

ARAB NEWS

Meet Alfred Tarazi – the artist carrying ‘the weight of Lebanon’s history’



Alfred Tarazi was born during the civil war, and much of his work portrays his recollections of that time. (Supplied)

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- Tarazi’s latest installations examine his country’s cultural heritage from a personal perspective

DUBAI: An eye-popping mixture of images from the era of the Lebanese Civil War can be found at The Hangar, an exhibition space in Haret Hreik, Lebanon, run by UMAM Documentation and Research.



UMAM is a local nonprofit dedicated to “understanding Lebanon’s present by dealing with the past.” So it makes perfect sense that the group is hosting Beirut-based artist Alfred Tarazi’s installation “Memory of a Paper City” —a vibrant, dynamic large-scale work which uses cut-out images and old photographs to capture not just the violence of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war, but also the cultural response

to it in the form of cultural figures including composer Ziad Rahbani, women scantily dressed in the bold attire of the era, images from the popular press that tell of a breakdown of social norms, photographs from the conflict and of other global celebrities and leaders such as Sylvester Stallone (as Rambo) and Che Guevara.

Tarazi was born during the civil war, and much of his work portrays his recollections of that time – both personal and societal – and his desire to preserve his country's history and heritage during the tumultuous present.

In many ways, "Memory of a Paper City" is a call to action to celebrate Lebanon's vibrant cultural heritage amid the current disintegration of state institutions that has led to the neglect and destruction of that heritage. Beirut, once a rich creative hub, is presently in disarray.

During the first days of 2023, Lebanon's only functioning power plant was shut down due to a worsening, long-running political dispute. While the country plunges into darkness, artists like Tarazi are working to keep the lights on, at least metaphorically.

Tarazi is quick to stress that the installation doesn't just portray Lebanon's heritage, but that of the wider Middle East.

"The 'Paper City' exhibition (takes) a lot from paper archives of magazines and newspapers from the 1930s until the end of the 1980s," Tarazi tells Arab News. "While I was collecting material for the exhibition, I found a lot of archives from some seminal (regional) newspapers in Lebanon from the Thirties onwards. If you were working in the press in Lebanon (at that time), you were contributing to the entire Middle East.

A series of external factors meant that huge amounts of such content were lost – "thrown away in the garbage due to numerous errors, lawsuits and bankruptcies," as Tarazi puts it. Tarazi's installation is a small step to restoring some of what was lost.

“We looked at over 100 publications to collect their archives. These are magazines that existed from the 1930s to the end of the 1970s. It’s a vast, vast heritage. The installation thus has this national endeavor,” he says.

Tarazi has a second installation being shown simultaneously – on the steps of The National Museum of Beirut and in a derelict warehouse nearby. “Hymne A L’Amour” highlights the country’s largely overlooked heritage of craftsmanship, though the lens of his own family’s artisanal legacy. While “Paper City” takes a more national, collective approach, “Hymne” looks at Lebanese history from a personal standpoint.

In the warehouse there are thousands of handcrafted decorative works created by the Tarazi’s family, including Baghdadi ceiling panels, colored glass lanterns, copper and brass vessels and 19th-century doorframes. Many of the pieces are in need of restoration.

“I come from a family of craftsmen and antique dealers which means there are a lot of objects that were passed from one generation to the other, and they fill a huge warehouse, where they’ve been rotting away for the past 50 years,” says Tarazi.

His great-great-grandfather Dimitri Tarazi opened the first Maison Tarazi antiques store in Beirut in 1862, after escaping Damascus during the 1860 Civil War. The store soon became renowned for its high-end craftsmanship and the Tarazis became the official supplier to the Imperial Ottoman Sultan from 1900.

Tarazi’s installation is a way to share these historically significant artefacts with the public. But there was also a very personal reason for him to stage the exhibition as soon as he could.

“It was crucial for me to get the material out of the warehouse to work with it while my father is still alive,” he explains. “It entails a conversation between father and son. It has always been extremely difficult for me to extract information from my father about this vast

cultural heritage, due to the war and everything that happened afterwards. It's difficult for my father to speak about."

In other parts of the world, these historical pieces may have found their way into museums and private collections, but in Lebanon they are largely without a home. Tarazi says there is no institution in the country that presents how people once worked with wood, copper and fabrics.

"All these materials are the fabric of life; they are life itself," he says. "This is how people used to decorate their houses. This is how people used to build their lives. I became interested in seeing to what degree I could take the objects of my family and transform them into works of art."

On the steps of the museum, Tarazi has built a scale replica of the grand French embassy residence in Beirut, Residence des Pins. It was here that General Henri Gouraud declared the creation of the state of Greater Lebanon, on Sept. 1, 1920.

Tarazi says the residence was first designed as a casino and was based on a model that has been passed down to him by his family. The original replica is one, Tarazi says, that he would have liked to have seen preserved in a museum. But since this never took place, he did it himself via a work of art.

"Both projects are common examples of broken transmissions of history from one generation to the next that are harsh and abrupt," Tarazi says. "Through my work, I've had the tendency to want to carry the weight of the history of Lebanon."

While it is painful to examine this history, it also, as Tarazi so eloquently expresses, offers a chance to revive memories of a Lebanese identity – and hope for a better future.