

## Helen Khal's study on "Women Artists in Lebanon"

(A study with documentation and accompanying color transparencies.)

This book-size study of about 150 pages aims at tracing "the background, development and documentation of the present status of women artists in Lebanon, with specific reference to those artists who have made significant contributions in the field".

The number of women in Lebanon who practice the plastic arts — painting, graphic design, ceramics, pottery, sculpture and jewelry — numbers about 40 artists. The author, with the help of art critics and other authorities on art in Lebanon, has limited her study to 12 of them, "whose contributions and influence were believed to be of special significance and whose evolution thus merited closer attention".

The remaining women artists, 21 in number, are accounted for in the last section of the study, with one biographical page about each artist, giving her address, her background, her activities and a personal statement on her creative intention.

Due to the shortage of records and publications on the artists in Lebanon, the author relied on personal investigation, interviews with art critics and others, and meetings with the artists themselves. Definite questions were addressed to them concerning influences which led them to choose an artistic career. The questions also traced the artist's evolution, her specific accomplishments and how the sensibilities of women artists differed from male artists in Lebanon.

The study presents the following facts about the relatively large number of women artists



in Lebanon:

1. Almost one-third of the artists are of non-Lebanese origin (either Arab or foreign).
2. Almost half of the artists received their training outside of Lebanon, while another fourth are self-taught or received private instruction.
3. Many of the artists, whether of Lebanese origin or not, spent their formative years in a country other than Lebanon.
4. Almost all the artists came from family backgrounds whose economic status was either average or above average; whose parents (one or both) were educated; and whose childhood environments provided general cultural exposure and sometimes actual experiences in the arts.

Besides these facts, Ms. Khal remarks that Lebanon for the

past thirty years presented favorable conditions for the entry, formation and optimum functioning of women in most professions. Change is particularly noted in art, because artistic expression lends itself to a "high level of social freedom and of modernization and a backdrop of ethnic and religious diversity which lends unique flexibility to the progressive life of the country".

There were five institutes and universities teaching art in Lebanon, and other private centers that offered complete art courses.

Today, the proportion of widely recognized women artists among the artist community in Lebanon is greater than in most other countries in the Arab World or in the West. Of the twelve leading artists of Lebanon, four are women.

Other reasons may be mentioned for this unusual number of women in this field. According to the author, Ms. Khal:

"It is an easy, fashionable diversion which adds glamour to their lives."

"It is something they can do at home, which permits them to exercise their individuality without endangering their protected position."

"It is one of the few permissible windows in the woman's harem. Through it she can directly express all that she feels and thinks."

Generally art critics consider the woman artist in Lebanon worthy of respectful consideration. Through her art

women have endeavored to assert themselves to establish their identity and to communicate their private feelings. The intensity of such effort and its serious purpose deserve social recognition.

When discussing the accomplishments of these women, art critics attempt to base their evaluation on characteristics which distinguish them from male artists. These differences have been summarized by the author as follows:

1. Women are artistically bolder, experiment more with different techniques and materials, and do not hesitate to explore new ideas. In this respect, men are more traditional in the arts.
2. Men are more politically and socially engaged, are more motivated by intellectualism, ideology and problems of the human condition. They are concerned with the world around them, its events and the physical environment, whereas women express a more private vision, are more personal and introspective in their creative intention.
3. Some women artists are exploring areas of sensibility that have not traditionally concerned men in art. Women are expressing very directly the intimate, sensual, and emotional responses they have as women toward the male-female relationship. They don't hesitate to communicate these feelings publicly in their work.
4. In approach, women artists generally are more meticulous and more patient in their attention to detail and the finish of a work. They have greater awareness for the physical properties of their medium.