

## A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

# The Rise of the Sursock Museum The Power of the Image to Create an Image of Power

Ashraf Osman

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

**Abstract** The Sursock Museum is a cultural institution that has played a significant role in shaping the art scene in Beirut, Lebanon, and the wider region, since its establishment in the 1950s-60s. This paper examines how the Museum employed the rhetoric of images on multiple levels, including that of its donor, the architecture, as well as the art to consolidate its power in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, the Sursock Museum's policies helped construct its public image as a place of cultural and social significance, while also reflecting broader power structures and hierarchies in Lebanese society.

**Keywords** Sursock Museum. Beirut. Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock. Salon d'Automne. Modern art history. Lebanon.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Book. – 3 The Man. – 4 Art in Beirut before the Museum. – 5 The Imaginary Museum. – 6 The Fall Exhibitions. – 7 The Structures of Power. – 8 Passport to Society. – 9 Ivory Tower Politics. – 10 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction\*

The silver jubilee of the Sursock Museum was in 1986, eleven years into the Lebanese War. One may think art is a low priority in wartime; nevertheless, a couple of leading art critics took the time to write extensive reviews of the museum's output till then. Fayçal Sultan's review appeared in *As-Safir* newspaper in 1987 (and later in a compendium of his writings on art for the paper, *Writings Recovered from*

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*the Memory of Beirut Arts*;<sup>1</sup> see Sultan 2013); while Cesar Nammour's "Assessment" appears in his compendium of writings on painting, *In Front of the Painting* (Nammour 2003). In both cases, the Sursock Museum was the only institution dedicated a chapter in either book.<sup>2</sup> By many measures, the Sursock Museum was – at least till then – not only the primary, but also the sole art museum in the country. However, its ascent was not as smooth and uncontested as its polished appearance may intimate.

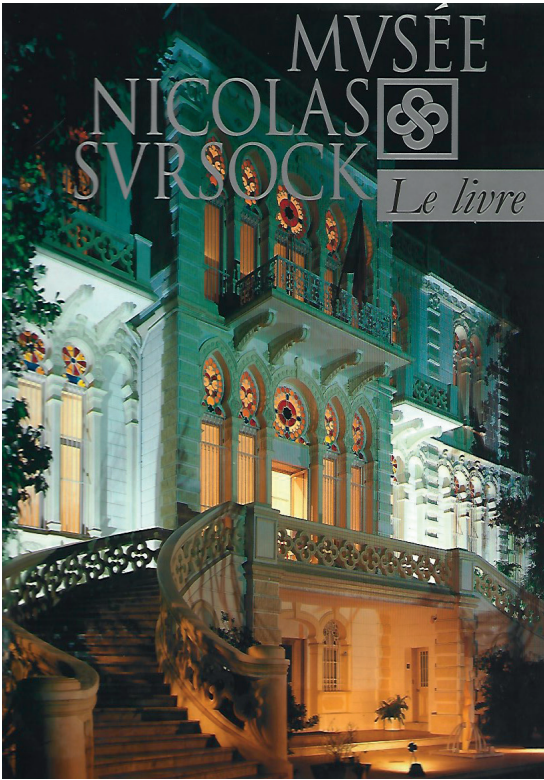
In a critical piece from 1967 (six years after the Museum's launch) titled "Sursock 'Museum'... When will it become a museum?", the weekly *Al-Ahad* declared: "The museum is not a museum (in the municipal or governmental sense). Rather, it is a seasonal exhibition hall [...] So how can the Sursock Museum, in its current state, be called a museum if any person, student, critic, or art student is unable through it to know the Lebanese artistic heritage from its inception until now?" (Sultan 1967). It can be argued, however, that the Museum has since not only presented the Lebanese artistic heritage, but also helped construct it over the years. And through its rise, it has harnessed the power of the image – in both its literal artistic sense, as well as its metaphorical sociopolitical one – to create an image of power unparalleled in modern Lebanese art history.

## 2 The Book

By the year 2000, nearly half a century after the passing of Nicolas Sursock, the patrician who donated his mansion and its collections of fine objects to establish an eponymous museum, that museum was the uncontested preeminent establishment for fine arts in Lebanon. To celebrate the turn of the century, the Sursock Museum produced a glossy hardcover volume, in French, titled *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre* (Nicolas Sursock Museum, The Book) [fig. 1]. Written by leading figures of the Museum and amply illustrated in color with artworks and artifacts from its exhibitions over the years, *The Book* attempted to capture the museum's history and trajectory across the few rich and tumultuous decades of its existence. Its cover featured, like the covers of many of the Museum's catalogues, brochures, and posters before it, the "architectural jewel" that is the Museum's building, its "immaculate whiteness" (Aboussouan 2000, 43) lit dramatically at night. As the primary publication on the main art museum in the country, *The*

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>2</sup> Nammour wrote another authoritative compendium, *Sculpture in Lebanon* (Nammour 1990), where – again – the Sursock Museum was the only institution to have a dedicated chapter.



**Figure 1**  
Cover  
of *Musée Nicolas Sursock,*  
*Le Livre*, 2000. Courtesy  
of Sursock Museum

*Book* presented a polished image of the institution and its chronology, but left several questions unanswered about the rise of the Museum from a private mansion with a rather modest collection to the imposing art establishment it became. That rise leveraged image, both in its literal sense of artistic product and in its more metaphorical sense of social perception, to consolidate power within the institution.

### 3 The Man

As an eponymous museum, the image and power of the Sursock Museum first emerges through that of its founding donor, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (ca. 1875-1952) [fig. 2]. The Sursocks were one of Beirut's most prominent and powerful aristocratic Christian (Greek-Orthodox) families that circulated within Ottoman and European high societies. "Illustrious" and "influential" (Trombetta 2009, 197) within an international Mediterranean bourgeoisie that spread among Alexandria, Beirut, Cairo, Constantinople, Paris and Rome, they were



Figure 2

Portrait of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock  
by Philippe Mourani. Circa 1920s. Beirut.  
Courtesy of Sursock Museum

wealthy landowners in modern-day Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. In his chapter on Nicolas Sursock in *The Book*, the conservator of the Sursock Museum (from 1980 until 2015), Loutfalla Melki, asks: “Wasn’t the child who had just been born in this district of luxury, calm and beauty – to which the Sursocks gave their name – predestined to venerate art and beauty?” (Melki 2000, 25). Thus, the link between luxury, wealth and power, on the one hand, and art, beauty and image on the other is implied as *fait accompli* from the start.

Obligingly, Nicolas Sursock embodied this privileged background as much as his ‘golden age’ of the ‘Nahda’, or Arab Awakening, the intellectual, cultural and political ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘Renaissance’ in the Arabic parts the Ottoman Empire – mainly in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia – during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Throughout the transitional period between the French Mandate and independence, Nicolas Sursock had an intimate relationship with the artistic manifestations that gave Beirut its cultural face that is open to various artistic currents known to French art” (Sultan 2013, 264). His residence, home of the future Museum, reflected this ‘eclecticism’ as well: built in 1912, it integrated Venetian and Ottoman elements typical in Lebanon at the turn of the century. “Italian without really being Italian, imbued with Andalusia [...] Moorish influence accentuated by the coloured stained-glass windows at

the top of the arcades” (Melki 2000, 27).

An “elegant” “aesthete”, Nicolas Surssock was a “hardened bachelor” and “the perfect dandy”. Thus, at a time when the patricians of Beirut built churches, mosques, schools, orphanages, and hospitals in the city, this “eccentric” patron chose a “most unexpected act of patronage there is: a museum” (Melki 2000, 17-19). He donated his residence and art collection to the city of Beirut to be preserved in a trust-fund or endowment (*waqf*) under the administration of Beirut’s municipal government after his passing. The home was to be transformed into a “public museum for ancient and modern art from Lebanon, other Arab countries, or elsewhere” (Surssock 1952). With that, Nicolas Surssock enshrined his name, and that of his family, in Lebanese art history.

By donating to the city of Beirut its first museum of modern art [...] Nicolas Ibrahim Surssock inscribed his family in the history of his country, following all those who contributed to building the Lebanese nation. (Surssock 1961)

#### 4 Art in Beirut before the Museum

Beirut did lack an art museum then, but the foundations of its art world had started decades earlier, in the Nahda era. The first generation of Lebanese artists who studied at academies in Paris and Rome returned to teach painting in Beirut at the turn of the century (Habib Serour at the Ottoman School of Bachoura and Khalil Saleeby at the American University of Beirut, then the Syrian Protestant College). The French Mandate (1920-43) saw the first public exhibitions in Beirut (at the School of Arts and Crafts, the Saint Georges Hotel, and the Parliament) of Rachid Wehbi, Georges Cyr, Philippe Mourani, and Moustapha Farroukh; and in New York, of Charles Corm and Youssef Hoyeck. The period also included the founding of such seminal institutions as the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) and the Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors. (cf. Chahine 1982, XXIX)

After independence, the Lebanese art scene continued to develop at home with the founding of the Lebanese Cenacle, which hosted exhibitions and lectures by and about artists like Bibi Zogbé, Moustapha Farroukh, and Omar Onsi; and abroad, with the participation of Lebanese artists in biennales and festivals of such cities as Alexandria, Washington, Vienna, Paris, and São Paulo (cf. Chahine 1982, XXIX). The closest and most influential in terms of institutional precedent for the Surssock Museum were the collective exhibitions organized by the Lebanese Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts, the first of which was in 1947 at the National Museum (that is primarily archaeological). Following that, starting in 1954, the Ministry

organized semestrial exhibitions at the UNESCO Palace – first a *Salon d'Automne* and then a *Salon du Printemps* – both of which continued annually for at least three years; after which only the *Salon du Printemps* continued (cf. Lahoud 1974, XI).

## 5 The Imaginary Museum

It was during that decade that the Sursock Museum was to be born. However, after its donor's death in 1952, a presidential decree circumvented his will until 1957, turning the villa in the interim into a guest palace (*palais des hôtes*) for visiting heads of state. The will was eventually honoured with the formation of a committee to turn the estate into a museum.

For a few years, until its official inauguration in 1961, the Sursock Museum operated as a museum without walls, holding its first exhibition in 1957 at the UNESCO building in Beirut. Titled *The First Imaginary Museum in the World*, in the spirit of André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*, the exhibition featured 663 colour reproductions of masterpieces from Asia, Europe, and America, offered by UNESCO (along with the New Graphic Society of New York, the Japanese government and the Honolulu Academy of Arts; cf. Aboussouan 2000, 44).

The 'Imaginary Museum' was appropriate for the nascent Museum's first exhibition on more than one level. In addition to the cultural caliber of its sources, its didactic educational nature, the fit of the global selection to the donor's eclectic taste, and the pragmatic convenience of the material's availability, it significantly covered a more essential challenge for the museum, namely the dearth of its inherited collection when it comes to fine art. The first clue of that is in the donor's aforementioned last will and testament, which lists "furniture, the curios, the golden, silver and crystal objects, the Chinese objects and any other estate", but no mention of paintings or sculptures *per se*.

The earliest and closest thing to an inventory of artwork found so far in the archives of the museum dates back to 1971 and is in the form of *Notes for the Committee Highlighting the Curator's Program* (Agémian 1971). The *Notes* mention that the Museum owns thirteen works of "pioneer" artists including Philippe Mourani, Daoud Corm, Omar Onsi, Georges Sabbagh, and Georges Cyr; and 26 pieces by "Lebanese artists today", including 21 paintings and five sculptures. Of the latter group, the *Notes* clarify:

This set was formed from the prize-winning works of the various *Salons d'Automne* organized by the Museum from 1964 to 1968 and which the artists – at least most of them – did not withdraw, the Museum Committee having given them the choice of take them back or leave them at the Museum.

## 6 The Fall Exhibitions

The *Salon d'Automne*, the most celebrated and longest running series of exhibitions at the Surssock Museum, both inaugurated it and helped build its image and power over the years, as well as its collection [fig. 3]. The selections for the first two Surssock Autumn Exhibitions/Salons<sup>3</sup> in 1961 and 1962 were done by the museum committee, which also featured works from private collections that the museum borrowed to expand the exhibitions. They were an effort to introduce the public to what the museum staff considered excellent works of Lebanese painters; so, the museum administration individually contacted the artists and extended an invitation for them to submit a selection of works.

Starting with the third *Salon*, the Museum invited all artists to participate, and the selection of the artwork became the prerogative of a jury nominated by the museum committee. This was seen as “an attempt to give cultural legitimacy to the generation of modernist artists at the Autumn Exhibition (after the Spring Exhibition, which was held by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Artists Association, turned into a salon open to all trends, currents, and levels of art prevailing in Beirut). And this is what helped stir the artistic atmosphere, giving an upward impetus to the trends of modern and contemporary painting and sculpture, which appeared in Beirut in the 1950s, with the feeling of the next generation of the Lebanese Academy that the Impressionist style had been exhausted and outdone by time” (Sultan 2013, 265). In addition to building upon the aforementioned custom of *Salons* established by the Ministry at the UNESCO Palace – and running parallel to them for many years – the *Salons* evoked an older French tradition rife with its own history of image and power (cf. von Maltzahn 2018, 254).

Dating back to 1903, the original *Salon d'Automne* emerged in response to the rigid traditionalism of the official Paris *Salon* of the French Academy of Fine Arts (*École des beaux-arts*). And in contrast to the *Salon des Indépendants*, an older alternative to the conservative official *Salon* characterized by the absence of both awards and a selection jury, the *Salon d'Automne* aimed to maintain high aesthetic standards by appointing an annual jury comprised of prominent cultural figures, including artists (cf. Altshuler 2008, 61). Like the

<sup>3</sup> The Museum's official launch in November 1961 was with a group exhibition titled the *Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures by Lebanese Artists*, in Arabic (or, in French, *Exhibition of Works of Lebanese Painters and Sculptors*). The exhibition's catalogue, and most reviews, did not mention 'salon' that year; however, the catalogues of all subsequent editions, starting from the following year (1962), had the title *Salon d'Automne*. The catalogues were typically bilingual, in Arabic and French, with the Arabic word *ma'rad*, or exhibition, used instead of the French *salon* (von Maltzahn 2018, 254).



**Figure 3** Salon d'Automne catalogue covers over the years featuring the iconic building of the Museum. Beirut. © Author. Courtesy of Sursock Museum

French model, Sursock's *Salon d'Automne* did feature selection juries and awards (in many of its iterations); however, "since Lebanon had no dominant art academy or official salon to rebel against, it is likely that the name was initially chosen to reflect the time of year and create a counterpart to the ministry's spring *Salon*. It is evident that the Sursock Museum's *Salon d'Automne* aimed to institutionalize modern Lebanese artistic creation by guiding both the artist and the public" (von Maltzahn 2018, 256).

The fourth autumn exhibition (1964) was the first where prizes were given, which were seen as "entirely sympathetic to the



abstract wave [...] This is what led in the end to the exacerbation of the crisis in the relationship between the Artists Association and the museum administration, which revealed for the first time in the history of Lebanese artistic life its absolute support for the abstract wave and its sharp attempt to inflame the conflict situation existing between abstraction and realism. (Sultan 2013, 265-7)

With that, the criticism and controversy began in earnest. "Judgment is a complicated process involving complicated emotions", wrote Dorothy Parramore in her review of this fourth *Salon* in 1964, "judgment, being a human activity, is prey to interest, faulty vision and many other human weaknesses". In her scathing review, titled *Sursock Museum Selections Described as "Disappointing"*, Parramore deemed the spectacle "a most disappointing and depressing panorama" and the selected works "as a whole, neither representative or of exceptional quality"; only some "merit the title 'works of art'" and "are achievements of which Lebanon should be proud". Of those, only one was featured in the single photo accompanying the review, and mentioned twice positively, "the great prize-winning sculpture of Viola Kassab in the garden. This figure is called 'Job' [...] the patient figure, in perfect symmetry" (Parramore 1964).

Kassab's *Job* was featured that year on the poster of the *Salon* [fig. 4], the first in a long tradition of artists' posters that were limited in edition (and distribution), where the Museum provided exhibitors at the *Salon* with base posters bearing the printed text, the surface left blank to receive a painted or drawn composition, or photo (cf. Agémian 2000, 145). The sculpture was also the most featured work of art on the cover of the *Salon d'Automne* catalogues over the years, showing up in the foreground of five of the post-War catalogues in the nineties (with the Museum building in the background). It may have been its placement (in the garden, by the entrance), or its subject matter (the ever-patient Job enduring his travails), or the memory (of the 'golden era' of the city, and maybe the nascent museum); in any case, something about it seemed to resonate intensely.

Nevertheless, the questions lingered. "Why are certain other valuable painters not represented at all? Why was there no prize awarded to a figurative painter? Surely it seems an enormous joke, but on whom and why?" (Parramore 1964). The Museum was aware of the challenge it was facing, as expressed in the Museum's official *Book*:

The great challenge of the *Salon* was that of being demanding at a time when there were no less than one hundred and fifty openings per season and when there was a certain confusion in the hierarchy of artistic values. (Agémian 2000, 134)



**Figure 4**  
A unique poster  
of the 4th *Salon d'Automne* featuring  
the prize-winning sculpture *Job*  
by Viola Kassabcatalogs  
over the years.  
Beirut. © Sursock Museum

That confusion, however, was not exactly cleared by the Museum and its Salons. In fact, it developed along a few different axes of image and power that were not entirely separate.

## 7 The Structures of Power

As expected, one of the first issues to rear its head is the structure of power, or who gets to decide?

The museum is managed by a small technical administrative body that works under a broad political umbrella. The head of the pyramid, the *Mutawali*, is the mayor of Beirut, based on his position, followed by an administrative committee composed of a president, vice president, conservator, treasurer, and about twelve members. Many aspects of its board of directors have changed during the different eras, but the museum was and still is very careful not

to publish news about it, even though it is a semi-official institution that has a relationship with the public. (Nammour 2003, 50)

However, between the layers of this pyramid, as can be imagined, there is much room for disagreement and power struggle.

The powers in the museum are lost, fluid and absolute. No one knows who is truly responsible: the mayor of Beirut in his capacity – by virtue of the will – as custodian of the museum, or the committee charged with its management. (Sultan 1967)

Outside of the Museum's own pyramid, the power struggle extended to the local art scene, as well. One aspect of that was with the Lebanese Artists Association for Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS), which had "contributed great efforts and pressure to achieve this transformation" (Nammour 2003, 48) of the building, following the death of Nicolas Surssock, from a guest palace to the museum he willed it to be, and therefore felt a certain sense of entitlement. A month prior to the inauguration of the Museum, the executive committee of LAAPS sent a letter addressed to the Conservator of the Museum with a list of seven requests in exchange for its participation in the next exhibition. The committee claimed to represent all its artist members (which were copied on the letter); however, several of them subsequently presented their resignation from the Association, which they saw as attempting "to control the Museum aimed at serving the interests of only a few". In turn, the Museum Conservator was dismissive of the letter, especially after the resignations were announced in the press, claiming that LAAPS was reduced to about twenty professionals: "There are two hundred painters in Lebanon; the tenth cannot, in any way, have the right of veto" (Khoury 1961).

The rift with LAAPS wasn't the only dimension, however, of the local power axis, but it brings us to another intersecting axis of the power struggle, that of the local vs. foreign. The participation of foreign critics "gave the Autumn Exhibition the legitimacy of complete openness to French culture and to the ambitions of transforming Beirut into a global capital of modern arts" (Sultan 1967). However, that is a realm of power fraught with complexity, especially in a post-colonial setting, only a couple of decades after Independence. The Museum was criticized of having "a 'hereditary' tendency to rely on French critics and journalists only and not great Lebanese artists to participate in the jury" (Sultan 1967). In the first eight salons in the sixties, around half of the jury members were Europeans or Americans, some of whom were residents of Beirut then (André Bercoff, Arthur Frick, John Ferren, and John Carswell), while others were invited especially for the event (Roger van Gindertael, William Townsend, Georges Boudaille, Jean-Jacques Lévêque, André Fermigier, Jean Salles, and

Roberto Pisani). But since the ninth *Salon*, which was the last before the war started (and possibly because of it), Lebanese citizens made up the majority of the jury (cf. von Maltzahn 2018, 257).

While it is true that some saw that the “presence of foreign arbitrators has given arbitration committees the status of impartiality” (Nammour 2003, 54), and that “Lebanon’s art world has always been marked by a high degree of mobility both to and from the country” (von Maltzahn 2018, 267), even the Museum’s own *Book* attests: “There were justified criticisms and contradictory opinions. The presence, for example, among the jurors, of foreign art critics, was far from unanimous” (Agémian 2000, 135). And as expected in a post-colonial setting, colonial policies had created power rifts on the inside by favoring certain groups over others, causing ripples of these preferences on the domestic academic level.

## 8 Passport to Society

A new and ongoing exhibition at the Surssock Museum takes its title *Je suis inculte!* (I Am Uncultivated!) *The Salon d’Automne and the National Canon*<sup>4</sup> [fig. 5] from a 1964 *Magazine* article by Jalal Khoury “whose acerbic protest of the museum’s elitist bias toward abstraction anticipated crises to come”, according to the exhibition’s wall text, which references this academic bias of the Salons:

Most of the *Salon*’s regular artists, and certainly the most renowned, either trained or taught at the *Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts* (ALBA). ALBA prepared the artists it graduated to pursue further study in France, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, and the Agémian, Kiwan experience proved to have helped them along in their endeavors [...] Francophilia (the love of francophone culture) bound the newly founded institutions together [...] But the museum’s pro-Western orientation – grounded in the reigning Christian nationalist discourse of Lebanese exceptionalism propagated by Michel Chia – eventually sparked criticism.

Another related echo of the national vs. foreign power dynamic was reflected in the politics of the image (of artwork and the museum) in a pronounced figurative vs. abstract rift. The exhibition’s wall text confirms this bias: “Although the *Salon d’Automne* was a battleground for competing artistic and critical positions, the museum

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition, commissioned for the Museum’s 60th anniversary and curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, was one of the reopening exhibitions of the museum after the devastating port explosion of 2020 which heavily damaged it.



**Figure 5** Exhibition view: “Je suis inculte”, curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, showing portrait of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock by Dutch fauve artist Kees van Dongen (circa 1930). 2023. © Walid Rashid. Courtesy of Sursock Museum

itself - the committee and jury members - advanced a consistently formalist agenda. It championed abstraction in painting and sculpture, and modernist experimentation more broadly”. While that was generally the perception of the Museum’s bias, it’s worth noting that the Jury of the eighth *Salon* did award two prizes (out of thirteen) to works of ‘naive’ art by Khalil Zghaib and Sophie Yeramian in 1969 (Sursock Museum 1968). And in the next (ninth) *Salon* (in 1974), the Museum Committee invited Italian art professor Roberto Pisani as the sole external juror, asking him explicitly “to pay particular attention this year to figurative art for this Autumn *Salon*, because it had noted that almost all of the last editions concerned abstract art” (Sursock Museum 1974). Such measures may be seen as responding to the outcry expressed in a central passage of the aforementioned eponymous article by Khoury:

If a man of common sense and average culture, who does not necessarily believe what is printed, ventures into the Sursock Museum, what would be his reaction to this mess of colors and pastes commonly baptized ‘Abstract Art’ and which constitutes the common denominator of the works selected? [...] But if he dares to be dissatisfied, we will take care to stick the label of uneducated and vulgar on him and send him to join the platoon of vulgar people from all countries, united by their common lack of culture. (Khoury 1964)

As such, image politics were not limited to the stylistic preference of the art echoing a larger postcolonial setting, but also reflected a pronounced hierarchy in constructing the social image of the 'elite'. The Salons' attraction extended beyond mere 'high culture' to the social spectacle element, as "among Lebanese artists, many consider art a passport to society. Among them are those whose wildest dreams embody their reaching the *Salon* of the Museum" (Sultan 1967). As we have seen from the beginning, this elitist image has been manifold, starting with the aristocratic heritage of the donor and the palatial architecture, to the historical Francophile leanings of institution. But that image was becoming increasingly problematic.

## 9 Ivory Tower Politics

Even a generally sympathetic art critic like Nammour dedicated an entire section in his "Assessment of a Quarter-Century of Activity (1961-1988)" at the Sursock Museum to the "Autumn Exhibitions' Ivory Tower Politics" (Nammour 2003, 51). In it he highlights nine aspects of these politics, some of which have already been highlighted, while others haven't yet. In its conclusion, Nammour sums up:

The museum's unclear policy and undeclared goals, the nature of which are difficult to discern through its works, between which it is difficult to see any connection, and past and current practices have led to the weakening of the fall exhibition [...] It is as if the ivory tower practices have led the museum to a great void.

Among these practices, in addition to those already mentioned (such as the disagreements around the juries), were the prizes these juries started to mete out in the Fourth Autumn Exhibition (1964). "However, the policy of awarding these prizes, naming them, their number, and whether the museum had to buy the prize-winning works and at what prices were not specified in a written system" (Nammour 2003, 54). In the following five Salons, during the rest of the sixties, the museum gave out numerous prizes in painting and sculpture, which ranged - depending on the year - from three to 13 in total, and included various appellations, such as the Sursock Museum Prize, Special Mention, Sculpture Prize, and the Italian Cultural Centre Prize. To add confusion, there were also occasionally rankings from first to fourth place, each of which could feature up to six artists, as it did in 1969 [chart 1]. "This lack of clarity, and the various personal interpretations that follow, have generated negative feelings towards the museum and a decline in its moral status among Lebanese artists" (Nammour 2003, 55). That was the last year prizes were awarded until after the War, when they returned with a new prize

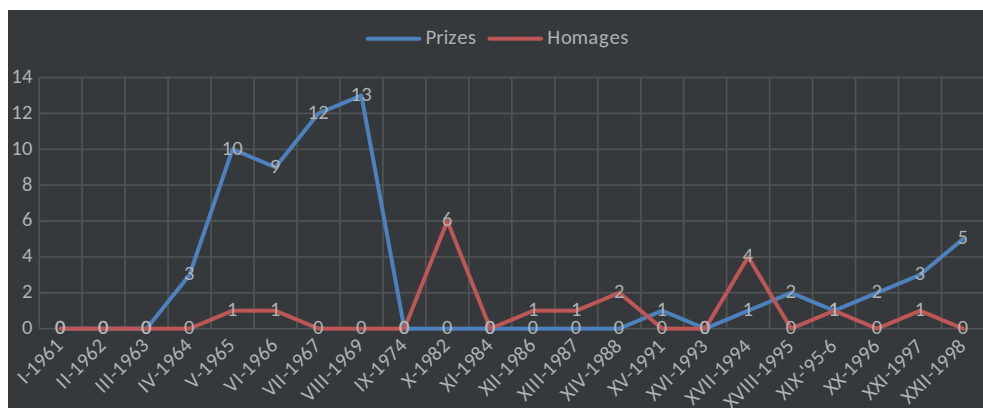


Chart 1 Charting Salon d'Automne Prizes vs. Homages over the years

for young artists named after Dorothy Salhab Kazemi, a pioneer of modern art ceramics in Lebanon who passed at the age of 48 in 1990.

During the War, prizes were replaced by homages, displaying limited works by Lebanese artists in honour of their memory. That tradition had started initially in the mid-sixties, before the War, with homages to pioneer artists, Cesar Gemayel and Moustafa Farrouk; but reached its peak in 1982, when the Museum reopened for the first time during the War, after seven years of no exhibitions since it started, paying homage to six artists who had passed in the interim. In the following years, retrospective exhibitions were held for Jean Khalifé (1992), Omar Onsi (1997), and Gibran Khalil Gibran (2000), but the museum held on to its policy of not holding retrospective or solo exhibitions for living Lebanese artists until 2017, when it held one for Amine El Bacha, a couple of years before his passing (cf. Nammour 2003, 55).

Such inconsistencies in museum policy, among others, irked artists and observers alike, to the point where the protests became part of the tradition.

On days like these, every year, there is an uproar among Lebanese artists about the Sursock Museum and the autumn exhibition in the aforementioned museum. However, the uproar this year was very loud and intense, as was evident in an almost comprehensive boycott of the autumn exhibition by major artists, such that the currently held exhibition was described as a 'weak exhibition' that does not even represent the 'autumn' of Lebanese art. (Sultan 1967)

The unbalanced policy in dealing with the works submitted to the exhibition led to harsh criticism from a large number of artists, as well as calls for boycott. In 1969, a whole group of artists officially

boycotted the *Salon*, deeming the participation in the jury of a Lebanese painter, Jean Khalifé, to be inadmissible, although Khalifé was president of LAAPS, who had wanted to be part of the jury even before the very first *Salon d'Automne* was held (cf. Agémian 2000, 135).

It may well be that towards the end of the decade, the fault lines that were to split Beirut and Lebanese society during the War to come were starting to emerge in those “Golden Sixties” (Bardaoui 2023). The *Je suis inculte!* exhibition wall text suggests that: “With the blow of the 1967 June War, these antagonisms were increasingly decisive on the waning authority of the museum. Independent institutions such as Dar El Fan cropped up and numerous artists turned away from the museum permanently, or at least until the end of the Lebanese Civil War”.

It is unclear whether these antagonisms were actually the reason that “numerous artists turned away”, or even if in fact they did turn away at all (or who those were). While there is a marked contraction in the size of the Salons in the eighties (the number of works per *Salon* went down on average from 124 to 89) it is possibly as much the result of the War, as it may have been due to “artists turning away”. It was in a divided city, after all; and while the Museum did have a collection point in the western half of the city, the situation must have had a dampening effect nonetheless. Likewise, it would be worth investigating to what extent the flourishing of Dar El Fan at the period may be attributed to the closure of the Sursock Museum from 1969 to 1974 for its first renovation and extension works.

## 10 Conclusion

What is clear is that - while the Museum may not have set out to do so - by that point it has arguably become ‘the’ art ‘Institution’ of the country. While we may not be able to tell when exactly the Sursock Museum became a museum, we can fairly say it did so in the period covered by *The Book*, somewhere in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps it’s only appropriate to end where we started. The prologue of *The Book* reminds us:

This book is not a balance sheet. It would like to be a promise. Beautiful, modest and happy like the Lebanon that was [...] a country which suffers from not being able to reinvent itself yet. Marked by wars, it is all the more attached to peace [...] Isn’t the survival of the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum an eloquent, albeit modest, testimony to this? (Tuéni 2000, 11)

Since that was written, the Museum has experienced the largest expansion in its history (which coincided with its longest interruption since the War), as well as more damage (from the catastrophic



explosion of 2020) than it endured throughout the years of the War. Resilience, for better or worse, is a descriptor that has become so attached to Lebanon, its people and institutions, that it is almost triggering at this point. But there is something comforting in the endurance of this Museum. It may not be so modest, and sometimes not as eloquent as could be; but hopefully, in its promise, and in its ability to reinvent itself and create power from image, the Sursock Museum offers something from which the country, as a whole, can learn.

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