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Print

Retracing a forgotten sculptor



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BEIRUT: "Jussuf Abbo (1888-1953): The Sculptor in the Bedouin Tent," the latest exhibition at Agial Gallery, aims to present a previously unseen look at the life of this Palestinian artist. Assembled by Palestinian artist Said Baalbaki, the exhibition presents 50 of Abbo's sketches, etchings and object, as well as texts – all taken from Baalbaki's personal collection of work from, and publications on, the elusive sculptor. Baalbaki has no work of his own in this show.

Born in Safad, northern Palestine, around 1888-1890, Abbo was a farmer and fisherman who later took up carpentry and stone masonry. It was not until he moved to Berlin in 1911 to study sculpture that his artistic career took shape.

"The exhibition is almost a presentation on the life of a disappeared artist ... which to me is more important ... than the works alone," Baalbaki told The Daily Star. "[When] he moved to Jerusalem to work as a stonemason, it so happened he was working on a building being built by Germans. The director there convinced him to go to Berlin and learn to be a sculptor.

"For me, Jussuf Abbo is the first Middle Eastern artist who went to Berlin and made a name for himself."

Baalbaki started this project in 2014. "When I discovered him, I started researching his life," he recalled. "By chance I saw his name in an auction. I hadn't heard much about him at the time, especially as his work is so varied, so it was difficult to identify his works."

Baalbaki has spent the last four years finding, and determining attribution for, 70 artworks and 100 texts mentioning the artist.

"I'm showing only a portion, but his works are rare [and difficult] to find, unfortunately," Baalbaki said.

"I have only one sculpture, an aquarelle and seven design sketches [plus many drawings].

"As a printmaker, he made many lithographs and etchings focusing on physiognomy.

"His sculptures were known to show his love for the nude female form. This one," he said, referring to a small bronze titled "Embraced Couple," "is of a couple but the form is vague. [It's] hard to distinguish between the two forms and could easily be a mountain range.

"He had a great sensitivity and attention to detail in his sculpting and etchings," he added, "creating a form with incredibly fine lines."

Baalbaki says many of Abbo's sculptures didn't survive World War I. He believes those that were originally exhibited in museums in Germany were taken during the war and melted down to make weapons.

When the war began, Abbo made or acquired a counterfeit Egyptian passport and fled to the U.K., never to be heard from again.

Baalbaki sent some of Abbo's pieces for restoration, but later decided to leave them as they were, to reflect Abbo's life and not to erase any of his history.

"This is the first step in a four-year project which could go on for decades" he said. "I haven't done an artistic intervention as he's not a known personality and recently we've seen a big fixation of fictive intervention with old artists. I wanted to present him as he is, more like in-depth research and curation, which is a challenge as an artist."

Alongside Abbo's artworks are vintage photos of places he'd been or postcards from that time period, which Baalbaki says is to give an overall look at the life he led, in today's age of media and imagery.

Catalogues with prints or photos of his works and articles reviewing his technique are also on show.

"I spent two years looking for a photo of him, wondering what he looked like. In 2016 I found a book by a German photographer that had a portrait of someone named Jussuf Abbo but no other details," Baalbaki said. "It was just last year that a family member published a short piece with a picture about his death and I was able to confirm the man in my photo was him." Baalbaki intends to continue his research and tracking down Abbo's works.

He expressed belief that the project has helped him reflect on his own art. "The exhibition is also about asking questions on identity, a person's homeland, which are also questions I ask of my own work," he mused.

"What is identity in regards to the artist? Is it the tent he used to sleep in, the memories he brought from Palestine or his workshop? These ideas are a large part of my own projects."

"Jussuf Abbo (1888-1953): The Sculptor in the Bedouin Tent" is up at Agial Gallery, Hamra until July 18, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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