

Following the recent donation by Claude and France Lemand of around 1,300 artworks by leading modern and contemporary Arab artists to the Museum of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, *Valérie Didier Hess* sat down with Claude Lemand to understand how this Lebanese French naturalised linguistics professor one day decided to open a gallery in Paris and to start collecting art, and why more than 30 years later, he and his wife France are donating a large portion of their unique collection to a major French institution.

(Translated from French by Valérie Didier Hess)

Interview with CLAUDE LEMAND

Where does your passion for art come from? Did your family background play a role in nurturing this passion?

My family was not really interested in art - I was born in a modest yet brave family, both of my parents were orphans during the First World War of the Ottoman period. My mother read a lot and was instrumental in instigating that curiosity and passion for literature in me. My father was illiterate and had started working since the age of eight. I therefore pursued my studies, graduating from the French University of Beirut with a Masters in literature and later obtained a scholarship to do a Ph.D. in France. I came back to Beirut in September 1974 and worked as a university professor but seven months later, civil war broke out. I was kidnapped, then seriously injured and consequently fled my country.

In 1969, I visited Shafic Abboud's first major exhibition at Dar El Fan, a beautiful gallery space characterised by its traditional Lebanese architecture managed by Janine Rubeiz, a highly committed art dealer who was very close to many Lebanese artists at the time. I was absolutely enthralled by this exhibition of dazzling works produced by a Lebanese artist living in Paris. Of course, I could not afford to purchase any of his works back then. Nonetheless, I found myself taking part in Beirut's bustling cultural art scene as besides reading Lebanese poetry, I had a friend at university who was a pianist and who took me to many concerts and plays. Beirut was truly a dynamic hub for art and culture in those years, fuelled by its local artists, actors and writers, but also by the many Arab refugees who had flocked to this liberal city from their repressed countries, and especially fleeing the horrors of the 1948 Palestine *Nakba*. >



Claude and France Lemand, June 2018
Portrait by Dahmane

Etel Adnan. **Landscape**, 2014
Oil on canvas, 32 x 41 cm.
Copyright Etel Adnan
Claude & France Lemand Donation
Museum of the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Photo Jean-Louis Losi

You also developed a particular interest for tondos, dedicating exhibitions and publications to that theme. Why do tondos appeal to you so much?

I looked for the origin of this interest and I am sure that the many Roman and Byzantine mosaics I saw in Lebanon must have played a role, yet there is no doubt that our excursion to the Meroe Pyramids in Sudan located north of Khartoum, when we lived there in the late 1970s was the pivotal experience that drew my attention to tondos. We had taken some old trucks transformed into buses to get there and had slept under the stars on the truck's roof: there were millions of stars shining above me, the horizon was defined by the heavenly vault and for the first time in my life, I had the impression of being transported into another world.

When I opened my gallery in Paris in 1988, I didn't showcase tondos but I had seen one in Abdallah Benanteur's studio that I purchased shortly after and I started to think about using the tondo for an exhibition's thematic. I researched the subject and found out that Monet had painted four tondos in 1907-1908, that Ingres' famous *'Le Bain Turc'* was originally a rectangular format but was transformed into a tondo for its first owner, that many modern and contemporary artists such as Delaunay, Kandinsky, Riopelle, Zao Wou-Ki, Télémaque and others, had all painted tondos, leading me to hold my first tondo exhibition in 1993. From then on, I organised every three years an exhibition entitled 'The Masters of Tondo', showcasing the tondos of Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, juxtaposed with other tondos of completely different styles. For these exhibitions, Shafic Abboud produced three tondos and Dia Al-Azzawi more than twelve.



What led you to leave your job as a public servant for France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to open an art gallery instead?

I was hired by France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to go teach French in universities located in Arab countries, from 1977 to 1988. I was first appointed in Khartoum, Sudan (1977-1981) and then in Cairo, Egypt (1982-1988), yet I had always sensed that being a public servant was not my destiny. My experiences in Sudan and Egypt especially gave me the idea of opening an art gallery in Paris in 1988 and if it worked, I would continue this path and if it failed, I would look for a job elsewhere. I knew that in order to find my place on the Parisian art scene as a gallery owner, I needed a concept so I decided to focus on artists who, like me, both came from abroad and lived in Paris, whether punctually or permanently. I think that the core motivation behind my decision of drastically changing careers is also nurtured by my Lebanese roots and spirit: we are very open to the world, we are full of initiatives and always ready to take risks, we are driven by passion which we believe will make us successful.

I therefore exhibited foreign artists but also a few French artists and held exhibitions for Abboud, Benanteur, Azzawi, Adnan, Abdelke, Henein, Choukini, Belkahia, Khalil, Mehadji, amongst others, as well as publishing several catalogues or monographs on those artists. It was challenging to start from scratch, to build relationships with the media and with publishers, to establish a solid client database and to gain the Parisian art scene's trust. My clientele was mainly French at the beginning and then European. After the rise of the Middle Eastern art market in 2006, I had more and more Lebanese clients and others from the Arab diaspora, particularly from the Gulf region. Lebanese collectors have always been buying art and frequently travelled to Paris to buy works by Lebanese artists considering Brigitte Schéhadé, the wife of the famous writer Georges Schéhadé, had opened her gallery near the Place des Vosges in 1976, exclusively exhibiting Arab artists. She was replaced in 1983 by the Iraqi-born gallery owner Waddah Faris who moved from Lebanon to Paris to set up his own space. His gallery represented most of the Arab artists who had previously worked with Schéhadé as Faris had more means and had access to a wider network of wealthy clients.

“... we hope that the works by the Arab artists who have fascinated us all these years and who contribute to the museum’s richness and uniqueness, will soon be admired by one million visitors every year.”

Tell us more about your experiences in Khartoum and Cairo - to what extent did these have an impact on your desire of collecting art?

When I was appointed in Khartoum, we were supposed to stay only two years, but I refused to take a job in Saudi Arabia and instead I preferred to wait another two years to take a position in Cairo. Khartoum was not a culturally stimulating place, there was not much to do and I was not a keen tourist of archaeological sites. Also, I wasn’t alert enough to art and I didn’t have the curiosity of meeting the directors of the School of Fine Arts - Ibrahim El-Salahi had already left Sudan by the time we lived there. We moved from Khartoum to Cairo, only then did I realise I wanted to have a better understanding of the art scene. Nevertheless, there were many well documented and lavishly illustrated periodicals on Islamic art, and sometimes on contemporary Arab art, that were published in London and Beirut in the late 1970s. I bought and read many of these periodicals, such as *Funoun Arabiya*, in which I discovered the works of several Arab artists, the likes of Dia Al-Azzawi for example, and other Lebanese and Moroccan artists.

However, it was really in 1983-1984, around two years after moving to Egypt, that I started meeting artists and visiting art exhibitions. I was also in a more comfortable financial situation, which allowed me to undertake new projects involving the development of the cultural relationship between France and Egypt. I had noticed that none of the Egyptian writers had been translated into French, except from Naguib Mahfouz’s *The Thief and the Dogs* (1972) that was published in French in 1981. The American University of Cairo had translated most of these books in English so I decided to initiate and fund the French translation, by inviting several publishers from France to sign contracts with the concerned writers. I also translated French books into Arabic and was the first one to publish J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Desert* (1980) in Arabic.

Furthermore, I helped to organise a major exhibition on the Franco-Egyptian cultural relationship at Cairo’s French Cultural Centre, which featured for example the engravings of the *Description de l’Egypte* (1809-1829). I therefore visited exhibitions in galleries, such as Gallery Mashrabiya, although the art market was barely starting by that time in Egypt. I supported a few of the young Egyptian artists by funding their exhibition catalogues or invitations, and also by buying a few artworks directly from the artists. I wasn’t really thinking about putting an art collection together, I was more in need of buying works by these artists to understand better the art scene. I probably did not have enough experience back then to know what names to buy and I am sure I have made mistakes. During our three last years in Cairo, between 1986 and 1988, I used to travel to Paris every three months to look at how galleries operated, who were the artists ‘en vogue’, what exhibitions were on and I often went to the BNF (Bibliothèque Nationale de France). I also read a lot of booklets on Egypt’s modern and contemporary artists published by Dr Beltagy’s office. I befriended several artists such as Hamed Nada, Mamdouh Ammar and his wife Ekram Omar, as well as the future gallery owner Sherwet Shafei, a truly remarkable and dynamic woman, who was the head of the TV Channel 2. Cairo’s museums back then did not exhibit any of these modern and contemporary artists yet I was truly struck by the beauty and uniqueness of Mahmoud Mohamed Khalil’s museum. I even wrote a report on this museum and how more should be done to promote its extraordinary Impressionist and Post-Impressionist treasures to the French Embassy.

You married a French woman, France, in 1977 and settled in Paris in 1988 where you have been living ever since - what role have both ‘Frances’, France the country and France your wife, played for you as a collector and art dealer?

Paris adopted me, France (my wife) adopted me. Like many, I was traumatised by the civil war in Lebanon and first fled to San Francisco for three months in 1976 before seeking refuge in France, in Aix-en-Provence, which was closer to Lebanon, in case the war ended for me to return. There I met France, my wife, who was a speech therapist and who came from a very intellectual family - her grandfather was a famous writer, a close friend of André Malraux and an art collector who donated his collection to MNAM Centre Pompidou. She inherited her father’s generosity and his love for humanity, and she has always been at my sides to share happy memories but also to face more challenging times. She has supported my vision and shares the same love for art, taking care of the artists we have represented in our gallery, by hosting them and by helping out with their children. Most importantly, she has accepted for all these years that her husband is a monomaniac: I live for art and for my gallery.

As soon as I opened my gallery in Paris, one thing was clear: I had the mission of promoting Arab artists to the Western world and of ensuring a continuity of Arab art, linking the present with the past throughout times. Paris was critical in allowing me to succeed in this mission and in giving me a second chance to live an accomplished life, after seeing my native country being torn into pieces by civil war. >

Dia Al-Azzawi. **Sunset over Basrah**, 1990
Acrylic on canvas, 91 x 122cm
Copyright Dia Al-Azzawi
Claude & France Lemand Donation
Museum of the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Photo Jean-Olivier Rousseau



What were the first purchases of your art collection?

All of our purchases are the fruits of a joint decision taken by both France and I. It was in Egypt that we made our first acquisitions: we bought from Aida Ayoub in Cairo an ink drawing by Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar and a large masterpiece by the same artist, *Abou Ahmed The Mighty* of 1951, which is now in a private collection in Doha – we paid a total of around the equivalent of 30,000 FFR at the time... We were also very keen on the female artist Margot Veillon, from whom we purchased two works from Mashrabiya Gallery, as well as Hamed Nada, Zeinab Abdelhamid, Adam Henein, Gazbia Sirry and Salah Enani from whom we also acquired several works.

The two main artists of your collection, and hence of the donation, are Shafic Abboud and Abdallah Benanteur, the former from the Mashreq, the latter from the Maghreb. How did you discover their work and what drew you towards these two artists?

Abboud, who had first moved to Paris in 1947, did not miss a single opening at my gallery yet I never asked him to show his works in my space as he was already a very well-established artist by the late 1980s with Waddah Faris' gallery. Abboud is the one who came towards me and asked whether we could work together. Of course, I was thrilled and our collaboration was very smooth, easy and fruitful. Back then, it never crossed my mind to buy a large group of works from him in one go – France and I would limit ourselves to buying a couple of works at each of his shows and thankfully we held exhibitions for Abboud annually. I knew his health was unstable but in my mind, our collaboration was eternal – I adored him as a person and I greatly admired his work. In 2003, when Abboud was very sick a year before his death, Adonis and Brahim Alaoui from the Institut du Monde Arabe had approached him to organise retrospective exhibition of his work, a project that was quickly abandoned due to lack of funds: Abboud was deeply affected by this disappointment. I visited him and reassured him, promising him to organise a retrospective show of his oeuvre, a promise I kept with the 2011 retrospective exhibition held at the IMA, partly financed by the sale of three paintings from Abboud's estate at Christie's Dubai. He had also seen the monograph I had published on Benanteur's work and again, I promised to deliver a similar book for him, which came out two years after his death in 2006.

Since day one of opening my gallery, I always had the vision of working also as an art publisher. Although publishing art books was not profitable, it nevertheless enabled me to meet some great artists. It therefore comes with no surprise that it was in a book illustrated by Benanteur that I first saw his work and from there, I discovered his paintings. His etchings were stunning and he printed them himself, so I suggested to him to publish a short story by Marguerite Yourcenar that he would illustrate. He hated working with publishers and dreaded writers' demands, having had a bad experience in the early 1960s. Since then, he exclusively illustrated texts by poets from the past, as opposed to living writers, but made an exception for my project, after I had given my word that I would handle the publishers. From 1987 onwards, I started buying paintings directly from this Algerian artist's studio, one of my most significant purchases being the monumental three polyptychs titled *Les Élus*' of 1986-1987.



What was your most memorable experience and your most exciting discovery as an art collector or art dealer?

As just mentioned, in terms of most memorable artwork, it was Benanteur's *'Les Élus'* polyptychs, executed at the apogee of his career, which in my opinion is neither French nor Arab, as it echoes the scope of American Abstract Expressionism yet at the same time, he looks back to 15th and 16th century Old Master paintings. Although Benanteur never explained his works, I was enthralled by his oeuvre from an aesthetic point of view and being surrounded by those three monumental panels was the peak of my happiness as an art collector.

In terms of most memorable experience on a human level, that would have to be my encounter with Abboud. When I started showcasing his paintings in my gallery, I felt inside me a physical and real joy as his oeuvre allowed me to bind with my native country once again, as well as with art and with such a humble and simple character. Every time I was hanging his works for a show in my gallery space, I would remember all the traditional Lebanese songs inciting me to sing them – Abboud too used to sing all the time as for him, painting was a synonym for happiness, even in his darkest moments.

Finally, in terms of affection, France and I are very close to the Japanese artist Manabu Kochi, born in 1954, who studied in Florence before settling down in Paris in 1981 – France and I are his children's godparents. Until I met him in 1988, having been struck by the beauty of his sculptures, no gallery had expressed interest in his work. Although his family lived through the massacres in Okinawa during WW2, Kochi emphasised the optimistic rather than tragic side of life in his works.

How did you decide to make such a generous and comprehensive donation to a French institution?

Even back in the early 1980s when we were about to move from Sudan to Egypt, I had dreamed of having my own little museum and here we are today. The question had always been – where would I set up my museum? There are so many wonderful castles, foundations, mansions in France but most are in isolated villages and no one would ever go see our collection if it was far away and difficult of access. France and I were determined to find a space in Paris but to house such a collection would mean investing in an *'hôtel particulier'*, a budget out of our league. Furthermore, no museum in Paris accepts the condition of a donation to be permanently on display in a dedicated space: donations are kept in the museum's storerooms and occasionally a few pieces are selected to be temporarily displayed – which does not concord with the vision France and I had for our collection. >

Manabu Kochi. **A Dream**, 1995
Acrylic on canvas, diameter 80 cm
Copyright Manabu Kochi
Claude & France Lemand Donation
Museum of the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Photo Alberto Ricci

Why chose the Institut du Monde Arabe ?

It was a combination of factors, given that Jack Lang was keen on renovating and reinvigorating the IMA and its Museum. Jack Lang is a man who thinks and who acts, he is truly the greatest Minister of Culture that France has ever known. He is a man of our generation, who can represent us, who has a humanist vision both national and universal. He regularly came to see my stand at the annual Art Paris Art fair, where I predominantly exhibited Arab artists. He heard about our project of donating a significant part of our collection to a museum. We met twice and we were perfectly aligned on all aspects of our donation.

The IMA is a museum of France, signifying that anything that comes into the museum can never be de-accessioned, unlike American museums, a critical point for France and I. Jack Lang has the same vision as us: we did not expect a dime from this donation but we had the guarantee that no work from our collection could ever leave the IMA museum. After months of finalising a vast selection of more than 1,200 artworks of all media and support, the donation was unanimously accepted by the IMA's administrative board on 19th June 2018.



Ayman Baalbaki. **Yuk**, 2012
Polyptych, mixed media on panel, 235 x 229cm
Copyright Ayman Baalbaki
Claude & France Lemand Donation
Museum of the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Photo Christie's Images

What impact do you want your donation to have on both the local and international art scene?

Our donation has increased the IMA museum's permanent collections by 40% - a large space will be exclusively dedicated to it. This collection illustrates our vision, our experiences and our passion for the artists we encountered throughout our lives. It will probably take a year or so for the space to be designed, whilst every artwork will be archived and documented. In the meantime, Jack Lang has requested to start exhibiting highlights from our donation from October 2018 onwards, and to continue to do so with three exhibitions held in three out of the museum's four floors every four months. This comprehensive ensemble of over 1,200 artworks will fuel the dynamism the IMA has been seeking for its museum over the last few years - it needs this 'art boost' for the years to come. It comprises of mainly artists of Arab origins but of also two other groupings, one of the *'Portrait of the bird that didn't exist'* bringing together 19 artists from all over the planet, and the second group *"Tondo from East and West"* includes works executed by 33 different international artists. The common thread for all those artworks is Paris: they were produced by artists of different origins who all temporarily or permanently settled in Paris at some point during their careers.

**In addition to your donation, I understand that you are also setting up a fund?
What is its purpose?**

Indeed, the aims of this fund will be to solely used for the IMA's benefit. Not only will it serve the museum's future acquisitions in view of enriching or completing our donation, but it will also seek to stimulate collectors, artists or sponsors in preserving and enlarging the collection, to finance exhibitions, publications, symposiums, educational programs and a research unit. Nevertheless, the intention is not to purchase young contemporary artists to launch them but rather to continue buying works which complements the vision of our collection.



What is your intention by doing such a generous act to the IMA?

Outside the Arab world, the IMA's Museum will become the largest museum representing artists from the Arab world. Paris and its museums attract millions of visitors from all over the world, and we aim for the IMA Museum to be no different. The policies of the IMA's chairmanship are ambitious and dynamic, and we will strive to appeal to the donors' generosity and to ensure that their roles as conveying a positive image of the Arab World is put forward. Thanks to these essential factors, we hope that the works by the Arab artists who have fascinated us all these years and who contribute to the museum's richness and uniqueness, will soon be admired by one million visitors every year. If we are donating this significant group of major artworks to the IMA's Museum, it ultimately symbolises our recognition to France (the country!) for adopting me and our determination to spread our knowledge on these artists, many of which are yet to be fully understood, share our passion for art and ensure the collection's continuity once we are gone...🙏

Chaouki Choukini. *Petit Prince. Enfant de Gaza*, 2010.
Bronze sculpture, 120 x 52 x 34 cm
Copyright Chaouki Choukini
Claude & France Lemand Donation
Museum of the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Photo Nadine Fattouh