

# Painter gives female forms to her 'modern Orientalism'

*'I aim to re-create the Orient where music vibrates and scents tingle in the air'*

**Jessy Chahine**

Special to The Daily Star

The viewer is nothing if not fascinated by the breadth of them. Chaste or nude, liberated or cloistered, Mona Trad Dabaji's paintings pay tribute to the oriental woman in her moments of intimacy and reflection.

In an audacious use of color and form, Dabaji's current unnamed exhibit addresses the stories of languid-eyed women, sipping coffee or tea, holding a book or a rosary, smoking a *nargileh*. Portrayed in their many facets, the women are seductive, self-absorbed, in a world where no one is watching.

Nostalgic slices of the lives of Lebanese and Gulf women, Dabaji describes the exhibit as a form of "oriental Epicuriansm of a region whose charm, by itself, is a concentration of all the pleasures of the senses."

The most striking aspect of Dabaji's painting is the attractive "roundness" of the women. "But that's how the true oriental women look. That's how they were idealized in all ancient Arabic poetry and paintings," Dabaji insists. "Roundly sexy ... sexily round!"

Dabaji considers herself a painter of "modern Orientalism" and the Orient is what binds all her depictions.

Her work conveys the impression that all these figures are actually the same woman – always and yet never the same. Veiled, nude, sipping coffee, preparing food or belly dancing, they all breathe the traditional Orient.

"I want foreign viewers to grasp the universal message of my paintings, as easily as the Arab public will," Dabaji says. "That's why my Orientalism is not heavy and overloaded with obscure meanings and hidden schemes."

Dabaji's "universal message" is clearly a testimony to how strong and self-confident the Oriental woman is.

"Throughout the years, the Oriental woman has been considered a totally marginalized and 'broken-wings' kind of person," Dabaji says. "But if you look into my women's facial expressions and attitudes ... you can tell how arrogant and rebellious each of them is. "They're confident of their



**Reveuse a la fenetre** shows a "dreamer at the window"

charm, even through the *hijab*, which ... has never, and will never, be thick enough to veil a woman's charm."

Her modern view of Orientalism assisted in developing her own style. It is a style she calls "la nouvelle figuration."

Graduating from the American University of Beirut in fine arts in 1975, Dabaji is a member of the Lebanese Artists, Painters and Sculptors Association. The secretary at the Sursock Museum's Salon d'Automne, she has taught drawing and painting since 1993.

Dabaji has held a number of exhibitions since 1988 in Africa, Jordan, at Epreuves d'Artistes, here in Beirut at the Sursock Museum and the Galerie de Medicis, Daniel Besseiche and Vivendi in Paris.

Dabaji's most recent exhibit was in Dubai and the painter will soon exhibit in Saudi Arabia. "I was very glad to have an intermediate exhibit here in Lebanon where the art public is very receptive," Dabaji says.

She is saddened by the current status of Lebanese art though. "It's agonizing, nice and easy," she reflects. "It was a great shock when Epreuves d'Artistes was closed."

After almost 18 months of preparation, Dabaji's current exhibit features 45 paintings.

"I usually work on two or three paintings at once, because oil painting takes time to dry."

A quirky specialty of Dabaji's is framing some of her work in wooden window frames. This exhibit features six such pieces, along with a wooden *paravent* – a Japanese-style folding screen – on which she's painted

two Lebanese peasants harvesting *loubia* in a green field.

Among the more appealing aspects of Dabaji's work are the warm, penetrating colors. "I never use intermediate colors or 'nuances,' as we call them in French. My colors are crude and striking."

Dabaji's play with color follows the "Aplat," or flat, technique, with its extremely strong colors and contrasts, which she uses to create shadows and impressions.

Oils are Dabaji's first love. "I go crazy for oil paint," she says. "I love its smell, I love its density, it's my favorite material and I can't deal with water paint or any other kind of paint."

Oil paint's other advantage, for her, is its way of "maturing" on the canvas as the paintings age. "Oil-painted canvases never fade with time," she says. "On the contrary, as the painting ages, colors become even more beautiful."

Another noteworthy element in Dabaji's paintings is the secondary role played by men.

"I only represent them to enhance the feminine presence in

my canvas," she explains. In one of her pieces, a dancing woman is captured alongside an utterly absorbed man. Another features two men and a woman playing cards together.

"But look at her hand," Dabaji adds. "She's the one who holds the best cards!"

Painting these women requires a lot of preparation. To find themes and subjects, Dabaji travels to villages in the Bekaa and other outlying regions, visiting the women there. She talks to them, getting to know them better and, just before leaving, takes pictures of them.

"It's important that my paintings be authentic in their content and spirit," Dabaji says.

The painter's passion for rendering Oriental women only ignited recently. "Before that," she says, "I used to paint Lebanese landscape and Beirut streets."

Living in France and Africa for several years, Dabaji grew nostalgic for her country. She returned to host her first personal exhibition in Lebanon a decade ago.

"Beyond history, color and humor, my main interest was to communicate the beauty of our tradition," she says in her written introduction to the exhibit, "the warmth of our interiors and the clarity of our blue skies."

"Today," she says, "my message remains the same."

"I aim to re-create the Orient where music vibrates and scents tingle in the air. I hope to portray an image of the Orient that since (French 19th century Orientalist master Jean Auguste Dominique) Ingres, has not ceased to make the world dream."

**Mona Trad Dabaji's** exhibit runs until Jan. 23 in Bourj al-Ghazal, fourth floor. For more information, call 01/216140

## JUST A THOUGHT

If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind

**John Stuart Mill, English philosopher (1806-1873)**