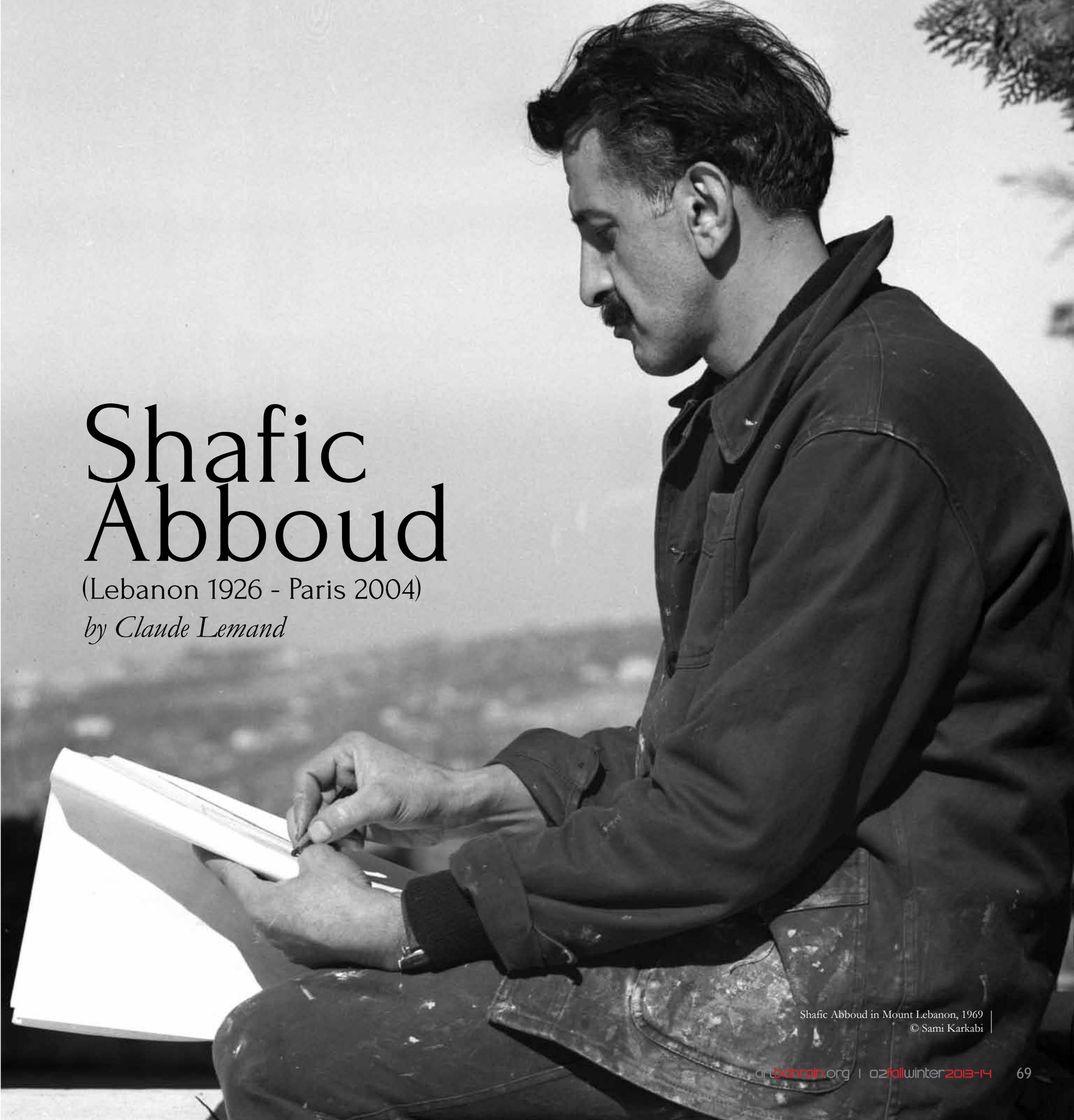


"I go to my studio with great desire and with that boundless delight at the prospect of painting. I go in and look around with the delectation of the lover as well as his fears." SHAFIC ABBOUD-March 1982



Shafic Abboud, **Les inspirations**, 1989. Tempera on 91 panels, 126 x 212 cm. ©Succession Shafic Abboud
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris



Shafic Abboud

(Lebanon 1926 - Paris 2004)

by Claude Lemand

Shafic Abboud in Mount Lebanon, 1969 |
© Sami Karkabi



Shafic Abboud, **Confidences**, 1981. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. ©Succession Shafic Abboud
 Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

I have a great admiration for Shafic Abboud, the foremost Parisian Arab painter of the second half of the 20th century. His paintings are a manifesto for freedom, colour, light and joy, as well as being a permanent bridge between the art scenes of France and Lebanon and the Middle East. Shafic Abboud was very attached to Lebanon, to its landscapes, its light and his own childhood memories. With respect to his own wish, it was important that his first retrospective be held in Paris, the city which he had loved, which had welcomed him and recognised his talent.

Shafic Abboud was from a Lebanese Arab Modern culture. The stories of his grandmother, who was the village's story-teller, left an indelible mark on him, at a very early age. He was immersed in the very colourful popular

culture of the villages of Mount Lebanon and was familiar with the paintings of the travelling story-tellers. The artist's eye was also strongly influenced by Byzantine icons and traditions from his church. These rites celebrate more the Resurrection and Transfiguration of Christ, rather than the Passion and the Saviour's sufferings which the Roman Catholic tradition and liturgy glorify. The writings, debates, ideals, hopes and battles characterising the Arab Nahda, a modernist and anti-clerical Renaissance which was initially driven by 19th century Lebanese writers and thinkers, were to later have a significant impact on Abboud's intellectual education.

Born in 1926 in Lebanon, Shafic Abboud arrived in 1947 in Paris. He blended in perfectly with the city's artistic life, just as many other artists who had come

from all over the world after the Second World War (from North and South America, Europe, Asia and North Africa). This was the second major movement of migration to Paris. France's capital was still at the time the City of lights and the favourite destination of upcoming artists seeking for modernity, embodied by Claude Monet's last painting period and by all the Parisian masters of the 20th century. Shafic Abboud had a particular preference for works by Pierre Bonnard, Roger Bissière and Nicolas de Staël. His first personal exhibition as figurative painter took place in Beirut in 1950, whilst his first solo exhibition as abstract painter was held in Paris in 1955. Abboud's painting gradually moved from the poetic Lebanese figuration towards the lyrical Parisian abstraction, followed by a move from abstraction towards

a very subtle and sublime personal “abboudian transfiguration”, which was simultaneously traditional and modern, pagan and sacred.

Like all creators, Shafic Abboud was complex and multiple. He knew how to appreciate the simple joys in life, such as eating well, drinking, loving, being affected by the light in a landscape, a fabric, a face or a woman’s body. He both claimed and wrote, as opposed to other artists who mention the torments of creation, that his happiness was fulfilled in painting and that it put him into a trance, giving him a sensual pleasure similar to that of love. I once told him that his paintings which hung in my gallery brought me a feeling of triumphant euphoria and hence, I had started to hum Lebanese and Arab songs from my childhood. Abboud had replied saying that he also used to sing in Arabic in his studio. It seems that it was almost natural for him that a sense of joy emanated from his paintings for both him and his admirers.

His work is often an invitation to the joy of life, a pagan hedonism yet limited by our frail human condition. However, this does not prevent a tragic element from being present in some of his paintings. These occasionally evoke, in an obvious or subtle way, difficult situations from stages of his life or that of his friends’, the tragic events happening in Lebanon, in the Arab world and in various parts of the World. Although Abboud never overtly put forward his engagements, his oeuvre and his interviews with the Arab press reveal his opinion as well as his political and social concerns.

Shafic Abboud is not the painter of one image, which is then reproduced in stereotypes with multiple variations. He is on a permanent quest. He first experiments, he then gets excited by his discoveries and finally, he doubts and reassesses. However, he is also faithful to different aspects of a series of continuous themes such as Seasons, Windows, Studios, Rooms, Nights, Destroyed Cafés, the temperas of the Childhood world, the temperas of Ancient Arab poets, Simone’s dresses, ...

When I described his mature work as being ‘transfigurative’ earlier on, it seems to me that this word reflects best Abboud’s search for a synthesis between his fairy-tale like childhood world and his technical mastering of abstract Parisian painting. He sought to transcend the latter, stimulated by both Bonnard and de Staël, by giving it a soul of its own and a rich and luminous texture.



Shafic Abboud, **L'aube**, 2003
Oil on canvas, 105 x 120 cm
©Succession Shafic Abboud
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris



Shafic Abboud in his studio, Paris, 2000
©Photo Wolfgang Osterheld. Courtesy Succession Shafic Abboud and Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

Through his paintings, Abboud aimed to share his own view on both his inside and outside worlds. He transfigured images filtered from his memory into painting, such as his series of Destroyed Cafés of 1990. These large colourful compositions beam the tragic reality of the war in Lebanon devastating the cafés by the sea in Beirut, which Abboud loved going to on his own or with his friends, when he used to visit every winter until 1975. In a similar way, he also transfigured his memory of his friend Simone after her death, whose dresses fascinated Abboud with their various shimmering fabrics. Being neither a devout follower nor believer of any religion, Abboud was nonetheless very much influenced by the glory of the Byzantine Greco-Arab liturgy. Symbolically, Art triumphs over death.

Please allow me to remind you the importance of this artist. Not only the French but also the Lebanese

and Arab critics acknowledged the quality of Abboud’s painting at a very early stage in his life. In 1953, he was the first Arab painter to produce painters’ books in Paris, using etchings for Le Bouna and silkscreen prints for La Souris. Furthermore, he was the first and only artist from the Arab World to participate to the first Biennale of Paris in 1959. In Lebanon, during two decades 1950-1970, he played a major role for Beirut’s cultural and artistic life. Beirut was the beam of all the Near-Eastern countries, and had experienced many fruitful hours of freedom, creativity, prosperity and a particular way of life, which contributed to its international reputation. Up to 1975, Abboud was used to spending the three winter months in Lebanon. He taught at the Lebanese University and organised personal exhibitions in one of the best galleries of the capital. Abboud’s works were exhibited alongside the biggest names of the Parisian art scene up to 1968, and he participated to the FIAC in Paris, from 1983 onwards. In 1994, after 15 years of war, the show of his oeuvre in Beirut was a huge media and commercial success. When Abboud passed away in April 2004, a moving farewell ceremony was organised at the Parc Montsouris in Paris’ 14th district, very close to where the artist had his small studio. Abboud then received a triumphant welcome, when his body was transferred to Beirut and to Mount Lebanon, where he was buried, as per his wish.♦

Translated from French by Valérie Hess.