many painters [became] aware of the need for profound changes in their situation”.⁶⁸ They had recognized

⁶⁶ Documentation related to their efforts is preserved in the archive of Shafic Abboud in Paris. I thank my supervisor Nadia von Maltzahn for having drawn my attention to these documents and for having shared them with me.

⁶⁷ On the contribution of Arab artists to the French artistic panorama, see the recent exhibition and catalogue *Présences arabes. Art moderne et décolonisation. Paris, 1908-1988* [Arab presences : Modern art and decolonisation. Paris, 1908-1988], curated by Morad Montazami at the Modern Art Museum, Paris.

⁶⁸ “Manifesto” of Atelier Porte Ouverte, p. 1. In French in the original source. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

the absence of a “definition of the state of the artist and of the interests and statuses of the members of such professional category”⁶⁹ which exposed the limitations of existing models and the lack of institutional infrastructure capable of supporting their roles in society. Therefore, the authors champion a more pragmatic, structured approach. Central to this was the idea of the “creation of a representative body authorised to become an interlocutor with official authorities”⁷⁰ and therefore empowered to negotiate on behalf of the entire profession. As the document further observed, the figure of the artist had become increasingly alienated from the public, caught in a system where dependence on art dealers and the commercial market encouraged a retreat into individualism and a kind of deification.⁷¹ This shift was accompanied by the production of cultural goods tailored to market demands, often at the expense of artistic integrity and critical engagement. In a telling passage, the authors of the proposal articulated their aims with striking clarity:

“The proposed idea was therefore to create an association founded on a communal principle, where solidarity would act as a counterbalance to fleeting tastes and passing trends. [...] We thought that the first urgent action would be to try to realise, without further delay, *a formula whose main goal would be for painters to take their destiny into their own hands* (emphasis added); and to establish new formulas for contact (between painters first, then with their public) and for the dissemination of works: to break the painter’s isolation, to allow as many people as possible an invigorating contact with the work; to restore to the work of art its primary vocation of research and adventure—such is the meaning of the following proposal”.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. 2.

⁷² Handwritten document outlining the project Atelier Porte Ouverte, p. 2. In French in the original source. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

What emerges from this statement is a multidimensional critique: of the failure of professional organisation, of the commodification of art, and of the artist's increasing alienation from both society and their own vocation. The group's efforts to overcome these impasses were fuelled by a desire to ground the association in collective values rather than individual or transient fashions. It emphasizes solidarity as a stabilising force, suggesting an intention to build something lasting against the shifting currents of taste and trend. These translated into a belief in experimentation, artistic risk, and social engagement. Rather than framing the artist as an isolated genius removed from the social fabric, it suggested a new relational model for the artist that would dismantle that isolation by placing emphasis on shared labour, horizontal collaboration, and political agency.

The project aimed to bring together between five to ten artists (painters and sculptors), each of whom would produce their work within their own studios. However, the resulting artworks were to become the "property of all," periodically exhibited either in solo or group exhibitions. In addition to individual production, the formation of a shared studio, *Porte Ouverte*, was envisioned as a common space for work, encounter, and dialogue. Within this atelier, artists were encouraged to collaborate on joint works based on shared interests or technical compatibility, in order to create experimental pieces "with no other aim than the creation of an original work."⁷³ While recognizing the value of each artist's individual research, the document emphasizes that such inquiry should ultimately contribute to the development of the collective work, whose success depends precisely on shared effort and collaboration.

This cooperative ethos also extended to the economic structure of the project:

⁷³ Ibid.

“Such an organisation, due to active collaboration on shared works, requires a challenge to the notion of price. The members of this cooperative will therefore offer their personal works at a uniform price, regardless of the author. Furthermore, these prices will be established in such a way as to make these works accessible to a public previously kept at bay by the excessively high prices of the works. For this cooperative, relieved of all kinds of advertising costs, nothing would prevent it from offering a painting to a public at the price at which it is granted to the dealer.”⁷⁴

Therefore, this model not only redefined artistic collaboration and authorship but also proposed a radical rethinking of art’s economic circulation. It sought to dismantle traditional barriers between artists and audiences, and to democratise both access to and ownership of art.

Yet even within this shared desire for structural change, differences soon surfaced, likely stemming from divergent economic considerations that may have shaped (and perhaps divided) the ambitions of the artists involved. A revealing exchange between Eido and Abboud in May 1965, at the very moment when preparations for their “long-awaited project”⁷⁵ were underway, exposes the underlying tensions and competing visions within the group.

Eido, whose energies and artistic principles had prodded the idea of Atelier Porte Ouverte, was born in Beirut and was among the first to attend ALBA at the time of its foundation. According to Lahoud, after his studies in Paris, he came back to Beirut in 1952, where he worked in a variety of media.⁷⁶ His studio became a space for encounter between artists as well as connoisseurs and students alike, but also for deep, philosophical inquiry about art, the relation

⁷⁴ Ibid. 3.

⁷⁵ Letter from Munir Eido to Shafic Abboud, 26.05.1965. In Arabic in the original source, translation by Maria Atallah. Courtesy of Christine Abboud. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

⁷⁶ See Lahoud, *L’Art Contemporain au Liban*, 129-130.

between content and form, and the discussion on abstraction and figuration.⁷⁷ His focus on the artistic dimension of art, rather than its commercial value, would become a cornerstone in shaping the conceptual framework of Atelier Porte Ouverte.

In the letter, Eido refers to Janine Rubeiz's "project," which was not met with unanimous enthusiasm; he notes that for both him and Wassek Adib it was "unacceptable".⁷⁸ However, Adib will later be a founding member of Dar el Fan and a stable presence in its committee. Eido also underscores that "none of the parties involved seems to be aware of each other's positions,"⁷⁹ suggesting a lack of transparency and a divergence of priorities among the involved artists. His account hints at the emergence of a parallel initiative that drew in some of the very same artists involved in Atelier Porte Ouverte. The result was a delicate overlap, where shared collaborators found themselves navigating between concurrent visions for a collective space, blurring the line between collaboration and quiet competition. While Eido was invested in a collective artistic experiment, others (namely Abboud, el Bacha and Aouad) appeared to be on the verge of securing the best arrangement in terms of opportunities and contracts.

What emerges is a picture of a collaborative venture marked by shared aspirations but also by the realities of individual ambitions, differing concepts of the project's scope, and the difficulty of aligning artistic ideals with practical negotiations.

This letter, together with Abboud's contemporaneous correspondence with Janine Rubeiz (which will be discussed in the following section), point to the coexistence of multiple and at times conflicting visions for the role of the artist, the function of institutions, and the shape of cultural life in Beirut. Although Atelier Porte Ouverte ultimately never came to fruition, the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Letter from Munir Eido to Shafic Abboud, 26.05.1965.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

idea behind it, a collective space where artists could work, exhibit, and sustain dialogue outside of commercial pressures, can be seen as a conceptual precursor to Dar el Fan. The discussions between Abboud, Eido, and their peers in the mid-1960s reveal a shared desire to create a platform that would nurture exchange and experimentation within Lebanon's artistic community, bridging local concerns with broader cultural currents. While the project dissolved under the weight of differing visions and practical obstacles, it articulated a vision for an independent, artist-driven platform that anticipated many of the values Dar el Fan would later embody. In this sense, Atelier Porte Ouverte stands less as a failed initiative than as a formative moment: a rehearsal for the collective cultural infrastructure that Dar el Fan would eventually provide.

Within this unsettled landscape, the foundation of Dar el Fan was not an isolated gesture but part of the same ecology of debates. Seen in this light, the centre was neither a sudden creation nor the product of a single vision. It arose as a situated and adaptive response to the aspirations and contradictions of the 1960s Lebanese art scene—a field marked as much by generative friction as by consensus. Its prelude is best understood as a moment of productive uncertainty, when artists and cultural actors were not only questioning their individual roles but actively reimagining the structures through which they might collectively speak, act, and intervene.

1.3. Correspondence between Janine Rubeiz and Shafic Abboud

Janine Rubeiz, whose profile will be traced in detail in Chapter 2, belonged to Beirut's Francophone bourgeoisie and was embedded in the city's social and cultural fabric. Educated and well connected, she often used to travel to and spend time in Paris. She developed a strong

interest in the arts early on, and collaborated with the theatre world as a costume designer, even contributing to the prestigious Baalbek International Festival after its establishment in 1956. By the early 1950s, she had already begun to cultivate relationships with artists, laying the groundwork for what would become a lifelong engagement with Lebanon's artistic and intellectual circles. Evidence of this early involvement can be found in her correspondence with the painter Shafic Abboud. Their exchanges reveal not only a personal friendship but also Rubeiz's growing ambition to establish a space dedicated to contemporary art and to support emerging and established Lebanese artists.

Born in 1926 in the mountain town of Bikfaya into an educated middle-class family, Abboud studied at ALBA under César Gemayel. Yet Abboud would soon depart from his teacher's influence to develop a more individual and structured painterly language. In 1947, he moved to France to further his studies and engage more directly with the European avant-garde. Although financial constraints forced his return to Lebanon in 1949, his initial exposure to Paris's dynamic art scene proved formative, with frequent visits to Montparnasse, a vibrant hub of artistic experimentation. By 1951, he returned to France permanently and by the mid-1950s, he had become integrated into the Parisian art community.⁸⁰ However, he never cut ties with his land of origin, where he exhibited for the first time in 1955. In July 1959, he participated in the inaugural Paris Biennale, initiated by André Malraux at the Paris Museum of Modern Art, in the section titled "France and the French Community", a category that included artists who had resided in France for at least three years.⁸¹ This participation marked a turning point in his career, offering significant international recognition. On 1st January 1960,

⁸⁰ On Shafic Abboud, see Pascale le Thorel *Chafic Abboud*, (Skira, 2014); *Chafic Abboud*, (Gallery Claude Lemand, 2006).

⁸¹ Le Thorel, *Chafic Abboud*, 44.

Abboud signed an exclusive contract with the Raymonde Cazenave Gallery in Paris. This agreement provided him with a monthly stipend, offering both financial stability and institutional backing. His first solo exhibition at the gallery, held in March 1961, was a resounding success. Abboud's work attracted praise from critics, collectors, and the public alike.⁸² Over the following years, his artistic trajectory evolved steadily: from the figurative compositions of his early period, he moved toward a refined form of abstraction, characterized by radiant colours and luminous tonalities.

The year 1964 would prove pivotal for Abboud. That year, he participated in the fourth Salon d'Automne at the Surock Museum, where the jury featured a mix of French and Lebanese art critics. His abstract painting *Enfantine* (Child's Play) was awarded the first prize, further consolidating his status in both French and Lebanese art circles.⁸³ That same year, he held at Rubeiz's home an exhibition of lithographs produced during a residency at the Offenbach Kunstwerkschule (School of Art) in Germany. This exhibition stands as an early example of Rubeiz's commitment to supporting contemporary Lebanese artists through curated exhibitions. The style of Abboud's lithographs can be inferred through the words of Claire Gebeyli, whose review is featured in *Magazine*.⁸⁴ Gebeyli highlights the artist's abstract approach, which evokes an "intricate, at times aggressive"⁸⁵ world, where light filters through chiaroscuro effects rendered by the skilful use of black and white. This interplay creates

⁸² Ibid. 52.

⁸³ The award provoked a scandal and was widely criticized in the press. Playwright Jalal Khoury responded with a sharply worded review titled "Je suis inculte!" [I Am Uncultivated!], *Magazine*, 17.12.1964, in which he accused the jury of elitism and a biased preference for abstraction. Rather than expressing concern over the potential derivativeness of abstract art, Khoury argued that a realist work rooted in vernacular references would have more accurately reflected national realities—and thus been more deserving of canonization. To the role of the Salon d'Automne, The Surock Museum has dedicated the exhibition "Je suis inculte! The Salon d'Automne and the National Canon" curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, (26.05.2023 – 15.06.2025). On the 1964 Salon and Abboud's abstraction, see also Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut*, 87-93.

⁸⁴ Claire Gebeyli, « Les dix lithographies de Chafik Abboud, » *Magazine* 387, p. 75, 21.05.1964.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

powerful volumes alongside fluctuating, ephemeral spaces. What emerges is a “struggle between light and darkness,” a kind of “black-and-white poetry.”⁸⁶ While the event is referenced in Abboud’s CV and in the correspondence between him and Rubeiz, no formal documentation of Rubeiz’s “gallery” during this early phase has yet surfaced. However, in subsequent letters, Rubeiz mentions her involvement in selling works by both artist el Rayess and Abboud “from home,”⁸⁷ suggesting an informal, domestic model of cultural patronage. As was not uncommon in Beirut at the time, Rubeiz probably relied on her apartment as an exhibition venue—an intimate space animated by her personal connections.⁸⁸

It was February 1964 when Rubeiz wrote to Abboud announcing that she had secured a large space at the Ghandour Gallery in Ras Beirut. “Aref and I were thinking of turning it into a painting gallery,” she explained, and asked whether Abboud would be interested in collaborating: “I don’t yet have a precise idea,” she admitted, “but I would like the collaboration of a few serious painters.” In conclusion, she added, “I would like to make a space of encounters, of exchange, of true values. The commercial aspect is accessory.”⁸⁹

The Aref she refers to – Aref el Rayess – was a prolific painter and sculptor, and one of the most intellectually and politically engaged artists of his generation. By this point, he had already exhibited in Lebanon, Senegal and Italy.⁹⁰ Deeply influenced by his experiences in Europe, Africa, and the Arab world, his work fused expressionist aesthetics with a commitment to pan-Arab political and cultural concerns, which resonated with Dar el Fan’s own political commitment, discussed in Chapter 3.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to Shafic Abboud, 25.03.1964. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

⁸⁸ Rubeiz will revive this idea during the Civil War, as discussed in Chapter 5.

⁸⁹ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to Shafic Abboud, 20.02.1964. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

⁹⁰ See the artist folder at the Archive of the Sursock Museum.

Read in this light, the letter is significant in several respects. It reveals that by the mid-1960s, Rubeiz was not only imagining a space for artistic exchange but was also actively forging relationships with artists (such as Abboud and el Rayess) who would later form the core of Dar el Fan's intellectual and artistic community. It also demonstrates her initiative in building not only personal but also professional relationships with artists whose stature in the international art world was steadily rising.

Rubeiz's statement that "the commercial aspect is accessory" offers an important window into her thinking, but it requires careful reading. The letter does not suggest a dismissal of the market altogether; rather, it frames economic considerations as secondary to art's capacity to foster dialogue and collective engagement. This nuance is borne out by later developments at Dar el Fan: although the space was not conceived as a gallery in the conventional sense, Rubeiz actively worked to secure agreements with artists, a point underscored, as we have seen, in Mounir Eido's correspondence. These suggest that she recognized the material realities of sustaining artistic practice and sought to create structures that would support artists more effectively than initiatives like Atelier Porte Ouverte, which, despite its collectivist ethos, offered little in terms of tangible economic security. In this light, Rubeiz's approach appears less as a rejection of the commercial dimension than as an attempt to subordinate it to a broader ethical and intellectual project while ensuring that artists could benefit materially from their work. Dar el Fan's model thus balanced idealism with pragmatism: it was neither a commercial gallery nor a purely utopian collective, but an effort to carve out a space where artistic exchange and financial sustainability could coexist on more equitable terms.

In August 1965, Rubeiz confirmed the signing of a contract with Fawzi Ghandour. Under the agreement, she retained full control as the gallery's sole artistic director and curator, though

the proceeds from artwork sales were to be shared with Ghandour. Despite this formal arrangement, there appears to have been a delay in the gallery's opening. A letter dated September 1965 indicates that the launch was postponed, with the opening now anticipated for January of the following year.⁹¹

Throughout this period, Rubeiz continued to consolidate her network of artists and collaborators. She reached out to Abboud requesting Farid Aouad and Amine el Bacha's address in France, in order to extend a formal invitation for collaboration and to begin planning exhibitions.⁹² Both painters would go on to exhibit in the earlier seasons of Dar el Fan, with Amine el Bacha becoming one of Janine Rubeiz's closest lifelong friends.

The growing involvement of artists like Aouad and el Bacha, alongside Abboud and el Rayess, reflects the early success of Rubeiz's efforts to build a community rooted in artistic quality and exchange. The informal beginnings in Ras Beirut, first discussed in her letters, gradually evolved into a formalised cultural centre. These intertwined narratives of friendship, correspondence, and artistic collaboration foreshadow the establishment of Dar el Fan as one of Beirut's platforms for modern art that was shaped not only by its exhibitions, but also by the shared values and aspirations of its founding circle.

1.4. The House Opens its Doors: Foundation, Mission and Structure of Dar el Fan

Dar el Fan had been formally established as a cultural association well before the much-anticipated inauguration at its historic building at the end of November 1967.⁹³ In February of

⁹¹ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to Shafic Abboud, 20.09.1965. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ This contrasts with the information in the May 1965 letter between Eido and Abboud, where, speaking about her project, Eido writes that Rubeiz "even went so far as to set up an official agreement in the presence of a lawyer and she's been preparing to travel to Paris to conclude it. She may, in fact, already be there". It is unclear

the same year, Abboud received an official letter⁹⁴ outlining the guiding principles of the association, whose “goal (far from being the pursuit of material profit) is the promotion, by all appropriate means, of the arts and letters in Lebanon in an environment conducive to their full flourishing”.⁹⁵ Francophone dailies *L’Orient* and *Le Jour* had both featured articles on the new initiative in the same period.⁹⁶ The weekly *La Revue du Liban*, a popular magazine among the French-speaking bourgeoisie, dedicated a two-page article to the still-in-embryo cultural centre in August of the same year (Fig. 1).⁹⁷ The predominant coverage of Dar el Fan’s opening by French newspapers serves as a revealing indicator of its identity, a “house for all” that resonated prominently with the French-speaking bourgeoisie.⁹⁸

The association was constituted in January 1967, as indicated by a letter to Banque Trad, signed by Janine and her younger brother Georges Rubeiz together with Michel Harmouche, which set out the centre’s financial organisation. Born out of private initiative as a *société anonyme*, a French business structure equivalent to a corporation, Dar el Fan divided its initial capital of fifty thousand Lebanese pounds (around 16,000 US dollars at the time) in 1000 shares and sold them at the price of 50 pounds to the public of artists, writers, and intellectuals (Fig. 2). This choice was explained as the best means “to allow the effective participation of each of its

whether this refers to the gallery-space she organized at her home, or to the project she was developing with Adib and Ghandour.

⁹⁴ Letter from Dar el Fan to Shafic Abboud, 02.1967. The letter also bears a first, simple logo of the association, whose design is unknown. It features the name of the centre in Arabic, inscribed in a door or pointed-window shape.

⁹⁵ Ibid. The same quote is found in the document “Dar el Fan”, undated (likely 1967), 1. Archive of Dar el Fan, p.1. In French in the original text.

⁹⁶ See for example “Dar el Fan en actions,” *L’Orient*, 15.02.1967; “Conférence de presse de Dar el Fan,” *Le Jour*, 15.02.1967.

⁹⁷ See “Les activités de ‘Dar el Fan wal Adab’ vont s’étendre à toutes les branches des Arts et des Lettres,” *La Revue du Liban*, 26.08.1967, 36, 37.

⁹⁸ The findings from archival research in journalistic outlets indicate a notable discrepancy in media coverage of Dar el Fan’s activities, with a significantly higher presence in French-language newspapers compared to those in Arabic and English.

member to the common effort”.⁹⁹ By spring, the founders had already begun selling shares, ensuring that the association would have a base of support in place before its physical space opened in autumn. In the first annual report of Dar el Fan, the centre counted, by the end of the season 1967/1968, 207 shareholders and 333 members.¹⁰⁰ The possibility to become a member was open also to those who did not own any share, through the payment of a yearly subscription at the price of 25 Lebanese pounds.¹⁰¹ Artist Halim Jurdak (1927-2020), who would collaborate with Dar el Fan for a long time, wrote that he was invited, alongside a group of other artists and intellectuals, to “contribute by purchasing shares to the extent of [one’s own] financial capabilities”. In another document, he adds “Dar el Fan was not funded by a system, or ruling system of embassy of any nation or any company or institution with a private interest and calculation”.¹⁰² In a later article, Janine Rubeiz will be quoted saying,

“From the beginning we have wanted Dar el Fan to be an independent cultural centre. Independent of considerations commercial, social or political. To protect this independence and this liberty, which is at the base of the existence of Dar el Fan, we have had to depend financially on a number of persons. We have not tried to obtain a government subsidy. We do not believe we should demand this until the State itself defines its cultural policy. We believe that only a democratic, popular support justifies our existence”.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ From the document “Dar el Fan”, 1.

¹⁰⁰ See the 1967/1968 Annual Report, 2. Archive of Dar el Fan.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. This probably entailed less benefits and possibilities in terms, for instance, of the election of the Executive Board.

¹⁰² From undated, handwritten texts (probably 1992, on the occasion of the passing of Janine Rubeiz) preserved in the Archive of Halim Jurdak. I thank Saleh Barakat for having shared the documents with me and my friend Ahmed el Shawky for his help in the translation from Arabic.

¹⁰³ Helen Khal, “Dar el Fan. Towards a ‘Culture of the masses’,” *Monday Morning*, June/July 1972.

Therefore, the self-financed structure¹⁰⁴ was a political choice that allowed a certain degree of economic independence and, as it will be discussed later, guaranteed equal participation among members and audiences of relatively diverse political backgrounds.

In a second, personal letter¹⁰⁵ to Abboud from the same year, Rubeiz describes the space designated to be the headquarters of Dar el Fan as being “en plein chantier” (under construction) and added, “tu verras, la maison sera formidable” (you will see, the house will be wonderful).¹⁰⁶ During the course of this research, it was not possible to reconstruct the circumstances that led Rubeiz to leave the space at the Ghandour Gallery and establish Dar el Fan in a different location. However, in a letter to Abboud dated May 1964,¹⁰⁷ she refers to the recent passing of Antoine Tabet. A prominent architect and a political figure, Tabet (1907-1964) co-founded the Order of Engineers and Architects and was involved in the construction of the Hotel Saint-Georges, an iconic modernist building in Beirut.¹⁰⁸ He used to reside with his family in a large, spacious traditional house located on Abdel Basset Fakhoury Street, off the main Bishara El Khoury thoroughfare in the Ras el Nabaa area. His son, Jad Tabet, explained to me that following the passing of his father, it became increasingly difficult for his mother to maintain the entire villa, which was subsequently offered to Dar el Fan under favourable conditions.¹⁰⁹ Thanks to Jad Tabet’s recollections, it has been possible to reconstruct the

¹⁰⁴ Dar el Fan also used to retain a percentage on the artworks sold during the exhibitions. This constituted a capital to be reinvested in the centre’s activities.

¹⁰⁵ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to Shafic Abboud, 1967. Archive of Shafic Abboud. This bears the first logo of Dar el Fan in the upper right-hand corner. Designed by painter and calligrapher Wajih Nahle, the logo features the inscription *Dar el Fan wa-l-Adab* in Arabic, rendered in the squared, geometric style of Kufic cursive script. The elongated forms of the *lam* and *alif* letters are stylized in such a way that the logo visually evokes the entrance of a nineteenth century Lebanese house, with two columns flanking a central doorway.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to Shafic Abboud, 30.05.1964. Archive of Shafic Abboud.

¹⁰⁸ George Arbid, entry “Antoine Tabet” in the Arab Centre for Architecture <https://arab-architecture.org/db/architect/antoine-tabet> [last access 16.05.2025].

¹⁰⁹ Interview with the author, Beirut, May 2023.

original layout of the building and trace the transformation of its spaces (Fig. 3). Like many nineteenth century Lebanese central hall mansions, the house was composed of two floors and surrounded by a spacious garden, with areas designed for outdoor leisure. The first floor consisted of a large central hall, around which several rooms branched off, which were later used as offices for Dar el Fan. The typical interior colonnade, creating a sort of stage and ending with the three pointed-arch windows, occupied the far end of the hall. Tabet recalls that his former bedroom was converted into the centre's café-restaurant, enhanced by the addition of a mezzanine level.¹¹⁰ This reimagining of the interiors and architectural adaptations mirrored the transformation of the space itself, as it shifted from domestic space into a public cultural hub.

Dar el Fan was conceived as a multifunctional space from its very inception. Already by the end of the first season, the centre had organised around 50 diverse events.¹¹¹ Over the years, it hosted roughly 240 cultural events including conferences, art exhibitions, movie screenings, poetry readings, musical concerts, and debates on political and current issues,¹¹² with the declared aim of "bringing art and culture closer to the audience".¹¹³ In the archival document *Dar el Fan*, we read that the "club", as it was defined, included an exhibition hall "dedicated to the plastic arts,"¹¹⁴ a spacious room for conferences and debates that could be transformed into a venue for theatrical plays and concerts, a library of books, newspapers, and vinyl records, as well as a cafeteria and restaurant. The centre also had a guest room, to host speakers and

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ 1967/68 Annual Report, 1. Archive of Dar el Fan.

¹¹² Due to the loss of the archives, it is not possible to reconstruct the exact calendar of the activities throughout the life of the centre.

¹¹³ Khal, "Dar el Fan. Towards a 'Culture of the masses'".

¹¹⁴ "Dar el Fan", 1

contributors from abroad. In the library, alongside works of art and literature, members could consult “constantly updated archives of Lebanon’s artistic and literary production,”¹¹⁵ underscoring the desire to build a lasting repository—a place where people could find and reclaim their own cultural history in a context where such a history was rarely preserved.

Set within its time, Dar el Fan explicitly sought to forge a renewed “Lebanese personality.” In the annual report for the 1967-68 season, we read: “The undertaking that concerned us was to establish Dar el Fan on solid foundations, to launch this *Lebanese cultural centre*, and to try to reach all circles that might take an interest in it.”¹¹⁶ The distinctly Lebanese character of Dar el Fan emerges also from the writings of poet and artist Etel Adnan (1925-2021): “Foreign cultural centres were numerous at the time and very active, competing for a very dedicated intellectual clientele, but it was time for a Lebanese centre to see the light of day.”¹¹⁷ In the same source, Janine Rubeiz asserts: “We were many to discuss in cafés but felt we needed a meeting place where we felt at home. Foreign cultural centres whose programmes were decreed by distant ministries could not provide everything we feel we need.”¹¹⁸ Described by its founders as “the first actual Lebanese cultural centre,” Dar el Fan’s self-definition highlighted not only its multifaceted institutional structure devoted to different artistic disciplines but also its ambition to articulate a distinctly Lebanese cultural identity, framed as a Lebanese cultural “personality.” This claim, which appears in writings by its founders and was echoed by some interviewees, has been contested by others who point to the existence of cultural spaces such as the Arab Cultural Club and the Cénacle Libanais. Nevertheless, I argue

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ 1967/68 Annual Report, 1. Archive of Dar el Fan.

¹¹⁷ Etel Adnan in Kassab, ed. *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 13-17, 14. In French in the original source.

¹¹⁸ Janine Rubeiz in Kassab, ed. *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 19-23, 19. In French in the original source.

that the definition is compelling for what it reveals about Dar el Fan's own self-portrayal and the cultural role it sought to carve out within the Lebanese artistic landscape.

The opening of Dar el Fan on 27 November 1967 was met with a certain degree of expectation by the press. Journalist Evelyne Massoud of *La Revue du Liban* reports bits of conversations with the founder Janine Rubeiz and secretary lawyer Francois Harfouche, and describes Dar el Fan's mission as to gather the "scattered" artists and intellectuals in an official, independent place.¹¹⁹ The centre was inaugurated with an exhibition dedicated to Le Corbusier, a choice that reveals much about its initial vision and positioning. The exhibition took place shortly after the architect's passing in 1965, lending the event a commemorative aspect. Yet Le Corbusier was far from an easy or conventional figure: not a Lebanese artist, but one of the foremost architects of the modern era, whose work symbolised innovation, modernity, and a break with tradition. By selecting his oeuvre for the inaugural exhibition, Dar el Fan aligned itself with a global modernist language, signalling its ambitions to be at the forefront of a contemporary artistic and cultural discourse anchored in Beirut and the Arab world but with an international outlook.

This opening event was supported by the French embassy – as will be several events over the life of the centre. This indicates that Dar el Fan did enjoy some forms of institutional backing from the outset, in contrast to narratives that emphasise solely its financial precarity, which the centre did indeed have to contend with. Moreover, the embassy's involvement reflects a dimension of cultural diplomacy, highlighting Lebanon's Francophone connections and the broader role of foreign institutions in fostering cultural initiatives, as will be discussed in

¹¹⁹ See "Les activités de 'Dar el-Fan w-al-Adab'".

Chapter 4.¹²⁰ Overall, such inauguration set a complex tone for Dar el Fan: it was both a local hub and a node in international cultural networks, a space tied to its “Lebanese heritage” and a display of modernism, but also a place tied to elite social strata.

Press coverage of the opening reveals much about the social makeup of Dar el Fan’s audiences. Reports and photographs depict gatherings predominantly composed of Beirut’s bourgeoisie, highlighting the centre’s embedding within the city’s elite cultural circles. Despite its progressive and socially engaged ethos, Dar el Fan maintained a distinctly bourgeois character. Its core membership stemmed from Beirut’s educated elites, and the cultural capital it fostered was shaped by their social standing. This thus created a space where avant-garde artistic and political experimentation coexisted with the values and resources of the intellectual upper middle class.

This alignment extended to the centre’s governance as well: the Executive Board, elected annually to oversee Dar el Fan, was similarly drawn from this same bourgeois milieu, underscoring the close ties between the centre’s leadership and Beirut’s cultural elite. Again, it has proved difficult to reconstruct the different boards elected throughout its eight years of existence. In 1967, under the presidency of Janine Rubeiz, playwright Raymond Gebara¹²¹ was vice president. Other members of the Board included Wasek Adib and artist Wajih Nahle (1932-2017)¹²² as responsible for the painting and sculpture section, while playwright and actor

¹²⁰ Dar el Fan will receive support from a variety of different bodies, both local, such as Middle East Airlines and the Conseil National du Tourisme, and foreign to sustain its activities. These, however, were mostly sponsoring events without decisively influencing the programme of the centre.

¹²¹ Playwright, director and actor Raymond Gebara (1935–2015) was a key figure in Lebanon’s cultural scene during the 1960s and 1970s, he was closely associated with experimental theatre.

¹²² Wajih Nahle studied under the guidance of Moustafa Farroukh. During the 1950s and 1960s, he developed a visual language inspired by the arabesque and Phoenician heritage, producing works that often resembled inscriptions, imaginary scripts, or calligraphy, with titles such as *Composition orientale* or *Vision orientale*. In the early 1970s, he turned toward a “new Islamic art” characterized by geometric forms, abundant use of gold, and recurring motifs such as calligraphy, musicians, and architectural references. Later, his style grew lighter and

Roger Assaf¹²³ was the head for the theatre committee, and opera singer Samia Sandri¹²⁴ led the one for music and dance. Sculptor Youssef Ghossoub¹²⁵ and professor Leila Osseiran supervised activities related to literature. Other members were engaged in administrative duties, such as decorator Francois Harfouche as treasurer (Fig. 4).¹²⁶ Over the years, the Boards consisted of a wide range of figures, with diverse interests in the arts and culture as well as different political leanings. They included artists Moazzaz Raouda (1906-1986), Simone Fattal (b.1942), Etel Adnan, and Aref el Rayess, cultural advocate and philanthropist Lady Yvonne Cochrane Sursock, art critic Nicole Malhamé Harfouche and poets Samia Toutounji and Nadia Tueni,¹²⁷ journalist and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) politician Marwan Hamade, Irene Jabre and journalist Maurice Sakr. The Board used to elect the president every year. Presidents of Dar el Fan were, beside its founder Janine Rubeiz, Nicole Harfouche and Samia Toutounji, whose profiles and roles at the centre will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Dar el Fan left a lasting impression on the public and remains widely remembered throughout Lebanon to date. The list of members of the season 1970-1971 preserved in the archives,

more abstract, with pastel tonalities and flowing forms that foreshadowed the aesthetic he would consolidate in the 1990s. On Wajih Nahle, see André Parinaud and Joseph Abou-Rizk, *Wajih Nahle: Pour un nouveau graphisme arabe, 1952–1977* [Wajih Nahle: For a new Arab graphic style, 1952-1977] (Khās Lubnān, n.d.).

¹²³ Born in 1941, Roger Assaf is a playwright, director and actor. During the 1960s, he studied acting in Strasbourg (France). Upon his return to Lebanon, he was a co-founder of the College of Arts in the Lebanese University. He was a Marxist and left-wing activist, and a supporter of the Palestinian Cause. His play *Majdaloun* about the Palestinian resistance in South Lebanon was censored by the Lebanese authorities soon after its launch.

¹²⁴ Samia Sandri (1934-2005) was an opera singer, songwriter and *kanoun* player, known for her efforts to popularize opera in Lebanon. She performed numerous concerts and recitals in Beirut's leading concert halls and made it her mission to introduce opera to the Lebanese public. Sandri went on to establish one of the first opera classes at the National Conservatory of Beirut and worked on translating and interpreting operatic arias into Arabic. She was a founding member of the Lebanese Opera Group.

¹²⁵ Born in Fanar in 1898, Youssef Ghossoub was a founding member of the Association of Lebanese Painters and Sculptors and chaired it for several years. He was regularly active in the organisation of exhibitions at the Unesco Palace. He passed away suddenly in 1967.

¹²⁶ From the record of the meeting of the Administrative Council of Dar el Fan, 31.07.1967. Archive of Dar el Fan.

¹²⁷ Nadia Tueni (1935-1983) was a Francophone poet. She worked as the literary editor of *Le Jour*. Among her publications, she authored the volume *Juin et le Mécréants* (1968), part of the discussion in Chapter 3.

counts roughly three-hundreds members. These included people as diverse as Sursock Museum's first curator Camille Aboussouan, prominent politicians Pierre and Raymond¹²⁸ Eddé, composer and Fairuz's husband Assi Rahbani, legislator (and future minister) Pierre Helou, and doctor and art collector Souhail Boulos.¹²⁹

Although the members and subscribers of Dar el Fan represented a wide spectrum of political and religious affiliations, as well as varied interests in the fields of art and culture, the centre maintained a distinctly left-leaning,¹³⁰ socialist orientation and was strongly associated with the Palestinian Cause. This alignment was not only evident in its programming but also in the way it was perceived by the Lebanese public, a perception that emerges repeatedly in interviews and contemporary accounts, where Dar el Fan is described as a place "for the Left". Yet, despite this clear positioning, Dar el Fan was not an exclusive space: it remained open to dialogue with moderate right-wing political parties and figures, fostering conversations that attempted to cut across ideological boundaries. Its political engagement will be examined in Chapter 3.

Unattached to any official body or political party and untied from commercial interests, Dar el Fan enjoyed a freedom that fostered creativity and debate outside of traditional forms of institutionalised power, both local and foreign. The centre soon became one of the main catalysts in the intellectual scene of Beirut and a meeting point where artists, journalists, thinkers, researchers, and politicians could meet, socialise, and discuss their work. Elsewhere

¹²⁸ A lawyer and a politician, he was the leader of the social liberal, nationalist National Bloc, an influential political party founded by his father Émile Eddé in 1946.

¹²⁹ List of Members, 1970-1971. Archive of Dar el Fan.

¹³⁰ The spectrum of the Lebanese Left was wide and diverse at the time. While Dar el Fan and the majority of its committee leaned towards socialism, its members belonged to a variety of political affiliations, with some of them being close to right-wing parties.

in his memoirs, Jurdak describes Dar el Fan as “an oasis for modern art and culture and a platform for free thinking welcoming quality from wherever it comes from”.¹³¹ He writes:

“The foundation of Dar el Fan at that particular moment was an event equal in importance, moral impact, and practical value to the establishment of an academy or the construction of a museum. It appeared at the necessary time to support the emerging plastic and visual arts movement in Beirut, positioning the city (before the outbreak of the Civil War) as a pioneer in the cultural and artistic life of the Arab world. Dar el Fan emerged as a forum for the family of art, culture, and literature: for those who looked ahead with their hopes, imagination, and ambitions, envisioning the twenty-first century in art, poetry, literature, and theatre”.¹³²

Although written as a commemorative text, this passage offers valuable insight into how Dar el Fan was perceived. It situates the centre within the highest ranks of cultural infrastructure, almost equal to academies and museums, while emphasizing its timeliness, its role in consolidating Beirut’s leadership in the Arab cultural sphere, and its forward-looking, almost utopian spirit. Such language reflects both the pride and the symbolic weight attached to Dar el Fan’s mission, revealing how deeply it was intertwined with broader aspirations for Lebanon’s artistic future.

While the passage paints an idealised vision of Dar el Fan’s mission, the centre’s tangible impact and evolving identity were shaped in part by the active contributions of its founding members. In the next section, it will be examined how artists involved in the association played a pivotal role in the centre through their exhibitions. Their work not only helped to legitimize

¹³¹ Private papers of Halim Jurdak, handwritten. In Arabic in the original source. Undated, probably written on Rubeiz’s passing. I thank my friend Ahmed Shawky Hassan for his help and guidance in the translation. I thank Saleh Barakat for having shared the archival material with me.

¹³² Ibid.

Dar el Fan as a dedicated space for the arts but also positioned it as a tastemaker shaping artistic standards and tastes within Beirut's dynamic cultural landscape.

1.5. Filling the void: Dar el Fan as an alternative tastemaker

This section examines the solo exhibitions of Shafic Abboud, Amine el Bacha, and Farid Aouad held at Dar el Fan within its first two years of operation.¹³³ However, due to the limited documentation available, consisting primarily of newspaper articles with the reproduction of few artworks in black and white, these exhibitions will not be approached much from the perspective of artistic critique. Rather, they are considered within a broader framework that foregrounds the evolving relationship between the artists and Janine Rubeiz, as well as the institutional dynamics of Dar el Fan during a formative phase of its identity. The decision to feature these three artists (each of whom had already achieved recognition in France and, to varying degrees, served as representatives of Lebanese art abroad) signals a deliberate curatorial orientation. Their inclusion not only laid the groundwork for enduring collaborations with Rubeiz but also contributed to legitimising and positioning Dar el Fan as a central actor in the articulation of a modern cultural identity in Lebanon. Conversely, the presence of such figures in its early programming helped shape the centre's public image as a locus of cultural modernity.

¹³³ The group of artists involved in the foundation of Dar el Fan was, of course, broader, including, as we have seen, figures such as Aref el Rayess and Halim Jurdak. This section, however, focuses on Abboud, el Bacha, and Aouad, as they each held solo exhibitions during the centre's first two years of activity, regarded as particularly formative for the centre's identity.

In this regard, Dar el Fan's programme partly suggests an alignment with the curatorial choices of the Sursock Museum. The centre exhibited several artists that had already taken part in the Sursock salons, such as Shafic Abboud, Elie Kanaan, Moazzaz Raouda, and Jamil Molaeb (b.1948),¹³⁴ some even winning prizes. In this sense, it seems to suggest a "confirmation" of the institutional canon. Yet, it also cultivated a platform for emerging voices, foreign artists, and more avant-garde or experimental practices. Perhaps due to the Sursock Museum's contested institutional trajectory and the lack of other cultural centres with a clear interest for the arts, Dar el Fan aspired to be a leading voice in the definition of what could be considered "Lebanese art," and to foster a community of discourse around it. A telling example of the Sursock Museum's perceived shortcomings appears in a December 1967 article in *Al-Ahad*, titled *Sursock 'Museum': When will it become a museum?* authored by art critic Faysal Sultan.¹³⁵ Published during the boycott of that year's Salon d'Automne, the piece criticises the Sursock for failing to meet even the most basic expectations of a museum. It was described instead as an improvised exhibition space, economically unsustainable, inconsistently managed, and lacking transparency. As such, it was seen as unable to fulfil its stated mission: to "make known the Lebanese artistic heritage from its inception to the present."¹³⁶ The article underscores that the museum was not functioning as a cultural institution capable of providing continuity for artists, nor as a pedagogical framework for articulating a national art history or

¹³⁴ Abboud, as we have seen, received a prize in 1964. Elie Kanaan was awarded in 1966, and exhibited at Dar el Fan in May 1968. Between 1964 and 1968, Moazzaz Raouda took part in the annual editions of the Autumn Salon and in 1967, she won first prize at the monuments contest organised by the Ministry of Tourism. She became an active member of Dar el Fan and its Executive Board, and exhibited her work at the centre in 1969. In 1967, young Jamil Molaeb won the third prize of sculpture. His work was displayed at Dar el Fan in 1972 (group) and in 1974 (solo). For a complete list of the prizes awarded by the Salon d'Automne, see von Maltzahn "Guiding the artist and the public?".

¹³⁵ Faysal Sultan, "'Mathaf' Sursuq... Mata yusbiḥ mathafan," [Sursock 'Museum'...When will it become a museum?] *Al-Ahad*, 24.12.1967. I thank my colleague Ashraf Osman for the translation of the article.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

nurturing public consciousness. In the author's opinion, it failed to serve as a unifying symbol or to cultivate the civic imagination.

I would argue that Dar el Fan actively sought to occupy this space. It positioned itself as an alternative cultural anchor—not only for the artistic community (crucially, by offering a space where artists could “feel at home”) but also for a broader Lebanese public in search of aesthetic orientation. Dar el Fan thus navigated a careful balance between institutional legitimacy and curatorial experimentation.

1.5.1. Farid Aouad, 1968: A “return” to Lebanon

In February 1968, Farid Aouad opened his solo exhibition at Dar el Fan, featuring more than sixty works. The event marked a significant moment in his relationship with Rubeiz and in his dialogue with the Lebanese cultural scene more broadly. According to *Le Jour*, numerous artists, art enthusiasts, and Lebanese men of letters attended the opening night.¹³⁷ Several of the most prominent critics of the time, including Mirèse Akkar, Nazih Khater, and Viktor Hakim, reviewed the exhibition. Local newspapers, including *An-Nahar*, *Le Jour*, and *L'Orient* framed it as Aouad's “return” to Lebanon after many years—a reflection of the anticipation surrounding the event. This sense of homecoming seems to have been shared by Aouad himself. In a short piece in *Le Jour*, the artist remarked that he might even postpone the opening date because his return to a country he had not seen in twenty years had “inspired the creation of new works.”¹³⁸ A statement that could probably reflect his desire of maintaining ties with the

¹³⁷ « Vernissage des œuvres de Farid Awad à Dar el Fan, » *Le Jour*, 11.02.1968.

¹³⁸ See the column Midi Minuit, *Le Jour*, 07.01.1968.

country of origin, but that could also be read as a broader commitment to the creation of a local artistic scene.

Aouad (Maidan, Southern Lebanon, 1924 – Paris 1982) studied at ALBA between 1943 and 1947 before continuing his training in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, as well as in the studios of cubist André Lhote and fauvist Othon Friesz, whose influence will later be visible in his work. He returned briefly to Lebanon in the early 1950s to begin exhibiting his work, but by 1959 had settled permanently in Paris. By the early 1960s, he had exhibited his work in Paris on different occasions and galleries, with a solo exhibition at the Raymonde Cazenave gallery in 1964.¹³⁹

Aouad's oeuvre is best known for its lyrical, poetic depictions of everyday life and ordinary moments evoking an existential sensibility that seeks to reveal the reality of human condition. His paintings portray markets, cafés, public transport, and crowded urban scenes imbued with a pervasive sense of solitude, isolation and introspection. His characters, even when set in quotidian contexts, are rendered with the depth of their lived experience yet simultaneously stripped of a certain dimension of the human, elevated instead, borrowing the words of art critic Mirèse Akkar, "to the dignity of archetypes"¹⁴⁰ suspended within the time and space of the canvas. This tension evokes an existential sensibility that was emphasised also by art critic Viktor Hakim who, on the pages of *La Revue du Liban*, defines Aouad's characters as immersed in "a world of questioning,"¹⁴¹ pointing to the artist's attempt to capture the human condition within a universe shaped by solitude and quiet isolation. The focus on the purely human

¹³⁹ On the work of Farid Aouad, see Lahoud, *L'Art Contemporain au Liban*, 89-90. See also Rami Karim, "Farid Aouad", Dalloul Art Foundation, available at <https://dafbeirut.org/en/farid-aouad> [last access 10.08.2025].

¹⁴⁰ Mirèse Akkar, « Farid Aouad à Dar el Fan. Un peintre, un vrai, » *L'Orient*, 10.02.1968.

¹⁴¹ Viktor Hakim, "Farid Aouad à Dar el Fan," *La Revue du Liban*, 17.02.1968.

character of his figures is, according to Nazih Khater, Aouad's answer to a world in which machines and technology confront humanity with unprecedented challenges.¹⁴²

This emerges also through his choice of colours. Working primarily in pastels, he developed a palette that softened forms and blurred details to convey the psychological and emotional depth of his subjects. By the late 1960s, his paintings acquired a layered haze, outlines dissolved, and alienation came to the fore. In her review titled pointedly "*Un peintre, un vrai*" ("A Painter, a True One"), Akkar focuses on Aouad's painterly quality. The exhibition, she argued, situated his practice within a "deeply personal classicism,"¹⁴³ highlighting his ability to balance beauty, skill, and restraint with confident sensibility and refined taste. Akkar describes his painting as meticulous, with multiple, careful brushstrokes layered with rigour. She calls Aouad a "colourist,"¹⁴⁴ often using darker tones of reds and blues "biting into"¹⁴⁵ the softer pastels present in his work, masterfully translating into words Aouad's use of colour.

Despite the relation he had cultivated with Janine Rubeiz and the enthusiasm surrounding his participation in the 1968 exhibition at Dar el Fan, Aouad would never exhibit at the centre again. The reasons for this silence may lie in a confluence of personal and structural factors. Battling chronic illness and financial precarity for much of his life, he came to occupy a fragile position in the art world. In a later article, art critic Joseph Tarrab would describe Aouad as a "solitary painter,"¹⁴⁶ evoking a creative life marked more by interior struggle than by public affirmation. Tarrab recalls a 1977 letter written by Aouad to Odile Mazloum and Samir Andraos,

¹⁴² Nazih Khater, "Al-rassām al-'ā'id min Barīs - 'Awwād: lil' insān al-jadīd fann jadīd, » [The Painter returning from Paris, Aouad: for the new man, a new art] *An-Nahar*, 14.02.1968.

¹⁴³ Akkar, « Farid Aouad à Dar el Fan ».

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Tarrab, « La Lutte avec la Peinture » [Struggle with painting], text for the booklet of the exhibition *Hommage à Farid Aouad* at Alwane, February 1988. In French in the original source. Archive of the Sursock Museum.

in which the artist confesses, “always this struggle with painting, seeking something that still escapes.”¹⁴⁷ The phrase speaks not only to Aouad’s own restless artistic inquiry, but to a deeper condition of existential displacement, where painting becomes both a refuge and a site of unresolved tension. His withdrawal from the institutional circuits, including Dar el Fan, may thus be read not simply as a symptom of marginalization, but as an index of a broader refusal (or inability) to conform to the cultural rhythms and expectations of a modernising art world.

1.5.2. Amine el Bacha, 1968: A long-lasting friendship

Born in 1932 into a culturally vibrant and open-minded family, Amine el Bacha was immersed from a young age in an environment where the arts and letters were central to daily life. His family home in Beirut became a salon frequented by artists, musicians, and thinkers, shaping his early exposure to Lebanon’s burgeoning cultural scene. El Bacha’s formation was profoundly marked by his years at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the late 1950s, where he became part of a constellation of Lebanese artists who were reimagining the visual language of modernism through both local references and transnational dialogues.¹⁴⁸ Among his peers were Shafic Abboud, Mounir Eido, and Farid Aouad, as we have seen. By the time he exhibited at Dar el Fan, el Bacha had already earned recognition in both the Lebanese and French art scenes, with works shown at prestigious venues including the Paris Biennale (1959), the Salon des Surindépendants (1964) and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (1966) at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. His paintings often drew from the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ On the work of Amine el Bacha, see *Amine el Bacha, Beyrouth: aquarelles et dessins 1953-2009* (Dar Nelson, 2009); *Les enluminures de Amine El Bacha* (Bank Audi, 1993). See also Rami Karim, “Amine el Bacha”, Dalloul Art Foundation, available at <https://dafbeirut.org/en/amine-el-bacha> [last access 10.08.2025].

immediate world around him such as urban scenes, landscapes, and human figures animated by the rhythms of Beirut. His style blended impressionist sensibilities with modernist abstraction, characterized by a vivid, almost rebellious use of colour that resisted fixed categorisation.

His exhibition at Dar el Fan in April 1968 consisted of 85 works including gouaches, watercolours, ink drawings, and collages in modest formats that emphasized the intimacy of his artistic language. Contemporary reviews, including those by Viktor Hakim in *La Revue du Liban* and Nazih Khater in *An-Nahar*, as well as in newspapers such as *Le Jour* and *L'Orient*, offer a multifaceted portrait of this body of work, underscoring the tension between lightness and intellectual complexity.

In his review, Hakim notes the distinct tonal qualities of the watercolours, describing them as characterised by “a cautious use of colour,” composed through separated patches or “*taches*” that left the white of the paper to shine through and illuminate the composition from within. These works, depicting coastal scenes and the landscapes of France and Lebanon, conveyed a certain spontaneity and lyrical “lightness”¹⁴⁹ (what one critic, in another review, called *joie de vivre*)¹⁵⁰ imbued with poetic innocence and “childlike poetry”.¹⁵¹ In contrast, el Bacha’s gouaches introduced denser compositions in which musical themes came to the fore. Music had long been central to his education and creative imagination, and in these works, the influence of Erik Satie is said to be particularly notable.¹⁵² These works evoked a visual equivalent to musical notation, with compositions structured like harmonic scores, in which colour operated in rhythmic and tonal registers. This synesthetic approach positioned el

¹⁴⁹ Hakim, « Amine el Bacha à Dar el Fan, » *La Revue du Liban*, 13.04.1968.

¹⁵⁰ See « El Bacha, où le retour à la pureté, » *Le Jour*, 12.04.1968.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² This aspect is underlined by both Hakim and the review in *Le Jour*.

Bacha's practice within a broader tradition of modernist experiments in the interplay between sound and image.¹⁵³ The collages further extended this musical motif. Incorporating musical scores, handwritten letters, and found ephemera (such as Paris metro tickets), the works were described as delicate assemblages that evoked, as Hakim wrote, the careful hand of a "miniaturist".¹⁵⁴ These were not arbitrary compositions but rather "finely attuned arrangements",¹⁵⁵ in which seemingly mundane elements became vessels for personal recollection and formal exploration.

According to *Le Jour*, the exhibition revealed a "new maturity" in el Bacha's work.¹⁵⁶ Khater observed in el Bacha's the rare ability to "draw artistic knowledge from the great masters" while still forging a deeply personal visual language—"one that would ultimately become his and his alone." Yet, while praising the "wealth of knowledge" and "sound thinking, solid composition, and open expression", Khater noted that the artist's status as a *muthaqqaf* (intellectual) might also constitute a limitation. For all its aesthetic strength, the work perhaps lacked a certain emotional immediacy, obscured by the imprint of his intellectual temperament.¹⁵⁷

This tension between tradition and innovation, between studied composition and affective resonance was at the core of el Bacha's 1968 exhibition. As *L'Orient* put it, El Bacha was "one of the most in-motion painters in Lebanon, in the truest sense of the term,"¹⁵⁸ a reference that

¹⁵³ I refer here, for instance, to the studies of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and László Moholy-Nagy.

¹⁵⁴ Hakim, « Amine el Bacha à Dar el Fan ».

¹⁵⁵ C.S. « Amine el Bacha : lumière de la couleur et musique des formes, » *L'Orient*, 10.04.1968.

¹⁵⁶ « El Bacha, où le retour à la pureté, » *Le Jour*.

¹⁵⁷ Khater, "Amin al-Bāsha rassām muthaqqaf wa-fannuhu jāmid taḥta waṭ'at al-manṭiq, » [Amine el Bacha is an intellectual painter and his art is solid under the burden of logic] *An-Nahar*, 08.04.1968.

¹⁵⁸ C.S. « Amine el Bacha : lumière de la couleur et musique des formes ».

can be read not only to his geographical mobility (between Paris, Beirut, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands) but also to his ongoing formal experimentation.

His exhibition at Dar el Fan thus exemplified many of the qualities that the centre championed. Among them, a commitment to artistic experimentation grounded in both local realities and international dialogues; a dedication to fostering new forms of expression; and an engagement with aesthetic traditions not as fixed models to be imitated, but as sources to be questioned, reinterpreted, and made one's own. El Bacha would exhibit again at Dar el Fan in 1970, further solidifying his relationship with the centre and its ethos as well as with Janine Rubeiz, with whom he cultivated a friendship that would deepen during the years of the Lebanese Civil War, when both remained in Beirut despite escalating violence (see Chapter 5).

1.5.3. Shafic Abboud, 1969 : Defining *Le Propre de l'Art*¹⁵⁹

Shafic Abboud's contribution to Dar el Fan extended well beyond his role as an exhibiting artist. As one of its earliest supporters, he purchased shares of the centre and actively participated in its intellectual and artistic life. His friendship with Janine Rubeiz, rooted in mutual respect and shared cultural ambitions, would last for decades. A photograph from 1980 captures them embracing, marking the occasion of Abboud's gift of one of his paintings to the, by then, dislocated Dar el Fan. The accompanying article emphasised that, although Abboud had chosen to live in Paris, he "never forgot his homeland" and remained committed to its cultural life. His donation, the piece noted, was both a gesture of friendship towards Rubeiz and a tangible

¹⁵⁹ The French phrase "Le propre de l'art", which Abboud chose as the title of his lecture, is a bit nuanced. It literally means "what is proper to art" or "the defining characteristic of art."

expression of his desire to help revive Dar el Fan during a period of difficulty due to the upheavals of the Civil War.¹⁶⁰

In 1969, Dar el Fan welcomed Abboud into its programme, marking his first solo exhibition at the centre (Fig. 5).¹⁶¹ By that time, he had already gained a certain international reputation. Hence, the event reflected not only his standing as a major Lebanese painter but also his belief in the centre's role as a meeting point for artistic exchange in Lebanon, and between Lebanon and the wider world. Abboud presented 25 paintings and 20 drawings, half of which were produced in Paris, the other half in his native village near Bikfaya,¹⁶² where he had recently returned to reside in order to "regain contact with his origin".¹⁶³ Accompanying the exhibition was a lecture titled *Le propre de l'art*—a reflection on the inherent nature of art and the artist's relationship to their medium.¹⁶⁴

This dual offering of visual and verbal engagement revealed the depth of Abboud's inquiry into painting at a moment of personal and artistic transition. As Nazih Khater noted in his review, Abboud was "in crisis",¹⁶⁵ although this was not a crisis of failure, but one of interrogation that marked his work by an internal questioning of the role of subject matter, the relationship between form and model, and the autonomy of colour.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Irene Mosalli « Chafic Abboud au Liban. Une toile à Dar el Fan et la même fascination pour la luminosité de Mhaite, » *L'Orient*, 24.04.1980.

¹⁶¹ Shafic Abboud's 1969 exhibition at Dar el Fan is the only one for which original photographic documentation has survived.

¹⁶² See Josiane Aoun « Chafic Abboud 'au jour' : 'dans 20 ans, je deviendrai, peut être portraitiste'. Il traitait du 'propre de l'art' hier soir à Dar el Fan, » *Le Jour*, 11.03.1969.

¹⁶³ Hakim, « A Dar el Fan : Chafik Abboud nous parle de peinture, » *La Revue du Liban*, 15.03.1969.

¹⁶⁴ Although there is no comprehensive transcript of the lecture, some notes for the presentation are preserved in the Archive of Shafic Abboud. From these, it is possible to reconstruct that the lecture was divided into four parts, namely Theories, Experience-Atelier, Technique, and Space. Viktor Hakim defined the lecture as "contradictory" in some parts. See Hakim, "A Dar el Fan: Chafik Abboud nous parle de peinture ».

¹⁶⁵ Khater, « Ma'raḡ al-rassām al-lubnānī allaqī tabannat-hu Bārīs mumaththilan li-madrasatihā Shafīq 'Abbūd: yaj'al ḡattā min al-azma 'amalan fanniyyan, » [The exhibition of the Lebanese painter who was adopted by Paris as a representative of its school, Shafic Abboud: He even turns a crisis into a work of art], *An Nahar*, 22.03.1969.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Painting, for Abboud, was an intimate process, “a journey of the artist toward the canvas, in the intimacy of the studio”,¹⁶⁷ rooted in curiosity and uncertainty. In his own words, “a painter does not set out to prove anything; he simply shows his work—and that is more than enough”.¹⁶⁸ Abboud’s paintings thus offered a meditation on the material and spatial properties of painting itself, and an exploration as much about the language of art as about the objects it depicts. The artist’s comments that this new direction might lead him back to figurative work¹⁶⁹ indicate a restless, self-reflective search rather than a fixed aesthetic stance. Khater’s description of Abboud’s art as “from the crisis” but not “in crisis” underscores the generative potential of this moment.¹⁷⁰ Abboud’s canvases were not products of confusion but responses to profound emotional and formal questions. In this body of work, colour was treated no longer merely as a tool but as a material in its own right, endowed with its own substance.¹⁷¹

This sense of a deeply personal artistic vocabulary was central to Abboud’s own thinking, as elaborated in his lecture. In it, Abboud retraced a history of art,¹⁷² discussing aspects related to technique, space and colour.¹⁷³ Through his analysis, he expressed scepticism toward the label of modernity often imposed on painters. He challenged the simplistic notion that modern art must mirror the civilisation from which it emerges. Rather than align with superficial timelines or categories, he cited figures like Klee, Kandinsky, and Mondrian—painters who,

¹⁶⁷ Akkar, « Chafic Abboud à Dar el Fan. La peinture : une réalité en conflit avec le peintre, » *L’Orient*, 11.03.1969. In French in the original source. The same quote is found also in Hakim, “A Dar el Fan: Chafik Abboud nous parle de peinture ».

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. In French in the original source.

¹⁶⁹ See Aoun, « Chafic Abboud ‘au jour’ ».

¹⁷⁰ See Khater, “Ma’raḍ al-rassām al-lubnānī”.

¹⁷¹ This notion is underscored by Khater, Hakim, Aoun and Akkar.

¹⁷² Interestingly enough, the references for his lecture were constituted solely by masters of western art such as Kandinsky, Bonnard, Van Gogh, Mondrian, Klee, Pollock, Kline, Warhol and Rauschenberg, with no reference to artists from the region.

¹⁷³ The treated topics were reconstructed through the survived notes for the lecture. See footnote 164.

despite working in a thoroughly modern idiom, retained the inward, intimate qualities more associated with earlier traditions. Abboud saw this tension not as something to resolve, but to inhabit.¹⁷⁴

The exhibition and lecture at Dar el Fan thus revealed an artist negotiating between worlds. Abboud had spent over two decades in Paris, where he lived, taught, and even worked as a museum guide to support himself¹⁷⁵ – experiences that likely deepened his awareness of the institutional frameworks necessary to support artists. Yet his ties to Lebanon and his commitment to its emerging art scene remained strong. As Josiane Aoun reported, Abboud had taken on a modest teaching post at the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, driven by a desire to connect with and support the next generation of Lebanese artists.¹⁷⁶ Abboud emphasised access to artistic knowledge and lamented the lack of museums in Lebanon, hoping instead to provide his students with exposure to as many masterworks as possible, often using projected images.¹⁷⁷

He channelled this experience into Dar el Fan's emerging identity, standing as an example of the mutually reinforcing ties between the broader cultural ambition of the centre and the personal artistic trajectories of its artists. His involvement and presence helped consolidate Dar el Fan as more than an exhibition venue. He offered not only works to be hung on its walls but also a model of artistic practice that was cosmopolitan without being detached. In return, Dar el Fan provided him with a platform to test ideas, reach a Lebanese audience, and contribute to a collective project of cultural institution-building and networking in a city whose

¹⁷⁴ See Hakim, « A Dar el Fan: Chafik Abboud nous parle de l'art ».

¹⁷⁵ See Aoun, « Chafik Abboud 'au jour' ».

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

art world was still in formation. In this mutual relationship, Dar el Fan shaped its self-image as a cultural institution grounded in both international dialogue and local engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to reveal that Dar el Fan was a platform born at the intersection of individual initiative, collective ambition, and a shifting cultural landscape. Rooted in a city already rich with artistic talent and intellectual ferment, Dar el Fan was less an isolated creation than the crystallisation of earlier conversations about the need for a representative space for the arts. A few years before its official foundation, artists and cultural advocates (including its own initiators) had imagined a place where practitioners could gather, exhibit, and exchange ideas. The opening of the centre in 1967 therefore marked not the beginning of a conversation, but the formalisation of a project that had been gestating within Beirut's creative circles for several years.

The Beirut into which Dar el Fan emerged was dynamic and competitive, home to numerous galleries, cultural societies, and intellectual forums. Dar el Fan distinguished itself through the breadth of its programming, its interdisciplinarity, and its emphasis on dialogue across artistic disciplines. From the outset, it presented itself as "open to all," yet this openness was shaped by its social grounding: its core audiences, leadership, and membership were largely drawn from the city's Francophone bourgeoisie. Support from the French embassy underscored these ties, providing resources and prestige but also situating the centre within a specific cultural and diplomatic network.

This social anchoring influenced the taste Dar el Fan sought to cultivate. Through its choice of exhibitions, whether devoted to international figures such as Le Corbusier or to leading

Lebanese artists, it combined international creation with a commitment to local production. The exhibitions of Farid Aouad, Amine el Bacha and Shafic Abboud not only consolidated the bond between Dar el Fan and its core artistic community but also played a key part in a process of mutual legitimisation: the institution's prestige reinforced the standing of these artists, while their recognition and acclaim in turn enhanced the centre's authority as a tastemaker. In doing so, Dar el Fan reinforced its standing as both a platform for the display of art and a site where cultural value was actively constructed. Such exhibitions heralded a distinctly Lebanese artistic modernism—anchored in local heritage yet experimental in form, and open to the influences of international schools, marking a confident articulation of Lebanon's place within a broader artistic world. Taken together, the first two years of Dar el Fan's existence illuminate the complex interplay of artistic ambition, institution-building and the shaping of cultural identity that would characterise its subsequent history.

As it has emerged from the discussion in this chapter, Dar el Fan resists easy categorisation. It could be conceived as an entity, an actor, or the sum of its members—different lens that shape the narrative about its role in Lebanese cultural history. As an entity, it had coherence: a name, a space, a recognisable mission, and a programme that established it as a central node in Beirut's artistic network. Under the leadership of Janine Rubeiz and later Nicole Malhamé Harfouche and Samia Toutounji, it developed a curatorial ethos that fostered dialogue between Arab and international artists, championed experimental forms, and engaged with questions of cultural identity, modernity, and social change. Yet this view risks making Dar el Fan appear flat and static. Seeing it as an actor foregrounds its agency: how its programmes intervened in debates on the formation of a modern aesthetic, the role of artists and intellectuals within society but also, more broadly, on the formation of a Lebanese

“personality”. Any such framing must also account for the fact that Dar el Fan’s character was inseparable from the varied range of individuals who animated it. The shifting visions of its presidents, the diverse networks of artists, critics, and intellectuals who passed through its halls, and the social fabric of its audience all shaped its trajectory. It was also a porous, improvisational space whose identity was in constant flux, defined in the moment by those involved. The succession of Rubeiz, Harfouche, and Toutounji as presidents makes this visible: each brought distinct priorities, from negotiations of heritage and modernity, to feminist inflections and curatorial rigour, to literary sensibilities and a drive to democratise cultural access.

Perhaps the most productive way to understand Dar el Fan is to hold these perspectives in tension. As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, it was both a structured cultural centre and a constellation of individuals; both a space that acted in the cultural field and one continually acted upon by its members and its socio-political context. Its yearly programmes reveal a consistent commitment to fostering aesthetic and intellectual exchange, but its vitality came from the fact that its identity was never monolithic. It was an institution that became an actor through the actions of its members, a collective experiment whose coherence laid in productive frictions.

Chapter II. Between Art and Activism: Dar el Fan as a Feminist Cultural Hub

This chapter turns from the institutional framework to the individuals at its helm, examining the three presidents of Dar el Fan within a discussion of Dar el Fan as a feminist cultural hub during a period of significant transformation in the landscape of women's activism and artistic production in Lebanon. Unlike some of the galleries led by women during the same period,¹⁷⁸ the centre articulated a multi-dimensional space for women's cultural participation that extended beyond artistic production into areas of political engagement, intellectual exchange, and institutional leadership. Women at Dar el Fan were not only exhibited or employed; they were organisers, thinkers, curators, and public interlocutors. The centre thus created a structure in which women could access and shape the cultural sphere at multiple levels, from administration to artistic practice to critical discourse.

The role of the three women who successively presided over Dar el Fan will be discussed: Janine Rubeiz, Nicole Malhamé Harfouche, and Samia Toutounji. Each brought distinct visions, networks, and forms of expertise to the institution, helping shape its identity as a feminist cultural hub. Following these profiles, the chapter turns to two key exhibitions that serve as case studies for the institutionalisation and expression of feminist aesthetics and discourse at Dar el Fan. The first is Cici Surssock's 1971 exhibition of nudes, which offered a space to challenge boundaries surrounding the representation of the female and male body.¹⁷⁹ The second is "The Women's Month" in May 1975, a landmark event that framed women's

¹⁷⁸ Such as, for instance, Odile Mazloum's *Galerie L'Amateur* (1964–1977), Amal Traboulsi's *Épreuve d'Artiste* (1979–2006), or Soraya Bekhazi's curatorial work at the Bekhazi Gallery. Helen and Youssef Khal's *Gallery One* (1963–1975; it reopened outside of Beirut from 1982 to 1983) did in fact strive to be a place of intellectual exchange too.

¹⁷⁹ This was not new to Lebanon, where the work of artists such as Juliana Seraphim's loosely surrealist exploration of female sexuality and desire was already breaking the norms of patriarchal tradition.

intellectual production as both a celebration and a political statement. While the month was dedicated to women with several initiatives, its core was represented by a dense week of conferences and lectures, alongside the exhibition “The Lebanese Women”. These exhibitions not only highlighted the work of female artists but also positioned women as central agents in shaping Lebanon’s cultural discourse.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to assess the extent to which Dar el Fan offered women artists, intellectuals, and cultural practitioners a space in which to articulate their aspirations, challenge social norms, and develop professional careers in the arts, interrogating the institution’s role in fostering women’s cultural and professional emancipation. This provides a lens through which to understand the entanglements of art, activism, and gender politics in Lebanon’s pre-war cultural landscape.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the use of the term “women” throughout this chapter. While feminist actors at Dar el Fan mobilised the category in a spirit of solidarity and common cause, “women” cannot be understood as a stable, homogeneous group.¹⁸⁰ The women who shaped and participated in Dar el Fan were predominantly educated, middle- and upper-middle-class individuals, with varying sectarian backgrounds but broadly similar access to cultural capital and institutional power. In the case of Dar el Fan, although feminist actors often invoked “women” as a collective political subject, there was a tension between this universalist impulse to sisterhood and their limited ability to engage effectively with women outside their own class and cultural milieu. Their programming reflected an awareness of

¹⁸⁰ In this sense, the clarification is informed by the pioneering work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Boundary 2* Vol. 12, No. 3, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism. Mohanty comments on the construction of a homogeneous category of “Third World women” in Western feminist scholarship, arguing that such essentialist framings erase differences of class, culture, and history. Her framework is useful for understanding how collective feminist identities (such as those articulated at Dar el Fan) may have been animated by solidarity, while still shaped by the class, sectarian, and educational positions of those involved.

sectarian diversity and occasionally sought to engage broader publics beyond Beirut's intellectual elite. Yet their effectiveness in reaching working-class or rural women, for instance, appears to have been limited. The form of feminist cultural work pursued at Dar el Fan thus remained largely embedded in an urban, bourgeois, and institutionally literate mode of action. It is from within this milieu that a particular form of feminist consciousness emerged—one that understood “women” as a political category anchored in solidarity, intellectual kinship, and shared aspirations, but also shaped by the boundaries of class and social privilege. With this qualification in mind, the chapter traces how Dar el Fan became an incubator for a distinct feminist cultural practice that was situated in, but not reducible to, the social position of its participants.

2.1 “Feminist” Movements in Lebanon and There Have Been Great Women Artists

While Lebanese women's movements had long existed, their objectives, ideological orientations, and modes of organisation evolved considerably throughout the twentieth century. The first generation of feminist associations that emerged after the independence of the Lebanese state in 1943 articulated their demands primarily in relation to national liberation and legal reform, advocating for the latter, access to education, and civic participation.¹⁸¹ Their efforts culminated in a union of feminist organisations in 1951, a landmark moment in the history of Lebanese feminism.¹⁸² Yet, despite these achievements, the movement was fragmented along sectarian lines, with Christian and Muslim women's initiatives often operating in parallel, reflecting broader divisions within Lebanese civil society. Feminist

¹⁸¹ Bernadette Daou “Feminisms in Lebanon: after proving loyalty to the “Nation”, will the “Body” rise within the “Arab Spring”?” (Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support, 2015-06-26).

¹⁸² Ibid.

activism remained largely confined to elite philanthropic circles and rarely mounted a sustained critique of the patriarchal state.¹⁸³

By the 1960s, a new cycle of feminist thought and action had begun to emerge, shaped by the shifting ideological terrain of the region and the internal dynamics of Lebanese politics. The disappointing Arab defeat in the 1967 June War marked a turning point in the collective political consciousness across the Arab world, prompting a deep reassessment of nationalist ideologies and giving rise to a more radical and critical political culture, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. In Lebanon, this rupture coincided with the maturation of Chehabist reformism and the spread of leftist ideologies.¹⁸⁴ Although women's organisations during this period often began as auxiliaries to political parties (particularly within the frameworks of social service and humanitarian work, which were strongly encouraged by the state under president Fouad Chehab, in office 1958–1964), they soon developed a greater degree of independence. Many associations severed their formal ties with the political parties that had once incubated them, forming autonomous structures that nevertheless often maintained ideological alignments with broader leftist, anti-imperialist, and secular currents. For instance, the Progressive Women's Union (*al-Ittihad al-Nisa'i al-Taqaddumi*), remained closely associated with the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), illustrating how ideological affinity could persist even in the absence of direct political subordination.¹⁸⁵

The feminisms that flourished in this period were also increasingly shaped by international currents. Lebanese feminists were neither isolated from nor passive recipients of the

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. Chehabism was a school of thought that followed the principles of President Fouad Chehab. His rule was aimed at strengthening the state through modernization, the development of civil service, public institutions, and infrastructure in order to rebalance sectarian relations.

¹⁸⁵ Lina Abou-Habib, Carla Akil, and Marwan Issa, *Reclaiming and decolonizing the history of women's rights and feminist movements in Lebanon* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Lebanon Office 2014) 28, 29.

intellectual and political movements that swept the globe in the 1960s and 1970s, entrenched with anti-imperialist socialist demands. However, within these struggles, gender equality was often treated as a secondary concern—something presumed to follow naturally from the achievement of class liberation or national independence. As a result, women’s rights were rarely prioritised in party platforms, and feminist demands were frequently subsumed under the agendas of male-dominated leaderships. Nevertheless, Lebanese women engaged actively with the ideas circulating in French and American second-wave feminism, as well as with emerging research in medicine, psychology, sociology, law, and anthropology.¹⁸⁶ This intellectual expansion enabled a broader critique of the structures that governed women’s lives not only in the legal or economic spheres, but also in relation to sexuality, bodily autonomy, and cultural norms.¹⁸⁷ Feminists questioned entrenched social roles, demanded recognition for domestic work, and challenged the limitations placed on women in both public and private spheres. Despite the persistence of economic and social constraints, there was a growing ambition within the feminist movement to reconceptualise what was often referred to as the “woman question”.

These broader currents of feminist engagement and activism found echoes in the cultural sector, where women artists claimed visibility and voice. A key document attesting to this is *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*,¹⁸⁸ a seminal volume to understand the presence of women

¹⁸⁶ It is likely to think that educated women in Lebanon were aware of works such as Brazilian sociologist Heleieth Saffioti’s *A Mulher na Sociedade de Classes: mito e realidade* (A woman in a society of classes: myth and reality) and art historian Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* While the first laid foundational ground for understanding women’s oppression within class structures, the second challenged the institutional barriers that had historically excluded women from the canon. These pioneering works signalled a growing awareness of gendered inequalities and sparked critical reassessments in both academic and artistic spheres.

¹⁸⁷ Traboulsi, “An intelligent man’s guide to modern Arab feminism” *Al-Raida* vol. XX no.100 winter 2003.

¹⁸⁸ Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, 1987).

artists in the Lebanese cultural scene. Published in 1987, this study by Lebanese-American visual artist, poet, and scholar Helen Khal was based on research she conducted in the mid-1970s. Drawing from her direct observation and active participation in the artistic milieu, Khal offered insights grounded in her close relationships with fellow artists and cultural figures. In the book, Khal profiles twelve women artists,¹⁸⁹ highlighting how they constituted a relevant presence in the cultural scene since the beginning of modern art, representing one-third of the leading artists in the vital cultural panorama of Lebanon. The author explores the conditions that enabled a significant number of women to be actively engaged in artistic production. It reveals that these artists were predominantly from upper or middle-class backgrounds, well-educated, and often francophone—factors that afforded them both socioeconomic privilege and creative agency within Lebanese society. In the introductory essay, however, the author also highlights the key challenges faced by women during the 1960s and 70s, particularly the tensions between their roles as artists and the societal expectations placed upon them as wives, mothers, and women.¹⁹⁰

Drawing on a 1974 UNESCO report,¹⁹¹ Nadia von Maltzahn observes that the perception of art in Lebanon as a hobby rather than a rigorous academic discipline or a serious profession may have inadvertently favoured women's participation in the field. In her analysis of gender equality within institutional frameworks in Lebanon, she focuses in particular on the Sursock

¹⁸⁹ Although she mentions, at the end of the volume, thirty-six more, of whom she includes a statement, images of the works and a short bio.

¹⁹⁰ Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, 21-24.

¹⁹¹ "Organisation des Nations Unites pour l'Education, la Science et la Culture: Consultation collective sur les problèmes contemporains des arts arabes dans leurs relations socio-culturelles avec le monde arabe, Hammamet, Mars 1974: 1. Les styles de l'art contemporain au Liban" [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Collective Consultation on the Contemporary Problems of the Arab Arts in their Socio-Cultural Relations with the Arab World, Hammamet, March 1974: 1. The Styles of Contemporary Art in Lebanon], in von Maltzahn "The Museum as an Egalitarian Space? Women artists in Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1960s and 1970s", *Manazir Journal*, Issue 1, *The Arab Apocalypse. Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East*, Silvia Naef and Nadia Radwan, eds. Autumn 2019, 73.

Museum's annual Salon, an event that soon became a hallmark of the museum's cultural programming, reflecting its institutional politics and priorities. Women artists, she notes, had been participating in the Salon since its inception in 1961. However, rather than presenting women artists as a unified group or highlighting their gender as a determining factor, von Maltzahn points out their diversity—both in terms of subject matter and artistic style, as well as in social background and generation.¹⁹² She argues that the Salon d'Automne functioned as an egalitarian space where gender was not a criterion in the selection of artists. This inclusivity, however, was not unique to the Salon. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the growing number of exhibition venues across Beirut were generally accessible to both male and female artists, reflecting a broader atmosphere of openness within the city's cultural landscape during that period.¹⁹³

2.2. Women at the Helm: Feminist Discourses Shaped at/by Dar el Fan

This contextual background is essential to understanding Dar el Fan's positioning within feminist discourse in Lebanon. The centre's engagement with debates on women's rights, secularism, and social justice was shaped by the same reformist energies that animated broader feminist intellectual movements of the time—movements characterized by a dynamic interplay, and at times tension, between Western feminist paradigms and the specific trajectories of women's activism in the Arab region. Dar el Fan's sustained focus on gender-related issues can be attributed in part to its all-female leadership, which fostered a more inclusive environment and shaped the centre's commitment to promoting female cultural and

¹⁹² *Ibid.* 80.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 81.

intellectual agency. While, as we have seen, a committee of around ten members (many of them women) oversaw Dar el Fan's programming, a closer examination of the profiles of its three presidents offers deeper insight into the institution's evolving direction. Janine Rubeiz, Nicole Harfouche, and Samia Toutounji each emerged from, and responded to, the intellectual climate of the 1960s and 1970s. With the exception of Rubeiz, who was also an activist in the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), their influence was exercised primarily through cultural and artistic channels rather than overtly political platforms.

While much of the scholarship on Lebanese modernism has focused on artists and intellectuals, the role of women as cultural tastemakers remains relatively understudied. This analysis follows two interwoven threads: the role of Dar el Fan's presidents as tastemakers, and the discourse of feminism within the centre's public programming and debates. As curators, Rubeiz, Harfouche, and Toutounji were not simply organisers or facilitators of artistic production, but key figures in defining the aesthetic and intellectual orientation of the cultural scene. They mediated between competing visions of femininity, modernity, and artistic freedom, shaping the institution's identity through exhibitions, lectures, and artistic networks. Their influence extended well beyond institutional curation, playing a central role in articulating and navigating the cultural modernity of Lebanon. In this way, Dar el Fan emerged as a critical space where feminist debates unfolded—both in dialogue with global feminist movements and in response to the specific contours of local gender politics—at times reinforcing, and at others challenging, dominant narratives about women's roles in Lebanese society.

2.2.1 Janine Rubeiz: Feminist Vision and Political Commitment at the Heart of Dar el

Fan

Janine Rubeiz was born in 1926 into a Greek-Orthodox middle-class family. She was French-educated, spoke Arabic and French fluently and travelled to France often. She is remembered as “a refined and active woman” and her name is associated with “memorable and outstanding activities”¹⁹⁴ while Samir Kassir described her as “known, despite her bourgeois roots, as Janine *La Rouge*, the Red.”¹⁹⁵ Rubeiz’s daughter Nadine Begdache (b. 1947) describes her mother as leftist, secular, and democratic with great faith in her country and a genuine will to improve it.¹⁹⁶ Her life story is intertwined with the founding, cultural vision, and commitment of Dar el Fan.

Influenced by the progressive, open-minded spirit of her father Nicolas, surgeon and founder of the Rubeiz hospital in Beirut, Janine was encouraged to challenge societal norms from a very young age. Begdache recalls that her mother used to wear shorts and bike to school, receiving open criticism and insults from both men and women in the streets. Although not an artist herself, Rubeiz was passionate about art, poetry, and theatre. In the early 1960s, she was part of the Committee of the International Festival of Baalbeck and in the association Modern Theatre,¹⁹⁷ as administrative director and costume designer. She cultivated friendships with several artists and used to socialize with them at cafés such as the Horseshoe and those of the Suq Bab Idriss, among the landmarks for intellectuals at the time. Helen Khal,

¹⁹⁴ See “Tribute: Janine Rubeiz,” *Al Raida Journal*, vol. 10, no. 58, Summer 1992 [last access on 22 May 2023].

¹⁹⁵ Kassir, *Beirut*, 496.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Nadine Begdache, May 2022.

¹⁹⁷ In a letter to the ambassador of Japan Otoshiro Koruda, Rubeiz describes Modern Theatre with the following words: “This group produces plays in Arabic which were played in many different Arabic countries.” Letter undated, probably early 1966, Archive of Dar el Fan. On the establishment of Modern Theatre and the Baalbeck Festival, see von Maltzahn “Heritage, Tourism and the Politics of National Pride. The Baalbeck International Festival in Lebanon.” *Quaderni Storici*, 2019, 2: 371–389.

in an article about Dar el Fan,¹⁹⁸ confirms that the centre was born out of the will of a group of friends “prodded by the energies of Janine Rubeiz” who wanted to provide a platform to support art and culture, but also the artists she was friends with. She served as president of Dar el Fan during several seasons. The opening one, 1967-1968, then again from 1969 to 1972, and in Dar el Fan’s last season in 1974-1975.¹⁹⁹

Writer and artist Etel Adnan, who served as a member of the Dar el Fan Board, defines Rubeiz as “*une bête politique*” (a political beast) as she describes her leftist leaning, her attachment to Marxist ideas and her affiliation to the PSP, led at the time by Kamal Jumblatt.²⁰⁰ Rubeiz was also an active member of associations for women’s rights and fought for granting empowerment and the development of women within society. In an interview with Monique Sibille for *Tele Liban* dated early 1970s, Rubeiz defines herself as a long-time feminist and denounces the lack of equality in man-woman relations.²⁰¹ An archival document dated 1977, reports that she was elected Commissioner for Women Affairs of the PSP.²⁰² Aware of the western-originating women’s liberation movements, Janine was inspired by the work of French philosopher, writer and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986).²⁰³ According to her friend Amal Dibo, Rubeiz drew deeply on the insights of *The Second Sex* (1949),²⁰⁴ embracing ideas that she could adapt to her Lebanese milieu, yet she never surrendered her own cultural specificity. Instead, she engaged critically with de Beauvoir’s

¹⁹⁸ Khal, “Dar el Fan. Towards a ‘Culture of the masses’”.

¹⁹⁹ In its headquarters along Bechara el Khoury Street.

²⁰⁰ Kamal Jumblatt (1917–1977) was a Lebanese Druze politician, who founded the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and was a major ally of the PLO. The PSP was a socialist party espousing secularism and officially opposed to the sectarian character of Lebanese politics. On Rubeiz’s affiliation to the PSP, see Kassab, *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*.

²⁰¹ See Kassab, *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 41.

²⁰² Ibid. 32.

²⁰³ Amal Dibo, “Al-mar’a insān wa-sharīk kāmīl: qaḍīyyat Janīn Rubayz” [The woman is a human being and a full partner: The case of Janine Rubeiz] in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, ed. Kassab, 25-39, 28.

²⁰⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage/Ebury 2007) [1949].

thought, using external perspectives to refine, rather than replace, her locally rooted vision of social change.²⁰⁵ She envisioned the struggle for feminist liberation as an integral part of a broader political transformation, underscoring the inseparability of gender justice from the pursuit of democratic and social reform. Moreover, she considered the struggle for women's liberation an essential part of any leftist programme for social transformation. In 1967, she affirmed "the total emancipation of the woman can only be achieved through Marxism-communism".²⁰⁶ Her commitment to the PSP remained steadfast well into the 1980s. Archival records from that decade show her serving as Deputy International Secretary of the party²⁰⁷ within the Socialist International,²⁰⁸ and in 1983, she represented Lebanon's women at the 12th Socialist International Women's Section conference in Albufeira (Portugal), titled "The World in Crisis – Socialist Women's Response."²⁰⁹

The political dimension of her thought emerges clearly through some of her archived writings, which links her commitment to feminism to broader social transformation. In her essay *Pour un ministère de la condition féminine* (For a Ministry of the condition of women),²¹⁰ she draws a parallel between the subordination of women and the subordination of men within bourgeois society, concluding that the proletarian woman suffers from a double exploitation—both as a worker and as a woman.²¹¹ At the same time, Rubeiz does not overlook the condition of the bourgeois woman, demonstrating a nuanced awareness of the intersections between gender and class. In her view, the bourgeois woman may be relieved of domestic labour by hired help,

²⁰⁵ Dibo, "Al-mar'a insān wa-sharīk kāmīl", 29.

²⁰⁶ "Le Procès de la Libanaise" *Magazine* n. 591, 1967.

²⁰⁷ General circular of Socialist International, no. G5/84, 30.05.1984, Archive of Dar el Fan.

²⁰⁸ The Socialist International (SI) is a worldwide organisation of political parties consisting mostly of social democratic political parties and labour organisations.

²⁰⁹ Socialist International Women, Bulletin number 4/83, Archive of Dar el Fan.

²¹⁰ Janine Rubeiz, « Pour un ministère de la condition féminine ». Handwritten document in French, undated. Archive of Dar el Fan.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* 4.

but she remains constrained by the social expectations imposed upon her through her role as a wife in a patriarchal order.²¹² Rubeiz's analysis highlights how gendered oppression operates differently across class lines, yet remains pervasive throughout the social structure. In her eloquent piece "*L'importance de la lutte pour la libération de la femme dans le procès de changement de la société*" (The importance of the struggle for the liberation of women in the process of social change),²¹³ (Fig. 6) Rubeiz provides a vivid portrayal of the status of women across Lebanese society. She articulates a radical critique of the structural subjugation of women, accentuating the pronounced disparities stemming from gender-based imbalances and denouncing how women are relegated to roles of "eternal minors,"²¹⁴ whose legal and social status is diminished and who are confined to domesticity, motherhood, and passive obedience. She insists on recognizing women as full human beings—citizens with equal rights, responsibilities, and potential to contribute to society. "We claim that woman is a human being in her own right," she writes, "and that she must enjoy the same opportunities to develop her personality and be a useful citizen."²¹⁵ For her, the idea of citizenship was not merely a legal designation but a transformative political ideal—one that had to be earned through struggle and defined through practice. In the context of post-independence Lebanon, where the notion of nationhood was in flux, she argued that full citizenship could only be realized through the dismantling of patriarchal structures.

"There is, therefore, a blatant discrimination based on sex. We call it sexism. As leftist activists, what are the fundamental principles to which we are committed? The equality of all in terms

²¹² Ibid. 4.

²¹³ Handwritten document in French, undated. Archive of Dar el Fan. A version of the document in Arabic is also preserved in the archive.

²¹⁴ Ibid. 1.

²¹⁵ Ibid. 1.

of rights and duties. Democratic principles are at the core of our beliefs, and defending them is our duty. We must fight against all forms of discrimination, whether based on race, colour, religion, sect, sex, or class. Thus, the struggle for the liberation of women, so that they may be considered equal, is a just struggle, and it is our duty—as militants—to participate in it. [...] The other is different from me because of a different colour, a different religion, a different sex, but that does not mean they are inferior or that they should not enjoy the same rights. They remain different, but they must enjoy the same rights and have the same obligations. And society must provide them with the same opportunities to develop their personality”.²¹⁶

Gender equality was not an optional reform but a prerequisite for democratic life. She believed that women had to be seen and therefore see themselves, as agents of political and social change. Her goal, then, was to help *shape* citizens: to foster the intellectual, emotional, and political development of women as full participants in national life, a collective engagement underscored by her invocation of “militants.”²¹⁷

On a broader level, her language also gestures toward Lebanon’s sectarian landscape, advancing a vision of equality that challenges the hierarchies embedded in Lebanon’s sectarian political system. Her insistence on respecting differences while rejecting any claims to superiority, confronts a society structured around entrenched communal divisions. In this light, Rubeiz’s feminism emerges not only as a call for gender equality but also as a broader political and social critique—an appeal for a more inclusive and democratic Lebanon that resists both patriarchal and sectarian forms of domination.

This entanglement of politics, feminism and cultural activism was at the core of Rubeiz’s life and influenced her management of Dar el Fan. Her role as its founder and president placed her

²¹⁶ Ibid. 3-4.

²¹⁷ Ibid. 4.

at the centre of Lebanon's modern cultural revival, but her contributions went far beyond curatorial innovation. In his essay "*L'inquiétude – Janine Rubeiz*" (The disquiet– Janine Rubeiz), her grandson Karim Begdache insists on the motivation for the creation and direction of Dar el Fan beyond the promotion of culture.²¹⁸ He explains how Rubeiz was never simply a philanthropist, nor just a cultivated middle-class woman running a cultural centre, but combined her interest in the arts with the creation of a cultural space that was "political in its everyday practice".²¹⁹

The annual reports of the centre's activities authored by Rubeiz during her presidency combine practical details (such as lists of events and the collaborating organisations for each season) with broader reflections on the work and significance of Dar el Fan. Beyond documenting the initiatives she championed, these reports constitute an invaluable source through which we can trace how her convictions were translated into cultural practice. They reveal how Dar el Fan became a space where artistic expression and political consciousness intersected, and where urgent questions of gender, class, and social justice were not only raised but also publicly debated. They underline a striking increase of the number of events, signalling an institutional zeal to broaden access and diversify formats. In her report for the 1970–71 season,²²⁰ she recorded that the centre had organised 30 conferences (11 held in Arabic and 19 in French) as well as 28 film screenings and 13 exhibitions. These were accompanied by other cultural events, including poetry evenings, concerts, and theatrical performances. In total, she counted 98 cultural activities, a notable increase compared to the 63 events

²¹⁸ Karim Begdache, "*L'inquiétude – Janine Rubeiz*", in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, ed. Kassab, 11-12, 11.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* 11.

²²⁰ Although she had already served as president from 1967 to 1969, the reports from those years were not authored by the president but might have been produced collectively, as they bear no individual signature.

mentioned for the previous year.²²¹ In the report for the following season, 1971–72, Rubeiz again documented the activities: 29 conferences and debates in French, Arabic, and English; 11 musical evenings and concerts; 30 film screenings; and 17 exhibitions featuring a variety of media, including paintings, textiles, reproductions, and posters. She stated that the centre had hosted 109 events that year, describing this as an increase compared to the 98 of the previous year.²²²

Nonetheless, Rubeiz questioned the impact of their work, noting a certain dissonance: although the public participated in events,²²³ they seemed largely indifferent to the deeper intellectual and cultural questions the centre sought to raise. After four years of activity, Dar el Fan organised a public self-critical session, inviting critiques and suggestions in an effort to assess its work and foster greater openness. Yet, as Rubeiz observed, “nothing came out of it, as the public seems indifferent” adding also that “from the State, there is nothing but total indifference”.²²⁴ This admission points to a deeper self-awareness: she recognised that the quantitative expansion of activities did not necessarily translate into the qualitative cultural transformation she aspired to achieve. Her reflections thus underscore a persistent tension between participation and meaningful engagement within Dar el Fan’s broader mission. It is within this context that she reasserted the foundational importance of culture to Dar el Fan’s identity, countering the widespread notion that culture was a luxury, an idea, she said, she had criticised already in the annual report of the previous season. On the contrary, she insisted, culture was “the means by which youth are transformed into adults”,²²⁵ positioning the centre

²²¹ However, this figure could not be verified as no annual report for the season 1968-69 was found during the research. A total of 54 events is reported in the report for the 1967-68 season.

²²² Although these figures provide a general overview of the centre’s activities, they cannot be verified due to the loss of the precise records of the activities.

²²³ In the first preserved report, she estimates around 6.000 visitors of the centre versus the only 1.000 of the first season. Annual report 1970-71, 2. Archive of Dar el Fan.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* 2.

as a formative arena for critical citizenship. Her commitment to a “culture for all” is reiterated in the subsequent report, affirming: “Should it be repeated? We stand for a mass culture, a popular culture; we are fundamentally opposed to an elitist culture, a class-based culture reserved for the privileged”.²²⁶ Her words reflect the belief that artistic and intellectual life should actively engage and include the broader public, a position that challenged prevailing notions of culture as a luxury accessible only to social elite – despite, as we have seen, the mainly bourgeois public of the centre.

By tying Dar el Fan’s independence to “democratic, popular support,”²²⁷ she reframes financial autonomy as a political act: dependence on government patronage could compromise the centre’s commitment to free inquiry. She concluded her report with a meditation on aesthetics, which far from a sterile theorizing about beauty, becomes a manifesto for engaged artistic practice. Her call to “rehabilitate and revalorize aesthetics in Arab society” charged artists and intellectuals with a dual task: to create meaningful work and to change the attitude of the public towards cultural production. In these layered reflections, Rubeiz’s annual reports and programme dossiers reveal a purposeful strategy: To use cultural programming as an active modality for shaping a citizenry in a society negotiating modernity, identity, and the promise of democratic participation.

This commitment was evident in the diverse range of events held during her tenure, each designed not only to entertain or educate but also to provoke thought and engagement on the most urgent issues of the day. Almost from the outset, Dar el Fan hosted critical debates and cultural happenings that confronted the aftermath of the *Naksa* and the broader anti-colonial

²²⁶ Annual report 1971-72, 2. In French in the original source. Archive of Dar el Fan.

²²⁷ Ibid. 3.

moment. A landmark event in 1967–68 was the Palestine debate with students of the *École supérieure des lettres*,²²⁸ which empowered younger voices to articulate new forms of solidarity. That season also saw the poet Adonis (b.1930) deliver the talk “Poetry and Revolution,”²²⁹ and an exhibition commemorating the first anniversary of the June War, which will be analysed in detail in the following chapter. In 1970–71, Rubeiz expanded this revolutionary strand by inviting French activist Claude Bourdet (1909-1996)²³⁰ for his lecture “*Culture et Actions Revolutionaries*” (Culture and revolutionary actions) as the opening of the season on 26th October.²³¹ A second, equally pivotal thematic current was feminist inquiry and women’s empowerment. Early on, events examined female sexuality and the social implications of the contraceptive pill, as well as the condition of young Lebanese women across family, school, and society. Jean Durtal’s (1905-1999)²³² lecture “*La femme et son évolution de Colette à Simone de Beauvoir*” (The Woman and her Evolution from Colette to Simone de Beauvoir) mapped women’s literary and social trajectories through two trailblazing figures of French letters.²³³ Prominent women’s right advocate Laure Moghaizel (1929-1997)²³⁴ contributed often to Dar el Fan’s programme. In January 1970, she gave a speech titled “*Des Femmes et des Myths*” (On Women and Myths) in which she deconstructed stereotypes related

²²⁸ See “Débat à Dar el Fan. La Palestine en février 1968,” *L’Orient*, 17.02.1968.

²²⁹ See the list of events at Dar el Fan in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, Kassab, ed., 128. No further information available.

²³⁰ Writer, journalist and militant politician, Claude Bourdet was active in French Resistance movements.

²³¹ See the list of events at Dar el Fan in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, Kassab ed., 136. No further information available.

²³² French poet, novelist and journalist Jean Durtal lived in and used to travel often to Lebanon. She authored the essay *Saïd Akl. Un grand poète Libanais* (Saïd Akl. A great Lebanese Poet) in 1970 (Nouvelles Editions Latines) and published the collection of poems *Chants pour Athanael* with the Edition Dal el Kitab in Beirut in 1971.

²³³ The event took place on 30th April 1969. See the list of events at Dar el Fan in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, Kassab, ed., 129. See also « Jean Durtal dira lundi à Dar el Fan comment la femme ne peut être ‘flouée’ » *Le Jour*, 03.05.1969.

²³⁴ Laure Moghaizel was a member of the Christian Women’s Solidarity Association, and in 1985 she was central to the establishment of the Lebanese Association for Human Rights. She contributed to Dar el Fan’s “Feminist May” in 1974.

to women and their role.²³⁵ In 1971–72, she held the debate “*Le mouvement féminin – lutte sociale ou lutte de sexe,*” (The Women’s Movement – Social Struggle or Gender Struggle) with lawyer and intellectual Bassem al Jisr (1930-2022), bringing multiple voices into dialogue over whether women’s emancipation was primarily a class struggle or a gender one. In addition, in May 1975, timed to coincide with the United Nations’ International Women’s Year, Rubeiz organised “The Women Month” that collectively affirmed Dar el Fan as a space where gender justice was not an afterthought, but a driving principle.

These initiatives, archival documents and writings highlight Rubeiz’s commitment to using the platform of Dar el Fan to address leftist and feminist issues at a time when these conversations were gaining momentum globally. A close collaborator of Rubeiz, Nicole Harfouche had been present at Dar el Fan since its inception and, like Rubeiz, was involved in advocating for women’s rights. Harfouche served as president of the centre on two occasions, with her first term from 1969 to 1970.²³⁶ Harfouche’s leadership, her vision for Dar el Fan, and her contributions to shaping the centre’s cultural and feminist agenda will be examined in the following section.

2.2.2 Nicole Harfouche: Cultural Leadership at the Crossroads of Art, Criticism, and Pedagogy

Nicole Malhamé Harfouche is a Lebanese artist, academic, and art critic. Born in Beirut in 1941, she pursued a francophone education at Nazareth Ladies’ College, before continuing her studies at ALBA, where she specialized in both Visual and Decorative Arts. In 1961, she

²³⁵ Aoun, « M^e Laure Moghaizel au Jour ‘On Peut être féministe et heureuse en ménage’. Elle parlera ‘des femmes et des mythes’ à Dar el Fan » *Le Jour*, 16.01.1970.

²³⁶ Likely, during a period when Rubeiz was abroad for her daughter’s studies.

participated in the first Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum. From that moment, she began participating in both group and solo exhibitions, both internationally²³⁷ and in Lebanon, where her work was featured at Dar el Fan, the French Cultural Centre, the St. Georges Hotel, Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste,²³⁸ and the Bekhazi Gallery.²³⁹ In 1993, her work was shown at the Salon d'Automne at the Grand Palais in Paris, where she was named a permanent associate member. These accomplishments and her education reflect her artistic merit, but also the particular social and cultural coordinates that shaped her trajectory — that of a woman formed by a bourgeois social background, a Christian upbringing, and a Francophone cultural orientation.

Beyond her artistic practice, Nicole Harfouche played a significant role in Lebanon's cultural scene, engaging with a range of institutions. She was a close friend of Janine Rubeiz and served as a member of the Dar el Fan committee from its inception, eventually assuming its presidency for two seasons – therefore acting as a driving force behind the centre's programming. In the academic sphere, she held long-term leadership positions at ALBA. From 1979, she began teaching at the academy, where she became the director of the Visual Art Department from 1985 to 2016. She also served as Vice President of LAAPS. Finally, from 1976 to its last apparition in 2011, she contributed regularly as an art critic to the pages of *La Revue du Liban*. While not directly tied to her work at Dar el Fan, Harfouche's contributions for *La Revue* are essential to understanding her broader cultural position, documenting artistic production

²³⁷ Abroad, she exhibited in Greece, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. Unfortunately, it was not possible to verify the dates of the exhibitions.

²³⁸ Founded in central Beirut in 1979 by Amal Traboulsi and artist and professor Martin Giesen, Épreuve d'Artiste acted both as a commercial gallery and a cultural institution. It remained active until 2006.

²³⁹ Founded by the Bekhazi family as framework shop in 1960, it expanded into a gallery in 1977. Also known as GAB (Galerie d'Art Bekhazi), it is active until today.

while also actively shaping its reception. Founded in 1928 by Lebanese émigrés in Paris, *La Revue du Liban* framed Lebanese culture through a Phoenician lineage and a Mediterranean cosmopolitanism rooted in French intellectual traditions, linking artistic production to narratives of progress, civilization, and national identity.²⁴⁰ Within this framework, Harfouche's criticism helped shape public taste by promoting a refined, Western-oriented aesthetic that emerged also from her disassociation from the Ottoman domination of Lebanon and the cultural politics promoted by the Empire.²⁴¹ Her writings contributed to codifying an artistic hierarchy that privileged European academicism and forms of modernism, reflecting both personal convictions and the magazine's ideological commitments. In the following, Nicole Harfouche's contributions as president and as exhibiting artist at Dar el Fan will be examined in order to better understand the ways in which she operated as a cultural actor within the framework of the centre.

Harfouche served as president of Dar el Fan during the cultural seasons of 1969-1970 and in 1974,²⁴² with her leadership coinciding with moments of expansion and times of constraint. The founding of Dar el Fan, in Nicole Harfouche's view, was closely linked to the earlier establishment of ALBA in 1937, which she saw as laying the cultural and institutional groundwork for such an initiative.²⁴³ According to Harfouche, the French Mandate marked a significant cultural shift in Lebanon, bringing new educational models and artistic frameworks in a country where the development of figurative art had been inhibited by Islamic visual

²⁴⁰ For an analysis of *La Revue du Liban* identity-driven agenda, see Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut*, Ch. 1.

²⁴¹ Interview with the author, Beirut, June 2022.

²⁴² Her annual report for this term suggests that she only covered the months from January to March 1974, following the resignation of Samia Toutounji from the position.

²⁴³ Interview with the author. Beirut, June 2022

traditions that favoured abstraction.²⁴⁴ ALBA, modelled explicitly on the French Académie des Beaux-Arts as stressed by Harfouche, embodied this transformation, aiming to formalise art education and promote Western-oriented practices, though “reinterpreted through a Lebanese lens.”²⁴⁵ For her, these developments helped justify and contextualise the later creation of Dar el Fan.²⁴⁶

At the annual press conference in 1969, Nicole Harfouche presented the upcoming cultural season at Dar el Fan, outlining a diverse and ambitious programme featuring a series of lectures, theatre evenings, concerts and exhibitions of artists such as George Guv (1918-1990), Hussein Madi (1938-2024) and Shafic Abboud.²⁴⁷ The lecture series was conceived in response to what Harfouche described as “the urgency of the moment,” reflecting the centre’s attentiveness to the pressing socio-political concerns of the period. The selected topics addressed critical national issues, including the relationship between religion and the state, the potential adoption of a single-member district voting system, and the sociolinguistic challenges posed by bilingualism.²⁴⁸ Each theme was explored through a structured format consisting of two opposing lectures, one presenting arguments in favour, the other against, followed by an open public debate. This format underscored Dar el Fan’s commitment not only to artistic and aesthetic programming, but also to cultivating critical public discourse within a politically charged and rapidly evolving national context.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ « Pour la nouvelle saison à Dar el Fan. Grotowski et un programme culturel chargé », *L’Orient*, 12.09.1969.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ However, it is important to note that Samia Toutounji would later revisit this approach to ideological debate during her tenure, when she emphasized the importance of truly “opening” the space to a wider range of voices. While Dar el Fan initially sought to provoke dialogue, its early programming may not have fully embraced the diversity of perspectives that would come to define the institution in later years. This shift in direction will be explored further in the following section.

Her first term as president saw her taking on an outspoken role as a cultural advocate and feminist voice. In March 1969, during a debate at Dar el Fan, she publicly articulated a feminist critique within Lebanon's artistic milieu by describing women as the "eternal victims" of a world designed for men.²⁵⁰ This commitment was further exemplified in April 1970, when Nicole Harfouche announced a major lecture by Imam Musa al-Sadr (1928-1978)²⁵¹ titled "The Struggle for Liberation and the Arab Woman".²⁵² In his address, Imam Sadr explored the concept of liberation as it pertains to women, emphasizing its intrinsic connection to men and to the broader dynamics of societal transformation. He positioned the woman's role at the intersection of competing forces: entrenched tribal conservatism, misinterpreted religious doctrines, and imported value systems that were, at times, distortive.²⁵³ The lecture attracted a particularly large audience, reflecting both the resonance of the topic and the prominent stature of the speaker.

Harfouche's dedication to pedagogy extended into her work at Dar el Fan, reflecting the spirit she later brought to her teaching at ALBA. Her contributions to the centre often blurred the lines between education and cultural practice. In June 1970, she conceived and organised an exhibition featuring over 400 works by 325 young students from Beirut's Saints-Coeur school, showcasing watercolours, gouaches, oils, and pastels produced over the academic year.²⁵⁴ The initiative highlights her dual commitment to arts education and institutional programming. In line with her pedagogical approach, the exhibition was conceived as a horizontal event,

²⁵⁰ "Eternelles victims", *L'Orient*, 12.03.1969.

²⁵¹ Musa al-Sadr was a Lebanese-Iranian Shia Muslim charismatic cleric, politician and revolutionary in Lebanon. He is considered to be the founder of the Amal Movement, a political party and militia affiliated mainly with the Shia community.

²⁵² Agenda Culturel « Conférence de l'Iman Moussa Sadr on « La Lutte de Libération et la Femme Arabe », *L'Orient*, April 1970.

²⁵³ For an extract of the lecture, see *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, Kassab, ed., 84-85.

²⁵⁴ « Le vernissage le plus mouvementé de la saison : 400 toiles, 325 (mini) artistes », *L'Orient*, June 1970.

without charts or prizes to be awarded to the participants. Harfouche explained that her goal was to sustain artistic curiosity and encourage openness to original forms of expression, affirming her belief in fostering creativity beyond competition. In December of the same year, Harfouche gave a lecture entitled *Les peintres romantiques de Proudhon à Courbet* (The Romantic Painters from Proudhon to Courbet).²⁵⁵ The lecture stands as a clear example of Dar el Fan's commitment to educational outreach, offering audiences an opportunity to engage with the historical and ideological foundations of modern art. At the same time, while the content of the talk is not preserved, its title points to her strong interest in nineteenth-century European, and especially French, artistic and intellectual history. This choice reflects Harfouche's broader tendency to privilege Western cultural references in her teaching method.²⁵⁶

Her return to the presidency in early 1974 came at a time of political uncertainty. The Arab-Israeli war of October 1973 had delayed the launch of Dar el Fan's cultural season. In a president's report drafted in March 1974, Harfouche explained that she had only been in office for two months and the season was still unfolding, with several planned cultural events being postponed due to the war.²⁵⁷ Nonetheless, she noted the centre's pivot back to regular activity by January, with events resuming at a biweekly pace. Despite the disruptions, the centre had succeeded in staging a solo exhibition by Etel Adnan (28 November to 13 December 1973) and another one in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Centre, focusing on Islamic studies and

²⁵⁵ See *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, Kassab, ed., 136. No further information is available.

²⁵⁶ This should be nonetheless situated within the centre's wider efforts to engage with local and regional artistic currents, as discussed in Chapter 1. Dar el Fan regularly featured artists and thinkers from Lebanon and the region alongside international figures. See Chapter 4 for further analysis of the centre's collaborations.

²⁵⁷ Annual report of Nicole Harfouche, season 1973-1974, 1. 06.03.1974. Archive of Dar el Fan.

typography.²⁵⁸ Harfouche's report underlines her curatorial instinct to engage with timely, provocative subjects:

“Since the beginning of the year, eminent speakers have given insightful lectures and panel discussions on current political and social affairs. They have been a great success with the public because they raised vital and burning issues that are important to debate, even if there are currently no radical solutions to propose.”²⁵⁹

In November 1973, Dar el Fan launched a cycle of conferences seeking to examine the fractures within Lebanese public opinion in times of national turmoil. The series brought together prominent intellectuals and political figures for a structured debate across multiple dimensions of the Lebanese crisis.²⁶⁰ Although unable to offer “radical solutions,” Harfouche stressed that it nevertheless provided an essential forum for public discourse on pressing issues. In doing so, she articulated a contrasting perspective to that of her predecessor, Janine Rubeiz, who had expressed a more critical view of Dar el Fan's impact, lamenting the public's limited engagement with its initiatives.

²⁵⁸ « Les études islamiques et l'art typographique arabe en Italie du 15e au 20e siècle. À Dar el Fan du 14 au 29 décembre” *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 10.12.1973. The exhibition was curated by the Centre for Italian-Arab Relations in Rome and organized by the Italian Cultural Institute in Beirut (IIC), with the aim of highlighting the significant interest that Arabic language and art have historically inspired in Italy.

²⁵⁹ Annual report of Nicole Harfouche, 1. Archive of Dar el Fan.

²⁶⁰ The opening session on November 6, *Fondements historiques, culturels et religieux*, featured Kamal Joumblatt and Kamal Salibi, with Georges Khodr and Adel Ismail offering critical counterpoints. The second session, *Facteurs économiques, sociaux et politiques* (November 13), included contributions from Pierre Edde and Karim Mroué, with Hicham Bsar and Mounir Chamoun as respondents. Subsequent conferences addressed the economic significance of oil in the Arab world (November 20), the role and responsibilities of national institutions—including the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches (November 27)—as well as the administration and the education sector. The series culminated in a forward-looking discussion on *solutions de dépassement*, featuring Pierre Edde and Ghassan Tuani. See *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 03.11.1973. Some of these debates will be discussed in the following chapter.

Harfouche contributed to Dar el Fan not only as a cultural organiser and president, but also as an artist. She debuted her first solo exhibition at the centre from 2 to 14 March 1972, followed by a second one in February 1974. However, since material on the latter is extremely scarce, the analysis will focus primarily on the first exhibition. Titled *Les Mondes Imaginaires* (Imaginary Worlds), the show featured a series of abstract works executed in gouache and watercolour. The exhibition was a personal milestone but also a site of symbolic exchange, as it was held under the patronage of Imam Moussa Sadr, with whom Harfouche had cultivated ties. Their collaboration was presented as part of her broader interest in fostering interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam, a pursuit aligned with the inclusive ethos of Dar el Fan. However, this (apparently surprising) exchange between two figures as different as Sadr and Harfouche should be understood within the wider historical and political context of Lebanon at the time. In his seminal volume on the history of modern Lebanon, Fawwaz Traboulsi wrote: “Sadr attracted the attention of [...] Michel Asmar’s Cénacle libanais, a thinktank of Lebanese nationalism, Maronite-style. All were in search of a new Muslim ally against the Sunni leadership and the Sunni ‘street’, considered too committed to ‘Abd al-Nasir and the Palestinian *fida’iyin*”.²⁶¹ His reading sheds light on the political interests that were pursued by different sects, under the mantle of culture.

Les Mondes Imaginaires presented over one hundred pieces, a considerable body of work that took viewers on a journey through Harfouche’s inner landscapes.²⁶² In interviews and writings, the artist described the paintings as expressions of her personal universe—“These worlds represent my inner visions and my personal universe,” she noted.²⁶³ The paintings resonated

²⁶¹ Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 178.

²⁶² Only a few are visible in the exhibition’s brochure. Some are reproduced in colours, while others in black and white.

²⁶³ Booklet of the exhibition. Modern and Contemporary Art Museum (MACAM) Archives.

with an otherworldly sensibility, one that bridged the personal and the cosmic, the spiritual and the sensory. The works blended gouache and watercolour in ways that emphasized fluidity, creating compositions that were simultaneously meticulous and spontaneous. This technique allowed for the creation of amorphous shapes and blurred chromatic transitions (pinks bleeding into blues, reds washed into yellows) yielding a soft, dreamy quality. More saturated or darker colours, whose violent contrasts disrupted the harmonious flow and introduced moments of intensity and dynamism, punctuated some passages. The media choices and the layering effects evoked textures found in nature such as sediments, clouds, and currents, yet they resisted fixed readings, offering instead a visual language of suggestion. The painting reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue provides a compelling entry point into Harfouche's visual world (Fig. 7). The composition, entirely abstract, unfolds like a map of the unconscious. Colours move weightlessly across the paper, suggesting a cosmic terrain or an emotional landscape more than a literal scene. Rose, brown, ivory, and pale turquoise tones interweave, with darker pigment deposits functioning like emerging ridges or internal pressures breaking the surface. The layering reveals subtle patterns, where pigment is dispersed unpredictably, reinforcing the organic logic that governs the painting's formation. The overall effect is immersive, meditative, and evocative of broader artistic currents prominent in European circles of the Art Informel movement, such as Lyrical abstraction and Tachisme.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ *Art informel* (literally "formless art", also known as Formalism) is an umbrella term used to describe a range of post-war European abstract and gestural tendencies that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s as a reaction against both academic traditions and the perceived rigidity of earlier modernist styles. Central to *art informel* was an emphasis on spontaneity, material experimentation, and the abandonment of structured composition. Within this broader category, lyrical abstraction and tachisme represented key tendencies. Lyrical abstraction favoured gestural brushwork, fluid forms, and a poetic, introspective tone, often positioning painting as an emotional or existential act. Tachisme—from the French word *tache* (stain or blot)—focused on irregular patches of colour, dynamic marks, and intuitive application, emphasizing immediacy and chance. These movements paralleled but also diverged from American Abstract Expressionism, offering a more intimate and often less monumental approach.

In her introductory text to the exhibition catalogue, Evelyne Massoud captured the poetic and philosophical aspirations of Harfouche's work. She described the paintings as occupying a liminal space between daybreak and twilight, between being and non-being. These were imaginary worlds not because they lacked substance, but because they addressed the deepest roots of existence, navigating the threshold between fantasy and reality. She likened the paintings to evocations of seas and skies, continents and oceans, cosmic apocalypses and constellations. The language of her analysis emphasized the paintings' poetic capacity to transcend material limitations. This poetic interplay was further underscored by a series of short poems, named "*projections poétiques*" penned by Harfouche herself and presented alongside the paintings. Written in French, these meditations addressed themes such as the contingency of life, corporeality, and the mystery of the world. Their inclusion highlighted Harfouche's belief in art as a total experience, one that merges image and word, sensation and reflection.

Critical responses to the exhibition (mainly on Francophone outlets) were largely positive, emphasising both the formal sophistication and the emotional depth of Harfouche's work. In *La Revue du Liban*, Massoud revisited the exhibition in a two-page review, reiterating the conceptual dualities that shaped *Les Mondes Imaginaires* and praising Harfouche's ability to visualise psychological states and metaphysical tensions.²⁶⁵ In *L'Orient-Le Jour*, Mirèse Akkar noted that the exhibition came as something of a revelation.²⁶⁶ While Harfouche was previously known through collective exhibitions such as the Salon du Printemps (Spring Salon), where her work had been well executed but somewhat derivative, here she seemed to have found her true medium. Akkar applauded her ability to blend watercolour with acrylic to create

²⁶⁵ Massoud, "Entre les couleurs de l'aube et les mystères du crépuscule : Les Mondes Imaginaires de Nicole Malhamé-Harfouche", *La Revue du Liban*, 19.02.1972.

²⁶⁶ Akkar, "Nicole Harfouche : l'aquarelle renouvelée », *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 04.03.1972.

her own painterly voice. “Nicole Harfouche engages in compositions that appear impulsive, but in fact are far more premeditated than they seem,” she wrote, adding that these paintings revealed a rich fantasia of form and colour, punctuated at times by straight lines or geometric elements that acted as structural counterweights.²⁶⁷ A third response, published in *An-Nahar* by the artist and critic Laure Ghorayeb (1931-2023), focused on the vivid and brilliant coloration of Harfouche’s palette. Ghorayeb emphasized how the sheer luminosity of the works invited prolonged attention and sensory engagement.²⁶⁸

Her second exhibition, titled *Hanine wa-Achwaak*²⁶⁹ (Longing and Desires, 1974), is more difficult to reconstruct due to the scarcity of surviving material. The survived brochure of the exhibition does not include images of the artworks but features the profile of a nude female body, suggesting that a bodily presence was introduced as subject in this new collection of works. The lack of visual documentation prevents a direct study of the exhibited works; however, a few brief texts provide fragmented descriptions that offer insight into the artistic content of the show. From these fragments, it appears that *Hanine wa-Achwaak* revisited some of the themes explored in *The Imaginary Worlds*, particularly the expressive use of colour and organic forms. However, it also introduced a more tangible and pronounced presence of the female body, which emerged with varying degrees of visibility within the compositions. In the exhibition brochure, artist Aref el Rayess describes Harfouche’s work as a “more mature interaction of colour with the forms of the nude, in a poetic harmony” that, in his view, expressed the artist’s femininity. Art critic Joseph Tarrab offered a more ambivalent evaluation.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Laure Ghorayeb “Nicole Malhamé Harfouche [...] šafra’ burtuqāliyya” [Nicole Malhamé Harfouche ... yellow orange] *An-Nahar*, 02.03.1972. On the consulted source, the title and part of the article is unreadable and it is impossible to reconstruct the exact content.

²⁶⁹ I do not follow IJMES in this case as it was transliterated as such in the brochure of the exhibition.

He characterised Harfouche's return as both "daring and disappointing".²⁷⁰ It was daring in that the artist tackled a culturally sensitive and traditionally taboo subject—the female body and the expression of female pleasure. In this sense, the exhibition can be seen as engaging, at least tentatively, with a feminist perspective, daring to centre female sensuality as a legitimate and complex subject of artistic exploration. In the compositions, the critic says, bodies appeared almost fused with colours, which themselves attempt to play an active role both in the pictorial construction and in the evocation of sensual pleasure.²⁷¹ Yet Tarrab also found the works disappointing: he noted that the figures lacked expressive vitality and appeared somewhat mechanical. In his view, the paintings fell short of fully surrendering to the erotic pleasure of the senses; instead, the colours functioned more as a "veil of tasteful modesty" than as a vehicle for genuine sensual exaltation.²⁷²

This attempt to engage with themes of bodily autonomy and female eroticism was not new at Dar el Fan,²⁷³ and it resonated with the broader debates around women's rights and representation. Within this context, Harfouche's exploration of the female body can be seen as part of a larger movement toward redefining women's roles both in society and in cultural production—an ambition that Dar el Fan itself actively nurtured through its programming and leadership.

Throughout her artistic trajectory, Harfouche maintained a consistent visual language shaped by natural forms and vibrant colours. Her work often depicted abstract renderings of flora and fauna, framed within swirling compositions that suggested both movement and interiority. Some pieces reached toward the figurative, with soft silhouettes of ethereal beings, while

²⁷⁰ Tarrab, "Nicole Harfouche à Dar el Fan. Un voile pudique..." *As-Safa*, 1972.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ See for instance the exhibition of Huguette Caland in 1970 and of Cici Sursock in 1971, the latter being discussed in this chapter.

others remained resolutely abstract, playing with boundaries and textures to suggest emergence and transformation. Her participation in the 1983 Salon des Indépendants in Paris, more than a decade after her exhibition at Dar el Fan, affirmed the continued relevance of her artistic vocabulary. The images reproduced in press clippings from that time reveal a stylistic continuity, suggesting the evolution of expressive forms that had already begun to take shape in the bodies of work presented at Dar el Fan.²⁷⁴

Having traced the profile of Nicole Harfouche's contributions to Dar el Fan, it emerges that her leadership was defined by a multifaceted engagement with the cultural landscape and commitment to feminist ideals. As both president and artist, and with a disposition as a teacher and art critic, Harfouche shaped the centre's artistic direction accordingly. While her tenure at Dar el Fan was characterized by a certain grounding in tradition and a focus on formal artistic expression, under Samia Toutounji's leadership, discussed in the following section, the centre began to shift toward a more experimental approach, embracing a broader, more inclusive vision that sought to engage with the energy and ideals of Lebanon's younger generation.

2.2.3 Samia Toutounji: Cultural Catalyst and Tastemaker in Lebanese Arts

Born in Beirut in 1939, Samia Toutounji was a poet, curator, and cultural organiser. The daughter of renowned writer and diplomat Tawfiq Yusuf 'Awwad (1911–1989), she grew up immersed in different cultural environments, an exposure that deeply shaped both her artistic sensibilities and curatorial vision. Throughout her career, she cultivated a distinctive approach

²⁷⁴ « Nicole Harfouche au 'Salon des Indépendants' et au 'Centre d'Art Contemporain' de Paris » *Le Reveil*, 12.03.1983.

that blended aesthetic experimentation with a commitment to social engagement and institutional reform. Her life was tragically cut short in 1989, when, alongside her father and brother-in-law, the Spanish ambassador in Beirut, they fell victim of heavy shelling in the residence's neighbourhood.²⁷⁵

Toutounji emerged as a literary voice in the 1960s. Her first poetry collection, *Multiples Présences*, was published by Dar an-Nahar on 3 May 1968. It opened with the striking line: "*Toutes les femmes parlent par ma bouche*" ("All the women speak through my mouth"), a powerful declaration of feminist solidarity and a testament to her belief in literature as a medium of collective expression. The collection marked the arrival of a bold, politically attuned voice in Lebanese poetry. Shortly after returning from one of several trips to Japan, a country that influenced her worldview and poetics, and where her father had served as Lebanon's ambassador starting 1966,²⁷⁶ Toutounji composed around twenty new poems. Though unpublished, these works were shared during a poetry evening at Dar el Fan in January 1971.²⁷⁷ The event, introduced by the poet Ounsi el Hajj (1937-2014)²⁷⁸ and attended by the Japanese ambassador, offered a glimpse into her poetic language and her efforts to bridge cultural worlds.

Alongside her literary pursuits, Toutounji was a key figure in Beirut's post-independence art scene. In the early 1960s, she collaborated with Youssef and Helen Khal at Gallery One, building a solid network with artists, gallerists and curators. She exhibited at her home the works of artists Assadour, in 1967, and Juliana Séraphim, in 1968. Her daughter Zeina remembers that

²⁷⁵ For an account of that day, see Nick B. Williams, "Spanish Envoy Killed in Beirut: Ambassador One of 20 Slain in 18-Hour Barrage", *Los Angeles Times*, 17.04.1989.

²⁷⁶ See "Ma'awīyat Tawfiq Yūsuf 'Awwād 1911–2011... Fāris al-qīṣṣa waqa'a ḍahīyat al-ḥarb" [The Centenary of Tawfiq Yusuf 'Awwad 1911–2011... The Knight of the Short Story Fell Victim to the War], *Al-Jarida*, 12.10.2011.

²⁷⁷ « Nouveaux poèmes de Samia Toutounji à Dar el Fan. Ce sera la fête japonaise », *L'Orient*, 14.01.1971.

²⁷⁸ In 1957, poet, journalist and translator Ounsi al-Hajj contributed to the foundation of the poetry magazine *Shi'r*. While working at the daily *An-Nahar*, he expanded the cultural column of the newspaper and in 1964, he founded the magazine *Al-Mulhaq* as a supplementary cultural publication to the main outlet.

she “grew up in a house where I would always see poets, painters, and theatre actors”.²⁷⁹ Art critic Joseph Tarrab captured the depth of her commitment in a profile dedicated to her work:

“It was in the promotion of art that she found more than a profession—she found a true vocation. For her, art was never a mere product to be sold. What mattered to her was the artist, not the client. Once she had chosen an artist—because she believed in the authenticity of their experience and the quality of their creative approach—she became a careful and devoted companion on their journey, offering moral and financial support, certainly, but above all critical support through frequent studio visits and rich dialogues about the works as they came into being.”²⁸⁰

For Toutounji, supporting the arts was not a professional obligation but a calling. Her work was grounded in the belief of the artist as a creator, and in a creative process aimed at advancing artistic research and fostering originality. She saw her role as that of a critical interlocutor offering material, moral, and intellectual support through frequent and stimulating conversations. Over the years, she hosted and supported many other artists at her home, including Amine el Bacha, Ibrahim Marzouk (1937-1975), and Hussein Madi (1938-2024), whose career she followed attentively and with whom she developed a close friendship. By organising exhibitions at home, she offered space, visibility, and sustained support to a rising generation of artists. Reflecting on her curatorial activities, she would later state, “The goal of these exhibitions was to counter the commercial trend that some galleries in Lebanon had imposed on the artist and the public together.”²⁸¹ In prioritizing profit over production, such

²⁷⁹ Interview with Zeina Toutounji, 07.05.2025.

²⁸⁰ Tarrab, « Hommage à Samia Toutounji, disparue il y a dix ans » *L'Orient-Le Jour* 24.04.1999.

²⁸¹ « Sāmiyah Tūtūnjī: mu'zam šālāt al-'arḍ hadafuhā tijārī. Limādhā lā tasta'in al-dawla bi-l-fannānīn al-lubnāniyyīn li-waḍ' al-takhīṭ al-jadīd li-madīnat Bayrūt wa-dawāḥihā? » [Samia Toutounji: Most galleries have a

galleries often favoured established international artists over local ones.²⁸² As Toutounji lamented, this not only deprived Lebanese artists of platforms to exhibit their work, but also more importantly, denied them the structural support necessary to develop sustainable careers.

Her involvement with Dar el Fan began in the late 1960s and culminated in her appointment to the board in 1969, followed by her presidency during the 1972–73 season. During this period, she attempted to reorient the centre’s cultural mission by placing a renewed emphasis on inclusivity, experimentation, and cross-disciplinary engagement. Motivated by a sense that the institution had not yet reached its full potential, she sought to challenge what she perceived as its stagnation and conservatism.²⁸³ In her vision, Dar el Fan could (and should) become a more progressive and dynamic space for artistic and intellectual exchange. Toutounji envisioned Dar el Fan as an arena for civic dialogue and critical reflection that would draw from the most diverse forms of cultural production and be more inclusive of different social strata. In her annual report, she stated:

“We wanted to open the doors of Dar el Fan to everyone. We believe that the time has not yet come when a selection of activities can be made based on pre-established criteria. We felt a moral duty to listen and to give others the opportunity to hear all forms of this artistic blossoming, with only a basic level of oversight. But this oversight, in no way, intends to be or can be considered a position-taking or a guiding authority in shaping culture in Lebanon”.²⁸⁴

commercial goal. Why doesn’t the State enlist the help of Lebanese artists to develop the new plan for Beirut and its suburbs?] Press cut from the Archive of Dar el Fan, 12.10.1977.

²⁸² Toutounji does not specify which galleries she has in mind and her assertion is difficult to evaluate fully, given that numerous galleries were actively exhibiting Lebanese artists during this period.

²⁸³ Interview with Zeina Toutounji, 07.05.2025.

²⁸⁴ Annual report of Samia Toutounji, 4-5. In French in the original source. Archive of Dar el Fan.

A hallmark of her presidency was a strong orientation toward youth engagement and public access. Convinced that cultural institutions should be porous and participatory, she established student committees across universities in Lebanon, encouraging young people to offer commentary, and contribute to event planning. This approach aimed at diversifying the voices within Dar el Fan but also redefined its relationship with its audience. In 1973, she addressed Dar el Fan's limited reach with striking candour, noting that its regular audience barely exceeded two hundred people.²⁸⁵ She observed that this public was widely perceived as elite, reinforcing the notion that the centre catered to a narrow circle. For her, the root of the problem was the broader lack of cultural education, seen as the consequence of sustained state neglect. In her words "This audience is considered an elite and, for public opinion, a confirmation of the fact that Dar El Fan is a limited enterprise destined for a restricted circle of people. In my view, the problem must be tackled at its root, at the level of a lack of culture, for which the State bears responsibility".²⁸⁶ Like Rubeiz, Toutounji viewed access to culture not as a luxury but as a right, essential for a wider public whose participation had long been curtailed by structural inequality. She understood that the future of Lebanese culture could not depend solely on elite patronage; on the contrary, it demanded broader societal engagement and meaningful state involvement. Cultural development, she insisted, required not just programming but a coherent public policy committed to supporting the production and circulation of local art. While Dar el Fan championed experimentation and avant-garde practices, she believed its efforts were not radical enough to disrupt mainstream tastes or expand its audience. In contrast to other institutions that enjoyed broader appeal often backed

²⁸⁵ This contrasts with the figures offered by Rubeiz in her reports, as the chapter has illustrated earlier.

²⁸⁶ "Samia Toutounji à Dar el Fan : Devant un état passif notre dernière chance est la polémique", *As-Safa*, 25.09.1973.

by official endorsement,²⁸⁷ Dar el Fan's dual commitment to innovation and inclusivity remained a delicate balancing act. As she explained:

"I believe I can answer that the public, when attending such-and-such a centre, is faced with an event already recognized and certified officially as being of high quality. This passive attitude is contrary to creativity and artistic evolution. The artist supported by the state is already known and reputed (most often a foreigner), while Dar el Fan works alone to support artists not backed by the state—it's a vicious circle."²⁸⁸

She went on to state that of the entire national budget allocated to culture, ninety percent was spent on foreign artists, while only ten percent supported local ones.²⁸⁹ This structural imbalance reflected a broader failure to nurture home-grown creativity and asserted the urgency of building a space in which both artistic and political autonomy could be reclaimed. This sentiment was echoed by her encounter in Algeria with local film-director Mohammed Lakhdar Hamina (b.1934),²⁹⁰ whom she identified as a key interlocutor because of his interest in post colonialism and Arabisation.²⁹¹ Her engagement with figures like Hamina highlights her growing concern with cultural sovereignty in the postcolonial Arab world. In this sense, her presidency sought to create spaces of genuine exchange, not only between artists and audiences, but also across borders. A key part of her vision involved building cultural bridges

²⁸⁷ Again, it is difficult to assess to which institutions she is referring to in this case – most likely, she had the Baalbeck International Festival in mind.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ It is likely that the state support of culture going to "foreign artists" was spent on the Baalbeck International Festival.

²⁹⁰ Mohammed Lakhdar Hamina played a key role in shaping post-independence Algerian cinema, which took a distinctly anti-imperialist stance. His early work reflects the ideological commitments of the Non-Aligned Movement and explores national identity and selfhood in the context of postcolonial emancipation and nation-building. The screening of the Algerian movies at Dar el Fan is discussed in the following chapter in the larger context of the centre's political commitment.

²⁹¹ Sylviane Zehil « Retour d'Algérie, Samia Toutounji fait le point des échanges possibles », *As-Safa*, 05.08.1973.

with neighbouring Arab countries in order to revalorize regional cultural production. As reported in a 1973 article in *As-Safa*, Dar el Fan launched an initiative to establish a network of Arab ambassadors, with the goal of fostering regional cultural cooperation. The Algerian government invited Toutounji to participate in an exchange and to help formulate a joint strategy for promoting cultural dialogue between Algeria and Lebanon.²⁹² In a 1977 interview, she spoke of having organised an exhibition in Algeria that same year. She praised Algeria's state-led efforts to establish a strong foundation for cultural activity and contrasted this with Lebanon's lack of institutional support. Commenting on the exchange, she noted, "The Lebanese public is familiar with European, North American, and Far Eastern cultures—but they disregard their own."²⁹³ Despite her critique of cultural dependency on foreign validation, Samia Toutounji actively promoted international exchange during her presidency at Dar el Fan. Among her most ambitious efforts was the invitation extended to writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (whose contribution is discussed in Chapter 4), alongside the organisation of a small Japanese film festival.²⁹⁴ These initiatives exposed local audiences to new forms of expression and broadened the cultural conversation beyond Euro-American paradigms. The dialogues she fostered between East and West, tradition and modernity, reflected her own hybrid intellectual formation and her commitment to cultivating a cosmopolitan cultural sphere that did not sacrifice local specificity.

Her feminist commitments, while not always overtly expressed in programming during her presidency, were nonetheless a defining aspect of her broader cultural vision. Unlike the presidencies of Janine Rubeiz or Nicole Harfouche, Toutounji's term did not feature dedicated

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ "Un festival du film japonais à Beyrouth et de multiples activités culturelles (grâce à Samia Toutounji de retour de Tokyo)", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 15.10.1971.

exhibitions of women artists or debates explicitly addressing feminist themes. Her daughter described her as “a feminist in her everyday life”, referring to her independency and her choices that at time would contrast with social expectations.²⁹⁵ She was among the signatories of the *Manifeste pour la création d’un mouvement de libération de la femme* (Manifesto for the creation of a movement for the liberation of women), and later played an active role in organising the landmark Feminist Month at Dar el Fan, held during the institution’s final year of operation and discussed below. These actions attest to a feminism rooted less in programmatic visibility and more in structural commitment and long-term building of solidarity.

Even as she championed experimental and politically engaged work, Toutounji remained acutely aware of the financial and logistical constraints that cultural institutions faced. Her presidency unfolded against a backdrop of growing regional instability and economic uncertainty. Budget reports from 1972–73 reflect recurring deficits and the precarity of cultural funding.²⁹⁶ To sustain Dar el Fan’s programming, she cultivated relationships with foreign embassies and international cultural institutions, which offered financial and logistical support. Toutounji’s balancing of idealism and pragmatism enabled Dar el Fan to survive during a volatile era.

After her presidency, Toutounji remained a vital force in Lebanon’s cultural scene. In 1985, she founded Galerie Platform, which functioned both as a commercial gallery and as a space for intellectual and artistic exchange. This continuity between her institutional and private initiatives attests to her dedication to sustaining cultural dialogue, even under increasingly

²⁹⁵ Interview with Zeina Toutounji, 07.05.2025.

²⁹⁶ Annual report of Samia Toutounji, 1. Archive of Dar el Fan.

difficult circumstances. She continued to support many of the artists she had championed in the 1960s and 70s, maintaining close relationships that blurred the lines between professional collaboration and personal solidarity, until her tragic death in 1989.

From the profiles of the three women who successively presided over Dar el Fan, it emerges that their individual visions, priorities, and networks played a formative role in shaping the centre's cultural agenda. Throughout its existence, Dar el Fan remained coherent in its mission to treat culture as a means of shaping "Lebaneseness", yet each presidency gave this ideal a distinct inflection. Under Janine Rubeiz, the centre's identity was anchored in a vision where artistic practice was inseparable from political and feminist engagement. She saw art as a tool for rethinking society's structures. Her programming reflected a belief that Lebanon's cultural vitality depended on openness to international currents while insisting on their reinterpretation through a local lens. She often sought ways to position modernist experimentation within a lineage that acknowledged Lebanon's heritage, thus resisting the idea of modernity as foreign import. This produced a curatorial language that was at once international and rooted, attentive to the continuities of tradition. Nicole Harfouche approached Dar el Fan from a different angle. Her priorities laid in pedagogy and an almost academic exchange. While equally committed to the idea of culture as a civic force, her orientation was also more explicitly shaped by French intellectual and artistic traditions. Samia Toutounji prioritised emerging artists and social inclusivity. Her commitment to diversity was as much about artistic experimentation as it was about audience composition: she sought to dismantle the perception of culture as a privilege of the elite and instead presented it as a shared civic resource. Together, their approaches formed a continuous yet evolving conversation on how art and culture could define and transform civic life.

To better understand how these leaderships translated into concrete programming, the following section turns to two emblematic case studies. These events, Cici Sursock's exhibition of nudes and the Week of the Lebanese Woman (as part of the Feminist May), offer insight into how Dar el Fan cultivated a feminist discourse that was both locally rooted and in conversation with broader transnational currents. Through these two moments, we see how the institution created space for women's voices, bodies, and visions to occupy central positions in public cultural life.

2.3 Cici Sursock: The Body and the Language of the Nude²⁹⁷ at Dar el Fan

The nomadic life of artist Justina Tommaseo Sursock (1923-2015), known as Cici Sursock, influenced by the ebb and flow of geopolitical events in Europe and the Middle East, bears witness to a time marked by the upheavals of World War II, the postcolonial era in Egypt, and the tumultuous Civil War in Lebanon. These geopolitical shifts not only shaped the trajectory of Sursock's life, but also reflect the historical context of cultural shifts, tensions, and exchanges that define the twentieth century.

²⁹⁷ Fine art nudes were not new to exhibition spaces, nor were they dismissed as shameful since the early twentieth century. Their introduction to the Lebanese artistic scene is often attributed to pioneering figures such as Habib Srour, Khalil Saleeby, and Khalil Gibran (1883–1931). Their students, including Mustafa Farroukh and Omar Onsi, continued to develop this genre. However, for a long time, the nude remained the domain of male artists. It was only in the 1960s that a generation of women, including Helen Khal, Huguette Caland, Juliana Seraphim, Nadia Saikali, and Cici Sursock, began to engage with and exhibit the nude, asserting their place within this artistic tradition. For an analysis of nudes in early twentieth century Lebanon, see Kirsten Scheid "Necessary nudes: Ḥadātha and mu'āṣara in the lives of modern Lebanese", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 42 (2010), 203–230, and "Looking at/as nudes: A study of a space of imagination" in *Fashioning the Modern Middle East. Gender, Body and Nation*, ed. Reina Lewis and Yasmine Nachabe Taan (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021). See also Nammour, *Amām al-lawḥa*, 30-33.

Born in Split (Croatia), Cici Sursock emerged from a lineage rich in artistic and intellectual heritage. She was a descendant of patriot, linguist and writer Niccolò Tommaseo.²⁹⁸ Her maternal grandfather was film director and photographer Josip Karaman (1864-1921), who founded and led the Grand Electric Cinema, the first cinema in Split, now renamed cinema Kino Karaman. The daughter of diplomat Milovan Tommaseo, Sursock's early years were marked by diplomatic travels. She spent most of her childhood in Vienna, and later moved to Belgrade where she attended the Academy of Fine Arts. She continued her studies at the School of Applied Arts in Ankara (1938-1943), where she practiced at the studio of Turkish artists Nurettin Ergüven (1905-1979)²⁹⁹ and Turgut Zaim (1906-1974),³⁰⁰ and later moved to Tehran. The upheavals of War World II led her and her family to settle in Cairo in 1944. While working as an illustrator for the British Ministry of Information in Cairo, she met her future husband, aristocrat Habib Sursock, member of a prominent Lebanese family. They married in 1947 and moved to the prestigious Gezirah Palace, acquired by Habib's family.³⁰¹ After the marriage, Sursock paused her artistic pursuit until the early 1960s, when she resumed painting portraits of family members. She held her first exhibition of portraits at the Cairo Atelier in 1963.³⁰² A second one took place the following year, at the Galerie Akhenaton. In 1964, the family's assets including the Gezirah Palace were seized as part of Nasser's programme of nationalisation,³⁰³ forcing the family into financial ruin. Suddenly impoverished, the Sursocks left to Lebanon. In

²⁹⁸ Niccolò Tommaseo was born in Sebenico (Croatia) in 1802 and passed away in Florence (Italy) in 1874. He is remembered for his novel *Fede e bellezza* (Faith and Beauty), published for the first time in 1840 and 1852 in its final version) and for his patriotic activities during the process of independence of Italy.

²⁹⁹ After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts, Nurettin Ergüven moved to Germany and studied at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. He was among the members of the Turkish Independent Painters and Sculptors Association.

³⁰⁰ Active since the 1930s, Turgut Zaim studied both at the Fine Arts Academy of Istanbul and in France. Interested in folk art, he was the choreographer of the Republican Theatre of Istanbul.

³⁰¹ Commissioned by the Khedive Ismail for the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Gezirah Palace is today the central section of the Cairo Marriott hotel.

³⁰² On the Cairo Atelier, see footnote 16.

³⁰³ See footnote 29 and 30.

Beirut, she resorted to painting to support her household and quickly became part of the city's vibrant intellectual and artistic circles. Sursock gained success among the upper class, with her portraits of the Beirut bourgeoisie and personalities from the arts and literature world. A consistent theme in her work, portraits were a guiding thread of her pictorial life. Her portraiture spanned Lebanon's cultural vanguard: she depicted screen legend Faten Hamama and singer Fairuz, poets Venus Khoury-Ghata and Nadia Tueni, painters Assadour and Juliana Seraphim, as well as the curator-gallerist Odile Mazloum.

By May 1965, just over a year after arriving in Beirut, she had already begun to establish herself within the city's cultural milieu, presenting a series of portraits and icons at the Phoenicia Hotel gallery. Her 1966 exhibition at the gallery of the Hotel Vendôme, titled *Corps et Âmes*, which featured female nudes rendered in black-and-white aerosol on hardboard, is regarded by her son Samir as the moment she secured her place in Lebanon's art scene.³⁰⁴ That same year, she published *Avec Amour*, a volume of illustrated poems, and in 1967, she mounted a collages exhibition that further demonstrated her multidisciplinary approach. The Baalbeck Festival subsequently commissioned her to design its 1967 programme, and her studio became a regular gathering spot known as "Sundays at Cici's" for figures such as Etel Adnan, Helen Khal, and other writers, critics, and performers.

Her first documented engagement with Dar el Fan dates to 1967, during the lecture "*Écrire et parler*" delivered by Surrealist writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues (1909-1991). A photograph from the event shows her alongside the French cultural attaché, de Mandiargues, and the poet Adonis.³⁰⁵ Again, in 1969 she is photographed in the company of Nicole Harfouche, the director of Beirut's Kennedy Centre, and the artist and professor Paul Lingren, during the exhibition of

³⁰⁴ Interview with the author, 13.06.2023 Beirut.

³⁰⁵ « La semaine Libanaise de M. et Mme. Andre Peyre de Mandiargues, Hotes de Dar el Fan » press cut, probably *La Revue du Liban*, date unknown. Archive of the Sursock Museum.

prints on loan from the Smithsonian.³⁰⁶ Her collaboration with Dar el Fan becomes more consistent and structured starting January 1970, when Cici Sursock, together with fellow artists Myriam Ghali and Guy Block, launches a weekly painting atelier.³⁰⁷

Throughout her career, she revisited Byzantine iconography, creating distinctive interpretations that reflected her own artistic vision. She merged influences of Coptic, Melkite, Balkan and Russian imagery with a bold, almost surrealistic approach. On 14 April 1975, she inaugurated her first exhibition of icons at the Hotel St Georges. The vernissage came a day after the Beirut bus massacre³⁰⁸ that marked the formal outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, soon forcing the hotel to close. During the war years, Sursock lived between Cairo, Beirut, and Split, ultimately settling in her hometown in 1988. There, she gained recognition with two icon exhibitions in 1986 and 1987. From 1991, she witnessed the wars in the Balkans, violent ethnic conflicts that resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia. As anti-Serbian sentiment spread, she shifted the aesthetic of her icons adapting them to the Italian Renaissance styles to escape hostile backlash.

Cici Sursock's artistic practice has consistently revolved around the human form, charting a path from early portraits to nude studies, and later developing a distinctive visual language rooted in religious iconography. This progression, anchored in explorations of bodily presence and its symbolic resonances, reached a pivotal moment in her 1971 exhibition at Dar el Fan,

³⁰⁶ The same photo is printed in press cuts from *La Revue du Liban* and the newspaper *Al-Ra'samal*, 18.01.1969. Archive of the Sursock Museum. The exhibition of prints from the Smithsonian is discussed in Chapter 4.

³⁰⁷ The initiative is announced in several press cuts from *Le Soir*, *Le Jour*, *The Daily Star*, and *L'Orient*. Archive of the Sursock Museum.

³⁰⁸ Occurred in Ain el-Rummaneh (East Beirut) as the peak of a series of minor clashes between Palestinians and Christian Lebanese. In the morning, a congregation of Phalange partisans was shot in front of a church in the neighbourhood, wounding a number of people. Phalangist militiamen reacted a few hours later with the ambush and gunning of a bus heading for the Tall al-Za'tar refugee camp, killing 21 (or 27 according to other sources) Palestinians.

which featured a series of large-scale male and female nude compositions. While the nude was by no means a new theme for Sursock, as she had previously explored it in her solo *Corps et Âmes*, the Dar el Fan exhibition marked both a continuation and a transformation of her approach. In a review of *Corps et Âmes*, Helen Khal described Sursock's bodies as going "beyond mere figurative presence."³⁰⁹ For Khal, Sursock aimed to communicate a "monumental quality inherent in the human body".³¹⁰ Her figures, rendered with simplified lines and a restrained colour palette, possessed an almost sculptural density, evoking forms cast in bronze or carved from stone.³¹¹ These characteristics carried through to the Dar el Fan exhibition, yet with a new depth of symbolic engagement.

That evolution was catalysed in part by an interdisciplinary exchange. At the time, the poet and writer Claude Khal was animating the "Atelier Planète"³¹² at Dar el Fan, an evening series known for its eclectic musical programming.³¹³ It was likely at Dar el Fan that Claude Khal first encountered Cici Sursock and saw some of her earlier works from *Corps et Âmes*. In them, he recognized a visual counterpart to the poetic vision he was developing in his volume *El, ou la marche vers l'Est*.³¹⁴ The book, composed of layered, allusive, and esoterically charged poems, follows a ritualistic structure. Its first half, *El* (named after the Phoenician god of darkness) evokes a metaphysical descent into confusion, and spiritual disintegration. This descent takes the form of a journey into the underworld, where the human soul confronts the void of unknowing, and of death as the sole possibility. The second half marks a turning point: a

³⁰⁹ Helen Khal, "Beyond the 'mere figurative presence' of Sursock nude", press cut from unknown source, undated. Archive of the Sursock Museum.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Born in Paris in the aftermaths of May '68, The Atelier Planète was a New-Age movement.

³¹³ Massoud, E. "El, où la marche vers l'Est de Claude Khal » *La Revue du Liban*, undated press cut. Archive of the Sursock Museum.

³¹⁴ Joyce Said, "Poet, Painter Combination Gives New Dimensions to Art Exhibit" *The Daily Star*, 24.03.1971.

rebirth, or ascension, into knowledge, symbolised by the movement eastward, hence toward light, clarity, and spiritual renewal.³¹⁵

To accompany the launch of this unusual volume, which was not sold in bookstores but made available only during an exclusive event at Dar el Fan, printed in limited and precious editions, Cici Sursock created a striking visual installation. Eight monumental canvases, some measuring up to four by three meters, and fourteen smaller pieces were exhibited on the gallery walls (Fig. 8). These works were not mere illustrations but functioned as autonomous artistic responses to Khal's texts. Reproductions of the paintings were later included in the volume itself, emphasizing their integral role in the poetic-philosophical project.

The exhibition captured the attention of both critics and audiences alike. Installed in the gallery, the scale and arrangement of the works created an immersive atmosphere, with the towering figures "vibrating through the space," as one contemporary reviewer observed.³¹⁶ The human body, naked, fragmented, at times androgynous, remained central to this series. Nudity, for Sursock, was not simply a formal device, but a symbolic stripping away of cultural, moral, and psychological constraints. In the bareness of the body, its essential nature could be revealed.³¹⁷ The figures, as in her previous work, retained their sculptural presence, but were now invested with deeper allegorical meaning. Marie-Thérèse Arbid described them as "a faceless humanity, without identity,"³¹⁸ while the Arabic-language publication *Al-Dustur*

³¹⁵ Ibid. See also Khater, "Kitāb El aw-al-masīra nahū al-sharq" [The book "El" or the march towards the East] *An-Nahar*, 18.03.1971.

³¹⁶ Yolande Aghemian, « Tout le nu, rien que le nu » *Le Soir*, 27.03.1971. An impression of the interaction between the large canvases and the space is found also in the words of another journalist, which described the canvases as "contribuent à créer un climat fantastique" [help create a fantastical atmosphere], D.A. "A Dar el Fan: "El, la marche vers l'Est", *Magazine*, 25.93.1971. Archive of the Sursock Museum.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Marie Thérèse Arbid, « L'humanité sans visage de Cici Sursock, pour 'La marche vers L'Est' de Claude Khal », *Le Jour*, 26.03.1971.

referred to them as “bodies in pieces, though yearning for a better world.”³¹⁹ Many of the bodies appear dismembered: some resemble toppled statues; others seem folded in on themselves, closed off. Others appear to float freely in the air. It is from this state of fragmentation that a sense of spiritual elevation begins to emerge.

Three works are key to understanding this process and tracing the evolution of the themes that run through the exhibition. The first is a female nude Sursock had painted earlier, (Fig. 9) in 1966, originally part of *Corps et Âmes* but re-exhibited at Dar el Fan and included among the illustrations in *El, ou la marche vers l’Est*. The composition centres on a single nude female figure, reclining in a foetal pose. The body is depicted in simplified contours, lacking anatomical detail, and surrounded by a dense red-brown background. The isolation of the figure, with its head turned away and its limbs drawn inward, conveys a deep inwardness, a moment of suspension. The palette, dominated by muted greys, whites, and faint pinks, lends the flesh a stone-like quality. At the same time, fissures and breaks run through the body, disrupting its solidity and suggesting both physical fragility and metaphysical fragmentation. The pose hovers between rest, pain, and withdrawal and in the context of Khal’s poetic cycle, it might be read as an introspective stillness waiting for the turn toward light and knowledge.

The theme of the solitude reappears in another painting produced specifically for the 1971 exhibition, titled *Suicide (or Death)* (Fig. 10), one of the largest and most thematically complex works from the same series. In *Suicide*, the setting shifts from abstraction to a constructed interior and from the single figure to a group of people. A sharply receding black-and-white checkerboard floor dominates the composition, creating spatial disorientation. Scattered throughout the scene are nude male bodies, headless, and ghostlike. Rendered in soft

³¹⁹ « Cici Sursock : Ajsāduhā al-mutaṣaddi’a tatūqu ilā ‘ālam anqā » [Cici Sursock : Her cracked bodies long for a purer world], *Al-Dustur*, 25.03.1971.

airbrushed greys with little colour, the figures seem almost dematerialized, their forms flickering between presence and absence. At the centre lies a single reclining figure, the only one with a visible face. It is the poet, marked out from the others by the possession of a head, a metaphor of consciousness. The surrounding figures, headless and rigid, stand or drift in the background. Their lack of faces becomes symbolic of their incapacity to see, to understand, to participate in the poet's knowledge.³²⁰ This painting is an allegory of isolation. The poet, as the only figure capable of seeing and understanding is condemned to a solitude so absolute it leads to death. Yet this death is not final, but it is the necessary passage through the darkness, that precedes rebirth. The act of dying, here, becomes a gesture toward a transformation that is not nihilistic, but transcendent. This brings the viewer to *Revival*,³²¹ which presents human forms floating across the composition, with limbs and torsos fragmented yet fluid. Despite the dismemberment, the figures convey a sense of calm and weightlessness, evoking the image of dancers suspended mid-leap, their bodies poised in a moment of grace, as if defying gravity.³²² In this metaphysical space—its quality heightened by the empty background—heads and faces reappear, though only in fragmented or suggested form. A bold, full circle in the top right of the painting evokes the sun, or the East, its illuminating presence hinting at spiritual connection and transcendence.

These works extend Sursock's longstanding interest in the human body into new philosophical and symbolic territory, engaging themes of death, rebirth, subtle eroticism and knowledge

³²⁰ Joyce Said, "Poet, painter combination gives new dimension to art exhibit at Dar el Fan".

³²¹ The analysis of *Revival* is based on the black-and-white reproduction present in the book and on press clippings. As such, it is not possible to reconstruct the original colour palette or assess the effect of the artist's use of colour.

³²² It seems that the ballet dancer and choreographer Rudolf Nureyev (1938-1993), who performed at the Baalbeck International Festival with Margot Fonteyn in 1964, inspired Cici Sursock for the depiction of these figures. See « Les nus de Cici pour un ouvrage initiatique de Claude Khal », *L'Orient*, 19.03.1971.

through a dialogue between visual art and poetry. Through fragmentation, abstraction, and symbolic inversion, Sursock's figures challenged conventions of gender and authorship. Her nude paintings, though not unprecedented in Beirut, participated in an emerging visual discourse on the body, one that was increasingly shaped by women artists who not only elaborated new forms of representation but were also the agents of such representation. Dar el Fan's decision to dedicate its exhibition space to such work was not incidental. It reflected the centre's growing role as a site where aesthetic innovation intersected with feminist critique and practice. Sursock's contribution was one strand in a wider network of women who were reconfiguring the terms of cultural production in Lebanon during the early 1970s.

This collective energy found its most explicit expression the following year, in what would come to be known as "The Women's Month", or "Feminist May". Within a wider, month-long series of initiatives dedicated to women, an intense week of lectures, public debates and the exhibition *The Lebanese Women* was organised and led by the very women who had come to shape Dar el Fan's identity. If the 1971 exhibition distilled a private notion of the body, the "Feminist May" made visible its political dimensions, offering a rare moment of institutional support for feminist discourse in all its plurality.

2.4 *The Women's Month* or "Feminist May" at Dar el Fan

The United Nations designated the year 1975 as "International Women's Year" and held the first UN World Conference on the status of Women in Mexico City, to focus on gender equality and women's full participation in development and peace.³²³ As Raewyn Connell has noted,

³²³ On the precedents that led to Mexico 1975, its discussions, debates and differences with the second UN Women Conference in Nairobi 1985, see Margaret Snyder "Unlikely Godmother. The UN and the Global

this historical moment marked the start of a challenge to the dominance of the global North within feminist discourse. The conference brought questions of global solidarity and inequality to the forefront, exposing the tensions and contradictions within feminism as an international project.³²⁴

In dialogue with global feminist currents and eager to contribute to the international momentum, the women of Dar el Fan launched their most ambitious and explicitly feminist initiative to date, “The Women’s Month”. This initiative, co-organised by Dar el Fan and the publishing house Dar an-Nahar, represented the culmination of the feminist discourse carefully cultivated at the centre over the preceding years. The seeds had been openly sown in 1974, when Dar el Fan began hosting weekly public discussions on what was often referred to as “the woman issue”. Coverage in the press, as well as the testimonies of participants, attests to both the seriousness and urgency with which these sessions were approached. Etel Adnan, a frequent participant in the meetings, captured their momentum in her article for *L’Orient-Le Jour*, titled “Feminism on the agenda. An action launched by Dar el Fan.”³²⁵ She described an atmosphere of critical debate and collective purpose, as participants gathered to explore the possibilities of a feminist platform rooted in the Lebanese context.

Women’s Movements” in *Global Feminism. Transnational Women’s Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*, eds. Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mary Tripp (New York University Press, 2006).

³²⁴ Raewyn Connell, “Rethinking Gender from the South” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2014), 518-539 (Feminist Studies, Inc.). The conference represented the starting point of a long and evolving process. As Amrita Basu points out, while the early gathering in Mexico City included many women connected to political life through their relationships with prominent men, by the time of the Nairobi conference in 1985, many delegates were established figures in their own fields, participating on the basis of their own authority and experience. See Amrita Basu “Globalization of the Local/Localization of the Global: Mapping Transnational Women’s Movements” *Meridians*, Autumn, 2000, Vol. 1, No. 1, 68-84 (Duke University Press). See also Ferree and Tripp, *Global Feminism*.

³²⁵ Adnan, “Le Féminisme à l’ordre du jour. Une Action lancée à Dar el Fan” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 08.11.1974.

The gatherings brought together prominent activists and intellectuals such as Laure Moghaizel (1929-1997), a long-time feminist advocate and collaborator with Dar el Fan, as well as artists, writers, and citizens interested in shaping a future of gender equality. Despite some divergent views, there was broad consensus on the need to take action. Some participants stressed the urgency of improving conditions for women in rural and working-class neighbourhoods, while others pointed to the importance of expanding access to higher education as a tool for economic independence.³²⁶ This multifaceted approach to feminist thought, intersectional before the term had gained common currency,³²⁷ revealed a collective awareness that the “woman issue” was far from monolithic. Even as the group was largely composed of bourgeois women, the conversations they fostered showed a growing consciousness of class-based and structural inequities.

A follow-up article by Adnan, published on 21 November, reported on the creation of a feminist manifesto, developed through the Dar el Fan meetings and written in both Arabic and French.³²⁸ Drafted on 18 November and published officially a month later,³²⁹ this document laid the groundwork for a broader Movement for the Liberation of Women. In nine points, it rejected sex-based discrimination and patriarchal control, called for the full political and social subjectivity of women, and refused the societal imposition of roles such as childrearing as exclusively female responsibilities. Most significantly, the manifesto linked the struggle for women’s rights to broader anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles, aligning itself with

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ The term « intersectionality » in relation to feminism was coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1989 seminal essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

³²⁸ Adnan, « Réunion féministe très animée – à Dar el Fan » *L’Orient- Le Jour*, 21.11.1974.

³²⁹ A copy of the Manifesto was found in the Archives of Dar el Fan, date 18.11.1974. The manifesto was published in *La Revue du Liban* no. 823, as part of the article “Janine Rubeiz, présidente de Dar el Fan: “Il est grand temps que la femme secoue cet asservissement millénaire...” authored by Samia Abboud on 07.12.1975.

transnational movements and rejecting the idea that women's liberation should be postponed in favour of other political priorities. It insisted that the fight for gender justice was not marginal, but central to the larger battle for liberation and social transformation. The signatories of the manifesto included key figures in Lebanon's intellectual and artistic circles: Janine Rubeiz and her daughter Nadine Begdache; Samia Toutounji; artists and writers Moazzaz Raouda, Simone Fattal, and Etel Adnan; as well as Laure and Joseph Moghaizel, poet Adonis, and critic Khalida Said. Their collective support signalled not only the seriousness of the initiative but also its entrenchment in Lebanon's cultural establishment.

In December 1974, in anticipation of the United Nations' declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year, Janine Rubeiz announced her intention to participate in global feminist activities, underscoring her commitment to the cause.³³⁰ The article reproducing the manifesto in *La Revue du Liban*, while quoting Rubeiz' personal passion, also hinted at certain limitations, referring to "the women of the Lebanese intelligentsia", thus reinforcing the perception that these conversations remained largely confined to middle and upper class circles. The magazine itself, targeting a bourgeois readership, reflected the classed positioning of the feminist debates at Dar el Fan, even as the institution sought to widen its reach and the content of such discussions.

Just a few months later, Dar el Fan issued a call for participation in its upcoming Women's Month. In March 1975, *An-Nahar* ran a headline: "With the Year of the Woman 1975, Dar el Fan invites creative women to an exhibition in May for them."³³¹ The article's language insisted on inclusive cultural politics:

³³⁰ Abboud, "Il est grand temps ... ».

³³¹ « Ma'a sanat al-mar'a 1975, Dār al-Fann wa-l-Adab tad'ū al-mubdi'āt ilā ma'riḡ fī Ayyār min ajlihinna » *An-Nahar*, 30.01.1975.

“We must move from the specific to the general intellectual and cultural level, as an issue that transcends its mere existence in certain societies to an issue that concerns women everywhere [...] It is not a struggle between men and women but rather a struggle of the two together against privileges and against every form of classism.”³³²

In a parallel statement published in *La Revue du Liban*, Rubeiz contextualised the programme within a global framework: “Yes, paths of liberation are different from one country to another... but what is undeniable is the similarity at the basis of the problem.”³³³ Here, she made explicit Dar el Fan’s long-standing engagement with the concerns of Arab and Lebanese women, while also gesturing toward a shared foundation with global feminist struggles, challenging the dominance of Western feminist paradigms, and sharing critiques emerging also from Black and Latin American feminists.³³⁴

Despite the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in April 1975, the initiative went as planned. The exhibition *The Lebanese Women* opened on 9 May at Dar el Fan. Featuring over thirty women artists and more than fifty writers, poets, scientists, and architects, it offered a panorama of women’s diverse creativity. Other than visual arts, contributions came from

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Janine Rubeiz, “Appel de Dar el Fan pour Le Moi de la Femme”, *La Revue du Liban* no. 893, 22.02.1975.

³³⁴ Black feminism began to emerge in mid-19th century, concerned mainly with racial and sexual violence. From the 1960s, it grew as a political and social movement seeking to guarantee social justice and civil rights for women. A foundational text of left-wing Black feminism is Mary Ann Weathers’ “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force,” (1969). Other leading figures in the movement are writer and professor Audre Lorde (1934-1992), author of *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (1979); activist and academic Angela Davis (b.1944), author of *Women, Race and Class* (1981); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984). In Latin America, precursor to feminist movements appeared since the early 19th century. From 1930s to 1950s, the main objective of the Latina feminist movements was the suffrage, while in the 1960s the movement shifted towards activism for defending women’s rights. Chilean sociologist Maria Julieta Kirkwood (1936-1985) is often regarded as the “mother” of feminism in Latin America. Her works, such as *Feminismo y Participación Política en Chile* (1982), were published in 1980s. Other notable figures include, alongside the already mentioned Heleieth Saffioti (see also footnote 186) Mexican anthropologist Marta Lamas (b.1947) who in 1976 founded the feminist magazine *Fem* in collaboration with feminist, poet and human rights activist Alaíde Foppa (Guatemala/Mexico (1914-1980).

music, theatre, and performance art. Janine Rubeiz herself contributed to the show with a few costume sketches for theatrical plays.

Unfortunately, only few works are visible through surviving press clippings. A press cutting from *La Revue du Liban* by Viktor Hakim shows a nude by Cici Sursock, an echo of her earlier 1971 solo exhibition at the same place.³³⁵ The return of the nude figure, this time situated within a programme openly dedicated to feminist thought and female creativity, offered a powerful visual continuity, linking the institution's earlier explorations of embodiment and visibility to a more explicitly political project. Next to Sursock's work was a group of sculptures by Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017), a pioneering figure in Lebanese modernism who had famously distanced her practice from gendered interpretations, once stating that her work was not "feminine."³³⁶ Her inclusion in this exhibition, however, revealed the complex negotiations many women artists undertook when confronted with feminist frameworks. While Choucair may have resisted essentialist readings of her work, she nonetheless chose to participate in an event that centred women as cultural and political subjects, suggesting a tacit alignment with the broader ambitions of Dar el Fan's feminist discourse.

The article in *An-Nahar* explained the broader ambitions of the exhibition: to foreground women's contributions to the cultural and intellectual life of the nation, while also confronting the barriers that restricted their full participation in society. "The aim is not only to question their rights and freedoms," the article stated, "but also to listen to what they say, what they depict, and what they point to in terms of meanings, ideas, visions, and solutions to our

³³⁵ Hakim, "L'exposition des femmes libanaises à Dar el Fan » *La Revue du Liban*, n. 855, 17.05.1975.

³³⁶ See for instance Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects. Art and Sociality from Lebanon*, 245 (Indiana University Press, 2022).

problems, our present and our future.”³³⁷ In this sense, the exhibition did not simply celebrate women as creators; it positioned them as agents of national renewal, capable of reshaping Lebanon’s future through their specific visions and values.

A dense programme of lectures accompanied the exhibition, constituting the *Week of the Woman*, the core of the “Feminist Month”. The conferences were held at the Engineers’ Syndicate in Ramlet al-Baida, with support from the PSP-affiliated Progressive Women’s Union. It is worth analysing some passages of the inaugural speech of Janine Rubeiz for the *Week*, as they summarise the feminist discourse that Dar el Fan was promoting:

“This International Women’s Year [...] will be very beneficial and positive. It has allowed for an awakening to the unjust situation of women. [...] For us Lebanese and Arab women, what will this year bring? What do we hope for? [...] Equality of rights and obligations before the law, in the workplace, and the establishment of a civil code governing personal status, applicable to all citizens without distinction. [...] As in all countries, there are vast differences in conditions between the bourgeois and the worker, the village woman and the city-dweller, etc. [...] The European woman is no longer a model... Believing her to be liberated, she once served as our example. [...] We are beginning to realize that the path laid out by the magazines of Paris misleads us into another form of sexism [...] where we have the illusion of being freer, but which is also fundamentally racist and contemptuous.”³³⁸

Framing Lebanese and Arab women’s struggles within a global context yet insisting on their specificity, Rubeiz articulates a vision of feminism rooted in local legal, social, and economic realities. Her call for legal equality and a unified civil code points to the urgent need to

³³⁷ « Ma’a sanat al-mar’a 1975 ».

³³⁸ Document of the inaugural speech of the Week of the Woman. Archive of Dar el Fan.

transcend confessional divisions and patriarchal legal structures in Lebanon, while her recognition of the deep disparities between women of different classes and geographies hints at the centre's intersectional approach. Equally significant is her critique of European feminism as a falsely universal model. By rejecting the seductive but alienating narratives circulated by Western media, Rubeiz resists a colonial logic that casts Arab women as imitators of Western liberation. Instead, she asserts the need for a feminism that does not replicate the exclusions or hierarchies of other systems, but emerges from within the lived experiences of Arab women themselves. Welcoming the speakers with this statement meant challenging hegemonic models while affirming the creative and political agency of Lebanese and Arab women on their own terms.

Speakers of the *Week* included local and international voices. Jurist and Minister of Justice in Bulgaria Svetla Daskalova, Greek politician and Parliament deputy Virginie Tsouderos, and Micheline Galabert, director of the Employment Study Centre in France, were invited for the opening lecture, to share contributions on the situation of women in their respective countries.³³⁹ Author Eveline Massoud stated that all of them succeeded "in asserting themselves not as women, but as full citizens" ("*citoyennes à part entière*").³⁴⁰ Most notably, Hoda Badran, then head of women's affairs at UNICEF, spoke of founding an Arab Women's Institute³⁴¹ in collaboration with the Arab League, proposing regional collaborations with institutions like Al-Azhar and satellite branches in Jordan and Syria. This explicitly transnational scope positioned *The Week of Women* within a wider regional dialogue. The conferences and

³³⁹ Massoud, « Une femme-ministre, une fondatrice de parti, une spécialiste de l'emploi inaugurent la Semaine Internationale de la Femme », *La Revue du Liban*, n. 857, May 1975.

³⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁴¹ The idea maybe aimed at extending the reach of an already-existing Beirut-based institute. Founded in 1973, the Arab Institute for Women (AiW), originally named the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), emerged from the Lebanese American University's longstanding tradition as an institution dedicated to women's education. It was the first institute of its kind in the Arab region and remains unique within Lebanon. It published Helen Khal's pathbreaking book *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* discussed above.

lectures that animated the *Week* covered a range of pressing issues, demonstrating the plurality of feminist perspectives circulating at the time. Emilie Nasrallah asked, “To what extent does the education of women contribute to their liberation?”, while Linda Matar raised questions about labour and gender. Ilham Kilab discussed the limits of sexual liberation, while Khalida Said interrogated the economic value of housework and the ideological implications of Lebanese education.³⁴²

Taken together, the conferences, debates, and exhibition of the *Month* and *Week of the Woman* brought to full visibility a discourse that had been slowly developing over years at Dar el Fan. They marked the highest point in the institution’s engagement with feminist thought and cultural production, foregrounding women’s contributions to the arts while pushing for a redefinition of citizenship, agency, and nationhood. Yet, for all its ambition, this moment also revealed structural limits. Although this second generation of Lebanese feminists strove for expanded political rights, including suffrage and representation, they struggled to break free both from the sectarian system and from the patriarchal model that continued to shape national politics. Female identity remained bound to the national narratives produced by the different groups, and women were largely excluded from actual decision-making processes in the country. Still, in its ambition, scope, and symbolism, the “Feminist May” at Dar el Fan stood as a testament to what a cultural institution led by women could generate when artistic freedom, political urgency, and feminist solidarity came together.

³⁴² The programme of the lectures and some of the proceedings are preserved in the Archive of Dar el Fan.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how Dar el Fan operated as a space for women not only in terms of inclusion but also as a site where women actively shaped cultural narratives and institutional practices. The centre's history demonstrates a form of gendered cultural agency that unfolded through both administrative leadership and artistic programming. Rather than being merely receptive to women's presence, Dar el Fan positioned women as creators, organisers, and theorists of cultural meaning.

The presidencies of Janine Rubeiz, Nicole Malhamé Harfouche, and Samia Toutounji, serve as entry points into this dynamic. Each brought a distinct vision to the institution, yet together they underscore how women's intellectual and curatorial authority defined Dar el Fan's trajectory. Their leadership did not simply navigate the centre; it reimagined a space able to challenge the masculinised image of institutional cultural power.

Beyond administrative agency, the chapter turned to specific curatorial moments in which feminist discourse emerged not only as content but also as structure. Initiatives such as the 1974 meetings on "the woman issue," the 1975 *Month and Week of Women*, alongside the exhibition *The Lebanese Women*, and the production of a feminist manifesto reveal a sustained and self-conscious engagement with questions of gender, politics and cultural production. These efforts resonate with second-wave feminist currents, particularly the emphasis on consciousness-raising, the politicisation of the personal, and the revaluation of female experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. The case studies of Cici Sursock's 1971 exhibition and the "Feminist May" initiative illustrate how Dar el Fan cultivated aesthetic and ideological experimentation, acting as a space of negotiation and plural expression.

Most importantly, Dar el Fan's feminist legacy should not be dismissed as derivative of Western models or as isolated from broader movements. It existed within a transnational network of feminist inquiry, reflecting both global influences and local specificities. The intellectual and artistic dialogues it fostered contributed to the redefinition of gender roles and cultural citizenship in Lebanon. As such, Dar el Fan must be understood as part of a wider feminist cartography, as an institution that, despite its contradictions, served as a platform for rethinking the relationship between gender, art, and social change. Within this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this feminist project. Dar el Fan's sphere of influence remained largely confined to Beirut's francophone, middle- and upper-class milieus. Despite occasional gestures toward inclusivity, the institution fell short of building sustained engagement with working-class or rural women.

In conclusion, Dar el Fan was not merely a venue for women's participation; it was a space through which feminist possibilities were staged, contested, and imagined. Its history opens a window onto the entanglements of cultural production and feminist thought in Lebanon during a moment of both national upheaval and intellectual ferment.

Chapter III. Committed Cultural Politics: Dar el Fan as a hub for *iltizām*³⁴³

In a letter to members and friends of Dar el Fan, Janine Rubeiz recalls the activities of the centre during its first two years of life and announces a few ideas for the upcoming season. In a passage that summarizes the essence of Dar el Fan, she writes:

“We worked hard during these two years, where we tried to implement the idea of a Lebanese cultural centre. A country presupposes a culture, a culture presupposes a personality, we are looking for the Lebanese personality. We know the different sub-personalities of different Lebanese sub-nationalities; it is time to determine, to search for the Lebanese personality. We have no recipe, no pre-established plans, we hope to provide a platform, to open minds to rational criticism, to accept dialogue” .³⁴⁴

These words offer a vivid depiction of Dar el Fan as an active subject in the production and circulation of ideas. The centre positioned itself as a participant in discussions on the local and international pressing topics that animated the political scene in Lebanon between the 1960s and 1970s. As we have partly seen over the previous chapters, ideas were to be shaped through and by the centre’s cultural activities, often organised in response to the sequence of unsettling events happening in and around Lebanon. Through a reading of the interplay between exhibitions, movie screenings, and political debates, this chapter argues that Dar el Fan advocated for an engaged (*multazim*) culture and artistic expression that was pivotal in the shaping of a renewed political consciousness. This translated into the development of a

³⁴³ A version of this chapter was published with the title “Committed Cultural Politics and National Identity Making: Dar el Fan as a hub for *iltizām*” in the thematic issue “Mondes intellectuels beyrouthins (années 1950-années 1980)”, Khalil, Aya and Candice Raymond (eds).

³⁴⁴ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to the members, 1969. Archive of Dar el Fan.

novel, New Leftist³⁴⁵ political identity capable of supplanting unsatisfactory political ideologies and surpassing the disenchantment of traditional pan-Arabism.³⁴⁶

The political commitment of Dar el Fan holds significance in the historical and cultural context of Lebanon, as it originated from the first endeavour to establish a dedicated multidisciplinary cultural centre that could rival with foreign ones. Founded with the explicit purpose of shaping and representing Lebanese culture, Dar el Fan aimed at assuming a critical role in fostering a sense of national identity amidst the diverse communities of the country. The establishment of such a cultural nucleus not only aimed at promoting Lebanon's rich culture but also sought to navigate the intricate interplay between culture and politics. In the quest for self-definition, Dar el Fan came to constitute an arena for understanding a social and historical landscape where different ideologies were at play and where a Lebanese identity was fashioned against the background of a turbulent time and amidst the slippery narratives of cosmopolitanism and the Golden Age.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ The New Left, arising from the counterculture of the 1960s in Western Europe and the United States, is a political and social movement that shifts its focus to cultural and social issues, departing from the traditional economic concerns of the Old Left. Specifically, the term encompasses a reevaluation of critiques against capitalism, imperialism, and democracy in the context of the emerging Cold War order. This chapter will later delve into the manifestation of the New Left in the Arab world and its connection to the 1967 War.

³⁴⁶ On the complex definition of Arab nationalism(s), I quote Patrizia Manduchi, "Arab Nationalism(s): Rise and Decline of an Ideology," *Oriente Moderno* 97, no. 1 (2017, 4–35) p. 4: "When speaking about Arab nationalism, at least three phenomena, only partially distinct from one another, must be identified: Arabism, pan-Arabism, and Nationalisms on a local basis. The first is Arabism (*'uruba*, being Arab) is the sense of belonging to the same world, in a single context from Morocco to Iraq, that emerged in Egypt and Near East in the last decades of the nineteenth century. From this cultural awareness of Arab identity, the pan-Arabism (*qawmiyya 'arabiyya*) developed in the interwar period, but especially after the Second World War. Finally, with the acquired national Arab independences, Nationalism emerged on a local basis, and took the name of *waṭaniyya*". Lebanese Nationalism considers Lebanon as a nation independent from the Arab world. The ideology often considers the Lebanese people to be direct descendants of the Phoenicians, a concept associated with Phoenicianism. Lebanese Nationalism was generally supported by the Lebanese Maronite community, while it was rather unpopular among Lebanese Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians.

³⁴⁷ Rogers, *Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism* (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008); *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut: Drawing Alliances* (Routledge, 2021).

Indeed, Dar el Fan *multazim* cultural practices are to be understood as embracing the nuances and transformations that the concept of *iltizām* (commitment) underwent in particular after 1967.³⁴⁸ First coined in the late 1940s by Egyptian novelist Taha Hussein (1889-1973), the term builds on Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of engagement discussed in his 1948 essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*. Here, Sartre emphasizes the idea that intellectuals have a responsibility to engage with their society and promote change through their work. In the context of decolonization between the 1950s and the 1970s, Arab intellectuals drew on Sartre's contribution and "reinvented existentialism"³⁴⁹ using various forms of cultural production to challenge the dominant narratives of colonialism and to articulate new visions of culture and, more explicitly, identity. In Lebanon, the notion of *iltizām* and *al-adab al-multazim* (committed literature) were championed by literary critics Suhayl Idris and his pan-Arab journal *Al-Adab (Literature)*, which had become the most important cultural journal in the Arab region by the late 1950s. A different position was supported by the collective of poets *Shi'r* (Poetry), and their homonymous literary journal founded by poets Yusuf el Khal and Adonis in 1957. Although encouraging Afro-Asian solidarity, the magazine resisted the discourse of *committed literature* in order to present an autonomous, non-political poetry.³⁵⁰

While the concept of *iltizām* was not a uniform one and different groups of intellectuals interpreted it in different ways,³⁵¹ it reflected the complex relationship between culture,

³⁴⁸ While debated by several scholars as to whether 1967 marks a turning point in the history of contemporary Arab thought, numerous academics have embraced it as a starting point for the analysis and revision of intellectual frameworks. See for instance Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (Pluto Press, 2004); Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (State University of New York Press, 1990); Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

³⁴⁹ Yoav Di-Capua, "An Invisible Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization," *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012), 172.

³⁵⁰ On the rivalry between *Al-Adab* and *Shi'r* see Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

³⁵¹ On the different articulations of *iltizām*, see Verena Klemm, "Ideal and Reality: The Adaptation of European Ideas of Literary Commitment in the Post-Colonial Middle East—the Case of Abdalwahhab al-Bayati," in

politics, and identity in the context of decolonisation, and highlights the role that intellectuals played in shaping public discourse and promoting social change. In the words of Di-Capua: “Since its early articulation, *iltizām* emerged as a doctrine of cultural action and a framework of thought that could organise, systematise, and rationalise the quest for postcolonial culture.”³⁵²

On the one hand, this chapter thus aims to illustrate how Dar el Fan has responded to and participated in the historical events and political debates of its time, through the artistic and intellectual practice of its members and community. On the other hand, it observes the political effects and objectives on and within society resulting from such intellectual engagement. Such comprehensive examination of Dar el Fan’s political commitment is indispensable for understanding how cultural institutions strive to shape the politics of culture and to navigate the complexities of cultural representation within the Lebanese society.

Of course, Dar el Fan was not the only local cultural hub in Beirut. As briefly introduced in Chapter 1, other clubs such as the Arab Cultural Club and the Cénacle Libanais were also active during this period in proposing a model of an engaged culture. While these shared commonalities, they possessed distinct characteristics as well. The Arab Cultural Club was established by an elite group aligned with the Arab nationalist trend, hosting debates, lectures, and occasional art exhibitions. Its mission includes fostering cultural and social connections among members to contribute to the development of Lebanese society and the establishment

Conscious Voices: Concepts of Writing on the Middle East; Proceedings of the Berne Symposium, July 1997, eds. Stephan Guth, Priska Furrer, and Johann Christoph Burgel (Steiner, 1999) and “Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizām) and Committed Literature (al-adab al-multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq,” *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literature* 3, no. 1 (2000); Friederike Pannewick and George Khalil, eds. *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s* (Reichert Verlag, 2015); Di-Capua, “An Invisible Chapter in Intellectual History of Decolonization” and “Arab Existentialism: What was it?” *Yale French Studies* 135–136 (2019): 171–188.

³⁵² Di-Capua, “Arab Existentialism: What Was It?”, 178.

of the foundations of national unity based on the principles of Arabism (*al-urūba*).³⁵³ Founded in 1946 by literary figure Michel Asmar and active until 1984, the Cénacle served as a platform for lectures and debates, and as a publishing house championing an engaged cultural perspective.³⁵⁴ It was particularly active in the early days of Independence and focused on defining a Lebanese national consciousness. However, it maintained a strong governmental, Chehabist³⁵⁵ approach and never won the sympathies of the Left. During an interview, Lebanese author and intellectual Elias Khoury (1948–2024) underlined how the Cénacle was perceived as an organ of the state apparatus of Fouad Chehab by the radical Left, and described it as belonging to “the right wing.”³⁵⁶ In contrast, Dar el Fan embodied a revisited, post-1967 Arabism that was more democratic and leftist, openly pro-Palestinian and in solidarity with a transnational network of anti-imperialist Third World movements, all characteristics contributing to shape a “Lebanese personality.”

The exploration and discussion of self-definition undertaken by these cultural spaces encapsulated the essence of a pivotal historical era.³⁵⁷ After the struggles for independence and ensuing processes of decolonisation, the region had seen the rise of pan-Arabism championed by Nasser. The 1967 Arab defeat against Israel was a major setback, which had a deep impact on the political as well as cultural dynamics in the Middle East. Although not involving Lebanon militarily, the war had decisive effects on the political scenario in the

³⁵³ From the website of the Arab Cultural Club [last access on 19 December 2023]. The website is no longer available, the Arab Cultural Club currently communicates only through its [Facebook profile](#). On the Arab Cultural Club, see also footnote 60.

³⁵⁴ On the Cénacle Libanais see Élias, A. *Le Cénacle libanais (1946-1984)* and “Construction de l’identité libanaise,” *Travaux et Jours*, no. 90 (2017).

³⁵⁵ On Chehabism, see footnote 184.

³⁵⁶ Interview with Elias Khoury, Beirut, July 2023. On the same topic, literary journalist Akl Awit (b.1952) considered the Cénacle Libanais of crucial importance for its philosophical discussions striving to shape and define a Lebanese independent state in the post-Mandate period (interview with Akl Awit, Beirut, June 2023).

³⁵⁷ Dar el Fan was perceived, by the majority of the interviewees, as “a place for art.” This definition was employed by artist Fadl Ziadé, art collector George Kamel, artist Saad Yagan, professor and director of the Arab Center for Research and Studies Khaled Ziadeh, architect Jad Tabet, and novelist Elias Khoury.

country. An additional influx of Palestinian refugees added to the previous wave caused by the *Nakba*. The rise of Palestinian militant organisations as part of the Palestinian Resistance,³⁵⁸ which found a wide social basis in the refugee camps and was supported by a large segment of the Lebanese political spectrum becoming a uniting cause for the Left, would be a catalyst in the path to the outbreak of the Civil War. On a global scale, whereas the Arab region had become a crucial battleground in the Cold War between the USA and the USSR, the protests of 1968 with their anti-establishment culture and calls for women's liberation resonated in Lebanon where a vibrant student and trade-union movement, as well as radical left organisations, were also gaining momentum. Global international redesign and widespread dissent towards Western modernist discourse overlapped and contended with one another in shaping culture as a site of political emancipation and identity making.³⁵⁹

This historical and political framework nurtured the programme at Dar el Fan with incredible diversity. Looking at the activities and the invited speakers helps to trace the political spirit of Dar el Fan: intellectuals of diverse national, ethnic, and religious communities were invited, with a preference for those with a leftist leaning.³⁶⁰ This highlights a clear political tendency as well as a flexible policy that would help the centre navigate the delicate dynamics of the country and of the Cold War.

³⁵⁸ The foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the Arab defeat in the consequent Arab-Israeli war brought to the emergence, by the mid-1950s, the *fedayeen* ("those who sacrifice themselves," militant or guerrillas considered to be the symbol of the Palestinian national movement) in Syria, Egypt, and Jordan. In 1964, the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) was founded as a political and militant organization aiming at establishing a Palestinian State. In the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, or *Naksa*, the Palestinian revolutionary cause became central and several Palestinian guerrilla organizations became active between Jordan and Lebanon, where they mainly relocated after being expelled from Jordan in 1970.

³⁵⁹ Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut*.

³⁶⁰ A composition that, as seen in Chapter 1, was also reflected in its Executive Board.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first tackles the response to the *Naksa* of 1967 and the strengthening of solidarity with the Palestinian revolutionary cause, informed by the long-lasting impact of the Algerian War of Independence. These bear witness to how Dar el Fan sought to build a network of solidarity throughout the Arab region that embraces larger Third World movements and political ideologies. The second section examines Lebanese artist Aref el Rayess' 1974 exhibition *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World* as a case study to explore the engagement and positioning of Dar el Fan and its audience at the intersection of the Civil War and the growing disillusionment with Third Worldism. The final part discusses how Dar el Fan attempted to create a platform of dialogue among different political sensibilities in a context of growing tensions on the verge of the Civil War in Lebanon. The structure serves the purpose of highlighting the commitment of Dar el Fan in different forms, from the political aspirations tied with its foundation, to its reaction to both regional and local events and to illustrate how this commitment was regarded as integral to the "personality" of Lebanon.

3.1 *Scorched Earth*:³⁶¹ The *Naksa*, the Palestinian Cause and the Memory of the Algerian Revolution

3.1.1 An Attempt to Elaborate the Defeat. The Exhibition *Le 5 Juin*

On 7 June 1968, on the first anniversary of the June War, *Le Jour* published a photo of journalist and author Maurice Sacre, writer and activist Leila Osseiran, and artist Aref el Rayess sitting

³⁶¹ The title is borrowed from the title of the artwork by Rafic Charaf (1932–2003) displayed in the exhibition of Palestinian posters discussed in the paragraph. Born in Baalbek, Charaf was a Lebanese artist who created work inspired by sociopolitical and autobiographical subjects, as well as poetry and folk art.

side by side at a table at Dar el Fan. The article's headline reads "*Cinq voix et le souffle d'un poète pour dire le 5 Juin*" (Five voices and the breath of a poet to evoke June 5) and it summarizes the main content of the panel they delivered "in front of a very crowded hall"³⁶² on the opening night of *Le 5 Juin* group exhibition.³⁶³ Deeply concerned with and involved in the Palestinian resistance, Osseiran spoke first, focusing on the impact of the *Naksa* on Palestinian women, their social status and their role within society, and the Palestinian struggle itself. El Rayess discussed the role of the artist with the following words:

"The role of the artist, the man of letters, the honest journalist like that of the painter is to warn of danger and to stand against and prevent harm to all enemies who infiltrate our ranks under the cover of science and culture".³⁶⁴

Sacre offered a panorama on the different narratives of 5 June, providing a larger analysis of the 1967 defeat, its causes, consequences, and future perspectives. He discussed how the *Naksa* was perceived as a turning point among the Arabs, not only concerning their shared history but also in the production and circulation of ideas and ideologies. A reading of poems of Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish followed the panel. The concerns of the speakers at Dar el Fan found a visual translation³⁶⁵ in the exhibition *Le 5 Juin*. This brought together the

³⁶² S. Nasri, "Cinq voix et le souffle d'un poète pour dire Dar el Fan," *Le Jour*, 07.06.1968.

³⁶³ On the event, also see Walid Shamit "Laylā 'Usayrān wa-Mūrīs Ṣaqr wa-Ārif al-Rayyis yataḥaddathūna 'an mīlād adab wa-fann wa-fikr al-muqāwama" [Leila Osseiran, Maurice Sacre and Aref El Rayess speak about the birth of literature, art and the idea of resistance], *Al-Youm*, 07.06.1968. It is not clear, however, who the other two "voices" were, as it is not specified whether Mahmoud Darwish and who read his poems count among them.

³⁶⁴ Ibid. In this passage, el Rayess stresses the role of the artist against intellectuals complicit with colonialism and Zionism. To commemorate the 1967 June War, el Rayess presented in the lecture at Dar el Fan as well as at the LAAPS. The different versions of his speeches culminated in his 1972 political manifesto *Ma' mann w-dudd mann?* [With whom and against whom?]. For a complete analysis of el Rayess' political commitment, see Natasha Gasparian, *Commitment in the Artistic Practice of Aref el Rayess: The Changing of Horses* (Anthem Press, 2020).

³⁶⁵ As I was not able to retrieve a catalogue of the exhibition, the reconstruction of it is based on the article by S. Nasri, "Les peintres libanais et le 5 juin. À partir de ce soir à Dar el Fan," *Le Jour*, 5.06.1968.

works of Aref el Rayess, Wahib Bteddini (1929-2011), Hassan Jouni (b.1942), Mohamed el Khatib (n.d.), Jamil Molaeb (b.1948), Tawfiq Abd-el Al (1928-2002), Cici Sursock, Georges Guv (1918-1990), Olga Limansky (1903-1988), Stelio Scamanga (1934-2021), and Ismail Shammout (1930-2006), among the most active artists in Lebanon's art world. The diverse backgrounds of the participants, whose birthplaces included Palestine, Yugoslavia, Russia, and Syria apart from Lebanon, and who were living in Beirut and nurturing its scene, offer a further glimpse of the diverse cultural panorama of the city at the time. They were selected through a call that Dar el Fan launched in collaboration with LAAPS, calling for artworks that were inspired by the June War and its consequences. Overall, they shared a very direct, visually overt, and easy-to-read interpretation of the tragedy and despair following the defeat. Mohammed el Khatib portrayed a group of fleeing refugees. Men and women walk carrying a few belongings and holding the hands of their relatives, afraid of losing them in the crowd. The painting of Olga Limansky, showing fearful faces of children staring at the viewer, was aptly titled *Effroi* (Fear), while the collage *Cinq Juin* (Fifth June) by Cici Sursock featured press cuts of newspaper headlines announcing the beginning of the conflict. The exhibition was well covered by the press, and obtained a good amount of critical reviews, both on Francophone and Arabic outlets, both praising and criticizing the event.³⁶⁶

The political importance of the 1967 War was immense, as it demonstrated the strength of Israel, the complicity it enjoyed from the world's major powers, and the failure of the Arab

³⁶⁶ See for example « Dar el Fan commémore le 5 juin », *Magazine*, n° 599, June 1968; "A Dar el Fan les peintres exposent sur le thème : 'Le 5 juin'," *La Revue du Liban*, n° 493, 8th June 1968; Nasri, "Les peintres libanais et le 5 Juin,,"; Khater, "5 Ḥuzayrān 'alā lawḥāt 27 fannānā: Jān Khalīfah al-ānjah fī al-ta'bīr" [The 5th of June in the painting of 27 artists : Jean Khalifé the most successful in the expression], 06.06.1968, press cut from the archive of Dar el Fan ; Jad el Hajj, "Fannānūnā yadda'ūn ḥuznan gharīban 'an nufusihim" [Artists claim a sadness alien to their souls], *Al-Jadid*, 14.06.1968. Among these, Khater and el Hajj expressed concerns related to an open call for committed works, as it may have pushed artists and intellectuals to respond to it out of a feeling of duty and responsibility rather than genuine commitment, therefore risking emphasizing the political statement of the works above their artistic quality. As well, it may have constrained some artworks within a political framework constructed by the institution itself but not acknowledged as such by the artists.

regimes to address it. Disillusion with pan-Arab nationalism and Nasser's Arab leadership became widespread. In intellectual circles, the political debate sparked by the defeat turned into a wide-ranging debate over Arab culture, modernization, and prospects for political change. Corroborating Sacre's point above, scholar Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab states that:

"Most Arab thinkers agree that the defeat by Israel in 1967 was a turning point in Arab popular and intellectual consciousness. It was a political and intellectual crisis that called for a reassessment and a revisiting of the modes of thinking that had prevailed as well as of the political and intellectual struggles that had hitherto been adopted".³⁶⁷

While the crisis that ensued post-1967 had intricate social and political underpinnings, its convergence with the events of May 1968 in France—particularly the widespread student protests, challenges to authority, and calls for social and cultural reform— signalled a transformation in the Arab political sphere. It helped inspire a new generation of Arab activists and intellectuals to question established political hierarchies while envisioning alternative forms of political and cultural engagement. For leftist circles in Lebanon, this period witnessed a notable introspection, as well as active participation in the global revolution prompted by movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America where the Third World movement emerged as a powerful political and cultural force.³⁶⁸ Rooted in the anti-colonial struggles of the Bandung Conference (1955)³⁶⁹ and later institutionalised through the Non-Aligned Movement,³⁷⁰ it

³⁶⁷ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, 2.

³⁶⁸ See Finn Christansen and Roland Scarlett, *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (Berghahn Books, 2013).

³⁶⁹ Held in Bandung (Indonesia) in April 1955, the Conference gathered 29 states from Asia and Africa, most of which were newly independent. It aimed at promoting economic and cultural cooperation between the states and resist colonialism and imperialism. It can be regarded as a step towards the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement.

³⁷⁰ Pioneered by political figures such as Nasser, Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980; communist revolutionary and politician who served as President of Yugoslavia from 1953 to 1980) and Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964; principal leader of the Indian nationalist movement and first prime Minister of independent India), the Non-Aligned

articulated a vision of solidarity among newly independent nations resisting both Western imperialism and Soviet domination. In the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of the “Third World” carried strong political and symbolic weight, offering a shared framework that linked liberation struggles from Vietnam to Algeria, Cuba to Palestine.³⁷¹

Although Dar el Fan itself was not openly affiliated to any political party, its main animators favoured a secular Arab understanding of Lebanese identity that drew on the political identity of the New Left. Departing from a revisited heritage of Nasserism (a political current based on the thinking of Gamal Abdel Nasser that blended Arab nationalism and socialism), the Arab New Left was a heterogeneous movement critical of capitalism and imperialism as well as of the status quo of the Arab regimes, perceived as inadequate in uniting the Arab nation.³⁷² Radicalised around the Palestinian Cause, which became central after 1967, it found in the figure of the *fida'i* the local symbol of an anti-colonial revolutionary struggle that had assumed transnational characteristics with the Tricontinental Movement.³⁷³ At Dar el Fan, these conceptions merged to shape a “*personnalité*” that came to constitute a third force surpassing the two opposite poles of a debate on Lebanese identity that had been running since independence, if not since the foundation of modern Lebanon itself, between a pan-Arabist conception versus a Lebanonist one. In this sense, the cultural activities of Dar el Fan served as

Movement (NAM) was founded in Yugoslavia in 1956, drawing on the principles agreed on at the Bandung Conference. It aimed at guarding independence and sovereignty of the newly independent countries in the face of the emergence of the Cold War superpowers.

³⁷¹ The coherence of the “Third World” as a political project waned by the 1980s, as shifting geopolitical alignments, debt crises, and structural adjustment programs fractured solidarities; the term itself gradually gave way to other designations such as the “Global South”.

³⁷² According to Haugbølle, “in Lebanon, the New Left was represented by Socialist Lebanon, a small intellectual vanguard group formed in the early 1960s, which later merged with a breakaway group from the Beirut branch of M.A.N. (Movement of Arab Nationalism) [NDLR: ANM, Arab Nationalist Movement] called Organization of Lebanese Socialists to form O.C.A.L. (Organisation of Communist Action of Lebanon).” See Sune Haugbølle, “The New Arab Left and 1967,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (2017): 497–512, p.503.

³⁷³ Born out of the Tricontinental Conference (Havana, Cuba, 1966), the movement aimed at expanding the Afro-Asian solidarity to Latin America. Hence, it gathered countries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America that focused on anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles during the Cold War era. It founded the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL).

a response as well as an arena for discussion on the forms of such “*personnalité*,” analysing what it meant to be Lebanese in those troubled times. These translated into political debates, movie screenings, and exhibitions that were responding to current issues while proposing shared, leftist political positions and narratives championed by the cultural actors or products involved. In the case of *Le 5 Juin*, for instance, the visuality of the exhibition reflects the pain of defeat while simultaneously prompting the observer to question what caused it.

3.1.2 Connecting the *fida'i* and Che Guevara. Different Forms of Support to the Palestinian Cause

Along with overtly political events, other forms of *iltizām* arose from the everyday practices of Dar el Fan and its members. One notable example is artist Huguette Caland (1931–2019), who was the daughter of Lebanon’s first post-independence president, Bechara el Khoury, and an advocate for the Palestinian Cause. She was actively engaged in empowering Palestinian women living in refugee camps, and her activism was briefly highlighted in the 1970 documentary *Resistance, Why?* directed by filmmaker Christian Ghazi and written and produced by the writer Soraya Antonius. In 1969, Huguette Caland, along with a group of other women, founded *Inaash*, a non-profit organisation aimed at creating employment opportunities for Palestinian and Lebanese women through the production of traditional Palestinian embroidery. Despite her commitment to the Palestinian Cause and activism not being expressed in her artworks, her first solo exhibition at Dar el Fan in 1970 was an intrinsic political act. She managed to organise some cars to bring Palestinian friends from the Sabra and Chatila camps to attend the opening, despite a ban on Palestinians leaving the camps at the time. Huguette Caland recalls how Janine Rubeiz was happy to receive them, explained

about the exhibition, and how their friendship grew stronger since then, indirectly hinting at Rubeiz's support for Palestine.³⁷⁴ Rubeiz's own commitment to the Palestinian Cause emerges from a 1972 letter where she addressed the PLO urging it to establish a committee for cultural affair in order to contrast "the Zionist propaganda" and to "reveal the truth to international public opinion".³⁷⁵ After acknowledging the importance of armed struggle to regain the territories occupied by Israel, she nonetheless expressed the belief that such struggle should be fought in the cultural realm as well, opposing the appropriation that "is plundering the Arab cultural heritage, and it copies our dances, our costumes, and even our types of food and it attributes them to Israel".³⁷⁶ In the same letter, she mentions having established contacts with committed artists such as American Joan Baez (b.1941)³⁷⁷ and Greek Mikis Theodorakis (1925-2021),³⁷⁸ who had already expressed their support for Third World and popular movements and who would be willing to support Palestine internationally.

The endorsement of the Palestinian Cause found its roots in the shared Arab identity championed by Arabism. In the aftermaths of the *Naksa*, this was re-evaluated and reinterpreted according to more leftist principles and democratic ideals, stressing the cultural and historical commonalities of the Arabs and supporting solidarity and cooperation apart from aspirations of national unifications.³⁷⁹ Novelist Elias Khoury, who enlisted in Fatah³⁸⁰ in 1967,

³⁷⁴ Kassab, *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 81.

³⁷⁵ Letter of Janine Rubeiz to the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. "Subject: Establishing a Committee Concerned with Cultural and Artistic Affairs", 10.11.1972. Archive of Dar el Fan.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Songwriter, singer and activist Joan Baez was particularly active in advocating for peace during the Vietnam War.

³⁷⁸ Forced into exile by the military regime of the Colonels, which took power in Greece in 1967, Theodorakis was the symbol of resistance against the Greek dictatorship.

³⁷⁹ On the evolution of Arab nationalism and the Arab Left see Fadi A. Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020); Haugbølle, "The New Arab Left and 1967,"; Laure Guirguis, "The New Arab Left and May '68: Transnational Entanglements at a Time of Disruption," *Critical Historical Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021).

³⁸⁰ Fatah, formerly The Palestinian National Liberation Movement (PNLM), is the largest resistant organization within the PLO.

was at the time among the leftist students who organised a debate on the Palestinian Cause held at Dar el Fan in February 1968. Student at the École supérieure des lettres, Khoury's contribution to the debate was entitled *Lebanon and the Palestinian Problem*. He denounced what he perceived as the dangerous neutrality of Lebanon in its relation with Israel, and the problematic lack of involvement of the Lebanese bourgeoisie in the struggle.³⁸¹ The debate was opened by fellow student Nakhle Moutran, who analysed the State of Israel in connection to Zionism, highlighting the relation to imperialism and tracing networks of solidarity with other movements of the Third World and Latin America. Other speakers included students Kamal Begdache, who discussed the economic and cultural significance of peace, and Francois Zabbal, who focused on the role of the intellectuals in the Palestinian Cause. The audience who attended the debate, composed mainly of students, passionately discussed the consequences of nationalism and imperialism and the role of the class struggle and the armed resistance in the Palestinian Cause referencing Marxist ideologies alongside Arabist principles of trans-Arab solidarity.³⁸²

In May 1968, only a few months after this debate, Dar el Fan organised a collective exhibition at its premises in collaboration with The Friends of Jerusalem³⁸³ under the theme of the Occupation. Palestinian artist Jumana el Hussein (1932-2018) portrayed the traditional architecture of Jerusalem, where domes and minarets coexist with churches and crosses, in vivid contrast to Rafic Charaf's *Scorched Earth* (1968) (Fig. 11). The Lebanese painter's palette of light and dark greys and browns depicts a deserted, devastated land. Meanwhile, Iraqi artist

³⁸¹ See "Débat à Dar el Fan. La Palestine en février 1968," in *L'Orient*, 17.02.1968. Khoury probably refers to the small part Lebanon played in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which was quickly followed by a desire for an armistice with Israel, and the neutrality of Lebanon in the 1967 June War. Overall, up until the outbreak of the Civil War, Lebanon had mainly stayed out of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ A Christian Lebanese organisation concerned for the welfare of Christians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The Palestine Poster Project Archive indicates it as the publisher of the posters discussed in the article. See <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/>

Kadhim Haidar (1932-1985) celebrated the resistance of Palestinian fighters, the *fedayeen*, in their battle against the Israeli Defence Forces, which gained recognition among Arab countries. A striking image depicts crusade-like warriors celebrating their military success on horseback against the backdrop of an orange-coloured sunset landscape, paying homage to the Battle of Karameh.³⁸⁴ Nearly 90,000 posters featuring these artworks were sold, and the profits were distributed among the dispossessed Palestinians in the West Bank and the families of fighters killed in the liberation struggle. This placed Dar el Fan and its committee in open solidarity with the Palestinian Cause at a time when this and the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was already dividing Lebanese public opinion. *Le Jour* reports excerpts of the statement of Leila Baroodi, one of the curators of the exhibition:

“The goal is clear. We must ensure that the Arab countries form a solid rear front and, especially in financial matters, play an important role: that of enabling the Arab inhabitants of the West Bank or other currently occupied lands to confront the occupation, to resist to the occupier”.³⁸⁵

The exhibition featured the works of several artists from the Arab region, including Iraqi painter Dia al Azzawi (b.1939), Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata (1942-2019), Iraqi sculptor Mohammad Ghani Hikmat (1929-2011), Sudanese painter and graphic designer Ahmed Shibrain (1931-2017), Syria-born Stelio Scamanga and Aref el Rayess. The latter displayed his work *The Palestinian*, which is also referred to as *Guevara* or *The Resurrection of*

³⁸⁴ Fought in March 1968, the Battle of Karameh (Jordan) opposed the Israeli Defence Forces and the combined forces of the Jordanian army and the PLO. Part of the Israeli strategy against Palestinians, the Israeli attacks on the camps of Karameh and Safi were in retaliation of raids by the PLO against Israel. Although on a strategic level the conflict went to Israel's favour, it became a turning point in the emergence of a new Palestinian political identity, as it marked the first success of their national struggle for the liberation of Palestine and it gained wide acclaim in the Arab world.

³⁸⁵ Fady Noun, “À Dar el Fan art et résistance,” *L'Orient*, 8.05.1968.

Che Guevara (Fig. 12). The duality of the title of the work is revealing of el Rayess' support of liberation fights, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist movements that were taking place globally during the decolonisation period and trace a link between the local struggle of Palestinians and the larger Third Worldist struggles of the South. In the same year, el Rayess illustrated a collection of 400 poems called *Juin et les Mécréantes* (June and the non-believers) by Nadia Tueni.³⁸⁶ A Lebanese Francophone poet, Tueni authored numerous volumes of poetry and worked as a literary editor at *Le Jour*. Presented at Dar el Fan in December 1968, her book was described as a political and poetic parable, and the profits from the sale of the original artworks and books were donated to Palestinian villages as well.

Whether through pro-Palestinian events or everyday actions, Dar el Fan and its members stood with the Palestinian Cause and the resistance. Significantly, the centre sold cultural items, such as books or posters that were instrumental in disseminating public support for the Cause, while the proceeds from the sales of these products provided tangible support for the resistance. It is evident that the endorsement for the Palestinian Cause came to constitute a central aspect of the new, emerging "Lebanese personality" promoted by Dar el Fan.

3.1.3 Algiers, the Cradle of the Third World Revolutions

El Rayess' support of the Palestinian struggle was rooted in another epic struggle of the Arab world, namely the Algerian Revolution. The latter played out between the Algerian National Liberation Front and France between 1954 and 1962, when eventually it led to Algeria gaining its independence from France. The war became a symbol of the Arab countries struggle against

³⁸⁶ See "Juin et les mécréantes," *Le Jour*, 14.12.1968; "Une poésie de combat. Signature, hier soir, de 'Juin et les mécréantes' de Nadia Tueni," *L'Orient*, 20.12.1968.

colonialism and foreign occupation and had a profound impact on the Arab public. It is no surprise that the Algerian War inspired artistic production in many countries that resonated with its struggle or celebrated it.³⁸⁷ In 1972, during an event commemorating the tenth anniversary of the war at Dar el Fan, el Rayess gifted his painting titled *Salut aux martyrs de la révolution Algérienne* (Greetings to the Martyrs of the Algerian Revolution) to the Algerian ambassador Mohamed Yazid.³⁸⁸ The painting, which he had painted in Florence in 1960, depicts French colonisers as officials with monstrous heads in the shape of a crocodile. The Algerian people in the painting are portrayed as a group of men whose bodies, legs, and arms overlap with each other, while one is probably protecting the corpse of a fellow fighter. The background of the painting features floating skulls, reminding viewers of the atrocities of the war. The artwork was donated to the National Museum of Fine Arts of Algiers. El Rayess was not the only artist connected to Dar el Fan who supported the Algerian Revolution. Artist and writer Etel Adnan expressed her complex relationship with the French language, which was perceived as the language of the coloniser, a condition that became clear during the Algerian War and resonated with the French Mandate in Lebanon, in her 1984 essay *To Write in a Foreign Language*. In an article published in *As-Safa* on 1 November 1972 and titled *Pour saluer la révolution algérienne* (In Honour of the Algerian Revolution) Adnan asserts that:

“Even if the Algerian revolution has not kept its promises, it does serve as an example of a revolution that shaped a new country. It established a key link to the Arab world. [...] the revolution is the beginning of an Arab awakening: The idea that Arabs can neither fight nor self-organise is no longer valid. One million Algerians died so that one hundred million Arabs would

³⁸⁷ See, for instance, the profusion of posters realized across the globe for the movie *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) by Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo.

³⁸⁸ See Yvonne Agemian, “‘Salut aux martyrs de la révolution algérienne.’ Une toile-accusatrice d’Aref Rayess,” *Le Soir*, June 1972.

feel less ashamed of having missed the train of history, and so that they might even dare to hope to catch up to it and jump on board”.³⁸⁹

The 1966 Italian-Algerian war film directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers*, was screened at Dar el Fan in February 1973. As the hall was overcrowded, the Algerian ambassador attended the screening from the back of the room.³⁹⁰ The movie, which is centred on the figure of freedom fighter Ali la Pointe, reconstructs the events that occurred in the capital of French Algeria between 1954 and 1957, during the War of Independence. The film was critically acclaimed for its importance in documenting guerrilla warfare. Although the movie was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, France banned its screening for five years after its release. At Dar el Fan, the movie was screened along with other Algerian movies such as *Hassan Terro* (1968) by Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina, *L’Aube des Damnes* (1965) by Ahmed Rachedi (b.1938) and *L’Enfer à dix ans* (1968).³⁹¹ Although the films approach it stylistically in different ways, they all share a common setting—the Algerian war and a staunch critique of French colonialism. Generally, they serve as indirect documentation and a tribute to the struggle for independence and resistance against occupation.

Political stances were at the core of Dar el Fan throughout its existence and contributed in shaping both the identity of the cultural centre and the “Lebanese personality” it aimed to propose. Departing from a paradigm shift in political ideology that reached its zenith after

³⁸⁹ From “Pour saluer la Révolution algérienne” (In honour of the Algerian revolution) published in *As-Safa*, 1.11.1972 and reprinted in Julian Meyers and Heidi Rabben (eds.) *The Ninth Page. Etel Adnan’s journalism 1972-1973* and translated by Pierre-Francois Galpin, Leigh Markopoulos and Marie Martraire (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2013).

³⁹⁰ “Midi-Minuit,” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 08.02.1973.

³⁹¹ *L’Enfer à dix ans* is made of five short movies directed by Youcef Akika (*Quand Jeannette*), Ghaouti Bendedouche (*La mer*), Abderrahmane Bouguermouh (*La grive*), Amar Laskri (*Hier des témoins*), and Sid Ali Mazif (*La rencontre*).

the 1967 defeat and aligning itself with the global movements of 1968, Dar el Fan embodied a distinguished political identity that diverged from conventional nationalisms and embarked on a journey that re-examined and revitalized the principles of both Marxism and Arabism. Socialist and revolutionary ideas were discussed and disseminated through cultural activities such as debates, conferences, and artistic representations. Members of the centre were able to explore concepts of class struggle, economic exploitation, and social justice through engaged artistic works. In the context of pan-Arab solidarity and the struggle against Western imperialism, Dar el Fan encouraged its members to identify themselves as part of a larger Arab community. These discussions allowed for the exploration of the links between Lebanese identity and Arab identity, while reinforcing the ideological convictions of members in favour of regional solidarity and cooperation. Its support for the Palestinian Cause and the Algerian Revolution is synonym of its leftist leanings, anti-imperialist standpoint, and right of self-determination of the Arab people, which eventually were promoted as values central to the cultural identity of the Lebanese citizen. Thus, the cultural activities of Dar el Fan created a dynamic space where political ideas could be explored, debated and contested. Through these exchanges, members developed a deeper understanding of their own identity. The discussed cultural activities meant to build and reinforce cultural connections with other countries from the region, such as Algeria and Palestine, as well as entering in a larger Third Worldist movement that connected countries from Latin America to south Asia. Perceived as integral to the revision of culture, this intellectual solidarity was rooted in a common history of colonialism and the struggle for self-definition, which could see the light in and was anchored in Cold War dynamics.

3.2 *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World: A Reflection on Aref el Rayess 1974*

Exhibition

Dar el Fan's commitment to fostering transnational cultural solidarity set the stage for Aref el Rayess' 1974 exhibition *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World* (Fuṣūl min wāqī' al-‘ālam al-thālith), a collection of 22 black and white charcoal drawings realised between 1973 and 1974.³⁹² Part of this body of work was the black and white charcoal drawing titled *Fi al- ‘ālam al-thālith* (In the Third World) (Fig. 13). Depicting a war scene in the style of Picasso's *Guernica*, the drawing features a complex, abstract composition with multiple figures. There seem to be two fronts clashing with each other. On the left side, a person holding a Kalashnikov rifle appears in the crowd. In the centre, several figures are depicted in varying degrees of abstraction, some with visible faces and others with stylised, swirling forms. The right side of the artwork features a more chaotic scene, with anthropomorphic creatures and monsters intertwining. On the top right, the face of a possible political leader attends to the scene with indifference. The use of black and white enhances the contrast and adds to the intensity of the picture. Its style blends elements of surrealism and cubism, with fragmented and distorted forms creating a sense of dynamic movement.

Through the analysis of the drawings, this section argues that *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World* constituted a re-interpretation (and re-presentation) of key social, cultural, and political Third World narratives, thus marking a turning point in el Rayess' commitment to the Third World cause—one that likely resonated with the broader sentiments of Dar el Fan's

³⁹² These pieces were later published at the end of Rayess' book *Road to Peace* (1978). Images of the artworks of *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World* are available on the website of the British Museum, where *Road to Peace* is part of the permanent collection; https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_2015-6035-1-1-38 [last access 25.02.2025].

audience. This shift occurred at a pivotal moment for Lebanon, as the country stood on the brink of civil war, with rising political tensions and ideological divisions shaping the cultural and intellectual landscape. By tracing the connections between individual artistic trajectories and institutional agendas, this examination highlights a network of exchanges that extended beyond regional boundaries.

Aref el Rayess is known for the complexity of his multi-rooted work and the multiplicity of styles that he encompassed and combined throughout his career. Born in Aley (Mount Lebanon) in 1928 into a Druze family, he started painting with his mother during his childhood.³⁹³ After a stay in Dakar, Senegal, he studied art in Paris and in Italy (both in Florence and in Rome) during the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1964, he arrived in New York as part of an international cultural exchange programme. While overseas, he stayed in Mexico for three months. Despite his long stays abroad, he never ceased to be a catalyst for the artistic scene in Lebanon. A prominent artist, he was not only among the founding members of Dar el Fan, but also became involved in the foundation of the Institute of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University³⁹⁴ and LAAPS, which he led for twelve years. He also became interested in the intellectual debate of the post-war time, and his political awareness was shaped during the 1960s. While in Italy, he realised a series of paintings that decry the brutality of the Algerian War of Independence, including *Salut aux martyrs de la révolution Algérienne* discussed above. A close friend of PSP-founder Kamal Jumblatt, he shared the political vision of the Arab New Left and was supportive of the larger

³⁹³ For biographical information on Aref el Rayess see Andrée Sfeir-Semler, eds. *Aref el Rayess. An Artist from Lebanon 1928-2005* (Druckerei Vogl GmbH & Co, 2024). See also Omran al Qaissi, *Aref el Rayess* (Mouassasat al Muhtaref, 1987). Brief accounts on the artist can be found also in Abou Rizk, *Regards sur la Peinture au Liban*; Fani, *Dictionnaire de la peinture du Liban*; Howling, *Art in Lebanon, 1930-1975*; Lahoud, *L'Art Contemporain au Liban*; Abillama and Tomb, *Art from Lebanon*.

³⁹⁴ There, he taught two classes until 1980, Analysis and Composition, and Techniques. See the Annotated Bibliography of Aref el Rayess in *Aref el Rayess. An Artist from Lebanon 1928-2005*.

anti-imperialist Third World movement. His political engagement strengthened after June 1967. El Rayess expressed his feelings and his participation through his works and through the exhibitions held over those years. His position is well summarised in his 1968 pamphlet *The artist as fida'i in his everyday life*,³⁹⁵ on the role of the artist in Lebanon after 1967. *Chapters from the Third World* was therefore not a unicum in his career as a committed artist. Two notable exhibitions are worth mentioning here: *Blood and Freedom* in 1968, presented at the exhibition space of the daily *L'Orient*, and *Love, Death and Revolution* in 1970, at Dar el Fan.³⁹⁶ In both, el Rayess showed a great variety of formal styles ranging from paintings and drawings with bright colours to darker tones, and mixing elements from realism, surrealism, and abstraction. This diversity in style was counterbalanced, nonetheless, by a steady consistency in content.

Themes of revolutionary struggles, resistance, anti-imperialism, and solidarity with the global movements for independence—ranging from Cuba to Vietnam, and encompassing Algeria and Palestine—were central to these exhibitions. The two titles, *Blood and Freedom* and *Love, Death and Revolution*, are also telling about the aesthetic and the general tone of such shows. When examining the works in *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World*, many of the themes central to revolutionary struggle and resistance remain evident. The drawing *The Coffin of the Martyr* captures the collective mourning and reverence for the fallen, while the work *There is Always Who Continues* depicts an armed fighter determined to carry on the struggle for liberation. However, the aesthetic approach in these drawings marks a departure from the

³⁹⁵ “Dawr al-fannān al-lubnāni ba’d 5 Ḥuzayrān: Al-fannān fī ḥayātihi al-yawmiyya ka-l-fidā’ī” [The role of the Lebanese artist after the 5th June: The artist as *fida’i* in his everyday life], *Lisan al-Hal* 15.06.1968.

³⁹⁶ On this exhibition, see for instance Joyce Said “Love, Death and Revolution. Powerful exhibition by Aref Rayess at Dar el Fan” *The Daily Star*, 30.10.1970.

heroic visual language often associated with revolutionary iconography. Instead of grand, triumphalist depictions, El Rayess introduces a more subdued and ambivalent tone. The coffin is only subtly suggested, with a flower resting upon it—its presence juxtaposed against the grenade nearby. Meanwhile, the fighter stands over a mass of dead bodies prominently placed in the foreground of the composition, among which el Rayess himself appears. This shift in aesthetic choices complicates the conventional narrative of martyrdom and resistance, suggesting a more introspective engagement with the costs of struggle.

In his review of *Chapters of the Third World*, art critic and intellectual Samir Sayegh (b.1945) wrote:

“If the previous paintings reflected the sincerity of this artist’s feelings towards the events of reality and the urgent desire to participate and get closer to the events, his new exhibition reflects the maturity of these feelings and their transformation into a conscious artistic vision [...]

In his new exhibition, these observations, and let us say the political position, gain effectiveness and clarity, due to Aref el-Rayyes’ ability, through practice, to crystallize his artistic language”.³⁹⁷

Sayegh highlights el Rayess’ continued engagement with political events while also signalling a shift in the artist’s political consciousness. This shift can be read as a grassroots perspective on a historically delicate moment—an account from within, by someone who both lived and participated in it. In this context, el Rayess’s trilogy *This is Some People Before the Battle, During the Battle, and After the Battle* offers a critical reflection on the struggle. While still engaging

³⁹⁷ Samir Sayegh “Ma’raq al-ajwibat al-muntazira” (Exhibition of foreseen answers), *Al-Anwar*, 13.01.1974.

with the theme of revolution, the trilogy carries a distinctly bitter tone. Through a satirical portrayal, el Rayess contrasts the bravery of revolutionary fighters with those who evade direct confrontation (hiding behind a curtain) yet ultimately reap the benefits of the struggle.

El Rayess himself articulated these concerns in a statement accompanying the exhibition, emphasising his desire to explore the contradictions of the long 1960s—a period of revolutionary fervour, yet one in which aspirations for self-liberation were repeatedly undermined by both external and internal political and economic forces. As he put it, “Our generation lives the harshest and most wonderful stage in contemporary history.”³⁹⁸ This declaration reflects a body of work that is more complex and introspective, less driven by revolutionary urgency, and more open to critical reflection. New considerations regarding the Third World project emerge from these drawings, as they question how to reconcile the vision of a just society with the realities of nation-state building and the pressures of foreign interference. *Waiting for Leadership* evokes the memory of the revolutionary, progressive leaders of the anti-colonial struggle, many of whom had lost power by the mid-1960s—either replaced by, or themselves transformed into, less tolerant and more authoritarian figures.³⁹⁹ Similarly, *Those Up and Those Down* presents a grim vision of the masses under the control of

³⁹⁸ El Rayess, “‘Ārif al-Rayyis yad’ū ilā al-īmān bi-qudrat al-insān” [Aref el Rayess invites to believe in the power of humanity], *Al-Rasad*, 17.01.1974.

³⁹⁹ Many leaders of Third World independence movements in the mid-twentieth century faced either assassination, often with foreign involvement, or were later accused of authoritarian rule. Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Congo, was assassinated in 1961 with the complicity of the CIA and Belgian intelligence, reflecting Cold War anxieties over his perceived pro-Soviet stance. Similarly, Amílcar Cabral, the revolutionary leader of Guinea-Bissau’s independence movement, was assassinated in 1973, likely due to internal betrayals but also within a broader context of Portuguese counterinsurgency efforts. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president and a leading pan-Africanist, was ousted in a 1966 coup backed by Western powers, later living in exile in Guinea. Over time, some leaders who initially embodied anti-colonial ideals, such as Nkrumah and others, faced accusations of consolidating power in ways that mirrored authoritarian tendencies, highlighting the tensions between revolutionary leadership and state-building in the post-colonial era.

monstrous figures who loom over them, disregarding their demands for freedom and social justice.

Created between 1973 and 1974, these drawings reflect the turbulence that gripped the Arab region during this period. They partially respond to the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, a conflict that, despite initial military successes by Arab forces, ultimately reinforced Israel's dominance and deepened regional disillusionment. Although Lebanon was not directly involved in the war, the country remained fragile, beset by growing internal divisions and escalating tensions throughout the early 1970s. These pressures would soon culminate in the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War just a year after the exhibition. In many ways, the drawings appear to foreshadow the impending conflict, their imagery steeped in scenes of chaos, battling soldiers, and monstrous figures that convey an atmosphere of rising violence and instability. Through this visual language, el Rayess captures the immediate political fractures of the time as well as a broader sense of uncertainty and crisis that was rapidly engulfing the region. The artist's disillusioned perspective navigates the tension between cynicisms and hope, ultimately sketching a less romanticised portrayal of the Third World. In the opening speech of the exhibition, el Rayess explained that by depicting reality "wearing a mask of ideals,"⁴⁰⁰ the drawings revealed the dissonance between the aspirations of liberation movements and the often-brutal realities of ongoing conflicts. These ideals, while powerful motivators, were unsustainable when confronted with the truths of political and social upheaval. A necessary step beyond hesitation and defeat, the unmasking of reality would have allowed individuals and societies to effectively contribute to the liberation of culture, science,

⁴⁰⁰ "Rusūm min wāqī' al-'ālam al-thāliṭh", (Drawings from the reality of the Third World), *Sada Lubnan*, 23.01.1974.

and politics. This process of confrontation and engagement was framed as essential for the Third World to reclaim its agency and equal footing in the global sphere.

Chapters from The Reality of the Third World received significant coverage in the press, with articles appearing in multiple national outlets,⁴⁰¹ underscoring both the relevance of its themes and the prominence of its artist. As a well-established figure in the Lebanese cultural scene, el Rayess likely attracted a diverse audience, drawing visitors from artistic, intellectual, and political circles. Given Dar el Fan's reputation as a hub for critical discourse and political engagement, the exhibition would have appealed not only to those with an interest in visual arts but also to activists, writers, and thinkers involved in broader debates on revolution, anti-imperialism, and the evolving trajectory of the Third World project. The media attention suggests that the exhibition resonated with contemporary anxieties, particularly amid increasing regional instability. However, the depth of its repercussions on political discourse remains uncertain. The intersection of public reception, media framing, and shifting political contexts requires further investigation to fully assess the exhibition's impact. Nonetheless, it likely had the potential to not only reinforce existing ideological perspectives but also to foster a more critical and introspective engagement with the contradictions and challenges of revolutionary movements fostering deeper discussions on their relevance in a rapidly evolving political landscape. It encapsulated both aspirations and disillusionments offering, rather than a romanticised vision, a critical portrayal of the Third World project, and serving as a document "from below" that exposed the contradictions of the long 1960s.

⁴⁰¹ Among them *An-Nahar*, *Monday Morning*, *Al-Anwar*, *Al-Thawra Al-Arabiyya*, *Al-Mahrar*, *Le Soir*, *Al-Haya'*, *Al-Rasid*, *Al-Sharqa*, *Sada Lubnan*.

The role of Dar el Fan as a cultural and ideological space warrants particular attention within this broader context. By hosting *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World*, the centre reinforced its position as a site where cultural production and political commitment intersected. This exhibition played a key role in shaping debates on anti-imperialism, solidarity, and the evolving meaning of the Third World project. Through its engagement with *multazim* art, Dar el Fan not only amplified the voices of regional and global struggles but also placed itself within a broader network of artistic and ideological exchange. In its efforts to shape “the Lebanese personality,” Dar el Fan promoted the values of the Arab New Left, framing them as central to Lebanese national identity. By doing so, it positioned itself at the heart of a shared revolutionary aesthetic that spanned continents, while navigating the tensions between artistic expression and political commitment, particularly in an era marked by revolutionary aspirations and growing disillusionment.

3.3 *Que faire?* On Sliding towards the Civil War

3.3.1 Dar el Fan as an arena for exchange?

Throughout the first half of the 1970s, internal tensions grew rapidly in the country, paving the way to a civil conflict. These included sectarian and confessional frictions and clashes among different groups, notably Muslim and Christian, and the increasing perception by most Christians of the Palestinian resistance as creating a threatening state within the state. Furthermore, during the early 1970s, confrontations with state forces unfolded as waves of strikes rippled through various sectors, ranging from tobacco to education.

The cultural programme of Dar el Fan responded by expanding the space for debates on internal issues during the 1970s. At the beginning of 1970, a talk moderated by journalist,

politician, and head of *An-Nahar* newspaper Ghassan Tueni⁴⁰² brought together the two economists Hicham Nassab and Georges Corm.⁴⁰³ The conference was entitled “*Que Faire?*” (What to do?) a title that drew inspiration from the political pamphlet written by Lenin in 1902. The speakers discussed economy and education, and aimed to highlight the interconnectedness of different aspects of social and political life and their impact on the current problems in Lebanon. The event was covered by articles with titles such as *Que faire ? Plus qu’un débat, une question angoissante* (What to do? More than a debate, a worrying question)⁴⁰⁴ and *Le ‘Que Faire?’ de Dar el Fan reste sans réponse* (The *Que Faire* of Dar el Fan remains unanswered),⁴⁰⁵ emphasising the significance as well as unresolved nature of the conference. In October 1972, under the presidency of Samia Toutounji, Dar el Fan hosted a debate featuring Ghassan Tueni, political leader of the National Bloc and minister Raymond Eddé,⁴⁰⁶ and Kamal Jumblatt to discuss democratic institutions in Lebanon. Etel Adnan offered a staunch critical review of the debate on the pages of *As-Safa* newspaper. Her article, titled “*Il a fallu trois hommes politiques pour dire trois fois rien*” (It took three politicians to say three times nothing),⁴⁰⁷ opens with the telling mention of the possibility of democracy to survive “present problems” and “the manners on which these problems are discussed or simply ignored,” referring to the state of growing tension in Lebanon and the lack

⁴⁰² Ghassan Tueni (1926–2012) was a journalist, politician, and diplomat. From 1948 to 1999, he was the head of *An-Nahar* one of the Arab world’s most important newspapers and founded by his father Gebran Tueni in 1933. He used to be part of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, founded as an anti-colonial and national liberation organization.

⁴⁰³ Georges Corm (1940–2024) began his career in the public sector in Lebanon in 1963 as an economist at the Ministry of Planning, then as an expert in monetary and financial issues at the Ministry of Finance (Central Bank Control and Coordination Department).

⁴⁰⁴ Published in *Le Jour*, 11.03.1970.

⁴⁰⁵ Published in *Le Jour*, 18.03.1970.

⁴⁰⁶ Raymond Eddé (1913–2000) was a Lebanese Maronite lawyer and politician. He served as a legislator and cabinet minister. The National Bloc, which he led from 1949 to 2000, is a social liberal, democratic, and secular party.

⁴⁰⁷ Published in *As-Safa*, 31.10.1972.

of tangible actions from political powers.⁴⁰⁸ Both Eddé and Jumblatt offered a definition of democracy, its values and role that Adnan describes as superficial and aleatory, while questions on how to tackle issues of sectarianism were left unasked. Tueni, who, however, failed to analyse in depth its complexities, addressed this and the paradoxes of the Lebanese constitution. Adnan concludes her article with the following lines:

“But after all, these three politicians have on several occasions jointly served in successive parliaments and ministries without having carried out a single reform. Before an overflowing room, they flattered the crowd, lightly detracted from one another, and made us wish that, at the next debate, Dar el Fan would invite a taxi driver, a peasant from the Beqaa Valley, a painter who does not sell his paintings, and a dreamer”.⁴⁰⁹

The overall atmosphere of tension, among both different religious denominations and various economic classes,⁴¹⁰ coupled with the demands of the Palestinian resistance, heightened the prevailing unease. Within this frame, Marek Halter’s exhibition at Dar el Fan in 1973, and the implicit warning it conveys about the atrocities of any war, does not appear to be a mere coincidence. Halter was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1932 and fled with his family from the city to the Soviet Union during World War II. During the 1950s, he studied at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, where he might have met with some of the Lebanese artists who were his contemporaries at the Beaux-Arts, such as Farid Aouad and Shafic Abboud. He gained recognition in 1967 when he launched an appeal for peace in the Middle East on the

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ November 1972 saw the strike of the workers of the Ghandour factory of biscuits and chocolate. This was followed by the strike of tobacco farmers in the South, then of several strikes in the educational sector that continued through the following year. See Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*.

eve of the June War. Following the end of the war, he founded the International Committee for a Negotiated Peace Agreement in the Middle East. Halter's ink drawings and gouaches exhibited at Dar el Fan were described as having a unique combination of simplicity and raw violence (Fig. 14). The reviewers described him as an engaged artist, particularly for his depictions of soldiers, helicopters, tanks, and battle scenes against a plain background, which created a powerful representation of the violence.

"Halter voices his protest with an almost amused cynicism. To him it is all so idiotic, tin soldiers fighting against tin soldiers, with cardboard shields and wooden swords, looking fat, funny and ridiculous, like gremlins in a child story book".⁴¹¹

Despite their childlike style and lack of detail, his works encouraged the viewer to focus on the forceful message they conveyed. Depicting any war, the artworks seem to extend an invitation for reflection on conflicts, their repercussions, and the connected loss of humanity experienced by the warring parties.

In the same year, Samia Toutounji, together with other cultural actors, shared her concern about the state of culture with *L'Orient-Le Jour*. Her words came after the April 1973 Israeli raid in Lebanon, when Israeli army units attacked several PLO targets in Beirut and Saïda (South Lebanon) as part of the retaliation for the Munich massacre at the Summer Olympics in 1972. The Israeli operation sharply polarised public opinion in Lebanon. While thousands attended pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the opponents of the armed Palestinian presence tried to use the opportunity to restrict Palestinian freedom of movement. The government installed a

⁴¹¹ "Halter at Dar el Fan. A cynical statement on war," *Monday Morning*, 12-18.03.1973. On the exhibition see also "Marek Halter à Dar el Fan : un peintre qui se bat contre la violence," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 13.02.1973.

curfew. Two weeks of fighting between the army and Palestinian groups ended in a stalemate. Toutounji referred to the loss that affected Dar el Fan—which she defines as “one of the bastions of culture”—following the establishment of the curfew, and to the inability “to speak or discuss the problems of the day.”⁴¹² In November 1973, under the presidency of Nicole Harfouche, Dar el Fan organised a series of events aimed at fostering dialogue regarding the tensions that were being exacerbated by sectarianism. The goal was to analyse the problem of the divide that was occurring within Lebanese society during a time of deep crisis. As briefly introduced in the previous chapter, these events were structured as debates between two speakers who held differing political positions or represented different factions, with the aim of encouraging conversation. The series of conferences covered a variety of topics, including the historical, cultural, and religious foundations of the divide, which was debated by Kamal Jumblatt and Kamal Salibi,⁴¹³ professor of history at the American University of Beirut, with the Orthodox archbishop Georges Khodr,⁴¹⁴ and the historian and diplomat Adel Ismail serving as counterparts. Other topics included economic, social, and political factors, with politician and former minister Pierre Eddé⁴¹⁵ and member of the central committee of the Lebanese Communist Party Karim Mroué⁴¹⁶ debating, and economist Hicham Bsar and

⁴¹² “Depuis l’instauration du couvre-feu, le spectacle au Liban perd 25.000LL par soir,” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 16.05.1973.

⁴¹³ Kamal Salibi (1929–2011) was a Lebanese historian, notably known for some of his books such as *The Modern History of Lebanon* (1965) and *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (1988). A strong opponent of sectarian politics, he described Lebanon as a complex mosaic of diverse but interconnected communities, with no single one able to secure its dominance over the others.

⁴¹⁴ Georges Khodr (1923) is the archbishop of Byblos, Botris, and Mount Lebanon. Advocating the renewal of the Orthodox Church in Lebanon and Syria, he is one of the most marking spiritual figures of Christianity in the Middle East. He has been active in promoting a dialogue with the Muslim community.

⁴¹⁵ Son of former president Emile Eddé, Pierre Eddé (1921–1997) was a politician and an economist, one of the figures of the traditional Lebanese right.

⁴¹⁶ A left-wing thinker, Karim Mroué (1930–2024) would become Deputy General Secretary of the Lebanese Communist Party from 1984 to 1992.

psychoanalyst Mounir Chamoun⁴¹⁷ serving as counterparts. The series also featured debates on the impact of the oil market, the roles and responsibilities of institutions, executive-legislative and judicial powers, administration, and education. Pierre Eddé and Ghassan Tuéni concluded the series with a discussion on possible solutions to overcome the crises. Sectarianism was explored, analysed and debated in other encounters at Dar el Fan throughout the end of 1973. On 20 December, Pierre Eddé, Ghassan Tuéni, Abdel Majid Rafei,⁴¹⁸ and Hassan Awada⁴¹⁹ met to discuss the Social Pact,⁴²⁰ the single constituency,⁴²¹ and development as potential means to overcome the confessional and political divide.⁴²²

3.3.2 *Dialogues between the deaf*. Criticalities of the Debates

Although generally attended by a wide audience, it seems that these events did not always achieve their intended objective. One aspect that Dar el Fan emphasised in sponsoring them was its opening towards diverse political sensibilities to engage in dialogue. During the conversation between Pierre Eddé and Karim Mroué, mediator Maurice Sacre described Eddé

⁴¹⁷ Mounir Chamoun (1934–2016) is nowadays considered to be the father of psychoanalysis in Lebanon. After completing his studies in France, he returned to his homeland where he taught at the *École supérieure des lettres*.

⁴¹⁸ Abd al-Majid al-Rafei (1927–2017) was a Lebanese politician and member of the Lebanese Parliament. He was the head of the Iraqi faction of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party.

⁴¹⁹ Hassan Awada (1923–2011) was a judge and a financial inspector during the government of President Fouad Chehab.

⁴²⁰ This was proposed by Tuéni as a new agreement based on belonging to the same society rather than to a sect. It was envisaged to be an alternative to the 1943 National Pact, an unwritten agreement that set out the principles of power-sharing between sects following negotiations between the Maronite politician Bechara El Khoury and its Sunni counterpart Riad Al Solh, who became the first president and prime minister of independent Lebanon.

⁴²¹ Proposed by Eddé, the establishment of a single constituency across the whole of Lebanon was aimed at overcoming the division between sects by ending the sectarian system of the political representation.

⁴²² Pierre Nasr, "Eddé, Tuéni, A-M. Rafihi et H. Awada à Dar el Fan. Pacte social, circonscription unique et développement pour dépasser le clivage confessionnel," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 20.12.1973.

as representing the “intelligent right” or a “refined bourgeoisie,” while Mroué embodied the “educated left.”⁴²³ This suggests that despite Dar el Fan’s goal of inclusivity there were still class-based barriers to accessing its activities, and throughout its existence, the targeted audience was primarily composed of an educated, mainly French-speaking bourgeoisie, thus failing to reach exponents of the nationalist right as well as lower social classes. Furthermore, the meeting that featured Salibi and Jumblatt discussing the causes of the lack of national cohesion and unity in Lebanon has been criticized as a “dialogue between the deaf.”⁴²⁴ More precisely, the author of the article in *L’Orient-Le Jour* blamed the speakers for not truly addressing the problem and suggested that it would have been more effective for each speaker to clearly present their own ideas, to take the risk of getting rid of their “own confusion” rather than engaging in an unproductive conversation.⁴²⁵ The conference ended up in mirroring Lebanon’s division rather than overcoming it, which seems to be further perpetuated by the inability of its elite members to effectively communicate, tackle problems and provide concrete solutions. From the collected sources on the series of debates, it emerges that the crisis in Lebanon tended to be oversimplified as mostly a religious disagreement. This attribution may be due to the fact that the promoters of the centre and its audience had scarce connections with the masses and its demands. The proposed resolution of secularism, which was championed by Dar el Fan’s founder Janine Rubeiz and its members, failed to address the complex interplay of demographic, political, and economic factors.

⁴²³ “Pierre Eddé et Karim Mroué à Dar el Fan. ‘Droite intelligente’ vs ‘gauche cultivée’ autour des causes du clivage libanais,” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 15.11.1973.

⁴²⁴ N. F., “Un dialogue de sourds,” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 8.11.1973.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

The exacerbated tensions between different communities peaked on the morning of 13 April 1975, when an unidentified gunman fired from a car on a church in the Christian East Beirut suburb of Ain el-Rummaneh, wounding a number of people. A few hours later, Phalangist militiamen reacted by killing Palestinians travelling in a bus to Tell el Zaatar refugee camp.⁴²⁶ Fights erupted between the Phalange and the Palestinian Resistance and its Lebanese allies, marking the beginning of a war that, despite a few periods of appeasement, was to last fifteen years.

In a letter written to conclude the 1974-1975 season and published in *L'Orient-Le Jour* on 16 June 1975,⁴²⁷ Janine Rubeiz directed her message to the audience and members of Dar el Fan. She described the recently concluded season as positive, but at the same time expressed her concern for the events in the country and her hope that the centre could count on a more engaged and committed audience when the cultural programme resumed after the summer break. Rubeiz reflected on the fact that despite all the efforts made by Dar el Fan to provide a platform for dialogue between opposing factions, Lebanon was in a dire state where violence was occurring with increasing frequency. She states:

“It takes a lot of in-depth work and a lot of time to change men, their mental structures, their conditioning, their irrational reflexes... the fruits of a long heritage. But if we don't change people, we don't change anything. [...] In view of creating the Lebanese citizen [...]”.⁴²⁸

Her “hope” expresses her steady faith in culture as a site not only to define a shared identity that overcomes differences but also to commit to concrete realities where “the chaos and the

⁴²⁶ This is commonly known as “the bus massacre”. See footnote 308.

⁴²⁷ Adnan, “Janine Rubeiz: ‘Pour la rentrée, je voudrais des citoyens concernés’,” *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 16.06.1975.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

crisis are the results of poor analysis and lack of general knowledge from the majority of the citizens and, unfortunately, of their leaders as well.”⁴²⁹ In July of the same year, when the violence had calmed down and the Lebanese believed that war was still avoidable, Dar el Fan announced the possibility of an exhibition where people could share their impressions of the events of the spring of 1975. The centre invited everyone to express their concerns through a poem, a construction, a photo, or a work of art that served as a witness of the time. This planned grassroots and collective exhibition never saw the light as Dar el Fan became inaccessible, and its premises were destroyed a few months later.

Conclusion

The chapter has examined how Dar el Fan demonstrated its political commitment between 1967 and 1975 through its cultural programme and the activities of its members. Navigating global 1960s Lebanon, Dar el Fan found itself entangled in a complex web of contrasting tensions, influenced by Lebanon’s diverse society, the aftermath of the 1967 *Naksa*, the rise of the New Left, and anticolonial stances. In this nuanced and challenging era, Dar el Fan served as a witness and participant in the intersections of culture, politics, and society against a backdrop of local and global complexities.

The foundation of Dar el Fan was itself a political act, as it came, as we have seen, as a response to the absence of support from governmental institutions and the need for a local cultural centre particularly crucial during the cultural re-evaluation following the Arab region’s defeat in 1967. Within this frame, culture was considered a site for political commitment and key in

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

promoting a “Lebanese personality” that embodied the values of the new Arab Left. At Dar el Fan, this emerged from the contribution of some of its members, who, although in different ways, expressed their political stances regarding the events happening throughout the Arab region. This shaped the centre’s programme, which was a testimony of its commitment to everyday political practice, with interests spanning from the condition of the woman in Lebanese society to urbanisation and environmental concerns. Particular space and importance have been given to uphold the struggle for independence, anti-colonisation, and resistance. Support towards the Palestinian Cause and the Algerian Revolution emerged from the cultural activities organised with the goal of promoting anti-imperialist and Third Worldist values among the Lebanese audience. Exhibitions, debates, and film screenings contributed to establishing and reinforcing solidarity and ideological connections with neighbouring countries as well as with regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America that shared similar revolutionary struggles and came to constitute a third counterforce in the polarised landscape of the Cold War. This aimed to raise awareness about decolonisation and its challenges, but also to fashion culture as a tool for building alliances and strengthening regional cooperation and mutual support. At the same time, Dar el Fan was able to maintain and cultivate good ties with both the USA and the Soviet Union, establishing collaborations with the embassies of both countries to enrich and develop its cultural programme, as the following chapter illustrates.

The political engagement of Dar el Fan became even more pronounced when tensions started to increase locally at the beginning of the 1970s. Attentive to the internal developments of Lebanon, Dar el Fan responded with the organisation of a series of political debates that strove to devise a common ground to tackle the crisis of the country. These, which have been described as “open to all” and to which “all were invited” demonstrated the ambition to be effective and accessible. However, when looking at the political spectrum of the speakers, it

emerges that there was no real exchange with far-right parties. Even so, most of the sources highlight the impasse that these debates often reached, lacking the ability to establish a meaningful dialogue. Moreover, it is unclear to what extent the members of Dar el Fan were conscious of the various social and economic factors weighing on Lebanon during that time, as the surviving sources on such debates do not seem to reflect a complete awareness of this complexity. This has likely posed limits to the dissemination of the identity it championed, without denying its vital role in supporting different cultural disciplines. This aspired “Lebanese personality” was inherently open to cosmopolitan influences, leftist, secular, anti-colonialist, and deeply committed to supporting the self-determination of Arab people. It embodied an Arab identity that had grown disillusioned with Nasserism and pan-Arabism, more conscious of the pitfalls of the “Third World project” and refused to accept Lebanon as a mere appendage of Europe. Instead, it acknowledged and grappled with the history of colonisation that Lebanon had endured, and it sought to actively respond to the evolving events and challenges within the region.

Chapter IV. Placing Dar el Fan on the Global Map: Between International Visions and Local Imaginings

As we have begun to see, Dar el Fan was not only a mirror of its time but also a formative agent in the complex historical dynamics of its era. This chapter focuses on the global connections that Dar el Fan was able to cultivate throughout its existence, highlighting the its role as a cultural node at the intersection of diverse international currents. Firmly embedded in Beirut's cultural and social fabric, Dar el Fan operated not merely as a Lebanese institution but as a transnational hub where artistic, political, and ideological exchanges intersected. In this, it reflected Beirut's broader historical role as a crossroads of regional and global currents, positioned within a wider transregional cultural geography. Some of these connections were informed by the political and ideological commitments explored in the previous chapter, while others were driven more by artistic curiosity and the desire to expose Lebanese audiences to contemporary international trends. In this sense, Dar el Fan once again reveals its complexity and its capacity to negotiate between political engagement and cultural ambition. These roles were not always distinct; rather, they often overlapped in ways that defined the institution's mission. The chapter explores this dual function, tracing how Dar el Fan operated as a space of articulation between competing global forces and local aspirations. In this framework, the centre enabled circulation among diverse artistic forms and intellectual traditions, fostering a transnational engagement while participating actively in shaping the cultural landscape.

Central to these global engagements was Janine Rubeiz, who was not only the founder but also the driving force behind Dar el Fan, as discussed in Chapter 2. Through extensive travels across the Arab world, Europe, Russia, and China, she forged an expansive network of contacts that broadened the centre's international reach. The resulting collaborations crossed ideological

divides and spanned continents. Dar el Fan hosted exhibitions on Indian art,⁴³⁰ displayed posters for the Olympic Games in Mexico,⁴³¹ organised workshops on Japanese Ikebana,⁴³² and screened films from across the globe. Its partnerships extended to the USA, USSR, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, as well as various South American and East Asian countries, all while remaining deeply engaged with inter-Arab artistic dialogues.

Drawing on Tony Smith's pericentric framework,⁴³³ which deconstruct the Washington-Moscow binary, this chapter also illuminates the particular kind of agency exercised by cultural institutions located beyond the traditional centres of Cold War power. Such a reading of Dar el Fan highlights the role of one of the so-called "minor actors", who were not simply conduits for superpower ideologies but actively mediated, reinterpreted, and localised them. Far from functioning as a peripheral outpost subject to external agendas, Dar el Fan exemplifies how cultural centres situated outside the major Cold War blocs balanced multiple influences, integrated diverse traditions, and exerted agency in shaping the ideological and artistic currents of their time. In doing so, the centre articulated a vision deeply rooted in Lebanon's distinct historical trajectory while simultaneously asserting a presence within broader global cultural circuits.

The chapter is structured into three interrelated sections, each exploring a distinct dimension of Dar el Fan's cosmopolitan connections and its role in shaping Lebanese cultural identity. The first section examines how cultural diplomacy and Cold War tensions played out in the centre's

⁴³⁰ Hakim, « Les fresques indiennes des caves des temples de l'Inde et de Ceylan à Dar el Fan », *La Revue du Liban*, no. 628, 09.01.1971. The exhibited frescos were copies executed by the artist Sarkis Khatchadourian.

⁴³¹ M.A. « Affiches Mexicaines à Dar el Fan. De l'Op Art pour athlètes », *L'Orient*, 12.10.1968 ; « Dar el Fan et les Olympiades », *Magazine* no.617, 17.10.1968.

⁴³² Ikebana is the Japanese art of flower arrangement. See the list of activities in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 131.

⁴³³ Tony Smith, "New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (2000): 567–91.

programming, focusing on Dar el Fan's collaborations with the American cultural centre in Beirut and relations with the USSR. It analyses how cultural diplomacy served as a platform for ideological contestation and exchange, situating Beirut as a critical site of Cold War cultural negotiations. The second section shifts focus to the Arab world, exploring the region's post-independence efforts to forge transnational projects and align with the Third World movement. It investigates Dar el Fan's role in facilitating these connections and promoting a shared vision of cultural solidarity and resistance against cultural colonialism. Finally, the chapter looks at a third set of events including collaborations with Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jerzy Grotowski, and a group of British sculptors. Rather than responding to political aspirations or being part of larger political projects, these exchanges reflected a more fluid and open-ended artistic dialogue. They introduced critical and experimental practices that resonated with transnational debates on aesthetics, while often operating outside formal cultural diplomacy. In doing so, they further positioned Beirut (and Dar el Fan) as a site where global intellectual currents intersected organically, allowing for alternative modes of solidarity, critique, and artistic experimentation beyond the geopolitical frameworks of the time.

Each section incorporates detailed case studies of cultural events, reconstructing the networks and interactions that defined Dar el Fan's influence. By analysing these connections, the chapter reveals the complex interplay of local, regional, and international forces that shaped the institution's role as a hub of transregional exchange in Beirut.

4.1 The Cultural Front: Cold War Entanglements in Beirut

In the aftermaths of World War II, the Arab region had become a crucial battleground in the Cold War, with Lebanon being involved in the proxy wars between the two major powers of

the time. The Eisenhower Doctrine, which stipulated that the USA would give economic and military aid to any Middle Eastern government threatened by Communism, and its implementation in the military action known as Operation Blue Bat in 1958,⁴³⁴ revealed U.S. interests in the region in securing allies and stopping the expansion of anti-western pan-Arabism. The Kremlin was equally active in asserting control over the Arab region, with its prime concern being the need to respond to and to contrast the growth of U.S. influence. The Soviets cultivated ties especially with Iraq, Syria and Egypt.⁴³⁵ Under the guidance of Nasser, Egypt had become the paradigm of Soviet support for anti-imperialist forces in the Third World.⁴³⁶ Together with Syria, Egypt was a strategic partner to undermine the alliance system the United States and Britain were building in the region. In 1955, the United Kingdom had formed the so-called Baghdad Pact, an intergovernmental military alliance with Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey, a line of strong states along the Soviet Union's southern frontier with the goal to contain the USSR. Indeed, by exploiting anti-Western nationalism, the Soviet Union had expanded its political and military presence in the Middle East during the 1950s and 1960s, the region no longer being exclusively in the Western sphere of influence as it had been at the time of Stalin's death.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Operation Blue Bat was a U.S. military intervention in Lebanon in July 1958, launched in response to a perceived threat of communist influence and regional instability during the Cold War. Authorized by President Dwight D. Eisenhower under the Eisenhower Doctrine, the operation involved the deployment of U.S. troops to support the pro-Western government of Lebanese President Camille Chamoun. The intervention aimed to stabilise Lebanon amid internal political tensions and broader regional conflicts, particularly in the context of rising pan-Arab nationalism. See Miles Copeland, "The Showdown of 1958: Crisis in the Lebanon" (ch.10) in *The Game of Nations: The Amorality of Power Politics* (Simon and Schuster, 1969).

⁴³⁵ Florence Gaub and Nicu Popescu, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East: An Overview" in *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, eds. (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018)

⁴³⁶ Egypt did not succumb to the Soviet cause or Soviet domination completely. Nasser continued to oppose communism in Egypt, although ties between the two countries continued for mutual interests overshadowing differences in ideologies.

⁴³⁷ After the death of Stalin, Khrushchev implemented a Third World strategy where the Middle East was central.

However, the Cold War did not involve military interventions only. A comprehensive cultural apparatus was deployed, with cultural programmes implemented by both parts to facilitate exchanges among intellectuals, foster cultural activities, and disseminate propaganda to garner public support for geopolitical agendas.⁴³⁸ This duality—culture as both enrichment and strategy—reflects the ambivalent nature of these exchanges, as artistic creativity was at times mobilised for ideological purposes, even as many practitioners sought to maintain autonomy from political instrumentalisation.

The United States pursued extensive cultural diplomacy efforts in the Middle East, using art, literature, music, and education to promote its ideological influence. The United States Information Agency (USIA, founded in 1953) disseminated carefully curated publications and broadcasts to highlight American cultural modernity.⁴³⁹ Diplomatic engagement between the United States and Lebanon has a long-standing history, rooted in educational and publishing initiatives that date back to the nineteenth century. In 1953, shortly after establishing its embassy in Beirut, the USIA, tasked with “sharing America’s story with the world” and enhancing “mutual understanding,”⁴⁴⁰ served as the regional centre for English language education, library outreach, and Arabic-language publications. Notable initiatives such as the literary journal *Hiwar* (Dialogue, published between 1962 and 1967) and the establishment of the Art Department at the American University in Beirut were intertwined with a larger plan of funding and sponsors underwritten by the United States and the CIA.⁴⁴¹ The John F. Kennedy

⁴³⁸ See for instance Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (The New Press, 1999); Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk, and Thomas Lindenberger, eds., *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*, 1st ed. (Berghahn Books, 2012); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (Penn State University Press, 2003).

⁴³⁹ See Amanda Laugesen, “American Publishers, Books, and the Global Cultural Cold War: Alfred A. Knopf Inc. and the United States Information Agency, 1953-1970.” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2016): 19–37.

⁴⁴⁰ See the website of US Embassy. <https://lb.usembassy.gov/public-diplomacy/> [last access: 03.01.2025]

⁴⁴¹ On the establishment of the Art Department at the AUB, see Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut*, 39; on *Hiwar* see Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 63.

Cultural Center and Library, an extension of these efforts, operated five branches across Lebanon, in Beirut as well as in Zahleh and Tripoli. The centre, aligned with broader Cold War strategies, was charged with promoting American culture and values through exhibitions, performances, and educational programmes.⁴⁴² In Beirut, it was situated in the vibrant and vital neighbourhood of Hamra.⁴⁴³ Although it maintained a focus on exhibiting American artists, it also hosted exhibitions of artists from Lebanon such as Jean Khalifé and Farid Haddad (b.1945). Moreover, it fostered ties with local institutions such as Dar el Fan, aiming at creating a space for cultural exchange and dialogue.

Conversely, Soviet cultural policy shifted dramatically after the end of the Stalinist era, evolving from rigid imposition to a more flexible and strategic approach aimed at cultivating international allies.⁴⁴⁴ In line with the principles of soft power, the USSR sought to create friends rather than impose a monolithic cultural model, using education and cultural exchange as key tools to project its influence.⁴⁴⁵ By championing themes of anti-imperialism, social justice, and economic equality, the USSR sought to appeal to newly independent nations and liberation movements striving for sovereignty and self-determination. The year 1955 saw the establishment of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee (SKSSAA), specifically tasked with interacting with liberation movements and other foreign non-state organisations through

⁴⁴² Despite its role in advancing U.S. cultural policy, detailed information about the centre and its activities remains scarce, highlighting the need for further research into its contributions and its impact on Lebanon's cultural scene during this era.

⁴⁴³ However, the centre's life throughout the 1970s was turbulent, reflecting the city's growing fragility during this period. The Kennedy Center reportedly suffered damage from bomb explosions and rocket attacks in 1970 and again in 1974, highlighting the precarious environment in which it operated.

⁴⁴⁴ Frederick Charles Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive. The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1960).

⁴⁴⁵ See Constantin Katsakioris. « Une superpuissance éducative. L'Union soviétique et la formation des élites du tiers-monde (1956–1991) ». *Traverse* 2018/1 S. 108.

public diplomacy, material and cultural support, mobilisation and expression of solidarity.⁴⁴⁶ A focus on students from the Global South was part of the broader Soviet strategy to position itself as a superior and more empathetic alternative to the United States. A cornerstone of this policy was the establishment of institutions like the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow in 1960, specifically designed to educate students from the Third World.⁴⁴⁷ Named after the Congolese independence leader, the university symbolised Soviet solidarity with anti-colonial and liberation movements. It provided higher education opportunities to young people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, equipping them with skills to aid their nations' development while fostering ideological alignment with Soviet ideals. These initiatives were not limited to educational programmes. Cultural diplomacy played an equally vital role, with the Soviet Union establishing cultural centres in key cities worldwide, including Beirut. In 1956, Sergey Kaftanov, the president of the new Soviet Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with the countries of the Arab East, headed a mission in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, and reported that close cultural relations between the Soviet Union and these countries were bound to play an ever-growing role.⁴⁴⁸ The Soviet Cultural Centre in the Lebanese capital was part of this global outreach, offering resources such as libraries, film screenings, and language courses aimed at fostering mutual understanding and goodwill. The centre functioned as a platform for cultural exchange, connecting Lebanese intellectuals, students, and artists with Soviet art, literature, and

⁴⁴⁶ Philip Casula, "The Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and Soviet Perceptions of the Middle East during Late Socialism." *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 59, no. 4 (2018): 499–520. Casula also explains how the Soviet conception of the East as potentially socialist set the profile of a form of Soviet Orientalism.

⁴⁴⁷ Founded by the First Secretary of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), the university "had as its mission to train students from less developed countries and to assist «the efforts of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples aiming at building a developed national economy »" in Katsakioris, "Soviet Lessons for Arab Modernization: Soviet Educational Aid to Arab Countries after 1956" *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 8, no. 1, (2010): 85–106. See also Katsakioris, "The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher Education for a Soviet–Third World Alliance, 1960–91." *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (2019): 281–300.

⁴⁴⁸ Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 213.

ideology. It also provided an entry point for Soviet cultural products into Lebanon, complementing broader initiatives such as art exhibitions, music tours, and intellectual forums. Art historian Olga Nefedova notes that throughout the 1950s, the USSR organised a series of successful exhibitions devoted to contemporary artistic production in Arab countries, including a 1957 exhibition specifically focused on Lebanon. Beyond fostering mutual visibility between Soviet and Arab art scenes, these exhibitions influenced the development of artistic discourses and aesthetic orientations within the Arab world.⁴⁴⁹

In Lebanon however, the presence of the American University of Beirut posed a formidable obstacle to Soviet cultural expansion:⁴⁵⁰

“Soviet influence did not grow so rapidly in Lebanon as it did in Syria. American ties with Lebanon, seat of the influential American University of Beirut, remained strong and close. However, Moscow was subjecting Lebanon to intense and astute pressure, directed especially at students and teachers, and at doctors, lawyers, journalists, writers, and artists”.⁴⁵¹

The following sections will analyse selected case studies of events at Dar el Fan through the lens of the cultural Cold War. These case studies will illustrate how Dar el Fan was a site where different cultural and political agendas converged (whether through exhibitions, lectures, or

⁴⁴⁹ For an extensive study of the Arab art students in the USSR see Olga Nefedova, “Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World: The Early History of Art Education for Artists from Syria, Lebanon and Algeria in the USSR in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s” in *Mediterranean Mosaic: History and Art* (ICSR Mediterranean Knowledge, 2019) 95. “Arab Students in the USSR Art Institutes in 1959–1979: Ideology and Life Worlds”, *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 1–38, (Brill, 2024).

⁴⁵⁰ Although Russian missionary schools were also active in Beirut since the end of the 19th century, promoting the diplomatic importance of Russia. See Souad Abou el-Rousse Slim, *The Russian Schools in Beirut at the End of the 19th Century* in *Entangled Education. Foreign and Local Schools in Ottoman Syria and Mandate Lebanon (19-20th Centuries)*, Julia Hauser, Christine B. Lindner, Esther Möller, eds. (Ergon-Verlag, 2016) 201-210.

⁴⁵¹ Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 214.

performances) revealing both the overt and subtle ways in which art functioned as a battleground for competing influences.

4.1.1 Etching Diplomacy: Paul Lingren and the Spread of American Printmaking

Cultural exchanges with the Kennedy Center were a recurring feature of Dar el Fan's programming, reflecting the latter's openness to transnational artistic currents and its engagement with U.S. cultural diplomacy. In December 1970, the Kennedy donated to Dar el Fan a collection of art and theatre books and records.⁴⁵² In 1971, three nights dedicated to American music exposed the public to the latest contemporary trends such as jazz.⁴⁵³ In 1974, the centre hosted the exhibition of American artist Fred Nall Hollis (1948-2024)⁴⁵⁴ with drawings, lithographs and engravings dedicated to Lebanese artist Juliana Seraphim, who he had worked with in Paris in 1972 and had introduced him to surrealism.⁴⁵⁵ Regular movie screenings were also held, offering local audiences an opportunity to engage with American cinema and its cultural narratives.⁴⁵⁶ These collaborations not only enriched the local art scene with access to contemporary American thought and practice in music, film, and visual arts, but also positioned Dar el Fan as an active interlocutor in Cold War-era cultural flows. It is in this context that the January 1969 exhibition of contemporary American engravings gains particular significance.

⁴⁵² From a document preserved at the archives of Dar el Fan.

⁴⁵³ See the programme of the month of March 1971, preserved at the archives of Dar el Fan.

⁴⁵⁴ The artist travelled widely to the Middle East and North Africa, and his art was influenced by Arabesque motives.

⁴⁵⁵ See Marie-Claud Trad « L'exposition de Nall à Dar el Fan. Un hommage à Juliana Seraphim » *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 19.06.1974 ; D.A. « Nall: Un chemin pittoresque » *Magazine*, 27.06.1974.

⁴⁵⁶ See for instance the programme of the month April 1973, preserved at the Aref el Rayess Foundation in Aley, Lebanon.

Paul Arthur Lingren (1923-1989), an acclaimed professor at the University of San Diego and director of the Smithsonian Museum's printmaking centre, brought with him forty contemporary engravings from the Museum in Washington, of which twenty-three were selected for display at Dar el Fan. Organised in collaboration with the Kennedy Center, the exhibition featured contributions from prominent American artists. Among them were renowned printmaker, painter and sculptor Jasper Johns (b. 1930), lithographer Garo Antreasian (1922-2018), painters Minna Citron (1896-1991), Arthur Deshaies (1920-2011), and May Janko (b.1926), etchers Gabor Petardi (1915-2001) and Warrington Colescott (1921-2018), graphic artist Shiro Ikegawa (b.1933), and printmaker and sculptor Dean Meeker (1920-2002).⁴⁵⁷ During his three-day stay in Lebanon, Lingren also conducted workshops at the Kennedy sharing his expertise with Lebanese artists and fine arts professors. The exhibition sought to encapsulate the landscape of U.S. contemporary printmaking, displaying a variety of techniques and approaches that highlighted the versatility of the medium. The daily newspaper *Le Jour* titled its coverage of the exhibition "At Dar el Fan, a complete panorama of contemporary engraving in the United States,"⁴⁵⁸ emphasizing the event's ambition to provide a comprehensive overview of American art trends at the time. However, beneath this diversity lay a striking commonality: almost all the featured works adhered to abstract expressionism or geometric abstraction. This reflected the overwhelming influence of these movements in post-war American art, which had become emblematic of the United States' cultural identity during the Cold War. These trends came to define not only the national artistic ethos but also the way American art was perceived globally. Capitalist ideological framework outlined and promoted abstract expressionism, with its emotive brushwork and emphasis on individual creativity, and

⁴⁵⁷ For a list of names of participating artists see "Fann al-ḥafir fi al-wilayāt al-muttaḥida 'abir ma'raḍ fi Dār al-Fan" [The art of engravings in the United States through an exhibition at Dar el Fan] *An-Nahar*, 14.01.1969.

⁴⁵⁸ "À Dar el Fan un panorama complet de la gravure contemporaine aux États-Unis" *Le Jour*, 11.01.1969.

geometric abstraction, characterised by structured forms and intellectual rigour, as emblematic visual languages of freedom, individuality, and modernity.

Just a few months later, in May of the same year, Lingren presented in a solo exhibition at Dar el Fan his own body of works, which drew heavily on the latest trends in American printmaking.⁴⁵⁹ The francophone daily *L'Orient* describes the works, highlighting their vigorous compositions and the interplay of light and shadow, and praises him for his ability “to adapt Lebanese traditional architecture to his modern engraving methods, creating pieces that *bridged cultural and artistic worlds.*”⁴⁶⁰

A few days after the opening of his solo exhibition, 148 works realised by 41 “students of Paul Lingren’s atelier” (36 Lebanese and five Jordanian) inaugurated at the Kennedy.⁴⁶¹ The works of “Intaglio 1969” were the results of further courses that Lingren, described as “special delegate of the USA”⁴⁶² held in Lebanon, under the sponsorship of the Kennedy, between February and May.⁴⁶³ According to *L'Orient*, the works ranged from exercises in style to fully realised pieces. Among the students were newcomers to printmaking, such as Helen Khal, Cici Sursock, Yvette Achkar and Vahé Barsoumian (b.1943), who brought their particular styles to the medium. Seasoned printmakers like Halim Jurdak and Krikor Norikian (b.1941) also participated, displaying more refined artistry and distinctive visions. The contributions were diverse, and some emerging talents received particular acclaim.

⁴⁵⁹See M.A. « Les gravures de Paul Lingren à DEF. Du clair-obscur à l'arcade libanais », *L'Orient* 24.05.1969.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁴⁶¹ Akkar, « Cent quarante-huit gravures de l'atelier Paul Lingren. La discipline de l'artisanat », *L'Orient* 27.05.1969.

⁴⁶² Mary Azoury, « Au Centre Kennedy Vernissage de 'Intaglio 1969' ou 148 gravures des élèves de Paul Lingren », *La Revue du Liban*, 1969 (date missing).

⁴⁶³ According to Azoury, all the participants received a certificate attesting that they participated to the courses of the Smithsonian Print Workshop.

While Lingren's artistic contributions and dedication to teaching are undeniable, his role as a cultural ambassador invites a more nuanced reading. His work cannot be divorced from the ideological currents of the Cold War, where art functioned not merely as a form of expression but as a tool for shaping cultural and political alliances. Hence, the reviews of his exhibitions in *L'Orient* and *La Revue du Liban* should be read within this context. His visit to Lebanon was not an isolated event but part of a deliberate strategy of cultural diplomacy aimed at projecting American values abroad. Lingren's focus on Lebanese heritage in his exhibition reflects a strategic engagement with local culture, presenting American artistic innovation as a harmonious complement to regional traditions. Mary Azoury of *La Revue du Liban* defined his works as "Lebanese engravings",⁴⁶⁴ suggesting that Lingren's art sought not only to celebrate Lebanon but also to foster cultural connections, positioning the United States as a partner in the preservation and reimagining of local heritage. *L'Orient* highlighted how both the exhibitions curated by Paul Lingren balanced the artisanal roots of printmaking with its evolution into a recognised form of high art, emphasising its ability to bridge the poles of traditional artisanship and modernist innovation.⁴⁶⁵ The analysis also underscores Lingren's pedagogical approach, noting how his workshops encouraged participants to explore their own creative instincts, with an emphasis on mastering technique rather than "adopting a prescribed style".⁴⁶⁶ In this sense, Lingren's departure from Lebanon marked the end of his physical presence, but not the influence of his work. As *La Revue* aptly notes, "Paul Lingren is leaving, but his attempt will certainly set a precedent."⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁴ Azoury, "Au Centre Kennedy Vernissage de 'Intaglio 1969'".

⁴⁶⁵ « Cent quarante-huit gravures de l'atelier Paul Lingren ».

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ "Au Centre Kennedy Vernissage de 'Intaglio 1969'".

His intention to “repeat the experience”⁴⁶⁸ in Turkey and potentially in Greece and his 1970 journey to India hints to the wider drawing of the US administration of deploying cultural ambassadors. There, as in Lebanon, he sought to promote printmaking and his educational philosophy, using the arts to foster cross-cultural connections while advancing American cultural ideals. Yet the framing of these works through Western critical perspectives reflects the complex interplay between cultural appreciation and cultural hegemony.⁴⁶⁹ It is also no coincidence that Lingren’s activities spanned regions of strategic geopolitical importance. Lebanon, with its cosmopolitan cultural scene, served as a key platform for engaging with the Arab world, while India represented a pivotal player in the Non-Aligned Movement. Lingren’s ability to operate in these contexts reflects the calculated flexibility of American cultural diplomacy, which sought to appeal to diverse audiences while reinforcing the universal charm of American values. Lingren’s efforts in both Lebanon and India highlight the dual nature of Cold War cultural diplomacy. On one hand, his workshops and exhibitions undeniably enriched local art scenes, providing resources, training, and exposure to global networks. On the other hand, they served as instruments of soft power, projecting an image of the United States as a champion of freedom, creativity, and progress. Lingren’s emphasis on technique over style aligns with this agenda, offering a vision of artistic autonomy that implicitly resonated with the broader ideological narrative of liberal individualism promoted by the U.S. during the Cold War.

Despite these underlying geopolitical agendas, it is crucial to acknowledge the agency of the Lebanese public and the individuals at Dar el Fan who engaged with these initiatives on their

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ His work in India culminated in the Festival of India in the United States, where he curated and toured exhibitions of over 250 Indian prints across the U.S. These exhibitions were celebrated for introducing American audiences to Indian artistry, blending traditional motives with modern techniques. See <https://www.skoander.com/product/paul-lingren-memorial-exhibit-1989/>

own terms.⁴⁷⁰ The encounters facilitated by Lingren's workshops and exhibitions provided invaluable opportunities for Lebanese artists and intellectuals to experiment with new techniques, access international artistic networks, and enrich their own practices. Dar el Fan, as a space of creative exchange, played an active role in shaping the outcomes of these cultural interactions, adapting them to its own local and regional dynamics. In particular, two noteworthy cultural events demonstrated Dar el Fan's engagement with narratives that were critical of the U.S., its politics and capitalist ideology: the screening of the short documentary *An Impression of John Steinbeck: Writer* (1969) by Donald Wyre and the theatrical play *Summertree* (1967) by Ron Cowen, both in 1970.⁴⁷¹ Although Steinbeck is regarded as a symbol of American literature, his political journey was multifaceted. He had contacts with leftist authors, journalists and labour union figures, engaged with communist movements and organisations,⁴⁷² supported the Soviet invasion of Finland, and later interacted with the American and Soviet intelligence agencies, the CIA and KGB, reflecting the complexities of Cold War allegiances. His work, such as his account of his travels through the Soviet Union (*A Russian Journal*, 1948), provided a nuanced portrayal of Soviet life under Stalin, contrasting Western stereotypes and underscoring his openness to commenting on U.S. policies. Similarly, *Summertree* explored the harrowing realities of conscription and the Vietnam War, capturing the uncertainties and fears of young Americans during that era. Together, these works indicate Dar el Fan's willingness to present narratives that challenged U.S. ideologies, and may have fostered critical discussions about war, politics, and cultural identity. While Lingren's work reflects the ideological complexities of Cold War cultural diplomacy, the benefits derived by

⁴⁷⁰ On the concept of agency in/of art and cultural initiatives in Lebanon, see also Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* and Scheid, "The Agency of Art and The Study of Arab Modernity", mafhoum.com, 2007.

⁴⁷¹ See Kassab, *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 134, 137. No further references have been found.

⁴⁷² In 1953, he joined the League of American Writers, an association of American novelists, playwrights, poets, journalists, and literary critics launched by the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in 1935.

the Lebanese participants highlight the reciprocal nature of these exchanges. Far from being passive recipients, they actively navigated and negotiated the cultural and artistic opportunities presented to them, making these encounters a significant part of their own creative trajectories.

4.1.2 Pulling Back the Iron Curtain: Soviet Educational Programmes and Cultural Exchange

While Dar el Fan cultivated ongoing exchanges with American cultural institutions, it also turned its attention to the Soviet Union, signalling its effort to engage with multiple artistic and geopolitical currents simultaneously. Events organised in cooperation with the Soviet Cultural Centre or sponsored by states that were under Soviet influence were numerous and diverse, with music concerts, film-ballet and movie screenings playing a predominant role. To name a few, concerts of the USSR Trio and of the Dresden Trio from East Germany were held in 1969, alongside other musical events sponsored by the GDR. Film-ballet *The Moor of Venice - Othello* (1960) by Georgian ballet dancer and Kirov-star Vakhtang Tchaboukiani (1910-1992) was screened in 1972.⁴⁷³ In the same year, Dar el Fan's audience saw the film adaptation of Tchaikovsky's ballet *the Queen of Spades* by director Roman Tikhomirov (1915-1984), based on the 1834 short story by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), a founder of modern Russian literature. Tikhomirov was awarded the title of People's Artist of the RSFSR⁴⁷⁴ in 1973, an honorary title granted to Soviet artists and creatives. Based on the 1906 novel *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky, the movie *Mother* is the first instalment in Pudovkin's "revolutionary trilogy"

⁴⁷³ Today the Mariinsky Ballet, the Kirov is a leading ballet school was founded in 1740s.

⁴⁷⁴ RSFRS is the acronym of Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the largest and most populous constituent of the Soviet Union.

alongside *The End of St. Petersburg* and *Storm over Asia*. The first and the last chapters were screened at Dar el Fan in April 1970,⁴⁷⁵ alongside *Le Premier Maître*, the first movie by Andrei Konchalovski (b.1937) during a month dedicated to Soviet cinema.⁴⁷⁶ Both filmmakers have produced movies for the Soviet Union cinema, reflecting elements of Soviet culture, language and history, and controlled by the Soviet government. An exhibition titled *The USSR through artistic photography* took place in 1969, under the auspices of the Soviet Cultural Centre. These examples are significant, as the cultural actors and artistic productions involved were regarded as among the highest embodiments of Soviet cultural achievement, representing the ideological and aesthetic values the USSR sought to project internationally.

Yet while the Soviet Union was committed to advancing a narrative of cultural supremacy, Dar el Fan's artistic committee navigated these offerings with a degree of autonomy. Even if it remains unclear to what extent those involved at Dar el Fan, such as the Board or simply the members, consciously positioned themselves within these broader geopolitical dynamics, they exercised cultural agency by selectively engaging with what was made available. On the one hand, through curation and negotiation, they accessed a wealth of high-quality artistic content and introduced their audiences to premier cultural productions. On the other, they leveraged the Soviet Union's cultural ambitions to serve Dar el Fan's own agenda.

The capacity to engage with Soviet cultural influence on its own terms is further illuminated by the experience of two Lebanese artists who studied in the USSR, offering a more personal lens on the interplay between local and personal ambition and international ideological framework. In December 1969, painter Wahib Bteddini and sculptor Nazem Irani (1930-2014) exhibited

⁴⁷⁵ See for instance the programme of the month of March 1971, Archive of Dar el Fan.

⁴⁷⁶ J. A. « Du 9 au 30 Avril à Dar el Fan. Quatre 'visages' du cinéma soviétique » *Le Jour*, 07.04.1970.

their work at Dar el Fan⁴⁷⁷ after a first presentation at the Soviet Cultural Centre a few months earlier. Their contribution is seminal as they were among the first students from the Arab world to study at the Surikov Institute⁴⁷⁸ in Moscow, as part of the Soviet programme for cultural exchange that was crucial to propagate communist ideals in several Third World countries.⁴⁷⁹ Interestingly enough, the exhibition took place only few months after the exhibitions of American engravings discussed in the previous section, underscoring Dar el Fan's commitment to pluralism and its role as a cultural crossroads amid competing ideological spheres.

Nefedova has identified between 200 and 250 Arab artists who studied in the USSR between the beginnings of the 1960s until the fall of the Soviet Union. Students from developing nations, primarily Arab and African countries, came to study in the USSR in search for better education, or drawn by shared communist ideologies.⁴⁸⁰ Many were tempted by the convenient conditions offered: The Soviet government used to pay for their travel, accommodation, and stipend and even provided warm clothes. This was particularly attractive to students with limited economic possibilities, especially those from rural areas, who could not afford to study in Italy or France.⁴⁸¹ The main idea behind these exchange programmes was to expose young talents to socialist ideas, spreading a favourable picture of life under communism, which would have been supported by these professionals upon returning to their countries.⁴⁸² Foreign

⁴⁷⁷ No catalogue of the exhibition is available, and the sole visual documentation consists of archival press clippings.

⁴⁷⁸ Initially founded at the end of the nineteenth century in Imperial Russia, the school was one of the largest educational institutions in the country. After the October Revolution, painter, publisher and art historian Igor Grabar launched the new college of fine arts, which was named Surikov Institute in 1948, after the realist painter Vasilij Surikov.

⁴⁷⁹ See Katsakioris, « Une superpuissance éducative » and “Soviet Lessons for Arab Modernization”.

⁴⁸⁰ Although this was not always the primary reason as Arab communism started to lose influence at the end of the 1960s.

⁴⁸¹ See Nefedova, “Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World” and “Arab Students in the USSR”.

⁴⁸² Nefedova notes that many students experienced first-hand the problems of the Soviet regime in terms of complicated bureaucracy and low level of service, and it is unlikely that they were keen on developing a socialist system at home. See Nefedova, “Arab Students in the USSR”, 14.

students were exposed to a less rigid version of communist life and reality in the USSR that was possible after the death of Stalin and under the regime of Khrushchev, where Socialist Realism, although remaining the dominant artistic style, allowed for influences from the Russian avant-gardes. In this sense, a genuine interest towards Russian or Soviet art constituted a further, though less common, reason to opt for studying in the USSR.⁴⁸³

Nazem Irani was born in 1930 in the village of Yaroun, South Lebanon. In 1950, he received a scholarship from the Ministry of Education to study at ALBA, where he specialised in painting and sculpture, concluding his studies in 1953. According to a biography preserved in the archives of the Surssock Museum, his first exhibition dates back to the mid-1950s, with his drawing attracting “a great deal of attention”.⁴⁸⁴ In 1960, he was the first Lebanese student to receive a scholarship to continue his education at the Moscow Art Institute, where he specialised in sculpture. There, from 1963 to 1966, he studied under the supervision of Soviet sculptor Nikolaj Tomski (1900-1984), president (1968-83) of the Academy of Arts of the USSR and designer of many ceremonial monuments of the Socialist Realism era.⁴⁸⁵ He graduated in 1966 with the sculpture *Sorrow* (Fig.15), which was praised by the graduation committee.⁴⁸⁶ The sculpture, made in gypsum, represents two female figures, maybe a mother and a daughter. The first figure, wearing a long dress and head covered with a *khimar*,⁴⁸⁷ is standing. She comforts the second one, who lays at her feet, by placing her hand on her head. The bodies

⁴⁸³ See Nefedova, “Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World” and “Arab Students in the USSR”.

⁴⁸⁴ From the CV preserved in artist folder in the Archives of the Surssock Museum

⁴⁸⁵ He taught at the Moscow Surikov Art Institute from 1948, taking rectorship in 1964-70. He was awarded the Stalin Prize, the State Prize of the USSR, and the Lenin Prize. See the entry “Tomsky N.V., (1900-1984), sculptor” in the Saint Petersburg Encyclopaedia [available at <https://www.encspb.ru/object/2804030200;jsessionid=CBEA3EC538D12E52C751DA36C6DB4CB1?lc=en>; last access 31.01.2025]

⁴⁸⁶ Nefedova, “Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World”, 109. The original sculpture was destroyed between 1975 and 1976, during an air raid over Beirut that demolished the artist’s workshop.

⁴⁸⁷ A headscarf worn by observant Muslim women that hangs down to just above the waist.

of the women are sculpted in geometric forms, and their physical shape remains undefined. Upon his return to Beirut, Irani taught at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University during the 1970s, serving as a professor of art and chairperson of the Art Department. In January 1976, he briefly returned to Moscow, planning to pursue his postgraduate studies, but returned to Beirut soon after as he was needed there as a teacher.⁴⁸⁸ He was an active member of LAAPS and Dar el Fan.

Irani's contemporary Wahib Bteddini was born in Kfarnabrakh (Mount Lebanon) and studied at ALBA from 1956 to 1960. Afterwards, he continued his studies in St. Petersburg and then at the Surikov Institute in Moscow from 1962 to 1966, where he earned a master in Monumental Art.⁴⁸⁹ His 1966 graduation painting, *Harvesting (or The Picking of the Apples in the Mountain*, Fig. 16), is a large, mural-like artwork depicting in vivid and brilliant colours a village harvest scene which gives expression to the working class and peasants, reflecting the principles of Social Realism. The nine figures in the scene, men and women, appeared divided into three groups occupying respectively the left, centre and right of the canvas. A large tree is placed in the background, in the centre of the scene yet expanding its crown to the sides, connecting the characters engaged in the harvesting of fruits from the tree. After returning to Lebanon, Bteddini taught in the Institute of Fine Arts at Lebanese University from 1967 to 1988, eventually becoming the head of the department.⁴⁹⁰

The 1969 exhibition *Painting and Sculptures of Wahib Bteddini and Nazem Irani* at Dar el Fan saw both Irani's *Sorrow* and Bteddini's *Harvesting* on display.⁴⁹¹ Other works from Irani

⁴⁸⁸ Nefedova, "Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World", 109.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid. 105.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ « Wahib Bteddini, Nazem Irani et graveurs Soviétiques à Dar el Fan » *La Revue du Liban*, no.572, 13.12.1969.

included sculptures depicting Ali ibn Abi Talib,⁴⁹² various nudes, and a large work titled *The Peasant Couple* (which portrays two seated peasants in traditional attire). Scarce information is available on the works of Bteddini in the exhibition, but an article by art critic Nazih Khater in the daily *An-Nahar* shows him in front of another large-size painting.⁴⁹³ This features a group of workers and soldiers in the foreground, with additional figures marching in the background while carrying the Lebanese flag. Khater observed that both artists appeared to be at an early, embryonic stage in their artistic development (a sentiment the exhibition of these graduation projects seemed to confirm) and emphasized that the relation between them and Socialist Realism⁴⁹⁴ remained that of “imitators rather than creators”.⁴⁹⁵ Regarding Bteddini, Khater remarked that although his choice of subjects (peasants and the working class) was committed to revolutionary nationalism, his technical execution remained somewhat inadequate, resulting in works that felt weak overall. In Khater’s opinion, Bteddini’s art still bore the imprint of academic training, merging influences from his studies in Lebanese Impressionism with techniques acquired at the Surikov Institute. In his paintings, for instance, he employed a sculptural approach with rigid, well-defined lines. On the other side, the critic highlighted Irani’s monumental vision. Even in smaller works, the sculptor managed to evoke the presence of a large public monument. His approach involved exaggerating the geometric construction of his pieces, simplifying their shapes to the point of achieving an elegant, almost elemental

⁴⁹² Ali (600-661 ca.) was the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, and the fourth caliph after him. He was the first Shia Imam, and is considered by the Shia Muslim to be the rightful successor of the Prophet, while Ali’s predecessors are regarded as illegitimate rulers and usurpers of his rights – a controversy that originated the Shia-Sunni schism in Islam. His depiction by Irani is therefore notable within the sectarian Lebanese context.

⁴⁹³ Khater, “Bteddīnī wa-īrani wa-49 maḥfūrah sūfyātīyya. Shay’ min al-i’bdā’ wa-qalīl min al-mughāmara” [Bteddini, Irani and 49 Soviet Engravings. A bit of creativity and a little adventure] *An-Nahar*, 07.12.1969.

⁴⁹⁴ The term Socialist Realism, which appeared in 1932 in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, defined it as an art of “honesty, truthfulness, and as revolutionary in the representation of the proletarian revolution” in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 3rd ed. (Thames & Hudson, 2016), 308.

⁴⁹⁵ Khater, “Bteddīnī wa-īrani...”

simplicity.⁴⁹⁶ A review in *L'Orient* echoed these sentiments, noting that most of Bteddini's paintings remained tied to the academic style and the academicism of Socialist Realism while Irani embraced the heritage of Constructivism.⁴⁹⁷

The two Lebanese artists' work was exhibited alongside fifty prints, both in colour and black and white, by Soviet artists. Khater underlines a certain degree of heterogeneity among these prints. Some works depart from typical Russian realism, venturing into a dreamlike or surreal register though pursuing structural solidity and a prominence of the line even when dominated by poetic touches. Others adhere more closely to the canons of Socialist Realism. However, these latter works appear somewhat outdated when compared to productions from other countries shaped by the same artistic tendencies, yet able to develop a more modern and innovative visual language.⁴⁹⁸ This reading is echoed by a journalist from *L'Orient*, who remarked:

“[They] are of the highest quality, countering the view of Soviet graphic art as merely formalist. They belong to a truly international school, sharing the powerful morphology and vibrant colour use of contemporary prints worldwide, yet they remain distinctly Russian, imbued with a lyrical, poetic spirit and a deep appreciation for nature rarely found in European or American art.”⁴⁹⁹

This passage highlights a tension in how Soviet art was perceived in Beirut at the time, where Socialist Realism was seen both as a potent vehicle for political expression and as a stylistic framework that could constrain individual artistic voices. While viewers may have anticipated Socialist Realism or propaganda-driven works, probably reinforced by the interpretations of

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ M.A. « Gravures soviétiques à Dar el Fan. Le lyrisme de la bonne vieille terre » *L'Orient*, 07.12.1969.

⁴⁹⁸ Khater, “Bteddīnī wa-īrani...”

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

Bteddini and Irani, the prints on display partly defied such stereotypes. As the *L'Orient* article notes, they aligned with global artistic trends in morphology and colour. At the same time, the author's remark that these prints were still "distinctly Russian" underscores the persistence of national artistic identities. The lyrical, poetic spirit and the deep connection to nature attributed to these works hint at a continuity with pre-revolutionary Russian artistic traditions. In his review, Khater offers a hint of the variety between the style and content of the engravings, highlighting a more or less deep connection with the dominant trend. This perspective challenges the notion of Soviet art as a monolithic construct, instead revealing the ways in which artists could navigate official constraints while maintaining cultural specificity and aesthetic individuality.

By exhibiting these prints alongside works by Bteddini and Irani, Dar el Fan's intentions were multiple. The centre aimed at showing the visual context in which Bteddini and Irani had studied and been trained, providing elements that might help assess whether and how this context had influenced their own artistic production. Hosting the work of Soviet artists naturally fostered artistic dialogue, while it also sought to demonstrate that creative expression within the USSR was more dynamic and nuanced than often assumed.

Beyond this exhibition and critical evaluations, further dimensions of Russian artistic production were explored through other initiatives. A particularly revealing example was provided again by Nazem Irani, who offered additional insight through two lectures on Russian icons delivered in January 1969 and March 1971. It is possible that Irani's choice to present on Russian icons was not only informed by his personal scholarly interests, but also by a keen awareness of how this subject might have resonated with Lebanese audiences. Lebanon, with its rich tradition of Christian iconography (particularly within its Maronite, Greek Orthodox, and

Melkite communities) offered a cultural context in which the exploration of icon traditions carried both historical depth and contemporary relevance. By drawing parallels or highlighting distinctions between Russian and local iconographic practices, Irani's lectures may have opened a space for dialogue that bridged local heritage with broader Eastern Christian artistic traditions. His engagement with Russian icons thus may have contributed to the centre's broader discussion on transnational aesthetics, inviting Lebanese audiences to reflect on their own visual traditions through the lens of a different, yet related, iconographic legacy. Traditionally part of Russia's artistic heritage since the tenth century, icon painting became a contested practice during the Soviet era. Officially, religious art was deemed incompatible with the atheist principles of the state, leading to the destruction and confiscation of many icons by Soviet authorities.⁵⁰⁰ Yet, Irani's lectures, as reported by *Le Jour*, focused on the "discovery and restoration"⁵⁰¹ of Russian icons, and he presented rare photographs of these sacred artworks. His research likely engaged with the work of the Igor Grabar Restoration Centre, an institution that had amassed significant collections of icons, often salvaged from churches, private collectors, or individuals seeking to protect them.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰⁰ Under the regimes of Lenin and Stalin, the production of icons was substantially halted. While several were destroyed, some were hidden to avoid destruction, or smuggled out of the country and acquired as stores of value by private collectors.

⁵⁰¹ Randa Habib « Intéressante causerie de m. Nazem Irani sur les découvertes et la restauration des icônes » *Le Jour*, 24.03.1971.

⁵⁰² The history of the Grabar workshops has been uneven. Open in 1918 to protect state artefacts during the Civil War in Russia, it gathered artists, scholars and restorers in a state-sponsored plan to protect cultural heritage. At the peak of its activity, during the 1930s, the workshop was closed and the restorers were persecuted and jailed by Stalin's leadership. World War II turned again the course of events in a different direction. During the mid-40s, the work of the Centre was considered necessary in order to salvage the collections of the museums whose collections had been stuck in the areas seized by the Nazis, and repair the artefacts that were damaged during the war. See Alexei Vladimirov, "Grabar's Workshops", *The Tretyakov Gallery Magazine*, no. 4, 2008. Available at <https://www.tretykovgallerymagazine.com/articles/4-2008-21/grabars-workshops> [last access 23.06.2025].

Irani's ability to access this material underscores the complexities and contradictions within the Soviet Union's cultural policies. While the USSR is often perceived as monolithic in its suppression of religious art, reality was more nuanced and history not linear. Within the Soviet regime itself, the relation with sacred art underwent different phases, while icons came to embody a more or less constitutive element of national identity. Moreover, some art historians and restorers saw the study of icons as a means of preserving Russian cultural heritage, subtly challenging the state's erasure of pre-revolutionary traditions. Their work, though often conducted in the relative obscurity of museum basements or academic institutions, allowed for the survival of a form of artistic expression that the regime sought to suppress. Hence, even under strict ideological control, spaces existed where artistic, scholarly inquiry could persist, and certain institutions were able to conserve and even study them, often under the guise of national heritage rather than religious devotion. Irani's experience further suggests that foreigners sometimes operated within a more flexible framework than Soviet citizens did. Visiting scholars and artists were probably allowed to navigate these cultural contradictions with greater freedom than locals did, as Soviet officials, particularly those in cultural diplomacy, were often keen to project an image of artistic openness to the outside world, allowing controlled engagement with topics otherwise censored internally. Irani's exposure to these networks, and his lectures in Beirut, also point to the existence of such unofficial channels of cultural exchange. By presenting his findings at Dar el Fan, Irani was not only sharing knowledge about Russian iconography, but also revealing the Soviet Union's internal contradictions.

These examples provide insight into the experiences of Lebanese artists who studied in the USSR, illustrating how their exposure to Soviet art movements, ranging from Socialist Realism to emerging avant-garde trends, both enriched their creative practices and influenced the

programming of Dar el Fan. In their studies abroad, these artists confronted inherent contradictions within the Soviet art system, encountering rigid state doctrines alongside dynamic, evolving trends. This duality not only expanded their own repertoires but also equipped them to bring a multifaceted vision back to Lebanon. At Dar el Fan, the public did not passively absorb these imported ideas; instead, they engaged critically, interpreting and even contesting these influences through the lens of their own experiences.

4.2 A Union of Arab Artists: Crafting a Cultural Vanguard for a Transnational Project

Beyond these engagements with the cultural projections of the Cold War superpowers, Dar el Fan actively cultivated connections across the Arab world and its leading intellectual voices, contributing to the articulation of a shared artistic language while embedding itself within wider regional currents of pan-Arab solidarity, cultural nationalism, and the complex reconfigurations of the post-Nasser era starting in 1970.

The mid-twentieth century marked a transformative era for modern art in the Arab world, characterised by a confluence of cultural and political interconnections. Following independence from colonial powers, Arab countries sought to assert distinct artistic identities, often rejecting the cultural paradigms imposed during colonial rule. As art historian Nada Shabout has argued, it was during this post-independence period that European modern art movements began to influence Arab artists who started intertwining artistic expression with political aspirations and social consciousness.⁵⁰³ Art became a medium for expressing collective aspirations, reflecting the broader currents of societal transformation.

⁵⁰³ Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 24.

This era witnessed a profound crisis of identity, as artists departed academic influences that had dominated their work. As Shabout observed, “they embarked on a new artistic creative process [...] they had developed an awareness that their modern cultures are implicitly dependent on the dialogue between their country and the wider international community”.⁵⁰⁴ Significant art movements emerged in the Arab region during this time, including the Art and Freedom Group in Egypt, established in 1938, the Baghdad Modern Art Group in Iraq, founded in 1951, and the Casablanca School in Morocco. Each movement played a pivotal role in shaping its country’s artistic landscape, championing diverse approaches to the perennial debate between tradition (*aṣāla*) and modernity (*ḥadātha*). However, such movements largely operated within national boundaries, with limited organic connections between them.⁵⁰⁵ Despite this, efforts to foster cultural exchange among Arab countries were deeply rooted in the region’s long-standing traditions of intellectual mobility and dialogue. Writers, artists, and thinkers traversed borders to study, collaborate, and disseminate ideas, forging enduring networks that contributed to a shared cultural heritage.

In the 1970s, the cultural dynamics of the Arab world underwent a significant shift. The ideals of pan-Arabism, although starting to decline, had inspired artists to move beyond national boundaries and create international networks that could sustain a common creative environment and consolidate Arab art as a transnational project able to articulate a collective identity.⁵⁰⁶ This period saw the proliferation of initiatives that intertwined artistic production with political aspirations⁵⁰⁷ resisting external domination. At the beginning of July 1971, the

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. 24.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ See Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, and *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 335.

⁵⁰⁷ It is important to note here that these creative endeavours were not immune to the political pressures of the time. Governments often co-opted artistic movements to serve nationalist agendas, using them as tools for projecting state-sponsored narratives.

meeting of a group of artists from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt in Beirut led to the founding statement of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists, which was followed by a First Arab Conference of Fine Arts in Damascus in December of the same year.⁵⁰⁸ Subsequent conferences in Baghdad (1973) and the Arab Biennales in Baghdad (1974)⁵⁰⁹ and Rabat (1976) further cemented these efforts.

Dar el Fan fostered creative networks among diverse realities and actors across the Arab world, including several events related to Algeria as discussed in the previous chapter, a celebration of contemporary Egyptian culture, an exhibition of Syrian artists, the establishment of connections with the Iraqi music scene, and a solo exhibition of Saudi artist Abdel Halim Radwi (1939-2006).⁵¹⁰ These contributed to the articulation of a collective Arab identity that transcended individual nation-states. Its cultural programme not only showed the richness of Arab artistic traditions but also highlighted the struggles and aspirations that united them. For instance, the collaboration between Lebanese and Palestinian artists during this period exemplified the interconnectedness of their experiences, producing works that resonated with broader Arab audiences reflecting themes of resistance, solidarity, and the quest for a collective identity, reinforcing the idea of a shared Arab cultural heritage.⁵¹¹

This section examines selected initiatives held at Dar el Fan within the broader framework of Arab cultural history. On the one hand, it underscores the interconnected tapestry of artistic innovation, political resistance, and regional diplomacy, revealing the interplay of forces that

⁵⁰⁸ On the foundation of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists, see "Statement of the Founding Committee of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists" in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 335.

⁵⁰⁹ See Naef, *À la recherche*. On the First Baghdad Biennial, see also Amin Alsaden "Baghdad's Arab Biennial. Regional Subversions, Global Ambitions", *Third Text*, 33:1, 2019, 121-150.

⁵¹⁰ Adnan, « L'Arabie Saoudite en couleurs. Abdel Halim Radwi à Dar el Fan », *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 23.10.1974

⁵¹¹ I refer here to the exhibition of Palestinian posters that was held at Dar el Fan in 1968 and that is discussed in Chapter 3.

shaped this transformative period in the Arab world. On the other, it seeks to illuminate the ways in which Dar el Fan contributed to the construction of a creative environment where different artistic trends and artists from the region could converge, as well as the political objectives that they embodied.

4.2.1 Egypt. Building and Weaving Identity: Hassan Fathi, the Wissa Wassef Art Centre, and Arab Cultural Expression

In 1971, Aref el Rayess spearheaded efforts to strengthen cultural ties between Lebanon and Egypt by proposing an entire month dedicated to exploring and celebrating Egypt's contemporary artistic scene. In their plans, this month would feature a diverse array of cultural activities, including an exhibition of Egyptian painters, lectures by renowned architect Hassan Fathy (1900–1989), a display of traditional costumes, and an exhibition of tapestries by the Wissa Wassef Art Centre.⁵¹² The daily *Le Jour* commented on the initiative with an article titled *First Steps Towards the Creation of a Union of Arab Artists: Dar el Fan Prepares a Month Dedicated to Contemporary Egypt*.⁵¹³ The article noted that the success of the initiative hinged on the support of the Cultural Ministry of the United Arab Republic (UAR)⁵¹⁴ or the Arab League, highlighting its significance on a broader regional scale as well as the intent and

⁵¹² It seems, however, that the month did not take place as such. Only a few of the initially planned activities were realised, scattered throughout the centre's calendar. Among these, the screening of two movies of Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine (1926-2008) *Al-ārd* (The Earth, 1968) and *Bāb al-ḥadīd* (Cairo Station, 1958) both in December 1972.

⁵¹³ See « Premier pas vers une Union des Artistes Arabes. 'Dar el Fan' prépare un mois consacré à l'Égypte contemporain » in *Le Jour*, 14.06.1971

⁵¹⁴ The United Arab Republic, established on 1st February 1958, was established as the initial step toward a larger pan-Arab state. It officially lasted until 1961, when Syria withdrew from the Union due to differing political ideologies. However, the Union continued to exist formally in Egypt until December 1971. Overall, the Union heralded a new age of Arab unity and won great popularity with the Arab masses beyond Egypt and Syria, reinforcing their loyalty to Nasser.

availability of governmental funding. This reliance on institutional support suggests the far-reaching ambition to establish robust cultural exchanges throughout the region, reflecting a desire to build a cohesive and dynamic artistic network as part of an Arab transnational identity.⁵¹⁵

El Rayess convened with notable cultural figures such as Jamil Hamoudi, curator at the Baghdad Museum,⁵¹⁶ Etel Adnan, and Nawal Hassan from the Cairo Cultural Centre⁵¹⁷ to discuss the establishment of a network for cultural exchange. Nawal Hassan's remarks, "Inter-Arab cultural meetings allow artists to free themselves from European influences and to create a movement which is more original and closer to their heritage"⁵¹⁸ encapsulate the ambition to shape a local artistic identity rooted in historical and political consciousness rather than external paradigms.

The involvement of Hassan Fathi and the collaboration with the Wissa Wassef Art Centre carry particular weight in the socio-political context of the time. While no conclusive evidence confirms that an exhibition of the Wissa Wassef work took place at Dar el Fan, the very prospect of such an exchange reveals the centre's commitment to fostering regional artistic solidarities and engaging with vernacular, decolonial models of cultural production.

The tapestries produced at the Wissa Wassef Art Centre had achieved widespread renown and were frequently exhibited both nationally and internationally.⁵¹⁹ Founded in 1952 by the pioneering artist and educator Habib Gorgi (1892–1965) at the Wikalat al-Ghuri in Islamic

⁵¹⁵ « Premier pas vers une Union des Artistes Arabes ».

⁵¹⁶ Jamil Hamoudi (1924-2003) was an Iraqi artist who served as Director of the Ministry of Culture's Fine Arts Department. He is known for his involvement in several Iraqi and Arabic art movements including the *Hurufiyya* movement, which bridged the gap between traditional and modern Iraqi art.

⁵¹⁷ No further information has been found on this person and place.

⁵¹⁸ « Premier pas vers une Union des Artistes Arabes ».

⁵¹⁹ They were exhibited in Paris in 1947, in London in 1948, and again in both cities in 1950. In 1975, they were in New York, in 1980 in Italy.

Cairo, the centre was born from early efforts to reform art education in Egypt.⁵²⁰ Gorgi introduced the “spontaneous method,” grounded in his conviction that the creative spirit of Egypt’s historical art traditions still thrived among modern Egyptians. By allowing children to express themselves freely and unencumbered by Western educational constraints, Gorgi believed that their innate genius would flourish and yield *authentic* Egyptian art.⁵²¹ In this open and experimental setting, elementary school children produced carpets, sculptures, and paintings inspired by folkloric tales and scenes, drawing them closer to the legacy of ancient Egypt. In 1954, the institution relocated to the popular neighbourhood of Harranyia in Giza, where it became known as “L’Atelier d’Art au Village.”⁵²² Under the stewardship of architect and Gorgi’s son-in-law Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911-1975), the Centre expanded its focus to include fabric arts, further cementing its role as a crucible for the integration of tradition and innovation. A graduate of L’École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Wissa Wassef enjoyed a distinguished career teaching design, art history, and architecture at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, where he also chaired the Department of Architecture from 1967 to 1971. His leadership encapsulated the Centre’s ethos: an unwavering commitment to natural creativity and the preservation of artisanship in Egyptian art.

Under the mentorship of the Wassef family, young artisans crafted works that not only celebrated Egypt’s rich artistic heritage but also captivated a global audience. Early interest in the Centre’s work is evident in Lebanon, exemplified by a 1957 article from Maryette Charleton, founder of the Art Department at the American University of Beirut, and later

⁵²⁰ For a deeper analysis on this subject, see El-Hajj, Hussein “Free Art Expression between Theory of Spontaneity and the Establishment of the Haraneyya Centre” (Cairo Working Group, Cairo 2018); Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 39.

⁵²¹ Ibid. See also F. Rofail Farag, “Is there any justification for the existence of Coptic Art? Two recent critical opinions” *Kunst Des Orients* 11, no. 1/2 (1976): 22–42.

⁵²² The construction, designed by Ramses Wissa Wassef, was to include his own house, a museum commemorating the work of Habib Gorgi, the school and workshops and a space to host the permanent collection of the Centre. See El Hajj, “Free Art Expression”; Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 125.

reinforced by a 1970 piece by Etel Adnan.⁵²³ Moreover, Sami Karkabi (1931-2017), an archaeologist and intellectual who spent considerable time in both Egypt and Ethiopia, sought to replicate the Wissa Wassef experiment in Faraya (Mount Lebanon), maintaining frequent correspondence with Wissa Wassef throughout the 1960s and 1970s.⁵²⁴

Beyond its artistic significance, the Wissa Wassef Art Centre occupied an important place within the social and historical fabric of Egypt and the broader Arab world. In the 1930s, discourses started in Egypt to “arabise” education institutions, including art education. The frequent exchanges between Egypt and Europe through meetings, conferences and exhibitions played a crucial role in challenging prevailing ideas around art education and in pushing educators to explore articulations that would suit their local context. The Wissa Wassef Art Centre’s work challenged prevailing assumptions about where artistic value and innovation could originate, affirming the cultural agency of rural communities and the legitimacy of local craft as a foundation for contemporary artistic practice.⁵²⁵

It is within this context that the Wissa Wassef Art Centre should be understood. Its rejection of formal training in favour of instinctual, unmediated expression was not merely a pedagogical novelty but a deliberate challenge to dominant academic conventions and aesthetic hierarchies, many of which were shaped by Western paradigms. For Dar el Fan, which supported youth-oriented initiatives and welcomed artistic practices rooted in local iconographies, this approach offered a compelling point of resonance. While Dar el Fan never

⁵²³ Maryette Charleton, “Giza Tapestries” *Art Education* 10, no. 5 (1957): 6–7. The article, rich in images, mentions the participation of the tapestries in the Young Artists from the Near East Exhibit, travelling in the United States with the support of The American Federation of Art; Adnan, “The Weavings of the Children of Harrania.” *African Arts*, no. 3 (1970): 41–42.

⁵²⁴ Jessica Gerschultz, “Lebanon in the Constellation of Modernist Tapestry”, *Orient-Institut Beirut Annual Report*, 2018.

⁵²⁵ The Rod el-Farag School for ceramics and the weaving workshop established in the 1920s by Huda Sha’arawi (1879-1947) and the Egyptian Feminist Union in Cairo represent a prelude on this. See Nadia Radwan, “How a Ceramic Vase in the Art Salon Changed Artistic Discourse in Egypt”, in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region. Politics of Tastemaking*, 113-131.

opposed Western artistic traditions, it provided a space where alternative models (regional, experimental, socially embedded) could be explored and legitimised. In this context, the Wassef Art Centre's emphasis on creative autonomy, cultural continuity, and grassroots pedagogy aligned with broader conversations emerging within Dar el Fan about the role of art in shaping an Arab identity grounded in both tradition and transformation. The potential collaboration between the two institutions thus was more than a cultural exchange; it was part of a broader ideological project to redefine Arab modernity and to rethinking the intersections of art, education, and grassroots creativity.

In this same spirit, Dar el Fan welcomed renowned Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) for a public lecture in 1972 and again in 1975,⁵²⁶ crystallizing its commitment to socially engaged, regionally rooted cultural discourse. Fathy, often described as a visionary of sustainable vernacular architecture, gained international recognition following the 1969 publication of his book *Al-Gourna: A Tale of Two Villages* by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture.⁵²⁷ Now considered a classic, the book offers an in-depth account of Fathy's work on the village of New Gourna, built to resettle the village of Gourna, near Luxor. Rather than imposing Western architectural norms, Fathy sought to recover indigenous knowledge systems and craft practices as tools for postcolonial empowerment. His architectural project for Gourna was thus said to be based on traditional Egyptian architectural principles, incorporating elements like mud-brick construction, inner courtyards, vaulted roofs, and arches. Fathy worked closely with the local community, tailoring the designs to meet what he thought were the specific needs of

⁵²⁶ « Hassan Fathi à Dar el Fan. Pour la 'cité idéale', les techniques de l'architecte soutenues par la musicalité du peintre » *L'Orient- Le Jour*, 27.02.1975.

⁵²⁷ The volume is best known for its English edition, published in 1973 by the University of Chicago Press with the paternalistic title "*Architecture for the poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*"; the French version (1969) is titled *Construire avec le peuple*.

the families who would inhabit the village, considering this process as both environmentally appropriate and socially just. He also taught residents how to build using mud bricks and revive time-honoured decorative techniques, guiding the construction process himself – a practice that interrogates whether what was labelled as “traditional” was ever genuinely so.⁵²⁸ His philosophy resonated strongly with Dar el Fan’s own ethos: a dedication to cultural production that was not only formally innovative but also conscious of local histories, geographies, and social conditions.

The 1972 lecture at Dar el Fan was covered by *An-Nahar* in an article penned by art critic Nazih Khater.⁵²⁹ In describing Fathy’s contribution, Khater affirms “his Luxor experience established his name in the world of architecture as one of the leaders of Third World Architecture”, underscoring a sensibility that resonated with transnational solidarity across the Global South. Later in Khater’s article, the discussion around architecture initiated by Fathy is presented as especially significant in a context where Western architectural principles were being imposed on societies “unprepared”⁵³⁰ for their assumptions and spatial logics. In contrast, Fathy’s vision sought not only to resist this imposition but also to articulate an alternative one rooted in local materials, traditions, and social needs that aimed to shape and reflect the identity of a “new Arab man.”⁵³¹

In 1973, when in Beirut while on his way to Oman, Fathy was interviewed by the art critic Joseph Tarrab, member of Dar el Fan’s intellectual circle. That interview marks yet another

⁵²⁸ A critical reading of the work of Hassan Fathy has been conducted by architect and researcher Mohamed el Shahed on its platform Cairoobserver. See for instance: “Hassan Fathy: Architecture for the Rich”, *Cairoobserver*, 06.01.2013 and “The Place of Architects and the Architecture of a Place”, *Cairoobserver*, 02.09.2012.

⁵²⁹ Khater, “Ḥasan Faṭḥī hadha al-masā’: ‘amār ‘arabī jadīd” [Hassan Fathi tonight: A new Arab architecture], *An-Nahar*, 10.01.1972.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid. The article also shares what Fathy labelled as the “failure” of the New Gurna project, which he discusses in the last pages of his book. The project for the village, caught between ineffective state policies and the resistance of the locals, was never completed and was eventually left abandoned. Fathy hoped to be able to replicate his model in other realities in Egypt, especially at Nabthura, his mother’s village.

testimony of the network between Arab intellectuals of different disciplines at the time. Featured in the article are three drawings of Aref el Rayess, inspired by the photos of the architecture and project in Gournah. Defined as “dream architecture” by Fathy, the pieces captured the humility and integrity of Fathy’s domed forms and earthen textures, yet “went beyond the architectural form constrained by practical requirements”.⁵³² He continues commenting on the possibilities of integrating architecture and art, in the quest for a new model to articulate an Arab modernity from within rather than through imported models:

“There is in his drawings an extraordinary atmosphere of dream, of liberation. The important thing about his work is that it can help reinforce the dream side in architects by indicating to them an atmosphere that they must be able to achieve in their work by developing the right artistic expression”.⁵³³

Fathy’s presence at Dar el Fan must be situated within the broader debates around modernism in the Arab world during the 1970s. This was a moment when architects from the Global South were not so much rejecting modernism as reworking its principles to speak from and to their own contexts. While many in the region sought to reconcile modernist forms with local environments, materials, and social needs, Fathy’s architecture, rooted in a romanticised vision of peasant life and vernacular tradition, often veered into essentialism—projecting a timeless, idealised rural subject that elided the complexities of contemporary social life. Yet it was precisely this posture, with its symbolic resistance to imported models of development, which contributed to Fathy’s mythic status in the 1970s.

⁵³² Tarrab, « Hassan Fathi: ‘Mon espoir est dans la jeunesse et la disparition du pétrole !’ » *As-Safa*, 03.10.1973.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

In this sense, Dar el Fan's programming functioned not only as a platform for interdisciplinary exchange, but also as a laboratory for imagining new modes of regional modernity, though not unproblematic. The institution's ability to convene figures like Fathy, connect them with artists such as el Rayess, and foster critical reflection through voices like Khater and Tarrab's, speaks to its larger ambition: to cultivate a transregional aesthetic grounded in local social realities, yet in dialogue with broader currents of artistic and architectural thought.

4.2.2 Syria: *Three painters from Aleppo*

Moving to collaboration with Syria, paintings and watercolours by Louay Kayali (1934-1978), Saad Yagan (b. 1950) and Wahid Magharbeh (1942-2018) were presented at Dar el Fan from 11 to 23 May 1972 in the exhibition *Three painters from Aleppo* (Fig. 17).⁵³⁴ The Lebanese public was already familiar with Syrian art, as the Sursock Museum had hosted the *Contemporary Syrian Painting* exhibition in 1966, organised by the Syrian Ministry of Culture and National Orientation.⁵³⁵ However, the exhibition at Dar el Fan holds particular significance within the broader context of artistic pan-Arabism and in line with the centre's efforts to build a network of shared cultural identity.

During the 1970s, the ease of travel and communication between Beirut and Damascus facilitated frequent movement between these two cities. Janine Rubeiz recurrently journeyed to Syria. In one of her visits to Aleppo, she sought out the artist Louay Kayali, who had already gained considerable recognition within the Damascene and international art scenes. Kayali's

⁵³⁴ I thank artist Saad Yagan who helped me in reconstructing the exhibition.

⁵³⁵ For a discussion of this exhibition, see Aneka Lenssen *The Shape of the Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century*, Ph.D. Thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014.

work was part of the collection of the Ministry of Culture in Syria;⁵³⁶ he had previously exhibited at Palazzo delle Esposizioni (Exhibition Hall) in Rome and represented Syria at the Venice Biennale in 1960, alongside another celebrated Aleppo-born Syrian artist, Fateh Moudarres (1922-1999). Born in Aleppo, Louay Kayali had pursued his studies in decoration at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome between 1956 and 1961. Upon his return to Syria following his graduation, he held several exhibitions in the country, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama. He embarked on a teaching career as professor of fine arts at Damascus University. Janine Rubeiz, intrigued by Kayali's artistic work, visited his studio with the intention of organising an exhibition. She also considered inviting some of his students, including Yagan, who had recently graduated from the Academy.

Kayali contributed four paintings to the exhibition,⁵³⁷ titled *Maa'loula*,⁵³⁸ *Seated Woman*, *Woman in front of a Dressing Table* and *White flowers*. *Woman in front of a Dressing Table* (Fig. 18) which is the only painting reproduced in the exhibition booklet, evoked a theme that was relatively conventional within art history, one that presents a feminine portrayal of women, preoccupied with the cultivation of their bodies and aesthetics. We might anticipate such a scene to feature a noblewoman. Instead, Kayali's painting departs from this traditional trope. The woman appears to hail from the more common strata of society, as evident from the attire she wears, which deviates from the ornate garments typically associated with the upper class.

⁵³⁶ The booklet of the exhibition at Dar el Fan features his painting *Et après? (And then?)*, dated 1965 and part of the Collection of the Syrian Ministry of Culture. The painting depicts a group of veiled women, draped in sombre black attire, bearing expressions of profound sorrow. Their collective demeanour conveys a sense of lamentation, as if they are mourning a tragic event. The artist captures the depth of their grief through the portrayal of these sorrowful figures. The painting might be a response to the 1963 Ba'athist coup, which resulted in the ascendancy of the Ba'ath party with its totalitarian domination.

⁵³⁷ According to Yagan, Rubeiz acquired all his paintings and subsequently displayed them at Dar el Fan. As per Yagan, the rationale behind this lies in the circumstance that Kayali, who was already grappling with depression and psychological challenges at the time, initially acquiesced to the exhibition but subsequently recanted his acceptance. Interview with the author, Beirut, March 2023.

⁵³⁸ The artwork captured the essence of the Aramaic mountainous town situated to the northeast of Damascus, a recurring theme in his career. Other paintings with the same subject are dated 1964 and 1969.

Her hands seem to bear the marks of labour or domestic work, far removed from the softness and refinement typically associated with the theme of a “woman taking care of her beauty.” Contrary to what the title suggests, there is no actual dressing table in the painting, and the viewer is presented with a frontal perspective of the woman simply tending to her hair. Notably, Kayali’s figures remained detached from their immediate surroundings, with the background typically composed of a single, solid colour. In this work, as in many of his portraits, Kayali focused on a working-class woman engaged in an intimate, everyday moment, imbuing the scene with dignity. By choosing a local subject rather than an idealized or elite figure, he challenged dominant artistic conventions but, arguably, he also contributed to shaping a national painting tradition—one that centres the realities of ordinary people.

Rites Verts was one of the 32 paintings and engravings by Wahid Magharbeh. The artwork encapsulates the artist’s interest in popular literature and folk tales that emerges from other works of that period as well. The composition is chaotic, suggesting a dramatic scene where a religious rite is taking place. Both anthropomorphic figures and animals alike participate, adding mystery and intrigue. Born in Aleppo, Magharbeh was a self-taught artist who used to roam libraries, galleries and museums in Damascus, and educated himself about international art trends.⁵³⁹ He began exhibiting his work in the early 1960s at the Fathi Mohammad Centre for Fine Arts in Aleppo. By 1969, he had exhibited at the National Museum in Aleppo. Magharbeh encountered Kayali in the early 1970s and the two developed a close friendship. Even as he moved to Rome to study Photography in 1975, his production remained deeply influenced by the Arab and Islamic miniature styles of Al-Wasiti and the School of Baghdad.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁹ Taher Al-Banni, *Wahīb Maghārbeh. Masīrat al-‘ibda’ bayn al-ta’šīl w-al-tahdīth*, [Wahib Magharbeh. Path of creativity between rooting and modernisation] (Ministry of Culture, Syrian General Book Authority, 2017) 20-21.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti was a thirteenth century Iraqi painter and calligrapher, noted for being the scribe and illustrator of the *Maqamat* (1237) a series of anecdotes of social satire written by poet Al-Hariri of

His aesthetic and narrative elements evoke the characters and atmosphere of popular folk tales and myths associated with ancient Mesopotamia, Assyrian and Babylonian imagery. He drew inspiration from ancient local heritage as well as from the surroundings where he grew up in Aleppo, with their Arab and Islamic artistic connotation. All of these diverse forms left an indelible mark on Magharbeh's paintings where influences from local manual artisanship, popular textiles, and utensils are visible.⁵⁴¹ These folkloric elements are woven into a distinctive visual language, one that does not merely depict tradition but actively reinterprets it to convey a sense of disillusionment.⁵⁴²

All the ten artworks by Saad Yagan seem to share common themes, such as the portraiture of men and their relationship in public spaces or caught in everyday simple activities. Influenced by his Marxist political ideas, Yagan was interested in representing the common people of society in their everyday life. *The Clown* featured in the exhibition booklet has an elongated and distorted face, one that represents the complexity of human feelings and the inner emotions of the individual. The distortion of the figure is a distinctive trait of Yagan's production throughout the decades, a characteristic he accentuates in order to symbolise the state of drama in human life.⁵⁴³ *The Two Friends*, featured in an article on the exhibition,⁵⁴⁴ presents similar characteristic. The figures in the painting appear sad, almost powerless. Despite the title, there is no cheerful scene depicted, only a sort of embrace—a moment of solace between two figures touched by a sombre reality. In both paintings, there is a tangible atmosphere of desolation, a shared understanding of sorrow. The setting, void of any other

Basra (1054-1122). The manuscript may have been realised in Baghdad as it follows the style of the Baghdad School, an influential school of Islamic art developed in the city during the late twelfth century.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² See *Contemporary Art in Syria 1898-1998*, Gallery Atassi, Damascus 1998, no page number available.

⁵⁴³ See *Contemporary Art in Syria*.

⁵⁴⁴ N.S. « Louaï Kayali, Wahid Magharbé et Saad Yagan réveillent en nous le réalisme » undated press cut.

element, accentuates the focus on the figures, evoking a narrative of empathy with these characters. Also born in Aleppo, Yagan, who currently resides in Beirut after having left Aleppo during the Syrian civil war, began painting at the age of thirteen. He studied painting at the Plastic Arts Centre of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Aleppo and graduated in 1964. Five years later, he held his first solo exhibition at the city's National Museum. The exhibition at Dar el Fan showed his work abroad for the first time. Although he was unfamiliar with Dar el Fan before his exhibition, he acknowledged the significant effort Janine Rubeiz invested in organising it and in promoting the artists both during and after the display. Her support extended beyond immediate sales, attempting to foster the long-term development of their careers. Following his exhibition, he visited Dar el Fan multiple times, where he had the opportunity to connect with artists such as Etel Adnan, Aref Rayess, Huguette Caland and Dorothy Salhab Kazemi (1942-1990), expanding his artistic network.⁵⁴⁵ On one of his visits to Beirut, he recalls meeting writer and political activist Ghassan Kanafani at the Horseshoe Café in Hamra.⁵⁴⁶

The collaboration between Kayali, Yagan, Magharbeh, and Rubeiz fostered artistic exchanges but also highlighted the thriving cultural connections between Beirut and the Syrian scene during this period. The *Three Painters from Aleppo* exhibition became a testament to the transnational bonds and artistic enthusiasm that transcended borders, nurturing the creative spirit of the era. Within this context, the works exhibited at Dar el Fan by the three Syrian artists shared common themes and stylistic traits, reflecting a moment when art became a crucial means of engaging with national consciousness amid intense political turbulence. Created shortly after the Baath Party's 1963 coup, which reshaped Syria's political and social trajectory,

⁵⁴⁵ Interview with the author. Beirut, March 2023.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

and in the wake of Syria's 1966 coup and the devastating 1967 defeat, these works convey an urgent reflection on questions of identity and history. The artists' emphasis on local subjects, social structures, and folkloric traditions was particularly significant within the broader Arab debate on tradition and modernity. However, rather than retreating into artistic conservatism or self-referential nostalgia, they sought to forge a visual language that responded to their historical and political realities. By reworking familiar cultural motifs, these artists articulated the anxieties of a present marked by Syria's instability and the broader intellectual crisis that engulfed the Arab world after 1967. Rather than offering an idealised or nostalgic vision of heritage, their works transformed folkloric symbols into expressions of loss, fracture, and uncertainty, mirroring the struggles of artists and intellectuals grappling with the failures of nationalist and revolutionary projects. This visual language functioned on two levels: it reaffirmed a connection to the people and their lived realities while simultaneously exposing the fragility of these very foundations in the wake of ongoing political upheavals and growing disillusionment with pan-Arab aspirations.

4.2.3 A Journey to Iraq, capital of pan-Arab Culture?

In 1974, Rubeiz and Souad Najjar, former Secretary General of the Baalbeck International Festival,⁵⁴⁷ travelled to Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi Ministry of Information and Culture. Though brief and often overlooked, this visit further attests to Rubeiz's wider vision for Dar el Fan, and captures once again the outlines of her larger commitment to a transnational Arab artistic field.

⁵⁴⁷A founding member of the Baalbek Theatre in Beirut, Souad Alameddine Najjar was Secretary General of the Baalbek International Festival from 1959 to 1969. Later she was a member of the National Council for Tourism. She is considered a pioneer for the development of theatre in Lebanon.

During their ten-day visit, Najjar and Rubeiz had the opportunity to meet and exchange with a group of Iraqi artists,⁵⁴⁸ as well as with Munir Bashir (1930-1997), then serving as artistic advisor to the Ministry of Information. Bashir was not only a towering figure in Iraq's musical renaissance, but also well-known on the Lebanese cultural scene. During the 1950s, he had performed alongside the Lebanese singer Fairuz (b. 1935) and taught in Beirut's conservatories. As a testament to this ongoing cultural exchange, *An-Nahar* reported that Bashir was expected to perform at the Baalbeck Festival and deliver a lecture at Dar el Fan just one month after Rubeiz and Najjar's return from Baghdad.⁵⁴⁹ In Iraq, Bashir was deeply invested in institutionalising the local musical landscape. Under his guidance, efforts were underway to establish conservatories, music schools, and dedicated performance spaces aimed at elevating and preserving the traditions of oriental music. His vision, much like that of the broader cultural policy in Iraq at the time, sought to balance heritage with modernisation in order to give Arab music the institutional weight and international recognition it had long been denied.

Upon their return, Najjar and Rubeiz hosted a press conference at Dar el Fan, sharing their impressions of what *L'Orient-Le Jour* described as a "cultural pilgrimage".⁵⁵⁰ They spoke of grand projects: massive investments in the arts, the excavation and glorification of the Abbasid past, and, most notably, plans to construct a "Cité des Arts", a full-fledged city of knowledge and creativity that would include museums, theatres, international research centres, music academies, and venues for congresses and exhibitions. *An-Nahar* refers to the two women's

⁵⁴⁸ Laure Ghorayeb "Su'ād Najjār wa-Janīn Rubayz: amwāl ḍakhma yaṣrifuhā al-'irāq musā'idan bihā ḥarakāt al-funūn" [Souad Najjar and Janine Rubeiz: Iraq is spending huge sums of money to help the arts movement], *An-Nahar*, 06.02.1974.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ « Souad Najjar et Janine Rubeiz retour d'Irak : 'une cite des beaux-arts va être construite a Baghdâd' », *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 06.02.1974.

praise of Iraq's ongoing cultural renaissance,⁵⁵¹ sustained "by the efforts and interest of the Iraqi state in culture and the arts"⁵⁵² with an investment of 82 million dinars⁵⁵³ to develop such a project over a period of five years. The vision was expansive and symbolically resonant, as echoed by the title of the article on the pages of *La Revue du Liban*: "Souad Najjar and Janine Rubeiz, return from Iraq: City of arts, cultural centres, international congresses, museums, research centres in the ancient Abbasid capital."⁵⁵⁴ Based in Baghdad, the former seat of the Abbasid Caliphate, the project sought to re-inscribe the Arab world into a historical arc of cultural eminence, bridging the golden age of Islamic civilization with a postcolonial future of regional artistic leadership.

The "Cité des Arts" project, however, never fully materialized. It seems to have remained largely on paper, as a dream whose ambition was perhaps too vast for the bureaucratic and political realities of the time. Even the General Union of Arab Artists, headquartered in Baghdad, struggled to secure a permanent building.⁵⁵⁵ Yet, the symbolic resonance of the 1974 visit marked a moment in which art, diplomacy, and ideology converged around the possibility of Arab cultural integration. Rubeiz and Najjar, both described as "*dynamiques*" in the pages of *Magazine*,⁵⁵⁶ were ideal emissaries for this vision. As women who had contributed in shaping the post-independence Lebanese cultural field through institutions, exhibitions, and international festivals, they embodied the kind of regional connectivity and intellectual fluency

⁵⁵¹ This term is used by *La Revue du Liban*, no.789, 09.02.1974, in the article « Soaud Najjar et Jeanine Rebeiz, retour d'Irak: Cites d'art, complexes culturels, congres internationaux, musées, centres de recherches, dans l'ancienne capitale abbaside »

⁵⁵² Ghorayeb, "Su'ād Najjār wa-Janīn Rubayz ».

⁵⁵³ "Souad Najjar et Janine Rubeiz retour d'Irak". The equivalent of roughly 277 million USD.

⁵⁵⁴ *La Revue du Liban*, no. 789, 09.02.1974.

⁵⁵⁵ Later initiatives, such as the Palace of Culture and Art launched in 1980 under artist Noori Al-Rawi, attempted to revive aspects of this vision, but by then the cultural field in Iraq was already being redirected and rebranded under the shadow of Saddam Hussein's regime. I thank Amin Alsaden for having drawn my attention on this topic and for having shared his knowledge on the Iraqi art scene of the time.

⁵⁵⁶ D.A., « Liban-Irak: une participation artistique possible » *Magazine*, 14.02.1974.

that Iraq hoped to draw into its orbit. Rubeiz's presence in Baghdad affirmed that Beirut, despite its increasingly precarious political landscape, remained a vital node in any Arab cultural constellation.

The broader context of 1974 cannot be ignored. This was a year of heightened ambition for Iraq, a country flush with oil revenues and determined to assert itself as a cultural as well as political centre of the Arab world. It was the year of the first Biennale of Arab Art in Baghdad,⁵⁵⁷ a landmark event that convened artists, critics, and ministers around the idea of a shared Arab aesthetic project. There was a palpable sense that cultural production could play a diplomatic role in the postcolonial moment and that Arab nations could forge unity not only through political declarations, but also through cultural initiatives. The proposed "Cité des Arts," while perhaps utopian, must be understood as part of this larger ambition: to create a transnational infrastructure for Arab artistic modernity. Rubeiz's trip was emblematic of her broader commitment to fostering dialogue across artistic, national, and ideological boundaries. It reflected her conviction that an institution like Dar el Fan should not be limited by the confines of the nation-state, but instead anchored within a wider transnational network. For Rubeiz, the future of Arab art depended not on isolation, but on sustained exchange and regional solidarity.

⁵⁵⁷ Alsaden, "Baghdad's Arab Biennial".

4.3 A “Third Way”? Engaging with experimental visions

Having examined Dar el Fan’s connections with the United States, the USSR, and the Arab world, this section turns to a different register of cultural engagement that was less directly shaped by political agendas and more aligned with the centre’s interest in artistic experimentation, inquiry, and dialogue.

The discussion centres on three case studies. The first is Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), whose radical rethinking of performance broke with traditional theatrical forms. Secondly, the chapter analyses Italian poet, writer, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), whose work challenged conventions around politics, religion, and sexuality through deeply personal and often provocative lenses. Finally, it considers the group exhibition of British sculptors whose works contributed to the debates between abstraction and figuration. While each of these figures emerged from distinct artistic trajectories, their presence at Dar el Fan illustrates the centre’s commitment to fostering conversations that were not necessarily framed by immediate political imperatives, but rather by shared concerns around form, expression, and the evolving language of the arts.

These encounters did not take place in a vacuum. They were shaped by the dynamics of translation, reception, and adaptation within Beirut’s particular cultural context. The inclusion of these artists and thinkers enriched local debates and practices, but also introduced tensions—between avant-garde experimentation and local expectations, between universalist artistic claims and situated cultural traditions. Understanding their role at Dar el Fan thus requires moving beyond a simple record of their presence, toward a more nuanced reading of how their work was situated within the institution’s broader ethos: one that accommodated a

multiplicity of voices, and valued artistic exploration as an end in itself, even amidst the politically charged climate of the 1970s.

4.3.1 Grotowski and the *Prince Constant*

From 10 to 14 September 1970, Dar el Fan presented Jerzy Grotowski's theatrical production *Prince Constant*. *L'Orient* announced his visit⁵⁵⁸ already in September 1969, and described it enthusiastically as the "standout event of the season".⁵⁵⁹ Grotowski, renowned for his innovative approach, had developed what he termed "poor theatre," a method that stripped performances of elaborate staging, costumes, and props, focusing instead on the actor's physical and vocal expressivity as the primary means of storytelling. His theatre was not merely a space for performance but a site of ritual, transformation, and deep psychological exploration.⁵⁶⁰ It is likely that this collaboration was initiated by Janine Rubeiz, whose interest in theatre shaped much of Dar el Fan's programming. Drawing on her experience as costume designer, Rubeiz had maintained ties to the performing arts scene, making her a key figure in facilitating such an avant-garde exchange.⁵⁶¹

The visit of Grotowski and his Teatr Laboratorium (Laboratory Theatre) to Beirut in September was preceded by an exhibition on Polish theatre, hosted at Dar el Fan in January of the same year and sponsored by the Polish embassy. Following Poland's participation in the Baalbeck

⁵⁵⁸The Polish director stopped in Beirut on his way back from Iran, hinting at the broad reach of his work across the region.

⁵⁵⁹ « Pour la nouvelle saison à Dar el Fan. Grotowski et un programme culturel chargé » *L'Orient*, 12.09.1969.

⁵⁶⁰ For further general information on Grotowski see the website of The Grotowski Institute and related Encyclopedia available at <https://grotowski.net/en/encyclopedia/grotowski-jerzy> [last access 13.03.2025].

⁵⁶¹ Further supporting this connection, in February 1971, Rubeiz was awarded, alongside Wasek Adib, a Medal of Merit in recognition of her role in promoting Polish culture. This suggests an ongoing engagement with cultural actors from Poland, and points to Rubeiz's sustained efforts to create platforms for international artistic encounters that extended beyond conventional cultural diplomacy. See *Le Jour*, 17.02.1971 (title unavailable, from a press cut preserved in the Archive of Dar el Fan).

Festival, this exhibition displayed over two hundred images and illustrations, offering Beirut audiences a visual reconstruction of key moments in the history and evolution of Polish theatre, from avant-garde experiments to contemporary reinterpretations of classical plays. The aim of the exhibition was not only to offer insights into this art, but also to illustrate how it had served as both an artistic and cultural force throughout Poland's history and formation of national identity.⁵⁶² Most likely, in Dar el Fan's vision, it constituted a preliminary exploration of Polish theatre and a first step towards the invitation of Grotowski to Lebanon.

Prince Constant was staged at the Palace of Mir Amin⁵⁶³ in Beiteddine (Shouf district), as the director allegedly set the condition of a space that would be "appropriate" for his play.⁵⁶⁴ Based on Juliusz Słowacki's adaptation of Calderón de la Barca's play, the production centred on the figure of Don Fernando, a Portuguese prince who endures imprisonment and suffering rather than betray his moral convictions. *Prince Constant* exemplified Grotowski's vision, featuring an intensely physical style of acting in which the performers underwent what appeared to be a form of spiritual and bodily transcendence. Ryszard Cieślak, the lead actor, embodied an almost mystical intensity, using his body as an expressive instrument of agony, resistance, and ultimate redemption. The performance abandoned conventional narrative structures, instead immersing the audience in a visceral, almost meditative experience.

⁵⁶² J.A. « 200 Images à Dar el Fan pour une démonstration : Le théâtre est l'art national des Polonais » *L'Orient*, 29.01.1970.

⁵⁶³ The palace was originally built for Emir Amin, son of the ruler of Mount Lebanon Emir Bashir Shihab II, in the nineteenth century. According to Evelyne Massoud, a restoration and revitalization plan of the palace had been launched in 1965 to promote tourism. The restoration was sponsored by a commission of the CNT, which assigned the project to architects Amin Bezry and Pierre Khoury. See Massoud, « Au Palais de l'émir Amin à Beiteddine le 'Prince Constant' de Grotowski fera tomber les tabous » *La Revue du Liban* no. 609, 29.08.1970 ; « Le théâtre-laboratoire de Wrocław chez l'Emir Amin » *L'Orient*, 01.08.1970.

⁵⁶⁴ M.A. « Jerzy Grotowski 'Ce n'est pas sur la scène, c'est dans la vie qu'on joue'. Dans une conférence de presse hier à Dar el Fan » *L'Orient*, 11.06.1970. See also J.A. « Ce n'est pas sur scène, mais dans la vie, que nous jouons pour nous cacher'. Pour 3 jours à Beyrouth le célèbre metteur en scène, J. Grotowski » *Le Jour*, 11.06.1970.

The intimate nature of Grotowski's staging (where actors and spectators shared close proximity) demanded active engagement from the audience, challenging the passive role typically assigned to theatregoers.⁵⁶⁵ However, since the play was performed in Polish, it remains unclear to what extent viewers could fully grasp the nuances of its dialogue.⁵⁶⁶

Prince Constant was well received in Lebanon, as reflected in numerous articles in the country's major news outlets.⁵⁶⁷ Beyond appreciation for the play itself, the press coverage highlighted the significance of Grotowski's presence in Lebanon, framing it as a moment of cultural prestige for the local artistic scene. His visit was depicted as a rare and remarkable occasion. Journalist Wafiq Ramadan of *An-Nahar* emphasised Grotowski's highly selective approach to invitations, with offers from no less than the USA and Europe being turned down – although it remains unclear whether this choice was determined by a political stance or practical conditions.⁵⁶⁸ Whether or not this claim was entirely accurate, it contributed to the perception of exclusivity surrounding his visit, reinforcing the sense that Beirut was becoming a key site for experimental artistic exchange. The play may have carried symbolic weight, resonating with audiences through its exploration of endurance and sacrifice, echoing the struggles and resilience of the time. Ramadan further underscored its impact by describing it with the Arabic term *ṣumūd*, a politically charged word associated with the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and their cause.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁵ Massoud, "Jerzy Grotowski à Dar el Fan: Nous vivons une période post-théâtrale – L'axe du théâtre c'est l'être humain – Le théâtre, c'est plutôt la vie et la vie... » *La Revue du Liban*, no. 598, 13.06.1970.

⁵⁶⁶ Yet, as Grotowski often used to emphasize, understanding Polish was not essential to following the plot or engaging with the central themes of his works.

⁵⁶⁷ *L'Orient, Le Jour, An-Nahar* and *La Revue du Liban* covered the event.

⁵⁶⁸ In his article, we read: "It is an achievement that Grotowski accepts to come to Lebanon at a time when he rejects larger offers to act or lecture in Europe and America". Wafiq Ramadan, "30 alf lira li-ru'yat 'amaliyyat khalq wa-ru'yat al-Amir Kunistan yata'adhdhab bi-ṭahāra 'ulyā" [Thirty thousand liras to witness a creative work and see the Prince Constant suffer in supreme purity] *An-Nahar*, 25.08.1970.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Yet, certain critical dimensions of the event remain unexplored within the Lebanese context. Grotowski's performances were staged for only a few dozen spectators, and high-ticket prices made them financially out of reach for many. While he rejected commercial theatre, the exclusivity of his productions often undermined his professed anti-elitist ethos. In practice, his theatre became a luxury experience, reinforcing rather than dismantling cultural hierarchies. This paradox extended to Lebanon, where *Prince Constant* was performed at the Palace of Mir Amin, already an elitist location per se. Moreover, prices for the ticket were extremely high, as noted by Ramadan:

“The ticket price for Grotowski's play is 85 lira. A lot of money? Of course [...] this is not to justify the high price of Grotowski's theatre tickets [...] a thousand dollars (3.000 lira) is the fee for Grotowski and his troupe of thirteen actors. However, the expenses increased because Grotowski sets a specific number of spectators for each of his plays and is careful not to let the number swell to become an audience. Therefore, he chose thirty-four spectators for a single performance of the play *The Price Constant* [...] so that the total number of spectators for the five performances will be only one hundred seventy. No matter how high the ticket price, it cannot cover the expenses.”⁵⁷⁰

Hence, while Dar el Fan positioned itself as an open space for artistic exchange, it is assumed that the audience for this event largely consisted of the cosmopolitan elite with privileged access to global avant-garde movements. This dynamic complicates the centre's aspiration for

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. According to the source, the whole operation costed around 30.000 Lebanese liras. The Polish Ministry of Culture contributed to the travellers' expenses with 13.000 liras, the Lebanese National Council for Tourism with 10.000, and Dar el Fan covered what was left.

inclusivity, revealing once again the inherent tensions between cultural openness and exclusivity.

Beyond questions of accessibility, Magda Romanska's critical analysis of Grotowski's work underscores that his own status was subject to competing narratives, relevant for the examination of the reception of experimental theatre.⁵⁷¹ While celebrated in the West as a radical innovator from behind the Iron Curtain, his reception in Poland was more ambivalent. His adaptations of texts followed an already existing and established Polish theatrical tradition, and his experimental methods, often demanding extreme physical and psychological commitment from actors, were met with scepticism. His political positioning was equally fraught. Though often perceived as a dissident artist resisting an oppressive regime, his relationship with the Polish authorities was more nuanced. As a Communist Party member, his theatre received state support, affording him institutional backing that other experimental artists lacked. This fuelled criticism within Poland, where some viewed him as an opportunist navigating the system rather than directly opposing it. Some saw him less as a pioneer and more as a construct of foreign enthusiasm, and his global recognition reinforced suspicions that his radical image was, at least in part, a product of personal political interests rather than purely artistic innovation. Such complexities however, were often overlooked by Western narratives and obscured by the broader mechanisms of cultural diplomacy, which operated beyond the immediate purview of cultural actors, small institutions such as Dar el Fan, and local audiences.

⁵⁷¹ For a critical review of Grotowski's work, see Magda Romanska, *The Post-Traumatic Theatre of Grotowski and Kantor. History and Holocaust in Akropolis and The Dead Class*, (Anthem Press, 2012).

Yet it is precisely within this tangle of contradictions that Dar el Fan's invitation takes on its full significance. Rather than endorsing one geopolitical bloc or the other, Dar el Fan appeared to be open to artists who moved between ideological poles, resisting easy categorisation. The decision to host such a figure (at once state-sponsored and avant-garde, celebrated abroad and questioned at home) points to the centre's desire to carve out a space for aesthetic experimentation through the selective appropriation of global forms and, ideally, placing them in conversation with local artistic and cultural production.

The centre's decision to host Grotowski speaks to a broader interest in positioning the institution as a platform for experimental and innovative theatre. In the early 1970s, Lebanese theatre-makers were beginning to explore their own forms of politically and aesthetically disruptive theatre. This local momentum found fertile ground at Dar el Fan, which launched an innovative café-theatre where the audience could assist the plays while sipping a drink in the informal hall of the centre. Just two years after Grotowski's *Prince Constant*, the centre staged *Ubu-Roi*, a bold reimagining of Alfred Jarry's play adapted and directed by Gérard Avedissian, in a production described by *L'Orient-Le Jour* as "irreverent".⁵⁷² The performance was unmistakably localised. Retitled *Hekāyat Kahrabia wa-Malekuha Ubu* (The history of Kahrabia and its King Ubu) and delivered in Lebanese Arabic, the piece satirised political ambition and absurd power, infusing Jarry's surrealist energy with the rhythms and gestures of Beirut's everyday life.⁵⁷³ The presence of Waddah Faris and Paul Matar (b.1946) in the cast add a further layer of interdisciplinarity. An eclectic personality, Faris was an Iraqi artist born in

⁵⁷² See Marie-Thérèse Arbid, "Baladi! Ya Baladi! "Ubu Roi" de Jarry revu (et corrigé) par Gerard Avedissian, *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 05.10.1972.

⁵⁷³ On the play, see also « Ubu Roi : comment réussir un coup d'état », *Magazine*, no.828, 02.11.1972 ; Christiane K. Saab « À Dar el Fan - Les Ubu de Jarry parleront l'arabe », *As-Safa*, 06.10.1972.

Aleppo, Syria, who worked in Beirut as a graphic designer and opened in 1972 Contact Art Gallery.⁵⁷⁴ Actor Paul Matar would later present *Noureddine et ses amis* (Noureddine and his friends), staged at Dar el Fan in 1974.⁵⁷⁵ The play demonstrated the same appetite for breaking theatrical conventions, blending humour, politics, and social critique in the “café-théâtre” format (Fig. 19).⁵⁷⁶ In 1973, it was the time of *Al Bakara* (The Reel) by Thérèse Awad (1934-2020). According to *La Revue du Liban*, it was “une pièce qui semble se réclamer du théâtre expérimental” (a play that seems to claim to be experimental theatre),⁵⁷⁷ characterised by unconventional monologues which recreate a state of constant flux masterfully played by actress Nidal Achkar (b.1941), a leading-to-be figure in Lebanese theatre. In Awad’s obituary, *L’Orient-Le Jour* describes *Al-Bakara* with the following words: “She left behind her that magnificent play *al-Bakara*, which had all of Beirut rushing to see it in 1973 at Dar el Fan. An unforgettable moment celebrating the triumph of a woman’s imagination—just before the first cannon blasts...”⁵⁷⁸

These productions were not derivative echoes of Grotowski’s legacy but rather original contributions shaped by a shared impulse toward theatrical experimentation, collective authorship, and performative immediacy. Dar el Fan played a critical role in nurturing this scene: it provided artists with both the institutional support and cultural legitimacy to mount ambitious, locally rooted work that resonated with contemporary debates around politics,

⁵⁷⁴ Waddah Faris, remembered as a true pillar of Lebanon’s cultural scene, left a legacy that stretches across several decades and touches multiple domains of artistic life. From his involvement in the Baalbeck Festival, to his pioneering work as a gallerist and his contributions in the field of graphic design, his influence was both wide-ranging and enduring. Beyond these roles, his deep passion for photography allowed him to document significant moments and personalities, leaving behind a visual archive that continues to testify to his central place within the country’s artistic and intellectual landscape.

⁵⁷⁵ See « Le ‘Noureddine’ de Mattar : un conte très gai », *Magazine*, 04.04.1974.

⁵⁷⁶ See Naomi Gray Wallis, “At Dar el Fan next month – Lebanon’s first ‘Cafè-theatre’”, *Monday Morning*, 16.10.1972, 27.

⁵⁷⁷ « ‘La Bobine’ de Thérèse Awad » *La Revue du Liban*, no. 737, 10.02.1973.

⁵⁷⁸ Edgar Davidian, « Thérèse Awad Basbous, touchée par la ‘baraka’ » *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 31.05.2020.

identity, and artistic form. In this way, the centre served as a vital node in the transnational circulation of avant-garde theatre, facilitating not just the importation of global influences, but also the emergence of a distinctly Lebanese experimental tradition.

4.3.2 Pasolini and the “Pasolini Film Festival”

In a letter dated January 1973, then-president Samia Toutounji invites Pier Paolo Pasolini, the radical Italian poet, writer and filmmaker, to Dar el Fan for “a week dedicated to your cinematic work”.⁵⁷⁹ Emerging from Italy’s post-war literary and artistic circles, Pasolini’s work continuously defied political, religious, and social conventions. He first gained recognition for his neorealist novels before transitioning to cinema in the early 1960s. His films, deeply influenced by Marxist thought, Catholicism, and classical mythology, interrogated power, sexuality, and the sacred. Pasolini’s cinematic style was raw and provocative, often using non-professional actors, documentary-like aesthetics, and allegorical narratives to expose the contradictions of modernity. He was a staunch critic of bourgeois values, capitalism, and the growing influence of mass consumer culture, which he saw as eroding traditional ways of life. In Italy, Pasolini’s work was relentlessly subjected to censorship, legal persecution, and public scandal. Many of his films were banned, heavily edited, or met with outrage, particularly due to their explicit depictions of sex, violence, and anti-clerical themes. He was often at the centre of media storms, with Italian newspapers sensationalising his legal battles, his leftist politics, and his openly queer identity, which remained controversial in a deeply conservative society.

⁵⁷⁹ Letter from Samia Toutounji to Pier Paolo Pasolini, January 5, 1973, IT ACGV PPP.I.1179. 1, Gabinetto G.P. Vieusseux - Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti, Florence, Italy. I thank Raed Rafei for having drawn my attention to this and the following archival documents.

In the letter, Toutounji reassured him that Dar el Fan's status as a cultural centre rather than a commercial theatre would allow his films to avoid censorship, expressing a strong desire to ensure that the visit would be enriching for both Lebanese and Arab cinema.

Originally, the trip was planned for late 1973, but it was postponed for unclear reasons – although a stagnation in the cultural season of that year could be attributed to the outbreak of the Arab Israeli War.⁵⁸⁰ He eventually visited Beirut in May 1974 for a brief forty-eight-hour stay.⁵⁸¹ During this time, three of his films were screened at Dar el Fan: *Edipo Re* (Oedipus Rex, 1967), *Medea* (1969), and *Porcile* (Pigsty 1969).⁵⁸² *Edipo Re*, freely adapted from Sophocles' tragedy, tells the story of Oedipus, destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus represents the allegory of the modern western man, who is bound to the catastrophe. The myth of Jason and the Argonauts is central in *Medea*, based on Euripides's tragedy. The woman, fooled and unreciprocated by Jason, ends up killing their children and herself. *Porcile* narrates two parallel stories that, although differently, represent a transgression of bourgeois values. Overall, these movies reflect Pasolini's engagement with themes of contraposition between modern and premodern societies, and his sharp critique of the eroding impact of capitalism on human values.

In the context of a city brimming with intellectual discourse and leftist activism as Beirut was at that time, Pasolini's perspectives likely resonated with audiences navigating their own

⁵⁸⁰ Pasolini's ties to Beirut, however, may have predated this visit. A letter from 1970 suggests that there had been prior attempts to arrange a screening of *Medea* in the Lebanese capital and to invite both Pasolini and Maria Callas, who played the lead in the film. Additionally, a document written by Pasolini himself hints that he may have passed through Beirut in March 1969, possibly while scouting locations in Cappadocia or Aleppo for the same film.

⁵⁸¹ His trip was made possible thanks to the support of the Italian Cultural Centre, Middle East Airlines and the National Council for Tourism. This reveals once again Dar el Fan's wide network, which was not limited to cultural venues but was instead branched out to a variety of institutions to support its cultural mission.

⁵⁸² *Medea* was screened at the Beirut Cine Club, on the Corniche al-Mazra, and maybe re-screened at Dar el Fan. Information on this is contrasting.

struggles between liberation and repression, tradition and modernity. Anti-imperialist sentiment was at its peak, with solidarity for global liberation movements shaping cultural and political life.⁵⁸³ Social movements, student protests, and labour unions were challenging entrenched sectarian and economic structures. Pasolini's exploration of marginality and forms of resistance intersected with these tensions, bridging European avant-garde cinema with Arab intellectual debates.

The hall of Dar el Fan was reportedly crowded during the screenings, and numerous articles in the Lebanese press reflect an enthusiastic response to the opportunity to view his films and engage with a major figure of European cinema. However, Pasolini's movies were not new to Beirut. Gerard Boulad, on the pages of *As-Safa*, writes that his previous movies *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, 1964) and *Teorema* (1968) had been screened in the capital's cinemas, while *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (The Hawks and the Sparrows, 1966) and *Edipo Re* were showed in non-commercial venues of cine clubs and festivals.⁵⁸⁴

L'Orient Le Jour, *As-Safa*, and *An-Nahar* followed Pasolini's visit, highlighting his contradictions and provocations and framing him as both a visionary and an enigma.⁵⁸⁵ A closer look at the language used to describe Pasolini's visit offers insights on how he and his films were received in Beirut. Boulad underscored his status as "one of the most prestigious filmmakers in Italy and

⁵⁸³ It seems that, while in Beirut, Pasolini had publicly declared his intention to make a film on Palestine, framing it as a gesture of support for the Palestinian struggle. See S.N. "Pasolini à Beirut : 'rêver c'est une forme de religiosité'", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 05.05.1974. The Italian intellectual had had the chance to visit Palestine during the shooting of his essay film *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* (Locations Scouting in Palestine, 1965). His controversial portrayal of the Palestinian Arabs is analysed and discussed by Luca Caminati in *Orientalismo Eretico: Pier Paolo Pasolini e il cinema del Terzo Mondo* (Bruno Mondadori, 2007).

⁵⁸⁴ Gerard Boulad "Pasolini, images et idées. Le grand réalisateur italien a répondu à l'invitation de Dar el Fan » *As-Safa*, 28.04.1974.

⁵⁸⁵ See for instance the dialogue with the journalist who asked him how he could conjugate his Marxism with his Christian faith in S.N. "Pasolini à Beyrouth".

worldwide,”⁵⁸⁶ even as debates over his work elicited both fervent applause and harsh denunciations. He describes the Italian intellectual as “The living paradox through which the unexpected always arrives [...] The Pasolinian universe is a torn, contradictory universe, marked by a spell of apocalyptic hysteria but which through the means of art constantly seeks the place and the moment of reconciliation”.⁵⁸⁷ The ambivalent character of Pasolini is echoed in other sources. In *An-Nahar*, Samir Nasri describes Pasolini’s films as “wonderful in their barbarity”⁵⁸⁸ a contrast that portrays them as both revolutionary and scandalous. In his article he writes that Pasolini “is aware that his films in Beirut, as in the world where they were presented, will be received with great enthusiasm, both admiration and rejection” and elaborates that “the dispute continues between those who consider him one of the most original creators of modern cinema and those who accuse him of being too sophisticated and even seeking to create a cheap scandal”. Nasri describes how even the same audience, composed at once by Marxists, the bourgeoisie, or the working class, felt at times engaged and represented and at times completely alienated by his films.⁵⁸⁹

Pasolini’s remarks about censorship also made headlines. In another article in *An-Nahar*, Nasri reported that Pasolini expressed disappointment that his latest film, *Arabian Nights* (1974), would not be screened in Arab countries, attributing this to its depiction of premodern sexual practices—an element he viewed as challenging contemporary censorship norms. He suggested that showing the film uncensored in Lebanon, and even at Dar el Fan, would constitute “a political revolution”.⁵⁹⁰ On Pasolini’s erotic production, Boulad writes:

⁵⁸⁶ Boulad, « Pasolini, images et idées »

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid. The author is quoting Marc Gervais *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Cinema d’aujourd’hui, vol. 73, Éditions Seghers, 1973.

⁵⁸⁸ Samir Nasri, « Tawṭi’a li-Bāsūlīnī wa-aflāmihi: tilka al-badī’a fī barbarīyatihā » [An introduction to Pasolini and his film, those wonderful in their barbarity], *An-Nahar*, 03.05.1974.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Samir Nasri, « Bāzūlīnī fī Bayrūt: ahamm min taḥqīq al-‘amal al-ḥulm bihi » [Pasolini in Beirut: More important than realising a work is dreaming it] *An-Nahar*, 04.05.1974.

“Needless to say that we will never see in Beirut his latest productions, quite erotic and very much debated such as Decameron, Canterbury Tales and Arabian Nights. And it is paradoxical that this filmmaker, who is becoming “cursed” for us as his latest production his forbidden, is now the one who is the most accessible to us”.⁵⁹¹

The quote illustrates how Beirut’s position as a cosmopolitan capital allowed for fleeting transgressions, but not for full confrontations with the most controversial aspects of Pasolini’s work. The selective visibility of his films revealed the delicate balancing act cultural institutions had to perform, negotiating between censorship, public morality, and the ambition to remain intellectually provocative. That Pasolini was “the most accessible” at Dar el Fan, despite being banned elsewhere, affirmed the centre’s role within this landscape: a porous space where contradiction was not only tolerated but also generative. In navigating the boundaries of the permissible, Dar el Fan offered a platform where radical aesthetic and political gestures could shortly surface, gesturing toward broader possibilities of solidarity and dissent.

Pasolini’s presence at Dar el Fan did more than offer audiences a rare encounter with a towering figure of European cinema. It marked a moment of convergence between radical aesthetic practice and the charged atmosphere of intellectual engagement in Lebanon. At a time when Beirut was grappling with competing visions of modernity, identity, and liberation, Pasolini’s films (steeped in myth, irreverence, and subversion) spoke powerfully to ongoing debates around power, marginality, and social transformation. The ambivalent responses in the Lebanese press, which ranged from admiration to disquiet, underscored the generative

⁵⁹¹ Boulad, « Pasolini, images et idées ».

friction his work introduced into the cultural sphere. More than a passive screening of foreign cinema, the Pasolini Film Festival became a space of dialogue between East and West, tradition and rebellion, censorship and artistic freedom, Western modernity and anti-imperialism. In this context, Pasolini's visit must be understood as part of Dar el Fan's broader project: forging transnational aesthetic solidarities that nurtured experimental forms of cultural and political imagination.

4.3.3 Between Art and Soft Power: The Organisation and Reception of *Seven British Sculptors* at Dar el Fan

The previous sections have examined Dar el Fan's collaborations with American and Soviet institutions—events that can be read through the lens of Cold War diplomacy, even if local actors often negotiated them with a degree of autonomy. The case of Grotowski was also analysed; his presence in Beirut already occupied a more nuanced and less rigid position between politics and experimentation. In light of such considerations, it becomes possible to approach yet another register of international engagement. As already introduced in the case of Pasolini, not all encounters at Dar el Fan were received primarily as instruments of cultural diplomacy. Some foregrounded the aesthetic, the experimental, and the curiosity for artistic dialogue, carving out a fragile and shifting space where artistic exchange could move beyond (and free from) ideological imperatives. In these instances, cultural diplomacy intersected with a genuine will for knowledge, producing moments that were less about aligning with geopolitical blocs than about testing new formal vocabularies and engaging with the unfamiliar.

The exhibition *Seven British Sculptors* (April 1970) exemplifies this dimension. While the event could certainly be situated within broader patterns of European cultural projection in the Cold War, its resonance in Beirut lay above all in the encounter with experimental sculptural languages and in the possibility of re-situating them within local debates. In this sense, it marked a continuation of Dar el Fan's role as a space where art circulated both within and outside of diplomatic frameworks, allowing experimentation and aesthetic inquiry to unfold alongside, and sometimes in tension with, the geopolitical pressures of the time.

The exhibition was organised in collaboration with the British Council and the Anglo-Lebanese association.⁵⁹² The show marked the final stop in an ambitious world tour that had already attracted tens of thousands of visitors in Cairo, New Delhi, and Istanbul. Its arrival in Beirut signalled not only a moment of international visibility for the Lebanese capital but also a deepening of Dar el Fan's commitment to presenting ambitious modernist art to its local audiences. Featuring 26 sculptures and 12 drawings by leading British artists including Henry Moore (1898-1986), Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), Lynn Chadwick (1914-2003), Robert Adams (1917-1984), Kenneth Armitage (1916-2002), Geoffrey Clarke (1924-2014), and Hubert Dalwood (1924-1976), the exhibition offered what the catalogue described as an "anthology of British sculpture in its *'phase d'éclosion'* (burgeoning phase)."⁵⁹³

As the curatorial text by David Thompson noted, the show did not aim to be retrospective or comprehensive, but rather to illustrate "what seven leading British sculptors were doing during

⁵⁹² According to journalist Nelly Helou, the Anglo-Lebanese Association was born a couple of years earlier, and it aimed at promoting mutual exchanges between the two countries through cultural and philanthropic initiatives. It is unclear whether this was a prelude to the British-Lebanese Association established in 1984. See Nelly Helou, « À Dar el Fan : La sculpture britannique entre le figuratif et l'abstrait » *Magazine*, no. 696, 23.04.1970, 82, 83.

⁵⁹³ Booklet of the exhibition, Archive of MACAM.

the second half of the 1950s” and to show “what the best British sculpture tended to look like in that period”.⁵⁹⁴ In this sense, it staged a moment of emergence, marking the consolidation of post-war British sculpture and its formal language as a force within the international avant-garde (Fig. 20).

The logistical effort required to bring the exhibition to Beirut was considerable. Several of the sculptures were monumental in scale, weighing over 400 kilograms. Dar el Fan’s indoor gallery space could not accommodate them all, and the largest pieces were installed in the courtyard garden. Press coverage emphasised the challenge of securing works from major museums and private collections, as well as the diplomatic effort involved in navigating international loans. Lady Cochrane, president of the Anglo-Lebanese Association and member of Dar el Fan’s Executive Board, noted that preparations had taken over a year.⁵⁹⁵

The exhibition was inaugurated by British Ambassador Cecil King and received significant attention in the Lebanese press, with articles on *Le Jour*, *L’Orient*, *Magazine* and *La Revue*. Among the most insightful responses was the review by Nelly Helou, titled *À Dar el Fan: la sculpture britannique entre le figuratif et l’abstrait* (At Dar el Fan the British sculpture between figurative and abstraction). Helou’s article serves not only as a record of the exhibition’s contents and layout, but also as a glimpse into the critical reception of abstract sculpture in Beirut at the time. Through her interpretive descriptions, Helou offers a framework for understanding how local audiences may have encountered and engaged with these forms. Helou opens her review with a quoted metaphor (of uncertain origin) that likens sculpture to a man walking with one foot grounded in tradition and the other reaching toward the future.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Helou, « À Dar el Fan : La sculpture britannique ».

This dual movement becomes a motif throughout the article, one that mirrors the exhibition's own curatorial stance: looking simultaneously backward to classical form and forward to abstraction. Helou asserts that sculpture evolves more slowly than painting; it is less immediately striking, more resistant to sudden breaks with the past. She positions modern sculpture as an art of gradual reformulation rather than revolution.

Upon entering the grounds of Dar el Fan, visitors were met with Henry Moore's *Woman*, a massive figure placed in the garden, whose bulky body contrasted starkly with its diminutive head, a formal tension typical of Moore's post-war works. Nearby stood *Mother and Child*, echoing the same monumental tenderness. A quote from Moore, "It is through the study of nature that I have discovered the principles of form and rhythm" was reported in Helou's article, anchoring the works in an organic logic that possibly wanted to resonate with viewers familiar with figuration. For Helou, Moore's sculptures evoked an instinctive humanism, their weight and asymmetry conveying both gravity and grace.

Helou emphasizes the pairing of Moore and Barbara Hepworth, noting, "Since art critics often associate them, Dar el Fan has not felt it appropriate to separate them." Hepworth's *Curved Form (Trevangan)* was also placed in the garden. A U-shaped sculpture perforated with a void near its base, it invited viewers to contemplate negative space as an active sculptural element. Helou praises the work's harmony and elegance, describing it as a "symphony of lines" that opens itself to light and air. Yet her interpretation is tinged with gendered essentialism: "*La sensibilité féminine chez Barbara Hepworth*," (The feminine sensibility of Barbara Hepworth) she writes, attributing the sculpture's formal delicacy and sense of enclosure to feminine sensitivity. While intended as praise, this framing reduces Hepworth's abstraction to emotional traits aligned with gender, overlooking the rigour and metaphysical ambition that underpin her practice.

Also in the garden were two avian forms by Bernard Meadows: *The Fallen Bird* and *The Frightened Bird*. These angular creatures, with their tense postures and rough surfaces, captured a feeling of anguish that Helou identifies as a core emotional register of the exhibition. Inside the gallery, visitors encountered the sharp-lined, textured forms of Lynn Chadwick, whose hybrid figures (half-man, half-machine) exemplified the sculptural language of post-war unease. "It is perhaps Chadwick," Helou writes, "who contributed most to forging the formal vocabulary of the postwar period." His sculptures, simultaneously aerodynamic and coarse, offered a visual allegory for the contradictions of modern life, where "sensitivity and violence fused in a single gesture".

The human figure, deformed and abstracted, was also central to works by Kenneth Armitage, whose legless and headless bodies recalled tree trunks more than living beings. Robert Adams, by contrast, pursued a more architectural language of purity, favouring smooth surfaces and linear compositions that Helou described as "among the most refined of his generation." Hubert Dalwood's works, positioned near those of Adams and Chadwick in the article's layout, occupied a space between abstraction and symbolism, reflecting his move away from the human figure toward more ambiguous forms.

Helou's review is as much a meditation on the exhibition as it is a reflection on Beirut's art public. She notes that the Lebanese audience remains "*réticent*" (reluctant) toward sculpture, particularly of the abstract kind, observing that painting, which she describes as more immediate in its use of colour and imagery, tends to attract larger crowds. Sculpture, she writes, is "more difficult to understand and to love," especially when it abandons figuration.

Yet she insists that the exhibition offers local viewers a vital opportunity “to know and appreciate the value of new conceptions in modern sculpture.”⁵⁹⁶

Indeed, the reception of *Seven British Sculptors* at Dar el Fan (especially as mediated by Helou) offers an example of how the centre staged encounters with international modernisms outside Cold War ideological binaries. While the exhibition was facilitated by the British Council, a state cultural organ with diplomatic aims and could be read through a Cold War lens, its afterlife in Beirut cannot be reduced to that framework and its local reception suggests a more layered reading. Helou interprets it as an aesthetic event, one that demands close attention to form, material, and affect. This mode of reception speaks to Dar el Fan’s broader curatorial practice: international exhibitions were not merely staged as reflections of geopolitical alignments, but as occasions for critical encounter and experimentation. Once situated within Dar el Fan, the artworks were refracted through local debates—between figuration and abstraction, monumentality and intimacy, post-war reconstruction and postcolonial redefinition. In this sense, the exhibition became less an act of soft power than a site of negotiation, where audiences appropriated and reinterpreted what was presented in ways that exceeded or even subverted its initial diplomatic intent. What matters, then, is not only the geopolitical logic that enabled the exhibition’s arrival, but also the agency of those who engaged with it, finding in the encounter resonances that spoke to their own historical and aesthetic concerns.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

Placing Dar el Fan “on the global map” revealed the dense and shifting network of cultural exchanges in which the institution was enmeshed. This chapter has argued that Dar el Fan functioned not only as a mirror of these entanglements but also as an active agent within them, shaping the contours of artistic circulation and intellectual dialogue in Beirut during the 1960s and 1970s. Far from being a peripheral or passive receiver of external currents, the centre emerges here as a “minor actor” with a distinctive capacity to mediate, reframe, and localise encounters that bore the weight of global ideological conflict, regional solidarities, and experimental aesthetic inquiry.

The case studies presented throughout this chapter have illustrated how these dynamics unfolded in practice. Dar el Fan’s collaborations with the American cultural centre and artists such as Paul Lingren highlighted the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping transnational artistic flows. These initiatives were not innocent of geopolitical strategy: they formed part of the United States’ attempt to extend its soft power, promote abstraction as a symbol of freedom and individualism, and secure allies in a region marked by growing Soviet influence. Yet within Beirut, these gestures were received and reconfigured through Dar el Fan’s own institutional logics. Local artists and intellectuals did not engage with American cultural programmes simply as consumers of propaganda, but as participants in workshops, dialogues, and exhibitions that enriched their own practices. The pedagogical dimension of Lingren’s visit, for instance, became an occasion for Lebanese artists to experiment with new forms of engraving and printmaking, thus embedding an American cultural initiative within a Lebanese matrix of artistic innovation. This demonstrates how Dar el Fan could harness Cold War diplomacy to serve its own cultural agenda, asserting agency even within asymmetrical structures of power.

Equally, the centre's encounters with the Soviet Union exposed Lebanese audiences to a different ideological and aesthetic horizon. Exhibitions of Soviet prints, concerts of Eastern European musicians, and film screenings brought to Beirut the artistic languages of Socialist Realism and its variants. More importantly, the return exhibitions of Lebanese artists such as Wahib Bteddini and Nazem Irani, both trained in Moscow, embodied the contradictions of Soviet cultural policy. While these artists absorbed the techniques and thematic emphases of their training abroad, their works also revealed the tensions between imitation and innovation, between adherence to a state-sponsored style and the search for a more personal or national artistic vocabulary. Here again, Dar el Fan functioned less as a passive recipient of ideological exports and more as a site where the complexities of these exchanges could be rendered visible, debated, and reframed within the Lebanese context. The very juxtaposition of Soviet prints and the work of Lebanese graduates in a single exhibition demonstrates how the centre positioned itself as a mediator of global artistic currents, encouraging audiences to engage critically with the cultural forms on offer.

The second axis of the chapter shifted toward the Arab world, where Dar el Fan played a vital role in the articulation of pan-Arabist artistic solidarities. From the "month of Egypt" to the exhibition of Syrian painters and the engagements with Iraqi cultural institutions, the centre anchored Beirut within a transnational Arab cultural geography. These initiatives must be understood against the background of regional efforts to create a shared artistic language. The founding of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists in 1971 or the biennales in Baghdad and Rabat, formed part of this larger aspiration to institutionalise Arab art. Dar el Fan, while not a state body, contributed significantly to this momentum, offering its platform to artists and intellectuals who sought to weave local traditions into collective visions of modern art. The

centre's role was thus not only to display art but to convene conversations, create solidarities, and embed Lebanese cultural production within a wider Arab and Third Worldist horizon.

Yet perhaps the most revealing dimension of Dar el Fan's global entanglements lies in the space it opened for aesthetic experimentation beyond immediate political frameworks. The visits of Jerzy Grotowski and Pier Paolo Pasolini, or the exhibition of British sculpture, illustrate how the centre also operated as a laboratory for experimental forms of cultural encounter. Grotowski's *Prince Constant* was staged not as an instrument of Polish diplomacy, but as an opportunity for Beirut audiences to experience a radical rethinking of theatrical form. Pasolini's presence, with his provocative blending of politics, religion, and sexuality, expanded the perspective on the debates on modernity and capitalism of the Lebanese audience. The British exhibition demonstrated how European cultural projection could be refracted through local curiosity: while it may be situated within broader Cold War cultural strategies, in Beirut it was received above all as an encounter with a form of abstraction, and the evolving language of such form within a debate that was ongoing in the country.

These examples underscore an important point: Dar el Fan's international connections should not be reduced to (or read only as) instruments of diplomacy or propaganda. Rather, they reveal the coexistence of different registers—ideological, political, aesthetic—that often overlapped but could not be collapsed into one another. Through the diverse spectrum of its initiatives, it created spaces where even ideological projects were negotiated, contested, or re-signified, and where the sheer pursuit of artistic knowledge was not obscured by political interests. To place Dar el Fan on the global map, then, is to recognise its layered and multifaceted character. It was embedded within Cold War diplomacy, Arab nationalism, and experimentalism, yet never reducible to any one of these frameworks. It exemplified the view

from a site beyond the major Cold War poles, where minor actors exerted their own agency in mediating global flows. In this sense, Dar el Fan reminds us that the global cultural history of the Cold War and the postcolonial world cannot be written solely from the perspective of Washington, Moscow, Cairo, or Paris. Beirut, through institutions like Dar el Fan, constituted a crossroads where these currents converged, were refracted, and acquired new meanings.

Finally, this chapter has sought to show that Dar el Fan's significance lies not only in the events it hosted but also in the broader cultural geography it made visible. By mapping the centre's connections to the United States and the USSR, to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, to Europe, we see how Beirut was situated within a dense web of exchanges that spanned ideological divides and geographic distances. This wider map complicates any attempt to position Lebanese modernism as either derivative of external models or isolated within national boundaries. Instead, it reveals a field of negotiation and hybridity in which Dar el Fan was a crucial mediator. Its legacy, then, is not merely that of a local cultural centre, but of a transnational hub whose activities illuminate the interplay of politics and aesthetics in a formative historical moment, articulating a vision of culture that was at once distinctly Lebanese and deeply international.

Chapter V. Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's curatorial activities during the Civil War⁵⁹⁷

"Dar el Fan was completely destroyed and looted, only a few archives could be saved. These thin sheets, witnesses of our effort, seem very precious to us today, because it was perhaps the only conscious work that was carried out in order to unite, to link, to establish a dialogue."⁵⁹⁸

With these lines, Janine Rubeiz refers to the destruction of Dar el Fan. With the outbreak of the Civil War, the centre halted its activities in the autumn of 1975, as the building was situated along Bishara el Khoury Street, which turned into the infamous Green Line that divided East and West Beirut during the conflict. The war dispersed the members of the Executive Board, Rubeiz's close friends among artists and intellectuals, as well as Dar el Fan's regular audience that either left the country or was unable to move freely in the city. In early 1976, the building was heavily damaged, scattering irreparably the archives and records of events that Rubeiz and other members had meticulously kept for eight years. Despite no longer having access to the building, the atrocities of the war and its impact on the cultural life of Beirut, Rubeiz continued her cultural mission until her death in 1992. However, the loss of a physical location hindered the execution of events that were previously central to Dar el Fan's activities such as public lectures, exhibitions and community gatherings. When possible, these had to be organised in other venues that did not have the same impact or social relevance of Dar el Fan. In order to address these difficulties, Rubeiz began developing alternative strategies to sustain the centre's mission.

⁵⁹⁷ An earlier version of this chapter was published in von Maltzahn (ed.) "Lebanon's Visual Arts in the 1980s: Artistic Production and Reception in a Conflicted Decade", *Manazir Journal*, vol.7, 2025.

⁵⁹⁸ From a text written by Janine Rubeiz, probably February 1976. Archive of Dar el Fan.

This chapter discusses Rubeiz's most significant artistic initiatives during the Civil War, still using Dar el Fan's identity as an umbrella, although the centre had ceased to operate as such.⁵⁹⁹ These encompass two large-scale exhibitions, namely *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*, and the organisation of a smaller art space at her own apartment.⁶⁰⁰ It traces her commitment to supporting cultural production throughout the conflict, which serves as a key entry point for analysing her use of art as a vehicle for social engagement. Indeed, the intention to define a Lebanese "personality" would become especially vital during these years, when Rubeiz sought to use Dar el Fan's curatorial programming as a means of fostering social cohesion amid escalating fragmentation.

Throughout my analysis, I will draw on concepts of art agency⁶⁰¹ and exhibitionary sociality⁶⁰² which consider art not merely as an object but as a relational experience, and exhibitions as dynamic players in the social and cultural discourse rather than static displays. In this sense, they became imbued with dimensions that extended beyond their primary functions.⁶⁰³ Together, *Liban 78*, *Beirut Tabaan* and the home gallery constituted spaces of agency where resilience was articulated amidst the war, enabling audiences to confront, negotiate, and reshape their understandings of identity, history, and community. More specifically, *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* served as social gatherings where a collective memory of the conflict was

⁵⁹⁹ Rubeiz remained active in the organisation of politically-oriented events throughout the civil war, however their analysis is beyond the scope of this article. Namely, in 1981, she launched the lecture series "The Christians and the Arabs"; in 1984, "Lebanon and the Sectarian Structure"; and in 1987, "Dialogue for Unity". These were all aimed at fostering national reflection, promoting dialogue across sectarian and ideological divides, and affirming a civic vision for Lebanon's future amid the ongoing conflict.

⁶⁰⁰ Rubeiz also co-curated the exhibition of the private collection of Ambassador Salah Stétié in June 1988. This exhibition is not discussed in the chapter, as it did not have the same social impact of *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*.

⁶⁰¹ On the concept of agency related to art, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Clarendon Press, 1998) and Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (De Gruyter, 2021).

⁶⁰² See Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds. *Thinking about Exhibitions* (Routledge, 1996).

⁶⁰³ An important precedent for the analysis of the social component in relation to artistic practices in Lebanon is set by Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*.

shaped. The home gallery provided a haven for artists, but more importantly, constituted an informal space for encounters and dialogue across different generations and sects. The analysis also illustrates how Dar el Fan evolved in response to the crisis. During the war, its role began to shift: whereas it had previously operated primarily as a cultural institution, it increasingly took on the function of fostering a social bond. Although differently, these initiatives became a tool for the elaboration of the lived violence and the constitution of a social group necessary for the very own survival of the nation.⁶⁰⁴

5.1 “The Lebanon we want for tomorrow”: *Proposal for a Cultural Policy and Liban 78*

The Lebanese Civil War took place from 1975 to 1990 and was one of the most devastating conflicts of the late twentieth century. In addition to the large number of dead, much of Lebanon’s infrastructure was shattered and the war had a deep, long-term impact on the art and cultural scene, affecting both organisations and artists’ production, with consequences that undermined the vibrant cultural scene of pre-war times. The conflict destabilised the network of official and unofficial cultural places and meeting spaces and the social fabric of intellectuals, artists, and journalists that animated it.⁶⁰⁵ In spite of this, exhibitions and cultural events did continue to happen throughout the war,⁶⁰⁶ though at a much lower pace, following the rhythm of the conflict.

⁶⁰⁴ See for instance Anja Peleikis, “The Making and Unmaking of Memories: The Case of a Multi-Confessional Village in Lebanon”, in Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein (eds.), *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁶⁰⁵ See for instance von Maltzahn (ed.) “Lebanon’s Visual Arts in the 1980s: Artistic Production and Reception in a Conflicted Decade”, *Manazir Journal*, vol.7, 2025, and the LAWHA database www.lebanonartworld.com alongside the already mentioned Maasri’s *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* and Rogers’ *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut. Maasri’s Off the Wall. Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (IB Tauris, 2009) traces the events of the civil war through the production of posters.

⁶⁰⁶ See for instance Hakim, “Reprise du rythme des expositions. Cinq peintres libanais à la Chase Manhattan Bank », *La Revue Du Liban*, No. 918, April 1977, 46 for an early account.

After having continued Dar el Fan's activities amidst the clashes and bomb explosions of the first months of the war, Janine Rubeiz recalls, "On 12 September 1975 we had to leave our headquarters in disaster [...]. During the summer of 1975, keeping optimistic, we had established almost completely the programme of the upcoming season. But we had to face the facts."⁶⁰⁷ Soon the area became a battlefield for the militias, and the building was heavily damaged. In February 1976, *An-Nahar* published a short statement from Dar el Fan, announcing the destruction and the looting of the building with the following words: "We hope that we can rescue some intellectual documents to remain a witness to our cultural activities and a contribution to the building of a better future."⁶⁰⁸

The war and the destruction of Dar el Fan's headquarter had a profound impact on Rubeiz, who retired from the cultural scene for two years. Disheartened by the lack of government support for the cultural sector, she reflected about cultural policies and practices, pondering on the growing challenges for the Lebanese artistic community. In this period of introspection, she participated in the discussion over the creation of a Ministry of Culture. Such debate in Lebanon was recurrent, involving various cultural and intellectual figures at a height in the early 1970s.⁶⁰⁹ In March 1971, Dar el Fan had hosted a debate titled "For a Ministry of Culture", chaired by poet and Lebanese nationalist Said Akl, with the participation of the French and Polish cultural attachés, the founder of *L'Orient*, Georges Naccache, and Wassek Adib, who

⁶⁰⁷ Rubeiz, « Vers une reprise des activités de Dar el-Fan » *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 28.03.1980. See also Rubeiz « La parole est à Janine » in *Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan*, 22-23.

⁶⁰⁸ "Dār al-Fan w-al-Adab taḥaṭṭamat muḥtawayātihā wa-nuhibat" [Dar el Fan was destroyed and its content was looted], *An-Nahar*, 05.02.1976.

⁶⁰⁹ On the debate about the establishment of a Ministry of Culture, see von Maltzahn, "Ministry of Culture or no Ministry of Culture?".

stressed how a dedicated ministry could help artists and intellectuals feel more connected to their nation.

Rubeiz reflections culminated in her deeply considered 1977 *Proposal for a Cultural Policy* (*lqīrāhāt min ajl siyāsah thaqāfiyyah*), which appeared in local newspapers. Addressing the then-president Elias Sarkis, the *Proposal* emphasised the role of culture and the urgent need for concrete government support, calling for the establishment of a Ministry of Culture from which all Lebanese citizens could benefit.⁶¹⁰ Importantly, the manifesto defined culture as “a conscious and unconscious foundation for society.”⁶¹¹ Building on this premise the Ministry’s role should be to ensure an egalitarian access to culture. This would foster cohesion within the country and lay the groundwork for building a strong Lebanese nation, because “it [was] only through culture that Lebanese citizenship [would] be realised on a profound level.”⁶¹² The publication of the *Proposal* after two years of Civil War was significant to empower artists as citizens with an active role in promoting culture as a unifying tool in time of crisis.

The *Proposal* was released a few weeks before the opening of the large-scale exhibition *Liban 78*, which seems to reinforce the central premise of the *Proposal* by positioning culture as a site for reflecting on the present, and imagining a more hopeful collective future. Within this framework, *Liban 78* was not merely a display of artistic works, but a performative and civic gesture in itself. Its theme, “the Lebanon we want and hope for tomorrow”⁶¹³ and the visuality

⁶¹⁰ For a brief introduction and English translation, see Lenssen, Rogers and Shabout (eds.), *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 415-419; Rubeiz, *lqīrāhāt min ajl siyāsah thaqāfiyyah li-khalq al-muwāṭin al-lubnānī al-jadīd* [Proposal for a cultural policy to create the new Lebanese citizen], *Al-Ahrar*, 1977.

⁶¹¹ Lenssen, Rogers and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 415.

⁶¹² *Ibid.* 418.

⁶¹³ Rubeiz, « Vers une reprise », 1980.

of the artworks proposed an elaboration of the lived violence and a narrative of the war and its aftermaths.

Held at the Glass Hall of the Ministry of Tourism in West Beirut in November 1977, *Liban 78* came at a time when many believed the Civil War was drawing to a close. It was preceded by an open call issued through various local newspapers, inviting visual artists to participate. A prize of 1.500 Lebanese lira was also established and awarded to the best artwork, sponsored by the National Council for Tourism Development and in line with Dar el Fan's mission of offering concrete support to artists. Aref el Rayess, then-president of LAAPS, designed the poster for the exhibition (Fig. 21).

Liban 78 grouped around 100 Lebanese artists and displayed roughly 150 artworks encompassing different media such as sculpture, engraving, murals, photography and tapestry.⁶¹⁴ The participants ranged from established figures like el Rayess, Shafic Abboud, Paul Guiragossian, Huguette Caland, Yvette Achkar, the Basbous brothers, and Saloua Raouda Choucair, to emerging talents such as Samir Abi Rashed, Hassan Jouni, and Nadia Baydoun; many others were simply amateurs. This mix of seasoned artists and new voices highlighted once again Dar el Fan's mission to nurture diverse artistic expressions and support young creatives alongside better-known ones. The exhibition was articulated into a main section serving as a focal point, and sub-sections celebrating the artistic contributions of specific regions. A special "Parisian section" featured Lebanese artists based in Paris, for instance, offering a glimpse into their diverse perspectives and experiences. These included Assadour, Juliana Seraphim, Solange Tarazi, Huguette Caland, Moazzaz Raouda, and Nadia Saikali, the

⁶¹⁴ These figures need to be treated cautiously. The exact number of the artists is unknown, some sources report 98, some 99 and another 103. According to the newspaper *Al Mustaqbal* the artworks were 192, with 168 paintings, seven murals and 17 sculptures. *L'Orient-Le Jour* records 147 artworks selected among the 300 submitted.

latter contributing a mural sent from the French capital.⁶¹⁵ The reviews mention that other sections, focused on artists from the south and from Tripoli, were represented as well, without however, providing further details.

Although no catalogue was produced, the available documentation of press clippings with the images of the artworks show that most of the pieces were influenced by what was commonly referred to as “the events”⁶¹⁶ between 1975 and 1977. Noteworthy works included Samir Abi Rashed’s *Salvation* and *The Phoenix*, Achkar’s *The Reconstruction*, and Moussa Tiba’s *The Exodus*.⁶¹⁷ The titles of these artworks provide an indication of the thematic focus as well as their visual content. Together, they not only reflected the urgency of the moment but also functioned as visual agents of memory and future aspiration.

In this sense, the artworks in *Liban 78* and the exhibition as a whole should be read in light of the perception of the war that had devastated the country for two years. Images both *of* the conflict and *in* the conflict bear what Bredekamp defines as a “Medusa-like power” on the spectator.⁶¹⁸ Far from being passive, they generate feelings, create experiences and actions in relation to perception and they shape the reality around them. In doing so, they acquire an active, performative nature in shaping how societies remember, process, and rebuild during and after conflict. Thus, within a context of conflict and fragility, the exhibition itself, as an act of coming together, and many of the artworks on display, with their visual content and titles,

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Such terminology is the most common to address the clashes and bombings during the civil war, which were rarely described using the word “war”.

⁶¹⁷ Habib Shawq, “Ru’ā 99 rassāman wa-naḥḥātan “Lubnān 78” takhluqu fī al-nafs jawwan min al-ṭuma’nīna wa-l-rāḥa” [Visions of 99 painters and sculpture of Lebanon 78 create an atmosphere of tranquillity and comfort in the soul], *Al Bayrak*, 07.11.1977.

⁶¹⁸ Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (De Gruyter, 2021).

acted as a galvanising tool to foster unity and an impetus towards “the future” amid the audience.

This is echoed in the extensive media coverage of the exhibition, where a discernible will to move on from the events of the 1975–76 war⁶¹⁹ is predominant, privileging present concerns and future possibilities over retrospective analyses. Reviews described it as a celebration of the artistic community that was still active in Lebanon after two years of war, and that was longing for peace and a reprise of cultural activities. One newspaper defined the fighting of the past two years as “an hour of childish anger that had passed,”⁶²⁰ overlooking a deep understanding of the conflict in favour of the urgent desire to move beyond the turmoil. An article titled *A national artistic uprising from under the tragedy*, portrayed Lebanon as a fragmented nation while underlining a creative uplift with the power of bridging divides and embody unity.⁶²¹ Again, the pages of *Al Shorouq* praised *Liban 78* as an exceptional artistic display.⁶²²

With 150 artworks on display, *Liban 78* seems to have prioritised the inclusion of the widest possible range of artists and works over strict curatorial selection. One of the most common criticisms was that the choice of the artworks did not adhere to conventional aesthetic standards. Some critics argued that works were included regardless of their artistic quality,

⁶¹⁹ Although commonly known as “two-year war”, this first phase of the conflict lasted from April 1975 to November 1976. This period was marked by intense sectarian violence, including the massacres in the Palestinian camp of Tel el-Za’atar and in the Christian villages in Damour. It culminated with the partition of Lebanon in early 1976, with Muslim-controlled areas in the South and Christian-controlled areas in the North. The first phase of the war terminated with the intervention of Syria in 1976, whose involvement marked a shift in the conflict.

⁶²⁰ “Fī ma’raḍ 1978 99 fannānan lubnāniyyan ya’riḍūn namādhij wa-alwān” [In the exhibition 1978, 99 Lebanese artists displayed models and colours], *Al Shorouq*, 05.11.1977.

⁶²¹ “Intifāḍa fanniyya waṭaniyya min taḥt al-ma’sāt!” [A national artistic uprising from under the tragedy!] *Al Mustaqbal*, 12.11.1977.

⁶²² “Fī ma’raḍ 1978 99 fannānan lubnāniyyan...” *Al Shorouq*, 05.11.1977.

stressing their immature and utopian approach. Abi Saleh in the Phalange-affiliated *Le Reveil*⁶²³ claimed that the lack of curatorial discernment weakened the impact of the exhibition, which was proposed by an institution that was supposed to guide the Lebanese public in both politics and art. He described it as “a medley of the best and the worst” stressing the faults of a jury that opted to include everything resulting into a *kermesse* which shifted the focus, the potential and the quality of some of the artworks.⁶²⁴ The critic writes: “A group exhibition [...] is not prepared like a charity ball. It is not enough to promote national unity for the exhibition to be a success.”⁶²⁵ In his opinion, the exhibition’s themes mainly seemed to revolve around clichéd slogans and motives in relation to “the nation” or national unity, without delving into a proper evaluation and selection of the artworks, thus feeding an “artistic confusion”⁶²⁶ unworthy to represent the Lebanese scene.

While *Le Reveil* might have been sceptical of artists and artistic production falling outside the official canon, this review reinforces the social role of an exhibition whose significance was, regardless of its declared curatorial statement, to constitute a space of resilience where violence was processed, and possibly surpassed, through visual culture. Indeed, many acknowledged the exhibition’s unifying force in a fragmented country and an antidote to war, to revive a sense of solidarity. Rubeiz herself asserted that “we do not believe that the role of culture at this stage can go in any other direction.”⁶²⁷ *Liban 78* functioned as a bridge for communities to come together, interact, and build social connections while grappling with complex themes such as conflict, nationhood, and identity. In this sense, the exhibition enacted

⁶²³ The newspaper was started by Amine Gemayel in 1977 and often featured translated articles from the official Phalange newspaper, *al-'Amal*.

⁶²⁴ « L'exposition Liban 78. Une sarabande du meilleur et du pire », *Le Reveil*, November 1977.

⁶²⁵ Ibid. « Une exposition collective [...] ne se prépare pas comme un bal de charité. Il ne suffit pas de bêler l'unité nationale pour que l'exposition réussisse ». Translation by the author.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ “Ma’raq 78: ittijāh thaqāfī wāḥid... mutawaḥḥid!”, *Al Shorouq*, 08.11.1977.

a form of collective agency where civil society was not only represented but also actively constituted through a cultural initiative. The act of cultural gathering was transformed into a statement of resilience and shared belonging. Both the exhibition and the art on display offered a paradigm of engagement with the concept of “being Lebanese” and its negotiation during the Civil War. Belonging was understood as a cultural and performative practice in which artists, curators, and audiences asserted their “Lebaneseness”. Within this context, this took the form of a citizenship grounded in a shared presence, participation and hope for the future. In such way, the central theme and the artworks played a crucial role in shaping a memory of the lived war, nurturing a national bond rooted in a cultural production that aimed at offering a *visible* alternative “tomorrow”.

5.2 Redefining creative spaces: How Janine Rubeiz’s home gallery reimagined Dar el

Fan

To overcome the loss of a space and the closure of many galleries in the capital, some started hosting exhibitions in private apartments.⁶²⁸ Janine Rubeiz resorted to using her flat in the Scotch Club Building in Raouche (West Beirut) as exhibition space and meeting place, a practice, as we have seen in Chapter 1, she had already developed in the early 1960s, before the opening of a designated space. During the Civil War, she became one of the most active cultural hosts, her presence representing a point of reference in the fragile cultural scene. This section will explore the dual nature of Rubeiz’s home gallery. On one level, it functioned as a resilient space that sustained cultural production amid the devastation of war. On a deeper

⁶²⁸ We have seen in Chapter 2 that Samia Toutounji, for instance, used to organise exhibitions at her place, before opening Gallery Platform in the mid-1980s.

one, it became a haven for encounter and dialogue, a site where new forms of community were forged. In this sense, it did not simply replace Dar el Fan, but rather extended its ethos into a more intimate network of interactions. Even in the absence of the formal institution, the spirit of Dar el Fan persisted, carried forward through relationships, memories, and artistic practices that transcended its physical space. This persistence of cultural life, operating through informal gatherings, emotional attachment, and collective memory, suggests that absence itself became a mode of presence, shaping how the institution's legacy was lived and reimagined.

Rubeiz opened up her house in December 1980 to exhibit the works of artist Michel Akl (1922-1997). After having studied with Cesar Gemayel and Omar Onsi, Akl exhibited his work in Beirut throughout the 1960s, but his house was destroyed during the war and most of his artworks were dispersed. Rubeiz was committed to provide him with economic support in a city where opportunities for artists had become scarce. The exhibition featured 46 pieces,⁶²⁹ including canvases, paintings on Masonite, and china ink drawings. Roughly half of the works were sold, indicating that both the public and the market were still active during the conflict. In October 1987, she displayed the work of Halim Jurdak, who had for long been among Rubeiz's circle, had participated in the foundation of Dar el Fan and exhibited there in 1970. A graduate from ALBA, Jurdak also lived and studied in Paris, travelled extensively in Europe and was well known within the cultural community in Lebanon, where he was a member of LAAPS. His work underwent different phases and subjects, spanning figurative and non-figurative abstraction, cubism and nature painting.⁶³⁰ The 1987 exhibition, titled *L'Eternel féminin*, presented a

⁶²⁹ According to the price list preserved in the archives.

⁶³⁰ On the work of Halim Jurdak see *Halim Jurdak - A Self Portrait*, (Fine Art Consulting and Publishing, n.d.).

collection of 53 abstract nude paintings that the artist had worked on for three years. The artworks focused on the female body, portrayed in the style of abstract expressionism. Colour and its application were central to the pieces, featuring minimal details and blurred lines that evoked a sense of suspension in both space and time. Rather than emphasizing their exterior appearance, the bodies seemed to invite a deeper, introspective analysis.⁶³¹ The opening of the exhibition saw a positive turnout and the presence of established artists Hussein Madi and Amine el Bacha, alongside younger artists such as Mohammad Rawas and Loulou Bassiri.⁶³² This way, Rubeiz's apartment served as a meeting place not only for the exchange of artistic ideas but also to foster encounters and dialogues among artists of different generations and across sectarian backgrounds.

Exhibitions for artists who had remained in Lebanon were not limited to her apartment only. In December 1985, she organised a solo show for emerging talent Mahmoud Zibawi (b.1962) at the Carlton Hotel. A second exhibition of his work followed in 1987 at ALBA. At the Carlton, he presented around thirty mixed media paintings and about twenty charcoal and China ink drawings. In line with his previous production, Zibawi focused on the human face, paying particular attention to its expressions. While the subjects in his earlier work were characterised by a sense of anguish, the ones exhibited at the Carlton seem to be more concerned with meditation and introspection. The style drew inspiration from abstraction as well as from what was defined by both the artist and some critics as "Byzantine" aesthetics,⁶³³ for the centrality

⁶³¹ See Sultan, "Ḥalīm Jurdāq fī ma'riḍihi "al-Anūtha al-Khālida". Ḥurriyyat al-alwān wa-ḥurriyyat istikhdām al-tiqaniyyāt al-mukhtalifa" [Halim Jurdak in his exhibition 'L'Eternel Féminin'. Freedom of colours and freedom to use different techniques] *As-Safir*, 11.10.1987. The exhibition was covered by *An-Nahar*, *Al-Liwa'*, *L'Orient-Le Jour*, and others.

⁶³² « Sous les auspices de Dar el Fan, Halim Jurdak, nouvelle manière » *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 10.10.1987.

⁶³³ Zibawi collaborates with the cultural pages of the main Lebanese newspapers with contributions on painting and poetry. He is known for his expertise in icons, with several publications on the topic, such as *L'Icône. Sense*

of the human figure and the use of gold in the background, in contrast with the darker tones employed in the previous portraits. Rubeiz described the exhibition as able to “illustrate very well the Islamic and Christian heritage of Lebanon”.⁶³⁴ This reading is particularly interesting amidst a backdrop of a war fought along a strong sectarian axis, and it attempts, once again, to use culture to level differences and foster connection across different groups. In this case, the “heritage of Lebanon”, rather than being simply constitutive of its past and present, is instrumental to build its very own future after ten years of war.

These exhibitions have different characteristics than *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*, another group exhibition that will be discussed below. They were more attentive in their curatorial selection and similar to those organised in art galleries, targeting an audience of art *connoisseurs* rather than the general public. In this sense, they seem to revive Dar el Fan’s mission at forming and orientating audience’s taste in the arts. Likewise, the display of art and the informal encounters at her home marked a shift in how art was exhibited and received. It provided a venue for artists to display their works, but it also created a more intimate environment for cultural exchange and discussion. Unlike the earlier period of Dar el Fan, which featured a widely attended programme of public lectures and debates, by the early 1980s these forms of intellectual engagement appear to have given way to more spontaneous interactions. While there is little concrete evidence of discussions or exchanges about art during this period, it is probable that, given Rubeiz’s central role in the art scene, such conversations did persist, albeit tended to be occasional, more exclusive, and accessible to individuals already within Rubeiz’ social circle, who were more likely than strangers to come to

et histoire (Desclée de Brouwer, 1993). In 2025, he curated the exhibition *On Earth as it is in Heaven. Icons from Jerusalem* at Dar el Nimer for Arts and Culture in Beirut.

⁶³⁴ Gladys Chami, “La foi artistique de Mahmoud Zibawi”, *Le Reveil*, 17.12.1985.

her private home. As such, it is uncertain to what extent these exhibitions reached the public who might have used to visit Dar el Fan for more widely consumed cultural products. This contrasts both with *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*, where the audiences were broader and the impact more visible as well as with the initiatives concerning the political status of the country that Rubeiz organized throughout the war.

Nonetheless, the absence of Dar el Fan, whether as a physical space or a consistent cultural presence, paradoxically enacted a sense of belonging among its community. It created a longing and an emotional attachment, as individuals came to associate the institution not merely with its tangible offerings but with the ideals, memories, and culture it represented. The ethos of Dar el Fan was carried forward in the practices and interactions of those who had been influenced by it. This distributed presence ensured that the centre's legacy transcended its physical boundaries, embedding itself in the cultural fabric of the society it served. In this way, absence became a form of presence, reinforcing a collective attachment to Dar el Fan and solidifying its place as a cornerstone of cultural and civic formation.

These dynamics shifted when Janine Rubeiz decided to formalise the space by officially opening a gallery under her name on 10 March 1988, which she ran until her death in 1992.⁶³⁵ The move was likely influenced by both artistic and economic considerations, as a solid business could sustain itself better than a cultural association in the precarious wartime panorama. The gallery was inaugurated with a solo exhibition of watercolours and oil paintings by Amine el Bacha, who had become a major figure of the art world in Lebanon. As we have seen, el Bacha's collaboration with Rubeiz dates back to the 1960s, when he contributed to the establishment

⁶³⁵ The legacy of Janine Rubeiz is continued by her daughter Nadine Begdache, who has been running the gallery since 1993.

of Dar El Fan and was among the first artists to exhibit there. Both el Bacha and Rubeiz remained in Beirut throughout the war, maintaining and deepening their professional and personal relationship.

The watercolour featured on the exhibition's invitation card depicts a serene picnic in nature, where the figures and natural elements are blurred and undefined, typical of el Bacha's dream-like, tranquil style (Fig. 22). While the use of peaceful imagery may appear incongruous with the surrounding atrocities, it can be understood as an expression of longing for normalcy in the face of prolonged instability. This longing was not merely a nostalgic yearning for a lost past, but an act of imaginative resistance: an attempt to assert continuity and emotional survival in a fractured world. In depicting a serene landscape, the artist evoked an alternative reality anchored in "normal" everyday life. In this sense, the words of his daughter Mahita el Bacha on the artist are telling, as she writes that "some could not understand how an artist could be embedded in a war zone and appear to not quite be there at all. But this is exactly what el Bacha is about: creating his own universe through his work [...] generally keeping darkness, sorrow and depression out of the picture".⁶³⁶ In this way, the aesthetic turn to peace was not only escapist but also aspirational, as well as commercial, offering a symbolic space where the possibility of healing and persistence could be envisioned.

Inaugurating the gallery with a solo exhibition by an artist whose work consistently celebrates Beirut's vibrant life and the landscapes of Lebanon stands in stark contrast to the surrounding devastation of the civil war. While such a gesture could be dismissed as the escapism of a privileged elite, detached from the daily suffering, it can more compellingly be read as a

⁶³⁶ Amine el Bacha, *Amine El Bacha. Beyrouth, Aquarelles et Dessins, 1953-2009* (Dar Nelson, 2009), 29.

conscious aesthetic choice by both el Bacha and Rubeiz. This way the exhibition offered an alternative visual and emotional vocabulary that refused to reduce the city to rubble and conflict. On the pages of *Al Tadamun*, Taher Ghaddar describes the exhibition as a testament to Lebanon's resilience, emphasising that despite the challenges of conflict, the nation will ultimately reclaim its cultural vitality.⁶³⁷ El Bacha's works illuminate another aspect of the Lebanese civil war: the persistence of everyday life amidst the chaos. Despite the constant threat of violence, life, against all odds, did continue. People still sought moments of normalcy, whether by going on picnics, gathering with loved ones, or simply trying to preserve a sense of peace and routine in the midst of violence. As Jean Said Makdisi poignantly recalls in *Beirut Fragments*, everyday life persisted not in denial of war but in defiance of it, with families continuing to mark birthdays, cook elaborate meals, and create small rituals of continuity amid the chaos.⁶³⁸ People cultivated life amid ruins not just as survival, but as an insistence on hope and futurity in spaces marked by recurring destruction and developed practices of "living around violence"⁶³⁹ that reflect both resilience and an effort to preserve ordinary rhythms. These accounts foreground how practices of care, leisure, and sociality coexisted with (and at times resisted) the logics of war. The portrayal of a picnic in a pastel-coloured landscape, far removed from the devastation of Beirut's wrecked buildings, underscores this enduring human spirit, a quiet act of resistance against the war's overwhelming darkness.

⁶³⁷ T. Ghaddar, "Ma'zūfat al-alwān" [Melody of colours], *Al-Tadamun*, 11.03.1988.

⁶³⁸ Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (Persea Books Inc, 1991).

⁶³⁹ Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming. Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). See also Munira Khayyat's work on life in war and ecologies of resistance.

5.3 Celebrating resilience as a social bond: *Beirut, Tabaan* [Beirut, of course]

At a chronological antipode in relation to *Liban 78*, Rubeiz and comic artist George Khoury curated the large-scale exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* (Beirut, of course). The event took place at Dar el-Nadwa, a cultural space in West Beirut, in an area that used to be at the heart of the now-divided city. The exhibition was, once again, a celebration of the creativity present in Beirut, despite its precarious conditions for more than a decade, and a homage to the enduring capital. It opened on 28 October 1989, almost in concomitance with the Taif Agreement, which eventually brought an end to the Civil War.⁶⁴⁰

George Khoury (b. 1956)⁶⁴¹ who described Rubeiz as “a diva of the art world,”⁶⁴² used to attend the exhibitions she hosted at her home. He recalls an incident during one such visit when a violent shelling occurred, compelling them to take refuge indoors until the danger subsided. He attributes the genesis of the idea for *Beirut Tabaan* to this moment, though this account, like many memories shaped by the affective intensities of war, remains difficult to corroborate. The aim of the exhibition was “to honour Beirut and the survival of its spirit, the continuation of its role and the confirmation of its creativity” (Fig. 23) as we read in the press release.⁶⁴³ Rubeiz and Khoury assembled a diverse group of roughly forty artists, spanning different ages, levels of establishment, aesthetics, and techniques. Belonging to two different generations,

⁶⁴⁰ The Taif Agreement was a peace accord signed in 1989 in Taif, Saudi Arabia. It was negotiated under the auspices of Riyadh and the Arab League, with participation of Iran, the support of the US, and under the direct supervision of Syria. This agreement restructured Lebanon’s political framework and sought to restore stability and balance between Lebanon’s various religious and political groups. See Michael C. Hudson “Lebanon After Ta’if: Another Reform Opportunity Lost?” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1999): 27–40.

⁶⁴¹ Known by his pen name Jad, Khoury felt inspired by international comic artists and focused on establishing comics as an art form and reaching an adult audience – a pioneering mission for the Arab world. During the conflict, he worked as a political journalist on the foreign desk of *An-Nahar*.

⁶⁴² Interview with the author, May 2024, Beirut.

⁶⁴³ Press release of Dar al Nadwa and press release of Dar el Fan, both from the Archive of Dar el Fan.

their distinct perspectives emerged in their curatorial choices.⁶⁴⁴ Rubeiz selected rather traditional works of art, such as paintings and sculptures, reflecting her long-standing connections and deep roots in Beirut's established art scene. Khoury introduced contemporary forms such as comics, music performances, and installations created from everyday objects and upcycled materials, presenting his engagement with newer artistic practices, while attempting to reframe the parameters of what was commonly understood as art. This blend of curatorial styles underscores the interplay of the traditional and the emerging, highlighting the importance of cross-generational collaboration in nurturing a dynamic and ever-evolving artistic community.

Among the selected artists were prominent figures in the Lebanese art world, who displayed their works alongside then emerging talents such as Lulu Bassiri, Mohammad Rawas and Greta Naufal. Contributions by established artists included a sculpture by Saloua Raouda Choucair, an abstract painting by Yvette Achkar, and a drawing by Aref el Rayess. While these works may not have been particularly ground-breaking in terms of artistic innovation, they bear witness to the artists' lifelong friendships with Janine Rubeiz and are important testaments to the cultural and social network she had been able to create and maintain, providing a supportive environment for artists during Lebanon's most tumultuous times.

The themes explored in the artworks, collected in a complete catalogue, varied greatly.⁶⁴⁵ The display included paintings, videos, music performances, installations, and comics, as well as pieces of writings and video interviews displayed alongside the artworks. This underscored the

⁶⁴⁴ Sultan, "Ḥawl ma'raḍ "Bayrūt Ṭab'an": Fikrah nāqīṣah li-ṭurūḥāt ijābiyyah" [On the exhibition "Beirut Tabaan". An incomplete idea for positive proposals], *As-Safir*, 31.10.1989.

⁶⁴⁵ I could access the catalogue of the exhibition through the private archive of artist Greta Naufal. One copy is now preserved in the archives of the Orient-Institut Beirut.

multifaceted nature of the artists' responses to the war, blending visual and literary art forms to convey their experiences and reflections. The imagery of the Lebanese civil war influenced the work of some artists, who depicted the devastated city through photos and paintings. An excerpt of Jad's comics featured a father carrying his child amidst ruins, while Ali Seif el Din's photograph captured damaged buildings through the shattered remains of a window.

Other contributions were less direct in their aesthetic approach. Some artworks completely rejected the conflict's aesthetic, striving to revive some normality. Among these were Lulu Bassiri's *Oud* and Georgi Chaanine's *Café*. Other artworks aligned with the artists' trajectory, such as Choucair's abstract sculpture and Achkar's painting. Poems and texts in both Arabic and French, such as a passage from Elias Khoury's novel *The Journey of Little Gandhi*,⁶⁴⁶ interspersed the visual artworks, adding literary depth to the exhibition.⁶⁴⁷ Overall, a sense of nostalgia pervades the artworks, as they seem suspended in time, waiting for the vitality of Beirut to return. The city, its people and its artists are the subject of *Beirūt: Shahādāt al-fannānīn* (Beirut: Testimonies of artists), a video shot by writer and poet Antoine Boulad while roaming the streets of the capital in October 1989.⁶⁴⁸ The video shows spaces and individuals grappling with the memories of the war, attempting to make sense of that turbulent period. The artists interviewed reflect on Beirut's past and its prospects, sharing personal narratives that consider how the city embodies resilience and stressing the role of art as a place to find

⁶⁴⁶ Published in Arabic in 1989, the story is set against the backdrop of the Lebanese civil war and follows the life of a poor shoeshine boy nicknamed Little Gandhi. Through his experiences, the novel explores themes of war, displacement, and survival, reflecting on the human condition in times of conflict.

⁶⁴⁷ The connection between art and literature was not new in the Lebanese and larger regional scene but generally found space into cultural products for specific audiences of *connoisseurs*. Instead, exhibiting artworks and literary texts alongside each other in an exhibition space allowed access to a wider audience, and created a place for exchange and social relations between the actors that were part of such a cultural circle and community. Earlier initiatives included the journals *Hiwar* and *Shi'r* or the series of precious books published by Dar an-Nahar. For a more thorough analysis of the intersections between art and literature in the long 1960s, see Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*.

⁶⁴⁸ The video was displayed during the exhibition.

solace. Janine Rubeiz, who is featured in the video, underscores how *Beirut Tabaan* is the symbol of a city “which does not want to die despite all that has been done to it”.⁶⁴⁹ In her article in *L’Orient-Le Jour*, journalist May Makarem aptly describes the exhibition as “a diary where confidence mixes with chaos.”⁶⁵⁰

Although it was not the only group exhibition praising artistic endeavours during the war, *Beirut Tabaan* received impressive press coverage. Local newspapers in Arabic, French, and English, such as *L’Orient-Le Jour*, *An-Nahar*, and *Monday Morning*, reported extensively on it. Various sources, including interviews and newspaper articles, highlighted the overwhelming response to the exhibition’s opening, which drew such a large crowd that the organizers had to extend the opening hours to accommodate everyone.⁶⁵¹ Attendees and journalists alike noted the vibrant atmosphere, with many people eager to experience the exhibition first-hand. The turnout reflected the sentiments of a population that lived for years between uncertainty and waiting, forced to seek refuge in shelters yet demonstrating a yearning for normalisation by continuing artistic and cultural production. Photos in the press clippings portray mainly the “rituality” of drinks and chats of the exhibition’s opening, which in the context of conflict took on an added layer of social significance, resonating as both a celebration and an act of unity. This sentiment was enhanced by the concomitance with the Taif Agreement, which brought a sense of relief for the long-awaited, imminent end of the war. *An-Nahar* journalist Sami Ayad

⁶⁴⁹ The video was kindly shared with the author by Antoine Boulad.

⁶⁵⁰ May Makarem, « Pour “Beyrouth évidemment” ». Samedi, à Dar el Nadwa... Rien que la mémoire affective », *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 30.10.1989.

⁶⁵¹ Note that the exhibition hall of Dar el Nadwa is made of a single room.

writes that among the reasons for the exhibition was “to honour the promised peace that was coming to us.”⁶⁵²

Unlike *Liban 78*, where artworks, regardless of their quality, were prominently featured and celebrated as visual markers in the creation of a narrative of belonging, the narration of *Beirut Tabaan* shifted the focus from tangible objects to the intangible dynamics of participation and community. Media attention predominantly emphasized speeches and themes celebrating the city’s spirit while a critical analysis of the artworks was lacking. Such absence in the press narratives surrounding *Beirut Tabaan* appears not as a void but as a deliberate statement, emphasising the act of gathering as the core of the exhibition’s impact. It highlighted the performative and relational aspects of the event, where the shaping of a civic belonging was rooted in shared experiences within a communal space. *Beirut Tabaan* succeeded in uniting artists and the broader public and distinguished itself as a social catalyst, fostering connection among people long separated by historical tensions that had fragmented the city.

In spite of the positive response of the general audience, comments in the press conference and reviews of the exhibition were diverse. Makarem described it as “a slap in the face of the crisis,” highlighting the “phoenix” aspect often associated with Beirut.⁶⁵³ Faysal Sultan, with similar words, affirmed that Beirut was not dead because “it was still dreaming”.⁶⁵⁴ This notion of rebirth (often, for instance, captured in the enduring metaphor of Beirut as a phoenix rising from the ashes) speaks to a persistent cultural imaginary of the city as resilient, irrepressible, and perpetually self-renewing. While this metaphor evokes a sense of hope and continuity, it

⁶⁵² Sami Ayad, “Lawḥāt wa-rusūm wa-raḡṡ wa-mūsīqā taqūlu fī iḥtīfāl “Bayrūt Ṭab’an” [Paintings, drawings, dances and music speak in the celebration “Beirut Tabaan”], *An-Nahar*, 29.09.1989.

⁶⁵³ Makarem, “Pour ‘Beyrouth évidemment”.

⁶⁵⁴ Sultan, “Ḥawl ma’raḡ “Bayrūt Ṭab’an”.

can also obscure the structural violence and cyclical nature of destruction by framing recovery as an almost mythic inevitability. Such narratives risk depoliticizing both suffering and survival, shifting attention away from responsibility, governance, and accountability. The phoenix metaphor, then, while emotionally resonant, may reinforce a kind of symbolic resilience that masks ongoing fragility, naturalising disaster and making rupture appear as a constitutive, even necessary, feature of Beirut's identity. In this sense, the metaphor is not just poetic, but ideological: it allows for a celebration of endurance while sidestepping the political conditions that produce the need for it in the first place.

Journalist Vicken Cheterian, after attending the press conference, questioned the limits of an exhibition that aimed to be so celebratory. He pondered the role of artists and intellectuals in a war-torn country and whether it was problematic to try to "hide reality" behind the nostalgic and triumphalist tone that emerged from the speeches.⁶⁵⁵ His critique points to a broader tension embedded in cultural production in times of crisis: the extent to which exhibitions like this one served as symbolic gestures of resilience rather than platforms for critical engagement or aesthetic innovation. Here again, as in the case of *Liban 78*, the quality of the selected artworks was not of primary importance; rather, the exhibition's purpose was to gather as many artists as possible and to foster a sense of reconnection. While this impulse toward collectivity was undeniably important in a fractured cultural landscape, it also meant that the artistic contributions were often subordinated to the event's commemorative and affective dimensions. The focus on celebratory narratives about Beirut, whether its cosmopolitan past, its mythic resilience, its phoenix-like rebirth, risked overshadowing deeper artistic inquiries into

⁶⁵⁵ Vicken Cheterian, "Beirut...Of course?", *Monday Morning*, vol. XVIII, No. 887, October 9-15, 1989.

trauma, displacement, or the structural conditions that had shaped the post-war reality. In this light, Cheterian's intervention can be read as a challenge to the political utility of art when aesthetic considerations are instrumentalised in service of national or communal healing.

Despite the critiques about its artistic relevance, the collaborative efforts of Rubeiz and Khoury were instrumental in curating an exhibition whose actual goal was, once again, to forge a shared belonging and unity in a city amid conflict. *Beirut Tabaan* prioritised the social and symbolic dimensions of the act of assembly related to an artistic event, providing an opportunity to engage in the act of "being together," crucial for creating a collective memory during a historically significant moment.

Conclusion

The chapter has discussed how Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's curatorial work during the Civil War not only preserved artistic expression but also revisited the "personality" that Dar el Fan tried to promote through a distinctive form of sociality. More than exhibition venues, *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* emerged as acts of collective memory and cultural resistance, becoming moments when art functioned as a bridge between trauma and the possibility of communal regeneration. In the context of conflict, the exhibitions transformed from spaces of aesthetic contemplation into sites of civic and emotional engagement.

The artworks presented in these shows acquired meaning within the curatorial frame and the broader wartime condition. Both exhibitions allowed for a recalibration of artistic value, where emotional resonance, urgency, and social symbolism often took precedence over formal innovation or critical detachment. In *Liban 78*, the artworks became visual agents of remembrance and aspiration. In *Beirut Tabaan*, the very act of gathering took precedence, and

the exhibition's impact resided less in the artworks themselves than in the communal performance of presence. Each exhibition thus fostered a form of cultural citizenship grounded not in institutions, but in the shared experience of survival, belonging, and hope. Rubeiz, as a curatorial figure, played a central role in this process. Her ability to convene artists, maintain networks, and harness the symbolic power of art in crisis made her a unifying presence in the fragmented cultural landscape of wartime Beirut.

These cultural moments also served as mechanisms through which the memory of the war was processed, at times through images and narratives, and at others through their deliberate omission. The exhibitions contributed to a broader, often ambivalent, cultural response to the war marked by selective amnesia, mythic imaginaries of national unity, and the symbolic restoration of normalcy. Yet within this ambivalence, they enabled new forms of belonging. Through ritual, presence, and symbolic labour, they constituted the community necessary not only for cultural survival but for imagining post-war futurity.

Rubeiz's transformation of her home into a gallery and later the formal establishment of Galerie Janine Rubeiz offered an alternative model of cultural resilience. These more intimate initiatives provided economic support for artists and fostered intergenerational and intersectorian dialogue, even as they reflected a narrowing of access and a shift in audience. While they could not replicate the pluralistic ambition of Dar el Fan, they nevertheless sustained its spirit, reshaped through necessity.

Taken together, these initiatives reframed art not merely as a reflection of historical trauma but as a generative social agent in the construction of memory, identity, and solidarity and to develop narratives that are essential to the very endurance of community shattered by years of violence.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the cultural politics of Lebanon during the long 1960s and 1970s through the case of Dar el Fan. The research began from the assumption that cultural actors, far from being mere reflections of their context, play an active role in shaping it, influencing both social and political dynamics. In this light, Dar el Fan was approached not only as a site of cultural production but also as a place where a vision of cultural identity—what came to be referred to as a “Lebanese personality”—was imagined and negotiated.

Beirut in the 1960s and early 1970s was home to a dense network of cultural institutions and initiatives, each of which sought, in different ways, to articulate Lebanon’s position in the modern world. The first chapter mapped this vibrant cultural landscape, situating Dar el Fan within it. This contextualization was necessary not only to highlight the richness of Beirut at the time, but also to understand the dynamics that gave rise to Dar el Fan in an art world that was rapidly taking shape. Within this environment, artists sought visibility, legitimacy, and economic sustainability while also desiring experimentation, dialogue, and debate. Dar el Fan was not the only actor engaged in such efforts. The Cenacle Libanais, despite its different political orientation, also positioned itself as a forum for intellectual debate, and had been attempting to articulate a Lebanese identity since the years immediately following independence. The Sursock Museum, though its history and role were contested, provided an important platform for Lebanese artists and collective exhibitions displaying regional and international production. Contact Gallery emerged as a space for artistic experimentation, while foreign cultural centres served as “windows” onto extra-Lebanese cultural life. What made Dar el Fan unique, however, was its capacity to bring together all of these dimensions under one roof while remaining broadly independent from official institutions. This

independence allowed the centre a degree of freedom in choosing its interlocutors and maintaining an openness to diverse political perspectives, even if it leaned clearly towards the left. From this first chapter emerged the ability of Dar el Fan to weave connections across disciplines and to act as a mediator in Beirut's competitive cultural arena. On one hand, it sought legitimacy by hosting exhibitions of established artists who were recognised as representatives of modern Lebanese culture. On the other, it provided space for experimentation, supporting original and avant-garde cultural production. This balance between recognition and innovation positioned the centre as both a guardian of cultural legitimacy and an incubator of new forms.

At the heart of this endeavour stood Janine Rubeiz. An art enthusiast and a feminist activist, she embodied the spirit of Dar el Fan. Her profile was discussed in detail in the second chapter, alongside the other two presidents, Nicole Harfouche and Samia Toutounji. The chapter examined their individual contributions to the centre but also their broader role as women in the Lebanese cultural scene, where Dar el Fan offered an unprecedented platform for female leadership. While they all shared the conviction that culture could serve as a vehicle for social advancement and civic participation, each president shaped the centre in distinct ways, illustrating that the Lebanese personality being forged was neither fixed nor uniform. Special attention was given to their engagement, although in different forms and practices, with second-wave feminism, which translated into debates on women's rights, contraception, and abortion, culminating in the organisation of the Women's Month. However, this was not a feminism imported wholesale from the West but one rooted in Lebanon's social realities and political tensions. By foregrounding women's contributions, Dar el Fan expanded the very definition of a Lebanese personality beyond male-dominated intellectual circles, inscribing

gender into the cultural narrative. In this way, it did not simply mirror the transformations of Lebanese society but actively helped to shape them.

The political commitments of Dar el Fan's members, already evident in the second chapter, have been further explored in the third. The centre operated during a particularly delicate period between the Naksa of 1967 and the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. In these years, Dar el Fan both responded to and helped shape a complex political landscape, at the local, regional, and global levels. After the 1967 defeat and the collapse of pan-Arab discourse, the centre participated in the urgent cultural renewal that followed. Its members repeatedly and explicitly expressed solidarity with the Palestinian Cause, then a unifying struggle for oppressed peoples worldwide. Alongside Palestine, the Algerian War of Independence also stood as a rallying symbol against neo-colonialism and imperialism. Together, these struggles became central to Third-Worldist discourse, a concept and political ideology that positioned itself against both Western imperialism and the emerging bipolar logic of the Cold War. Through a series of events and initiatives, Dar el Fan and its members articulated a leftist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist orientation that aligned them with global liberation movements. At the same time, Lebanon was sliding toward civil war, and Dar el Fan increasingly conceived culture as a means of mediation and dialogue to address internal tensions. What emerged was not a singular, uniform identity but rather a vision (perhaps utopian) of culture as a unifying force capable of embracing differences. This notion reinforced the centre's function as a space where art, politics, and intellectual life were not separate domains but overlapping terrains of negotiation.

The fourth chapter broadened the scope further, situating Dar el Fan within wider geopolitical currents. While deeply embedded in Beirut's cultural ecosystem, the centre was inevitably entangled in international dynamics. The Cold War, in particular, provided both constraints and

opportunities. Cultural diplomacy from the United States, the Soviet Union, and various European countries saturated Beirut with competing ideological projects. Yet Dar el Fan resisted absorption into these binaries. It hosted Soviet exhibitions and American film screenings, welcomed European intellectuals such as Jerzy Grotowski and Pier Paolo Pasolini, and simultaneously championed Arab artists. This multiplicity of engagements did not imply neutrality but reflected a deliberate negotiation of space, interests, and goals.

Alongside these global currents, Dar el Fan actively participated in debates about Arab cultural identity after independence and particularly in the wake of 1967. It promoted events aimed at fostering cultural pan-Arabism, forging links with Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq. These exchanges testified not only to Beirut's centrality as the cultural capital of the Arab world at the time but also to the shared regional aspiration of building a common cultural project. The chapter closed by considering less overtly political cultural productions, reminding us that even in such a politically charged period, there was space for aesthetic debates that engaged with politics in subtler ways. For instance, the exhibition of British abstract sculptors, while embedded in a larger project of cultural diplomacy, was received and read through the lens of the critical discussions on abstract art in Beirut. This highlights how even cultural products shaped by political agendas retained the agency of those who produced and experienced them. In this sense, Dar el Fan practiced an openness that resisted reducing artistic and intellectual life to ideological function, offering instead a model grounded in experimentation, dialogue, and plurality.

With the outbreak of the Civil War and the destruction of the building that has hosted it, Dar el Fan's role shifted. It became invested in the belief that culture could serve as the glue of a fractured society. The fifth chapter explored this transformation through Janine Rubeiz's curatorial work during the war, especially in two major collective exhibitions situated at

opposite ends of the conflict: *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan*. These exhibitions were less about strong curatorial choices in cultural production than about creating social moments where art could foster dialogue, social cohesion, and the imagination of a shared future necessary for present survival.

In conclusion, what emerges from the chapters of this study is the active role played by Dar el Fan, a seemingly minor actor, in shaping Lebanon's cultural, social, and political context. It did so by proposing a model of Lebanese personality that was never singular or definitive. Instead, Dar el Fan functioned as a laboratory where identity was constructed, tested, and negotiated. It was a place where artists, intellectuals, and activists explored what it meant to belong to Lebanon while remaining connected to wider regional and global currents. Its ambition was not to define an essence of "Lebaneseness" but to cultivate the conditions for a plural, evolving, and dialogical ethos.

At the heart of this project was the belief that culture could serve as both mirror and motor of social life. "Culture is what changes life," in the words of Dar el Fan's founder, Janine Rubeiz. Through exhibitions, lectures, debates, and performances, the centre wove together aesthetic experimentation, intellectual inquiry, and political engagement. Its uniqueness resided precisely in the simultaneity of these functions: a place where debates on abstract painting could coexist with discussions of the Palestinian Cause, avant-garde theatre performances, and exhibitions of women artists exploring nudes and sensuality. In doing so, Dar el Fan cultivated a Lebanese cultural identity that was heterogeneous: rooted in national concerns yet open to transnational solidarities; shaped by elite cultural forms yet attentive to broader social realities; independent yet entangled in global and regional politics.

Dar el Fan's significance lies not only in its programme but also in its method. It represented an experiment in institution-building: an autonomous, member-supported cultural house that

attempted to reconcile the roles of gallery, creative hub, and intellectual forum without collapsing into any of them. Its mission was pursued not only through the offered cultural products, but also through the practices of gathering, debating, exhibiting, and performing. The sociality embedded in this “house” was instrumental in offering a vision of cultural life as dialogical, plural, and open-ended.

Any reconstruction of Dar el Fan and its story must confront the silences produced by war and archival destruction. The centre’s building and archives were destroyed in 1976, leaving its history fragmented and reliant on scattered documents, press clippings, and oral testimonies. These sources, invaluable yet partial, are shaped by memory and positionality. This study has sought to navigate these constraints through triangulation, though much remains unknown, such as the reception of audiences beyond the bourgeois elite or the relevance of the programmes outside Beirut. Future research could expand on these questions by situating Dar el Fan within a comparative history of cultural centres across the Arab world, from Cairo to Baghdad, Damascus, and beyond.

The question of legacy is equally pressing. The experiment of Dar el Fan survives in the memory of those who experienced it, who recall the centre as a lost golden space of exchange, while also acknowledging its limitations of class, accessibility, and elitism. Meanwhile, it is difficult to identify a direct heir to Dar el Fan in today’s Beirut.⁶⁵⁶ In Lebanon, marked by economic crisis, political paralysis, and ongoing conflict, the memory of Dar el Fan resonates as both inspiration and provocation. It demonstrates the potential of independent cultural spaces to foster civic

⁶⁵⁶ Perhaps the closest parallel lies in Zico House, an independent platform for artists located in central Beirut. With its welcoming and homely atmosphere, Zico House echoes the “feel at home” ethos that underpinned Rubeiz’s project. While visual arts and exhibitions dominate its programme, it also hosts cultural encounters, performances, and film screenings. As its website notes, “Zico House has also initiated collective projects, incorporating the whole building as a space for encounter and exchange.” Its mission includes goals such as “Encourage civil associations to use arts as a medium in their social work” and “Create an environment for exchange, dialogue and communication.” In this sense, Zico House seems to carry forward aspects of Dar el Fan’s ethos, even if under different conditions.

participation, dialogue and resilience but also exposes the fragility of such initiatives in the face of violence and structural neglect. For contemporary practitioners, its history underscores the importance of independence, interdisciplinarity, and inclusivity, while recognizing the limits of cultural activism without broader political and social transformation.

Ultimately, Dar el Fan's story is not simply a chapter in Lebanon's cultural history. It is a prism through which to understand the intersections of art, politics, and identity during a period of global and regional upheaval. It reminds us that cultural institutions are not passive containers but active agents in history. They can consolidate or contest identities, reproduce or challenge power, mirror or transform society. In imagining a Lebanese cultural identity, Dar el Fan did not provide a definitive answer but staged the very question of what it meant to be Lebanese in dialogue with others. It modelled a cultural life that was at once local and transnational, experimental and rooted, politically engaged yet aesthetically adventurous. Most importantly, it testifies to the centrality of culture in shaping how communities imagine themselves and their futures and it invites us to think of cultural identity not as a fixed essence but as a practice that must continually be enacted, negotiated, and reimagined.

List of Images



Figure 1. Article « Les Activités de 'Dar el-Fan Wal Adab' vont s'étendre à toutes les branches des Arts et des Lettres », *La Revue du Liban*, 26.08.1967, 36-37. Photo of the author.

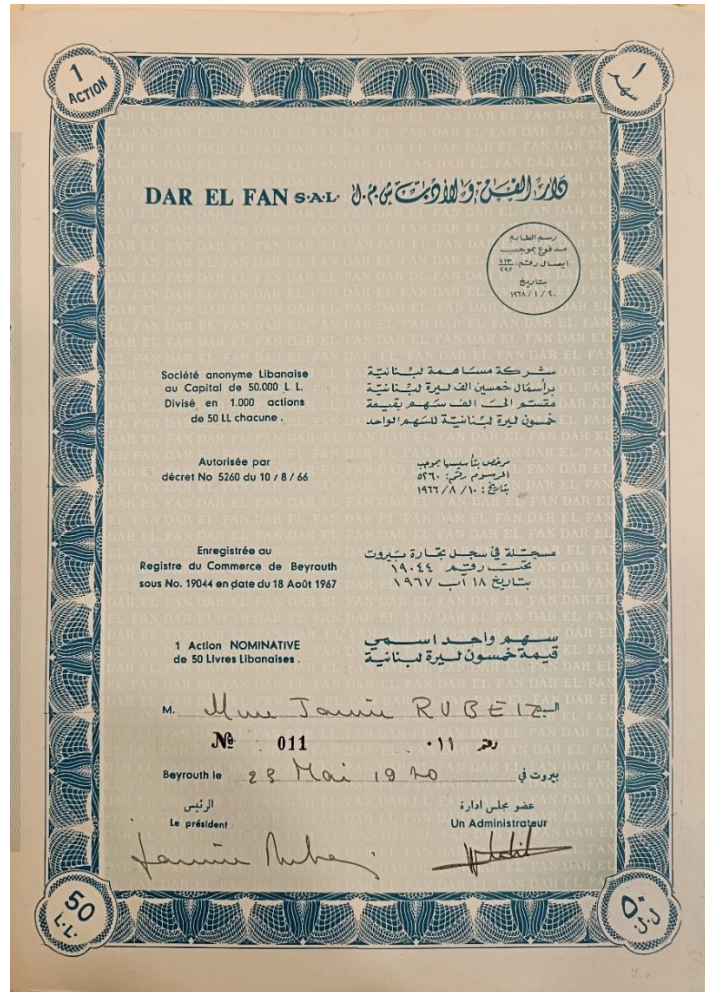


Figure 2. One of the shares of Dar el Fan purchased by Janine Rubeiz, dated May 1970. Archive of Dar el Fan, Beirut, Lebanon. Photo of the author. Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon.

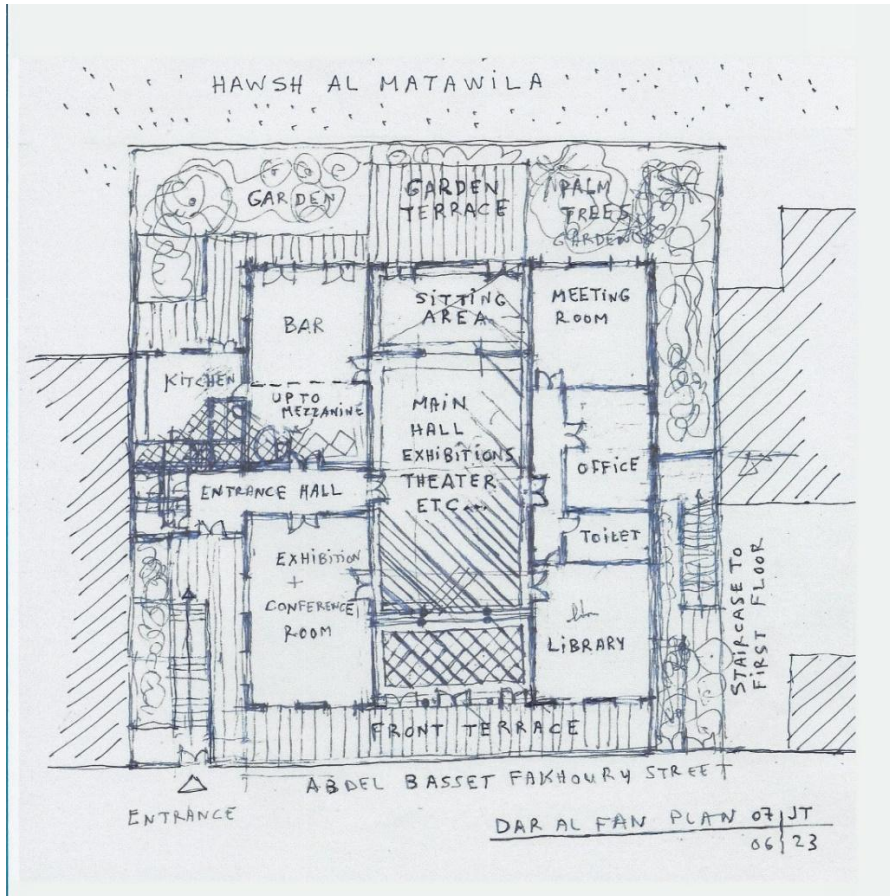


Figure 3. The floor plan of Dar el Fan designed by Jad Tabet, June 2023, Beirut, Lebanon.

الافتتاح
تشرين الثاني ١٩٦٧
شارك في مجلس الإدارة :

السيدات	السادة
عفروز روضة	داثقت اديب
سامية ساندري	نقولا نهار
سامية تنبهي	موريس حفر
ليكول عرفوش	ريجون جباره
ايران جب	وجيه نمله
تيريز كارا و نخلان	ادونيسي
ايثون سرتق كوكريين	فرنسوا عرفوش
اتيل حمدان	مروان حماده
سيمون فتال	حسن مشرفيه
ناديا كوريني	مهدي العام
جانين ربيز	سمر مخدور
	حمدان كنعان
	غداد دباسي

Figure 4. Archival document listing the members of the Executive Board of Dar el Fan, dated November 1967. Archive of Dar el Fan, Beirut, Lebanon. Photo of the author. Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon.



Figure 5. View of the exhibition of Chafic Abboud, Dar el Fan 1969.
Archive of Dar el Fan, Beirut, Lebanon.
Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon.



Figure 7. Cover of the brochure of the exhibition *Les Mondes Imaginaires* by Nicole Malhame Harfouche, Dar el Fan 1972.

Archive of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon.

Photo of the author. Courtesy of MACAM.



Figure 8. View of the exhibition of Cici Sursock *El, ou la Marche vers L'Est, Dar el Fan*, 1971. Archive of Samir and Rosine Sursock, Beirut, Lebanon. Courtesy of Samir and Rosine Sursock.



Figure 9. Cici Sursock, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on canvas.
Samir and Rosine Sursock Private Collection, Beirut, Lebanon.
Courtesy of Samir and Rosine Sursock.



Figure 10. Illustration for the book *El, ou la marche vers l'Est*.
Black and white reproduction of the painting *Death (or Suicide)*, Cici Sursock, 1971, oil on canvas.
Photo of the author. Courtesy of Samir and Rosine Sursock.

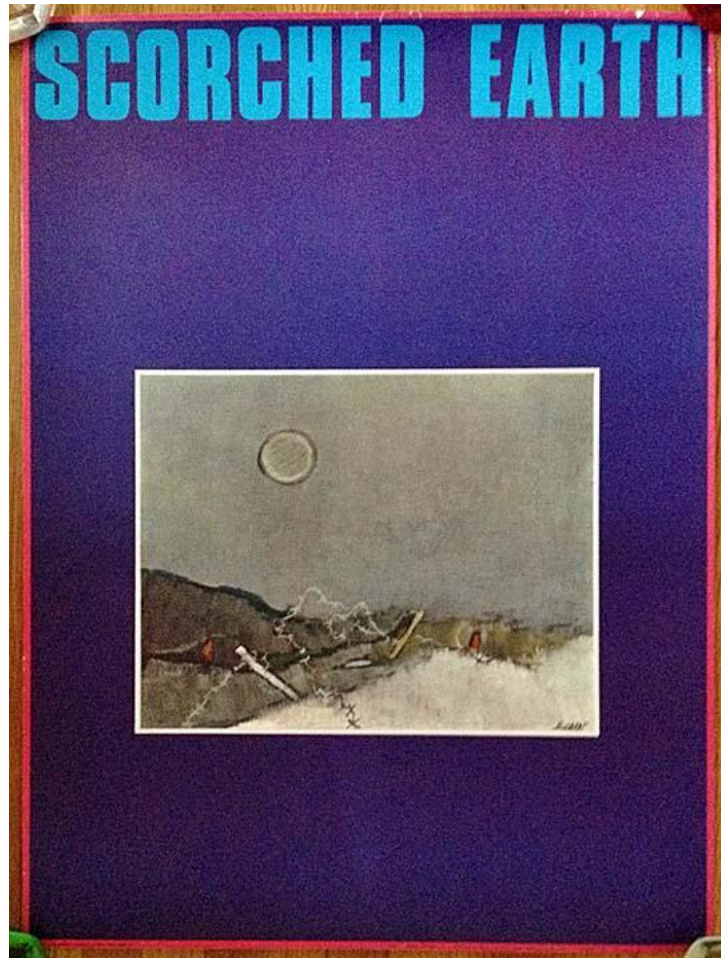


Figure 11. Rafic Charaf, poster of *Scorched Earth*, 1968

Size: 57 x 43 cm

Publisher: Friends of Jerusalem (Lebanon)

Source: The Palestine Poster Project Archive <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/posters/scorched-earth>



Figure 12. Aref el Rayess, poster of *The Palestinian* or *Guevara* (from the original title of the painting used in the poster), 1968

58 x 43 cm

Publisher: Friends of Jerusalem (Lebanon)

Source: The Palestine Poster Project Archive <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/posters/palestinian>



Figure 13. Aref el Rayess, *Fi al-ālam al-thālith* (In the Third World), etching from the book *The Road to Peace* (1978), 1973/74, charcoal on paper.

Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.



Figure 14. Marek Halter, [Scene of battle with helicopter and soldiers], n.d., photograph of ink drawing
Private archive of Joseph Tarrab, Beirut, Lebanon.
Photo of Nadia von Maltzahn.



Figure 15. Nazem Irani, *Sorrow*, 1966, gypsum, 137 x 90 x 75 cm
Courtesy of The Surikov Moscow State Art Institute, Moscow, Russia.



Figure 16. Wahib Bteddini, *Harvesting (or The Picking of the Apples in the Mountain)*, oil on canvas, 1966. Courtesy of the Sursock Museum Archive, Beirut, Lebanon.



Figure 17. Poster of the exhibition *Three painters from Aleppo*, Dar el Fan, 1972

The painting on the cover is by Wahid Magharbeh

54 x 30 cm

Archive of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon.

Courtesy of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon.

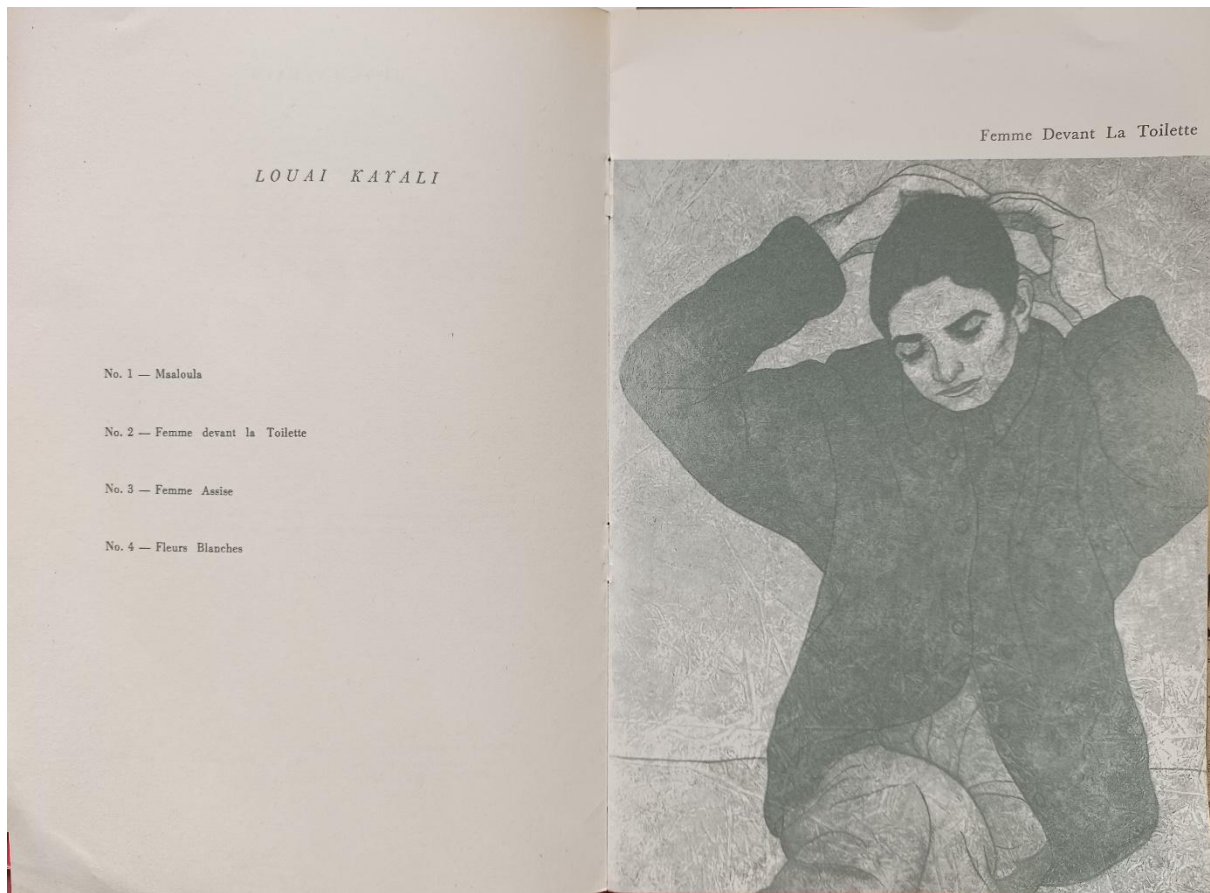


Figure 18. Booklet of the exhibition *Three Painters from Aleppo*, Dar el Fan, 1972.

Left page: the exhibited paintings by Louay Kayali

Right page: reproduction of the painting *Woman in front of a Dressing Table*, Louay Kayali.

Archive of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon.

Photo of the author. Courtesy of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon.

By Naomi Gray Wallis

FRONT ROW

Marie-Claude Eddé in "Ubu Roi" *Gerard Avedissian in the "hakatati"* *Paul Mattar and Marie-Claude Eddé*

At Dar el Fan next month LEBANON'S FIRST "CAFÉ THEATRE"

In rehearsal for a November 3rd opening at Dar el Fan is "Hekayat Karabia wa Malika wa Ubu" — "The Story of Karabia and its King Ubu".

The original play was "Ubu Roi" by the French author Alfred Jarry, written at the turn of the century for puppets and loosely based on "Macbeth" — the theme being a usurping man and his wife. The Arabic version at Dar el Fan is, in turn, loosely based on the "Ubu Roi". It is a farce with undercurrents of philosophy and overtones of vulgarity. Added to the play is the "hakatati" — the storyteller. But unlike the traditional Arabic storyteller, this one jumps in and out of the action.

The company is headed by Gerard Avedissian, who is the director and also plays the "hakatati". Mr. Avedissian has both acted and directed in the French, Armenian and Arabic theater in Beirut and has studied theater in France and Russia.

The company of actors includes Hanan Aboud, Jane Arida, Marie Claude Eddé, Waddah Farris, Mohammad Jebily, Paul Mattar and Krikor Tcherkezian; all of whom have assisted in devising the various flights of fancy which spring from the plot.

The costumes have been designed by Sue Arcache in a general "oriental" style. Miss Arcache has used fabric from old brocade dresses because she feels that it has a tacky and showy quality suitably in keeping with the mood of the play.

The play is being presented as "Café Theater" — in other words, your entrance money buys you a drink and you sit at a small table rather than in a regular theater seat. The café theater style also bestows the freedom to chat, boo, hiss, join in, leave and presumably go to the bar and replenish your drink! Perhaps a bridge between "legitimate" theatre and the "happening", and certainly something new in the Lebanese theater.

GEORGIAN COMPANY COMING

The Georgian State Dance Company, which will be arriving in Beirut on October 24, will be giving seven performances at the Unesco Palace between October 25 and 29 (evening performances Oct. 25-29; matinee Oct. 28-29).

The company, which recently completed a three-month tour of the United States (its success added one month to the originally planned period), usually spends six months of the year outside the Soviet Union, touring European countries.

Holding several international folk dancing prizes, the Georgian State Dance Company embodies the history of the Georgian people, both ancient and recent. Practically every facet of Georgian life — pagan rituals, religious ceremonies, work, war, humor, love — has been turned into a dance. All male Georgians are taught to dance in their childhood — first on the half toe and then on the full toe, so that the male dancers of the company dance on full points in soft unpadded shoes.

The costumes and scenery the company will bring with it to Beirut will weigh over five tons.

Tickets for the Oct. 25-29 performances are available at Antoine (Bab Edriss), UNESCO and Strand Cinema.

THIS WEEK

KENNEDY CENTER

Tues. Oct. 17, 7:00 p.m.

Film on Cinema:

1. Ken Murray.
2. The making of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

Thurs. Oct. 19, 7:00 p.m.

Contemporary American Theater:

A discussion program on recent trends in American Theater with Samir Nasri and Jack Dagiannis.

(Reservations: 341160)

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Figure 19. Article "At Dar el Fan next month - Lebanon's First 'Café Theatre'", *Monday Morning*, 16.10.1972, 27. Photo of Nathalie Rosa Bucher.



Figure 20. Cover of the booklet of the exhibition *Seven British Sculptors*, Dar el Fan, 1970. Archive of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon. Photo of the author. Courtesy of MACAM, Beirut, Lebanon.



Figure 21. Aref el Rayess, poster for the exhibition *Liban 78*, 1977.

Approximately 50 x 70 cm.

Archive of Dar el Fan, Beirut, Lebanon.

Photo by the author. Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon.

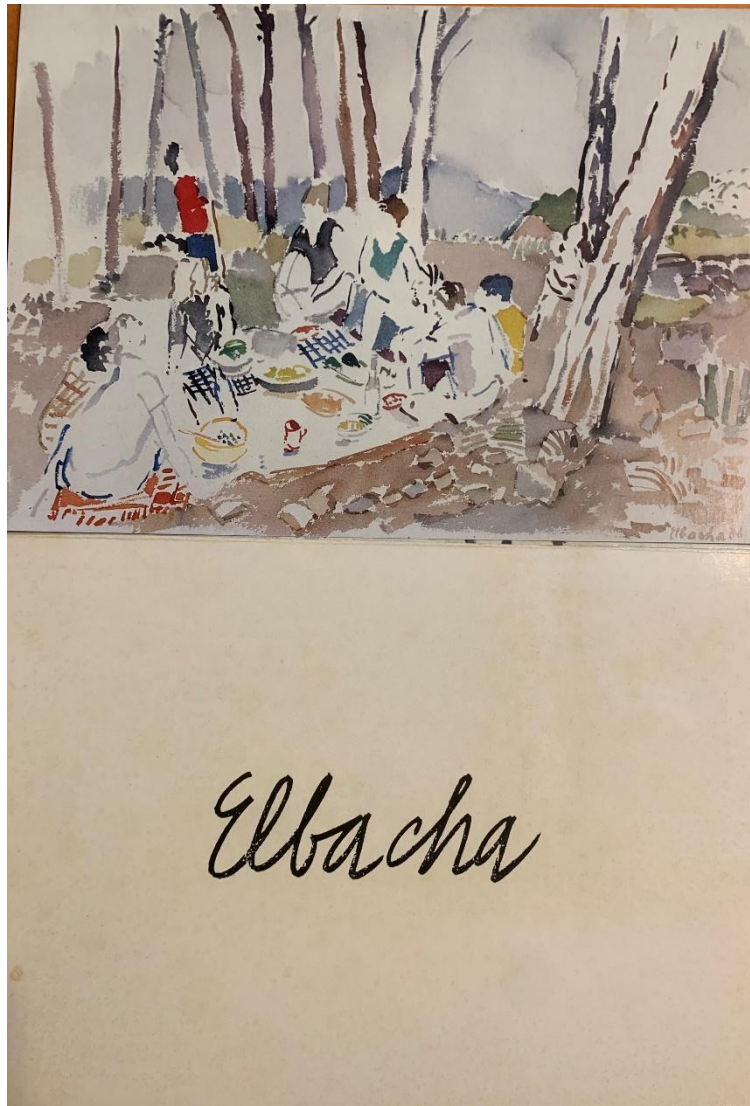


Figure 22. Invitation card for the exhibition of Amine el Bacha at Galerie Janine Rubeiz, 1988. Archive of the Sursock Museum. Photographed by the author.

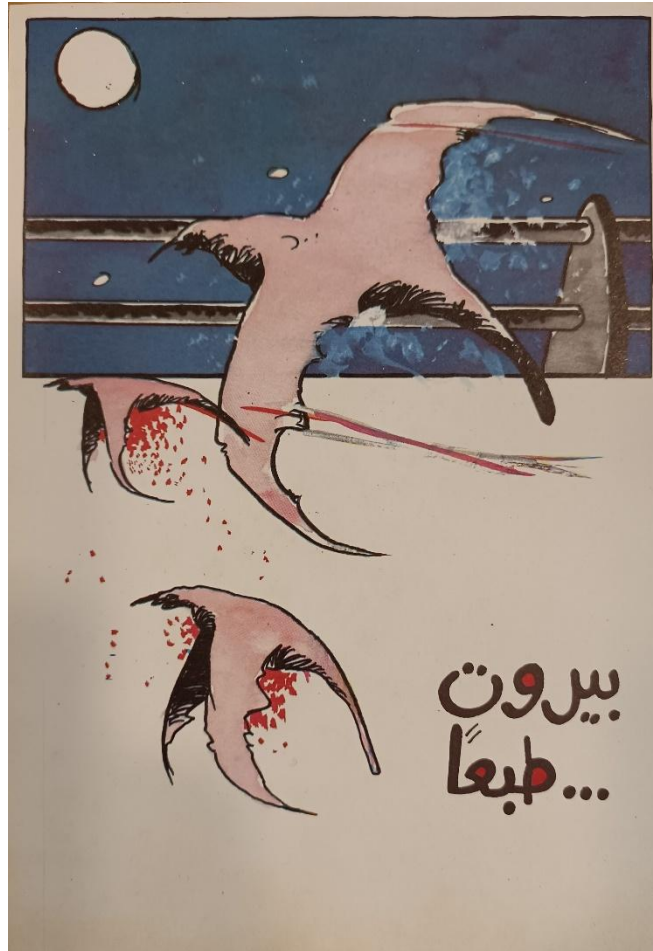


Figure 23. Invitation card for the exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* designed by Jad Khoury, 1989. Archive of Dar el Fan, Beirut, Lebanon. Photographed by the author. Courtesy of Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon.

Annex A - Biographical Dates of Cited Artists

Abboud, Shafic 1926-2004
Abd-el Al, Tawfiq 1928-2002
Achkar, Yvette 1928-2024
Adib, Wassek 1926-2014
Adnan, Etel 1925-20021
Akl, Michel 1922-1997
Aouad, Farid 1924-1982
Barsoumian, Vahé b.1943
Basbous, Michel 1921-1981
Bteddini, Wahib 1929-2011
Corm, Daoud 1852-1930
Cyr, Georges 1880-1964
Douaihy, Saliba 1915-1994
Eido, Mounir 1920-2014
El Bacha, Amine 1932-2019
El Khal, Yusuf 1917-1987
El Rayess, Aref 1928-2005
Faris, Waddah 1940-2024
Farroukh, Moustafa 1901-1957
Fattal, Simone 1942
Gemayel, César 1898-1958
Guv, Georges 1918-1990
Harfouche, Nicole 1941
Jouni, Hassan b.1942
Jurdak, Halim 1927-2020
Kanaan, Elie 1926-2009
Kayali, Louay 1934-1978
Khal, Helen 1923-2009
Khalifé, Jean 1923-1978
Limansky, Olga 1903-1988
Madi, Hussein 1938-2024
Magharbeh, Wahid 1942-2018
Marzouk, Ibrahim 1937-1975
Matar, Paul b.1946
Molaeb, Jamil b.1948
Nahle, Wajih 1932-2017
Nammour, César 1937-2021
Norikian, Krikor b. 1941
Onsi, Omar 1901-1969
Raouda, Moazzaz 1906-1986
Rubeiz, Janine 1926-1992
Saleeby, Khalil 1870-1928
Salhab Kazemi, Dorothy 1942-1990
Scamanga, Stelio 1934-2021
Shammout, Ismail 1930-2006
Srour, Habib 1860-1938
Sursock, Cici 1923-2015
Toutounji, Samia 1939-1989
Wehbi, Rachid 1917-1993
Yagan, Saad b. 1950
Zibawi, Mahmoud b. 1962

Annex B - List of Cited Events

Year	Category	Subject	Speaker/Director
1967, November	Art exhibition	Le Corbusier	
1967, December	Lecture	<i>Writing and Speaking</i>	André Pieyre de Mandiargues
1968, February	Art exhibition	Farid Aouad	
1968, February	Political debate	Palestine	Students from the Ecole Supérieure des Lettres
1968, March	Lecture and poetry reading	<i>Poetry and Revolution</i>	Adonis
1968, April	Art exhibition	Amine el Bacha	
1968, May	Art exhibition	Palestinian posters	
1968, May	Art exhibition	Elie Kanaan	
1968, June	Art exhibition (group)	<i>5th June</i>	
1968, June	Debate	5 th June	Leila Osseiran, Aref el Rayess, Maurice Sacre
1968, November	Art exhibition	Hussein Madi	
1968, December	Lecture	<i>The sexuality</i>	Alaadine Drouby
1968, December	Book signing and poetry reading	Book signing of <i>Juin et le Mécréantes</i>	Nadia Tueni and Aref el Rayess
1968, December	Lecture	<i>The contraceptive pill</i>	Dupres Latour, Elie Karam, Nabil Kheir
1969, January	Lecture	<i>The Art of Russian Icons</i>	Nazem Irani
1969, January	Lecture/debate	<i>The Lebanese Girl in her Familial, Social and School Context</i>	Students of the Sacre Coeur School
1969, February	Art exhibition	Georges Guv	
1969, March	Art exhibition	Shafic Abboud	
1969, March	Lecture	<i>Le Propre de l'Art</i>	Shafic Abboud
1969, March	Concert	Concert of the Soviet Trio	
1969, April	Concert	Concert of the Dresda Trio	
1969, April	Lecture	<i>The Woman and her evolution from Colette to Simone de Beauvoir</i>	Jean Durtal
1969, May	Art exhibition and workshop	American engravings, curated by Paul Lingren	
1969, June	Art exhibition	Paintings and posters of the students of the Sacre Coeur, Sagesse and Antoura schools	

1969, November	Art exhibition	Moazzaz Raouda	
1969, December	Art exhibition	Wahib Bteddini and Nazem Irani	
1970, January	Lecture	<i>On women and myths</i>	Laure Moghaizel
1970, January	Art exhibition	Huguette Caland	
1970, February	Conference	<i>The New Woman</i>	Josette Naffah, Nadia Tueni, Claire Gebeyli, Abdallah Zakhia
1970, February	Art exhibition	Theatre in Poland	
1970, February	Movie screening	Japanese movies	
1970, March	Debate	<i>Que faire?</i>	Ghassan Tueni, Hicham Nachabé, Georges Corm, Gebran Majdalani
1970, March	Art exhibition	Amine el Bacha	
1970, March	Theatrical play	<i>Summertree</i>	
1970, April	Art exhibition	<i>Seven British Sculptors</i>	
1970, June	Art exhibition (group)	Exhibitions of the students of the Saints Coeur School	
1970, April	Movie screening	USSR movies	
1970, April	Lecture	<i>The struggle for liberation and the Arab woman</i>	Imam Moussa Sadr
1970, October	Lecture	<i>Culture and revolutionary actions</i>	Claude Bordet
1970, October	Art exhibition	Aref el Rayess	
1970, November	Movie screening	USA movies	
1970, December	Lecture	<i>Les peintres romantiques de Proudhon à Courbet</i>	Nicole Harfouche
1971, February	Art exhibition	Halim Jurdak	
1971, March		<i>For a Ministry of Culture</i>	Said Akl, Marcel Girard, Julien Forays, Georges Naccache, Wassek Adib
1971, March	Lecture	<i>Russian icons: new discoveries</i>	Nazem Irani
1971, March	Movie screening	USSR movies	
1971, March	Art exhibition	Cici Surssock	
1971, March	Book signing	<i>El ou la marche vers l'Est</i>	Claude Khal
1971, October	Movie screening	Japanese movies	
1972, January	Lecture	<i>Contemporaneity of Modern Arab Architecture</i>	Hassan Fathi
1972, March	Lecture	<i>Women Movement: social struggle or sexual struggle</i>	Laure Moghaizel and Bassem al Jisr

1972, March	Art exhibition	<i>Les Mondes Imaginaires</i> , Nicole Harfouche	
1972, March	Movie screening	<i>Accattone</i>	Pier Paolo Pasolini
1972, April	Art exhibition	Aref el Rayess	
1972, May	Movie screening	USSR movies	
1972, May	Art exhibition	<i>Three Painters from Aleppo : Loauy Kayali, Saad Yagan and Wahid Magharbeh</i>	
1972, October	Theatrical play	<i>Hekayat Kahrabia w- Malekha Ubu</i>	Gerard Avedissian
1972, November	Movie screening	Japanese movies	
1972, December	Movie screening	Egyptian movies	
1973, February	Art exhibition	Ahmed Abdel Al	
1973, February	Movie screening	Algerian movies	
1973, February	Theatrical play	<i>Al Bakara</i>	Therese Awad
1973, March	Art exhibition	Marek Halter	
1973, November	Art exhibition	Etel Adnan	
1973, November	Debates	<i>Fondements historiques, culturels et religieux</i>	Kamal Jumblatt, Kamal Salibi, Georges Khodr, Adel Ismail
		<i>Economic and political Causes</i>	Pierre Edde, Karim Mroué, Hicham Bsat, Mounir Chamoun
		<i>Foreign economic causes and the oil</i>	Nicola Sarkis, Marwan Iskandar, Nakhle Moutran, Karim Bakradani
		The role of current executive and legislative institutions	Assam Naman, Salah Matar, Raymond Farhat, Mohsen Ibrahim
		The role of administrative institutions	Khatshik Babkian, Hassan Awada, Marwan Kasrawini
		The role of educational institutions	Stephan Sacre, Abd el Wahab Shmitli, Ghassan Ayash
		Overcoming the Lebanese divisions	Pierre Eddé, Ghassan Tueni, Abd al-Majid al-Rafai, Hassan Awada

1973, November	Movie screening	USSR movies	
1973, December	Art exhibition	Etel Adnan	
1974, January	Art exhibition	<i>Chapters from the reality of the Third World</i> , Aref el Rayess	
1974, February	Art exhibition	Jamil Molaeb	
1974, February	Art exhibition	<i>Hanin w-Ashwak</i> , Nicole Harfouche	
1974, April	Theatrical play	<i>Noureddine and his friends</i>	Paul Matar
1974, May	Art exhibition	Mustapha Adjaout	
1974, May	Movie screening	<i>Medea, Porcile, Edipo Re</i>	Pier Paolo Pasolini
1974, May	Series of debates	<i>"The case of the Lebanese Woman and the Horizon of her Liberation"</i>	
1974, November	Movie screening	USSR movies (in collaboration with the Soviet Cultural Centre)	
1974, November		Series of meeting regarding <i>"The Woman Issue"</i>	
1974, December	Movie screening	USSR movies	
1975, January	Movie screening	USSR movies	
1975, February	Lecture	<i>The Ideal City</i>	Hassan Fathi
1975, February	Movie screening	USA movies (in collaboration with the Kennedy Cultural Centre)	
1975, March	Exhibition (group)	Le Groupe des Dix (Abdellatif Baroudy, Bassam Dick, Mohammed al-Haffar, Fadel Ziadeh, Faysal Sultan, Mohamed Azizé, Mohammed Ghaleb)	
1975, May	Series of debates	The Women's Month	
1975, May	Series of debates	International Week of the Woman <i>Equality</i> <i>Work</i>	Hoda Bedran, Randa Kahlidy, Emilie Nasrallah, Salam Hussein Micheline Galabert, Claire Gebeyli, Linda

		<p><i>Politics</i></p> <p><i>Peace</i></p> <p><i>Conclusions and Further Steps</i></p>	<p>Mattar, Elham Kallab, Nicolas Sarraf</p> <p>Virginie Tsoudeiros, Laure Moghaizel, Emilie Phares Ibrahim, Georges Corm</p> <p>Svetla Daskalova, Marie Debs, Méliné Topakian, Nakhle Moutran</p> <p>Hoda Bedran, Svetla Daskalova, Virginie Tsoudeiros</p>
1975, May	Art exhibition (group)	<i>The Lebanese Women</i>	

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L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti.

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Studente: Flavia Elena Malusardi

Matricola: 956630

Dottorato: Storia delle arti

Ciclo: XXXVII

Titolo della tesi¹: Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz: The Shaping of a Cultural Identity in Lebanon.

Abstract:

The dissertation examines cultural politics in Lebanon during the long 1960s and 1970s through the case study of the cultural centre Dar el Fan w-al-Adab [House of Art and Literature], founded in Beirut in 1967 by cultural advocate Janine Rubeiz (1926–1992) and active as a cultural space until 1975. It argues that the centre was an agent in shaping a particular cultural identity (termed “Lebanese personality”) in a time marked by internal tensions and international entanglements. After having retraced the structure of the centre, its mission and its ambitions, and selected early exhibitions, the subsequent chapters develop the analysis along different axes. Chapter 2 examines the contribution of women to the centre’s leadership and programming, with particular attention to feminist practices and the ways in which global feminist discourses were reinterpreted in relation to Lebanon. Political engagement is central in Chapter 3, which considers the interplay between culture and politics in a Lebanon caught between global Third Worldist and anti-imperialist movements, the regional impact of the Arab defeat in the 1967 War, and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975. Chapter 4 situates the centre in a broader international network of regional initiatives and Cold War dynamics, where culture, politics, and diplomacy intersected. Finally, it examines Rubeiz’s dedication to culture during the War, understanding it as a resource for sustaining social cohesion. The work sheds light on an understudied cultural institution, but also proposes to read it as an active cultural and political laboratory. The model of cultural identity that emerges is porous, attached to local concerns while also positioned within wider regional and global constellations.

La tesi discute le politiche culturali in Libano durante i decenni 1960/70 attraverso il caso studio di Dar el Fan w-al-Adab [Casa dell’arte e della Letteratura], fondato a Beirut nel 1967 dall’attivista culturale Janine Rubeiz (1926-1992) e operativo in quanto centro fino al 1975. Si sostiene che il centro fosse un agente attivo nel plasmare una certa identità culturale (chiamata “personalità Libanese”) in un momento contrassegnato da tensioni interne e intrecci internazionali. Dopo aver ritracciato la struttura del centro, la sua missione e ambizioni, e alcune prime mostre selezionate, i capitoli successivi sviluppano l’analisi secondo assi differenti. Il Cap. 2 esamina il contributo delle donne alla leadership e al programma, con particolare attenzione alle pratiche femministe e a come femminismi globali fossero rilette in relazione al Libano. L’impegno politico è centrale nel Cap. 3, che considera il rapporto tra cultura e politica in un Libano teso tra movimenti Terzomondisti e anti-imperialisti, l’impatto della sconfitta Araba del 1967, e lo scoppio della Guerra Civile nel 1975. Il Cap. 4 situa il centro in una rete internazionale più ampia di iniziative regionali e dinamiche della

¹ Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell’elaborato consegnato.

Guerra Fredda, dove si intersecano cultura, politica e diplomazia. Infine, si analizza l'impegno di Rubeiz per la cultura durante il conflitto, quando questa viene intesa come una risorsa per favorire coesione sociale. Il lavoro fa luce su una istituzione culturale poco nota, ma propone anche di leggerla come un laboratorio politico e culturale attivo. Il modello di identità culturale che ne emerge è poroso, legato a interessi locali ma posizionato anche all'interno di costellazioni regionali e globali più ampie.

Firma dello studente

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Flavia Rubeiz', with a checkmark at the end.