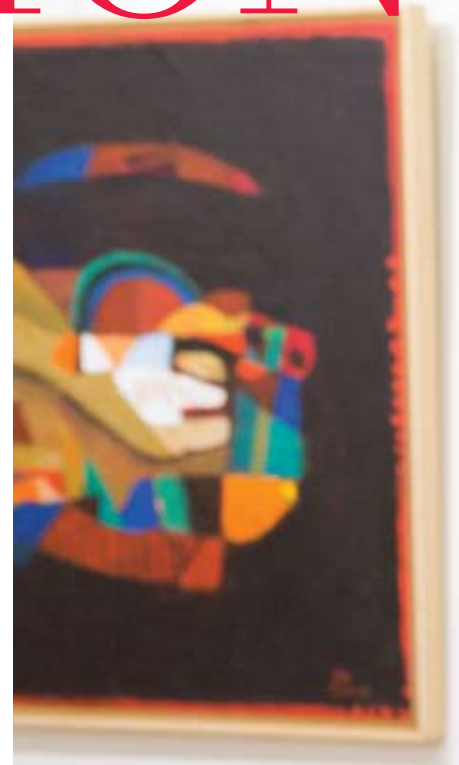


# A PASSION

## GALERIE CLAUDE LEMAND

It was the discovery of an illustrated artist book which inspired Claude Lemand to establish a gallery in Paris. **Franck Barthelemy** and **Myrna Ayad** discuss the space, which, over two decades and a second gallery later, is dedicated to the promotion of Modern Arab art.



# F

rom an early age, literature, music and visual art appealed to Claude Lemand. Raised in Beirut, the founder of the eponymous Paris gallery spaces spoke Arabic at home but was sent to a French school. The Lebanese capital was, he recalls, “a centre of Arab and international culture for the entire Middle East; a city where I was exposed to Western and Arab poetry, novels, music, folk and modern theatre and emerging visual art.” He credits his parents for infusing in him a passion for the arts. “They had never travelled [outside Lebanon],” he says, “but engrossed themselves in popular culture through songs and literature.”

Lemand’s mother was very fond of literature and encouraged her son to pursue higher education. He received a Master’s in Comparative Literature in 1971, after which he was granted a three-year scholarship and relocated to Aix-en-Provence to pursue a PhD. Passionate about theatre and classical music, Lemand would make a trip to Paris from Aix every three months. Enthralled by the French capital and revelling in the Paris of the 1970s, he felt that nowhere offered better exposure to artistic trends, movements and concepts. “I could visit museums and exhibitions, attend plays and concerts; I could learn about the art of great civilisations and explore the famous paintings and sculptures,” he recalls.

# TO SHARE



Claude Lemand in his gallery space. From left to right: all (detail) works by Dia Al-Azzawi. *Sunset on Basrah*. 1990. Acrylic on canvas. 91 x 122 cm; *Oriental Garden*. 1995. Acrylic on canvas. 142 x 61 cm; *The Blue Bird*. 1983. Oil on canvas. 69.5 x 78 cm.



Above: Mohammad Omar Khalil. (Detail) *The Hidden Man*. 2007. Oil and collage on canvas. Diameter: 105 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand.

Facing page: Najla Mehadji. *Fleur de Grenade*. 2003. Oil stick on canvas. 170 x 195 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand.

## MEETING THE MASTERS

Lemand returned to Beirut and taught linguistics at L'École des Lettres for a year, leaving Lebanon again with the onset of political tensions in January 1976. From 1977–88 he worked for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a professor, teaching linguistics in French in universities in the Sudan and Egypt. It was in Cairo that Lemand met many of the country's renowned intellectuals and writers, among them Yusuf Idris and Naguib Mahfouz, whom he encountered through a translation centre he had set up to encourage French publishers to access Arab literature. In the process, he also met some of Egypt's pioneering artists, among them Hamed Nada, Gazbia Sirry, Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar and Zeinab Abdel Hamid. His interest in Modern Arab art was aroused and

he began to buy works by some of these artists, his taste evolving and deepening with each piece he acquired. "I kept almost all the art that I bought then," he says proudly. "I refused to sell any, even when I was offered large amounts of money for some between 2007–9."

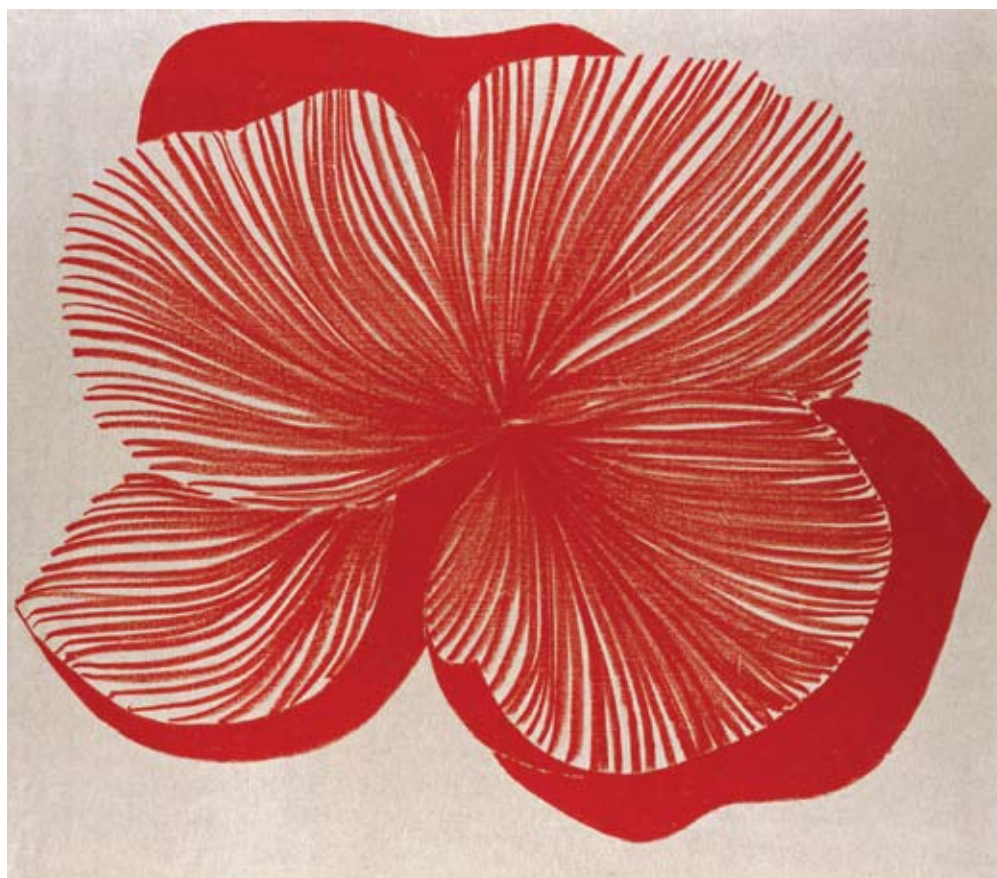
In 1987 Lemand stumbled on the illustrated books of Algerian artist Abdallah Benanteur in a library in Paris. "I immediately made my way to his studio in Ivry!" he exclaims. It was an intellectual encounter that was to change Lemand's life and profession – Benanteur's passion for creating artist books, together with the strength of his etchings and their bright colours, resonated with Lemand, who gave up his teaching career and decided to become a gallerist in Paris. "My passion for art became very strong at that point," he admits. "There was no doubt in my mind: I truly wanted to promote art and to do it from Paris, too. I love the city and I feel good there." Galerie Claude Lemand opened to the public in October 1988 on 16 rue Littré (in the 6th arrondissement). The 64 square-metre, two-level space was inaugurated with Benanteur's limited edition artist book, *The Last Love of Prince Genji*, and was the first of his many solo exhibitions at the gallery.

**Setting age,  
nationality  
and gender  
aside,  
[Lemand]  
created  
Avant-garde  
narratives,  
showing  
for instance  
Shafic  
Abboud,  
Abdallah  
Benanteur  
or Farid  
Belkahia  
alongside  
Sam Francis,  
Joan Mitchell  
or Jean Paul  
Riopelle.**

The space's founding premise was to promote artists from all over the world, people who – like Lemand – had left their native countries and chosen to settle in Paris. The decision to showcase works by Diasporic Arab artists led Lemand to discover others, including those who had migrated to London, New York and other cities in the West, such as Shafic Abboud, Dia Al-Azzawi, Yousef Abdelke, Etel Adnan, Assadour, Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Omar Khalil, Mahjoub Ben Bella, Kamal Boullata, Chaouki Choukini and Najia Mehadji. "I did not want to extend my artist portfolio beyond Europe because I wanted to be able to meet the artists as often as possible," explains Lemand, who has always valued the close relationships he enjoys with his artists.

#### SPREADING THE WORD

Lemand had seen Abboud's works in Paris through some galleries and again at the FIAC fair in the 1980s. "He impressed me with his abstract work and eventually became a good friend," says Lemand, who went on to give Abboud a solo show in 1997. Despite illness, the frail Abboud was eager to "bring spring to the gallery" through the exhibition. "When I hung the paintings, I sang Lebanese folk songs and was euphoric!" laughs Lemand, who has amassed an impressive collection of works by Abboud, Benanteur and Al-Azzawi. "His pieces took me back to the enchantment of the Lebanese



GALLERY



This page, top to bottom: Shafic Abboud. (Detail) *Saison II*. 1959. Oil on masonite. 130 x 130 cm; Assadour. *Nuages Polychromes avec un Personnage*. 2005. Oil on canvas. 114 x 146 cm; Etel Adnan. (Detail) *Poem by Al-Sayyab (Al-Um Wal-Tiflat Al-Da'ia)*. 1970. Watercolour and ink on 24-page Japanese book. Page size: 33 x 25.5 cm. Total book size: 33 x 612 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand.

Facing page: Dia Al-Azzawi. (Detail) *Man and White Dove*. 1986. Acrylic on terracotta. 44 x 58 x 8 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand.

landscape and even managed to erase the horrors of the war from my memory." The gallerist's intention was "to introduce Modern Arab artists to the international art market" and in order to achieve this Lemand took a rather unconventional route. Setting age, nationality and gender aside, he created Avant-garde narratives, showing for instance Abboud, Benanteur or Belkahia alongside Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell or Jean Paul Riopelle. Such shows are an integral part of the gallery's programming and are staged annually. The Parisian public soon proved receptive to such innovative exhibitions, delighting in the cross-cultural mix and intrigued by Lemand's exhibition of Western greats alongside their Arab counterparts. "Art connoisseurs in Paris do not segregate artists according to their origins," he adds.

Initially the collectors who flocked to Galerie Claude Lemand and supported the institution were from Europe and the USA, and not from the Middle East. However, as the gallery grew in stature and the impact of its exhibitions spread, that collector base expanded to include buyers from the Arab world. "Those who bought pieces by Abboud in his 1997 solo show were split 50-50 between Lebanese and Europeans," explains Lemand. It was after 2006 that the gallery began to witness a steady increase in interest from Arab collectors, particularly from the Gulf – spurred on by Qatar's acquisition of Modern Arab artworks, the advent of the Christie's Dubai sales and the staging of *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* exhibition in London and Dubai. These events, believes Lemand, were pivotal in shedding light on art from the Middle East and thus also on his roster of Arab artists.

In line with his passion for promoting Middle Eastern artists is Lemand's role as a publish-

**"The number of foundations or public collections dedicated to Arab Modern artists remains very limited. So much more can be done."**

er, which has seen him print monographs and books on the likes of Abboud and Benanteur. "I always have a great connection with the artists whose monographs I publish," he says. "When I see something I like, I want to put it into print." Lemand's zeal for publishing stems from the rediscovery of *Maqamat Al-Hariri* – the celebrated Arabic illuminated manuscripts illustrated by Yahya Ibn Mahmud Al-Wasiti (1054 –1122) – in Europe in the 1940s. Arab artists found inspiration in the elaborate illustrations of these manuscripts; this, in turn, inspired Lemand to stage exhibitions such as *Homage to Al-Wasiti* and *Renaissance Arabe du Livre*, both of which showcased the paintings and drawings of Arab artists such as Adnan, Abboud, Al-Azzawi, Benanteur, Belkahia, Boullata, Khalil and Ziad Dalloul juxtaposed with pivotal monographs of their work.





Above, left to right: Abdallah Benanteur. *Le Courroux*. 1989. Oil on canvas. 195 x 130 cm; An installation view of *Arab Masterpieces* at Espace Claude Lemand. From left to right: Hamed Nada. *Music on Pyramids*. 1986. Oil on canvas on cardboard. 61 x 61 cm; Dia Al-Azzawi. *Sunset on Basrah*. 1990. Acrylic on canvas. 91 x 122 cm; Dia Al-Azzawi. *Oriental Garden*. 1995. Acrylic on canvas. 142 x 61 cm; Dia Al-Azzawi. *The Blue Bird*. 1983. Oil on canvas. 69.5 x 78 cm; Dia Al-Azzawi. *Man and White Dove*. 1986. Acrylic on terracotta. 44 x 58 x 8 cm; Abdallah Benanteur. *L'Elu*. 1987. Oil on canvas. Triptych. 150 x 350 cm; Chaouki Choukini. (Detail) *The Horse of Guernica*. 2011. Bronze. 147 x 84 cm. Edition of six.

All photography by Dahmane unless otherwise specified.

## EXPANDING OPTIONS

In celebration of the gallery's 20th anniversary in October 2008, Lemand opened a second exhibition space, L'Espace Claude Lemand, on Avenue Jean Moulin. Transforming an 84-square-metre former artist's studio in the midst of a global recession, he now uses it to showcase his artists' larger canvases and stage retrospectives and thematic exhibitions. "There were certainly no market-driven reasons to open [the space] at that time!" he laughs. What drove him, however, was the desire to offer his collectors the comfort of a non-profit venue where they could view artworks away from the confines of a 'commercial' space. Last January L'Espace hosted *Benanteur: An Itinerary*, a retrospective of the Algerian artist's paintings made between 1957 and 2011; and in parallel, the gallery exhibited some of Benanteur's small and medium-sized works. This November sees the works of Al-Azzawi created during 1963–2011 through *An Itinerary: Paintings*

and *Gouaches*, followed by a show in January, *Dia Al-Azzawi: Art and Literature*, which will see Lemand showcase paintings at L'Espace and gouches at the gallery – many of which will be exhibited for the first time.


After 2006, with institutions and collectors alike acquiring Modern Middle Eastern artworks more vigorously, Lemand noticed a certain 'nationalism' in the buying habits of private collectors. Some of them, he says, "would unfortunately only buy works by artists from their own countries," whereas Lemand's Parisian buyers "did not consider such borders and bought what they liked". He maintains a pragmatic view about the so-called 'boom' in Middle Eastern art and is delighted by the initiatives and exhibitions of institutions such as Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and Paris's Institut du Monde Arabe. Yet he still sees scope for greater activity. "The number of foundations or public collections dedicated to Modern Arab artists remains



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very limited,” he says. “So much more can be done.”

As far as Contemporary Middle Eastern art is concerned, Lemand exhibits young talents in his group shows. Earlier this year, he staged *La Creation Libanaise* at L’Espace, in which he chose to create a dialogue between three generations of Lebanese artists and included works by Contemporary names such as Ayman Baalbaki and Zena Assi. In July, Lemand added paintings by Moroccan-born Mehadji to *The Masters of the Tondo* exhibition. “It makes me very happy to discover emerging artists and support them,” he says. Even so, for the last few years the gallery has not added any new names

to its roster, preferring instead to focus on its stable of established masters. Lemand has, however, kept his finger on the pulse and acquired works by prominent names on the Contemporary Middle Eastern art circuit, thereby fuelling a vision he has to possibly establish a foundation in Paris that will showcase pieces from his private collection. “As a gallerist, I have had the invaluable pleasure to live surrounded by artworks that I like, whether in my spaces or at home,” he smiles. “And I’d like to continue to share that with the public.” 

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