



# Homage to Amine El Bacha Partitions and Colors

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Sursock  
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The Sursock Museum presents *Partitions and Colors: Homage to Amine El Bacha*, the first exhibition in a cycle of homages to artists represented in the collections of the Sursock Museum. This series of exhibitions is supported by Banque Libano-Française.

Since its inception in 1930, Banque Libano-Française has always demonstrated its support for arts and culture, and the preservation of cultural heritage, in Lebanon and beyond.

Banque Libano-Française is proud to support a new series of exhibitions at the Sursock Museum, paying homage to leading figures in the history of art in Lebanon. *Partitions and Colors: Homage to Amine El Bacha* is the first of these exhibitions. This tribute showcases a collection of oil paintings, water-colors, and painted wooden objects created between the 1960s and the first decade of the 21st century.

*#amineelbacha #hommage #partitionsetcouleurs #sursockmuseum #blflebanon*

**In collaboration with:** Amine El Bacha Foundation

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Cover

Detail of

Lumière hivernale [Winter Light], 1992

Oil on canvas, 94.5 × 149.5 cm

Amine El Bacha Foundation collection

Amine El Bacha's paintings reflect a profound artistic experience that arises from his travels and wanderings through different cities, his time spent in cafés, watching the world go by. The realms evoked in his work are studies of everyday life; through a familiar treatment of Oriental atmospheres and forms, he manages to reveal the unexpected that lurks at their heart. The space of his creation thus transforms into a theatrical one, realistic and sometimes fantastical. At times, he narrates Oriental tales, unbound by anything but an imagination that opens out onto childhood memories and a mysterious, poetic sensibility that reveals itself in his musical composition of color and form. Like a wanderer, taking in the familiar forms, views and landmarks encountered on his walks, always paying attention to the particularities of a place and its relationship to the people that inhabit it.

The works in this exhibition, selected from amongst a considerable oeuvre that tackles a range of subjects in a range of materials, are grouped into four main categories: abstractions and landscapes; the fantastical; religion and the Last Supper; and music. These works showcase the transformations in El Bacha's artistic trajectory: from abstract moods bordering on freeform expression to an aesthetic stylization of melodious, improvisational color that establishes a new world of harmony in the composition of form (landscapes, still life, the theater of journeys and memories). El Bacha does not paint what the eye perceives so much as he depicts what is revealed by his desires as they wander freely in a poetic space, encountering colorful and unrestrained feeling. Subjects are embodied as another facet of one's interior space, consecrated for the purpose of joy, the fantasy of happiness. Images are transposed atop images, emotions atop emotions. There is a persistent inclination toward re-balancing and re-ordering things, not so they might resemble their guises in reality, but to disclose the way they appear in dreams. A daydream where the "flow of emotions," which Freud refers to as the raw material of memory, drifts into the earliest recollections of childhood.



Amine El Bacha in his studio  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection





*Top*  
**Untitled, Undated**  
Oil on canvas, 48 × 51 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection

*Bottom*  
**Paysage (Qartaba, région de Byblos)**  
[Landscape (Qartaba, Byblos District), 1988  
Watercolor on paper, 24 × 33.8 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection

# **Amine El Bacha: Memory in the Palms of His Hands**

**Fayçal Sultan**

Amine El Bacha is a prominent Lebanese artist who has left an important mark in the art world – locally, regionally, and beyond. He belongs to the small cadre of Arab artists whose works have been acquired by museums in Italy, Spain, France, and the Arab region. Born in 1932 in Ras Al Nabaa, Beirut to a family passionate about painting and music, El Bacha began to master painting color through memory during the period when he was frequenting the studio of Hungarian painter Stefan Lokos. With Lokos, he started to go on open-air (*en plein air*) painting excursions, taking in cityscapes of Beirut from the rooftops of its residences, gardens, and seaside cafés. This period preceded his studies from 1954-1957 at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in the studios of César Gemayel and Jean-Paul Khoury, as well as that of Fernando Manetti from Italy. In 1959, El Bacha received a scholarship from the Embassy of France to pursue his studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in the studio of Maurice Brianchon, and at Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, in the studio of Henri Goetz. It was during his time in Paris (1960-1968) that El Bacha crystallized an approach to experimenting in abstraction. He experimented with reconstructing nature through color semiotics, based on the presumption that color develops with both vision and musical sensibility, influenced by light, temperature, and climate. He discovered that modernism constitutes a return to the basics of childhood – to an intuitive spontaneity – that arises from a primitive impulse. For El Bacha, abstract art, consecrated by studios in the academies, emerged from Cubism and from the particularities of art from the Orient, an art that relies on simplification and flattening to create the essence of things.

## **Abstraction**

El Bacha could not shake off the magic lavished upon him by Paris, where he spent most of his time visiting exhibitions and museums, and painting the city day and night. He painted people in cafés, streets, theatres, and public squares, especially the artists' square of Montparnasse. Many artists influenced El Bacha during this period: the paintings and writings of Paul Klee, the experiments of Pablo Picasso, and the arts of the Orient that fused the figurative and the abstract. His artistic influences – including those afforded to the Color Field movement – further inspired his experimentations with color, where dynamically daubed surfaces of color as well

as musical rhythms were at play. Indeed, a sense of color local to Lebanon remained prevalent in El Bacha's work during his time in Paris. Most of his friends, among them Farid Aouad, could perceive the climate of Beirut in his colors; so, his memory of color during this period, which continued for about a decade, was not readily willing to surrender to the effects of life in the palette of Paris.

Around this time, El Bacha was painting with an abstract perspective, reflected in his ability to create a bird's eye view aesthetic wherein colorful landscapes were at once distilled, intersecting, and discordant. This aesthetic erased detail and mirrored the eloquence of shorthand and brevity. Exemplars of these experiments were exhibited in the Alexandria Biennial (1962); the Salon des Surindépendants (Paris, 1964); the residence of his friend the architect Wathiq Adib (Beirut, 1964); the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in the National Museum of Modern Art (Paris, 1966); and in Gallery Manoug (Beirut, 1967).

In 1968, El Bacha's style began to shift toward expressionism as he began to evoke memories of his childhood and to tap the springs of local, or Lebanese, themes while tuning his ear to the melodies of contemporary logic, thereby integrating the influences of figurative reality and the abstract. (Exhibition at Gallery Saad, 1971 and Gallery Contact, 1972.)

## **Work in Italy**

With the start of the Lebanese Civil War, El Bacha traveled to Italy in 1976 upon an invitation from the Educavi Maesta Foundation. He signed a five-year contract with the foundation's international director Giorgio Cena, who had collaborated with renowned international artists, including Corneille Guillaume Beverloo (Netherlands) and César Baldaccini (France). In 1979, El Bacha won an international competition to design the mosaic of the church of San Martino in the city square of Legnano, Italy. The mosaic piece consists of six parts narrating the tale of Saint Martino, who was fond of nature and charitable work.

The assemblage of this mosaic shepherded El Bacha toward the aesthetics of Byzantine and Islamic arts, widely appropriated in many Italian and Spanish cities. Pictorial and ornamental elements formed the core of this work, which revolved around nature and its paradisiacal forms, evincing an Oriental spirituality. Italian art had come to know this spiritual dimension through the mosaic creation of the Basilica of San Vital in Ravenna, Italy, under the rule of Theoderic the Great.

While living in Italy, El Bacha garnered many prizes, notably the Love Prize and the Città Eterna Prize. Due to his rising prominence in international exhibitions, the publisher of precious art books Cegna Editori selected him, alongside five other international artists, to illustrate a volume by the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor.

## The Last Supper and Seasonal Landscapes

While El Bacha's success in Italy could have propelled him to leave Beirut behind altogether, it in fact strengthened his ties to the dreams and colors of the city. His time in Italy honed his artistic memory: for instance, the Last Supper featuring Jesus and his disciples appeared repeatedly in his body of work, distinguished by the artist's expressionist approach. Having witnessed the great destruction inflicted upon the Beirut Central District in the wake of the Civil War, he delved further into the Last Supper as subject matter in his oil and watercolor works; it pervaded his paintings. Indeed, he was inspired by the scorched walls in the Saint George Church and the implications of its destruction and devastation, which he painted many times over in the early 1990s, reconstructing this timeless scene that Leonardo Da Vinci painted on the wall of the Santa Maria delle Grazie church in Milan. El Bacha painted the Last Supper over and over again, extending his engagement with the subject into his other work: the expressionist rhythms of this series reflects a certain allegorical confrontation with the death – and resurrection – of Beirut as a city.

El Bacha had long believed in the aesthetic value of art, a value which transcends tragedy and despair; as such, his paint brush, accustomed to the joy of meandering through the gardens of color, took him back to the reveries of nature and its seasons. To that end, in 1980, he produced and exhibited a mural painting (940 × 150 cm) at Gallery Damo in Antelias. Afterward, he painted a series, *Four Seasons*, which, in its rhythmic aesthetic, evokes each season as a unique symphonic movement. The French manufacturer of Aubusson tapestries Robert Four transformed one of these paintings into a carpet as large as a wall, which adorned the Jeddah airport in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## Andalusian Songs

El Bacha discovered the secret of paradise lost, pervasive in his childhood dreams, in old Beirut, a city whose every other facet vanished in a series of wars. In its architecture, in the jasmine wafting through the air of residential gardens, and in its fountains and shallow pools, Beirut took him back to the cities of Andalusia, which the Arabs had lost centuries ago. This sentiment propelled him to take an artistic research trip in 1987 to Spain, during which he painted the poetry of daily life saturated by the ruins of Arab civilization in Andalusia. During this period, El Bacha produced a collection of about a hundred watercolor and ink wash paintings. Later, there emerged an art book project with texts by Arab and Spanish researchers about Andalusian civilization; in the context of this project, an arts foundation later purchased this collection. El Bacha also painted a mural, *Tribute to Ziryab, the Andalusian Musician*, in 1987, which was later acquired by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

This magical trip was like a dream, a portal to the tales of paradise lost and to the memories rooted in the European conscience since 800 AD. Perhaps El Bacha found himself and his dreams in this journey, for he entered swiftly and without a hitch the rhythms, magical and latent, in the castles and gardens of Andalusia's cities, especially Toledo, the city of poets and artists, and Granada, the erudite heavenly oasis. During this trip, El Bacha also researched the historical formation of Arab painting in the library of El Escorial as part of an effort to breathe new life into a relationship with the foundational elements, colors, and ornamentation schemes of this movement, exemplified by the thirteenth-century manuscript *Book of Games* by Alfonso X and the manuscript *On the Usefulness of Animals* by Ibn Al-Durayhim.

### **Painting and Music: Interweaving Interstices**

El Bacha's affinity to music came to light throughout various periods of his career, which together formed a milestone in his expressionist style and his search for new approaches to the creation of a modern painting sans a foreground. Through this style, El Bacha searched for an approach rooted in serious consideration of the artistic trajectories of childhood and memory. Perhaps, for El Bacha, the temporality of painting and that of music were one and the same. Indeed, he often listened to music early on in his artistic career when he would lock himself in his room to paint the rhythms of nature. His uncle Khalil Makniyeh designated a room as a salon for musicians in the garden of the house. Stories about musical composition crossed with El Bacha's first attempts to author a rhythm of color, holding within it the nuances of domestic life in Beirut, reconciling the qualities of the rural and the urban. El Bacha's uncle gifted him a watercolor set so that he could play around with painting birds and architectural ornaments, and with coloring wooden clogs. The moment of this gift stands as El Bacha's first tool to exercise color memory, merging the temporality of sight and that of sound: he began to mix colors with musicality as if he were mixing watercolors with water or the melodies of voice with voice. Thereafter, the melodies of color in his painting tended toward the technique known as divisionism, which became a veritable platform for his work. According to this technique, melody grounds the oeuvre and infuses the compositional structure, merging with it to convey the quality of each brushstroke – discreet, calm, or unruly – just as each music note manifests in the facial expressions of musicians and their musical instruments.

In this chorus of musicians, El Bacha found sublime euphoria, which opened the heart of his paintings to surprising questions and to the labyrinth of unknown experience. In Paris during the early 1960s, he achieved an aesthetic through experimentation, considering abstraction, color splattering,



and non-figurative approaches. This period of work revealed for El Bacha the fertile secrets of graphic scale, based on repetition, congruence, symmetry, and interconnections between the part and the whole in forms at once human and ornamental. So, the secret is latent: it is in how spontaneity can often bring about ornamental desires like intuitive conjecture in order to honor these desires by making them a reality – all this while considering the emancipation of form and composition as phrases of a *maqam*, or a melodic system of traditional Arabic music, at once flowing and luminous in a ritual of color, full of lyricism.

El Bacha gave form to the latent color of paradisiacal energies in nature. He relies on shorthand and brevity, integrates the figurative with latent abstraction, and activates the potential of emancipated color splattering techniques. These techniques bring to light artistic and formal elements that illuminate landscape, both its poetics and spatial qualities, its light and shadows. In that regard, El Bacha contributed to the emancipation of form in the 1970s in order to arrive at a gestural language that combines the semiotics of reality and abstraction. Watercolor splattering in climates of poetic musings, or in climates of warmth and humidity, usually reflected El Bacha's attention to the diffusion, gradients, and prisms of light, at once dynamic and static. This splattering formed the delicate elegance of his style, pulsing with a vision for the maximum expression with minimum means. This explains the secret of El Bacha's tendency toward color splattering: it tightens two-dimensional space and detail just as it grows and multiplies with sensitivity and is influenced by the spontaneity of the climate of memory. Why do you think Paul Klee once said, "Color and I are one"?

### **Landscape: Poetic Delusions**

This underlying tendency to paint landscapes, spaces of intimacy, cafés, streets, and people sitting around the dinner table in the cities of Lebanon, France, Italy, Spain, and Cyprus propelled El Bacha to journey to interior worlds, where a radiant vigor draws together light and ambiance just as it merges desire and delight in a dance of color. From his deep musings on nature, El Bacha realized that the latent secret to happiness resides in planting and harvesting, at one and the same time. So, he filled his strokes with the utmost expression to arrive at an apex, integrating nature's elements, particularly its sensuality, strength, and lucidity, within and without figurative time. For El Bacha, abstraction – derived as it was from nature – was like poetry in its ambiguity and serenity. After all, because nature holds the existential glossary of color, design, and movement, we must meditate on it patiently and tranquilly. The objective is to arrive at a certain form of knowledge, which reveals itself through the minutia of it all, as portals to the primordial sources of light and movement open.

In an interview I conducted with El Bacha in the cultural supplement *Al-Mulhaq* of the newspaper *Annahar*, he explained this to me, stating that he was searching for the emotions of color lying behind the truth of sight:

I'm in a constant and chronic struggle with nature. I'm trying to let go of painting nature directly, and trying more to stick to painting the obsessions and subconscious associations of self-expression. Although my work is all based on impulse, I still prepare myself mentally as if I were painting actual objects, ultimately. Maybe this is my improvisation technique.

### **The Fantastical Imagination**

For El Bacha, landscape painting is the vision of free thought, whose impulses afford a passage to freedom. He believes that vision is the work of sight, and in turn vision must be re-invented to arrive at landscapes of visual paradox. In his experiments, landscape improvisation springs from a latent system of Oriental logic, which he formulated to harvest the movement of meditative seasons and their Arabesque intersections, at once seen and unseen, which open up portals to the self, to a process of writing about interior worlds, complex and ambiguous. For decades, El Bacha researched poetics in the movements, light, and shadow of the natural world; in the way women, birds, flowers, and clouds gathered and collected; and in the colorful, geometric designs in the ornamentation of the rugs of his childhood. El Bacha spins his tales from these types of movement through a sort of patchwork architecture, being as it is a science interrelating space and dimensionality, that always determines – through a color intuition, if you will – the patterns of intersection and overlapping as well as the extent of their integration or juxtaposition. In his insistent focus on interstices and subversion, it's as if El Bacha relinquishes the restrictions of form, focusing instead on how to balance surface composition, elusion, and confrontation with the subject matter and the visual space. In his experiments in phantasmagoria, there is something else driving him. These experiments offer a complete representation of mankind and objects: waves and shells, sky and clouds and wind, birds soaring with wings spread wide and creatures in flight, lovers entangled and the faces of women. Perhaps he was trying to give a greater importance to painting form in these experiments, to prioritize the lively and externalized poetry of contour and of its semiotics. After all, a painter's hand, not that of the colorist, unleashes the movement of forms and fills them with creative and poetic potential, at once revealing and expressive. El Bacha was painting the stratum of bygones in these experiments, the way he saw things. These strata gave Mediterranean cities the most beautiful mosaic poetry of civilizational form.

## Shadow Puppetry and the Joy of Wood Painting

During the first phase of El Bacha's stay in Paris in the early 1960s, he lived in a small room. So tight was the space in this room that he was compelled to spend his time carving wood instead of making oil paintings. Due to his difficult financial situation, he would buy wooden boxes of cheese, eat the contents, and then use the boxes to make objects, color them, and form them into something like little sculptures. These experiments developed with time, and he began coloring folding screens, boxes, and windows, which led him to creating marionette-like figures drawn from folklore and *One Thousand and One Nights*.

In his wood paintings, which surged to the forefront in the 1980s and 1990s, El Bacha was aiming at how to reconcile the world of his paintings with an ornamental style of color through a stylistic embodiment of subject matter. He filled his figurative vocabulary with a meaningful sense of presence that became tangible in its encounters with light and negative space, through the vision of a painter, not a sculptor. Instead of handling mass as a sculptor might, he treated surfaces of wood with the logic of assembly and combination, as a carpenter would. He would sometimes substitute the need to sculpt a face by painting on a wood surface. Any sense of flattening, which might result in a static feeling, would quickly dissolve due to the dynamism springing from his assiduous composition and his design of shape and form. Perhaps the shapes of birds, faces of women, and ornamental motifs all unlocked the obsessions of his childhood when wood painting was one of his hobbies. This might explain why El Bacha's landscapes were full of small cubic rhythms and strokes of musical color that evoked a mosaic quality. Forms such as totem poles were portrayed in a ceremonial light, full of rhythmic color, just like the games of a toddler, that end at the top with human heads, offset by the prominence of faces – in frontal and cross-section views – and of statures integrated with floral and geometric ornamentation as well as seascapes.

Sensory perception accumulates and radiates in memory with time. Thus, El Bacha created tales of heroes in confrontation in the embossment of his sculptures, boxes, and folding screens – sometimes with a sense of irony and mirth, sometimes with love and joy. His paintings and sculptures both never drew a distinction between the great joy and the colorful richness of life, a joy that snatches its tales from the reverberations of shadow puppetry and the universe of childhood.



**Le Dîner intime** [The Intimate Dinner], 2004  
Oil on canvas, 142 x 203 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection



*Top*  
**Untitled, 1971**  
China ink and watercolor on paper,  
50 × 69.5 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection

*Facing*  
**Untitled, 1997**  
Oil on wood, 41 × 48 × 17 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection







*Top*  
**Amine El Bacha**  
L'Orchestre [The Orchestra], 1999  
Oil on canvas, 95.5 × 151 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection



*Bottom*  
**Amine El Bacha**  
La Cène [The Last Supper], 1984  
Oil on canvas, 98 × 152 cm  
Amine El Bacha Foundation collection

## **Amine El Bacha**


b. 1932, Beirut, Lebanon  
Lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon

Amine El Bacha's work spans painting, illustration, sculpture, and writing. He completed his studies at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in 1957, and in 1959, received a scholarship from the Embassy of France to pursue his studies in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. El Bacha's illustrations have been featured in numerous poetry volumes, including Alain Jouffroy's (1965), Léopold Sédor Senghor's (1978), and Nadia Tueni's (1983). His body of work also encompasses mosaic, tapestry, and jewelry – notably, the mural of Club des Artistes, Vincennes, France, and the mosaic of the church of San Martino, Legnano, Italy. His work has been exhibited widely, including at the Alexandria Biennale; the National Museum of Modern Art (Paris); the 6th Conches Biennale (Paris); and the Kreisl Gallery (Madrid). Major prizes include the Love Prize and the Città Eterna Prize.

## **Fayçal Sultan**

b. 1946, Tripoli, Lebanon  
Lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon

Fayçal Sultan is an artist, art critic, and researcher. He earned his foundational training in painting and photography at the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, and completed his Ph.D. in visual arts in Paris in 1988. His writings have been featured in several publications, including *400 Years of Freedom Culture* and *L'art Au Liban : Artistes Modernes Et Contemporains 1880-1975* (2012). He's also published a monograph titled *A Collection of Writings on Art in Beirut* (2013), bringing together a selection of articles and studies written in Assafir from 1976-1993.



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