Looking for artists or poets? Or musicians, perhaps? In Damascus the best time to look is at night and the best place is in cafes – especially the one I saw in 1979. It's exciting and it never seems to close.

If you do go – and you really should – you'll recognise it right away: the walls are lined with paintings by local artists. The food is, well, *ya'ni,* but you won't care because that's not why you go. What you go for is the atmosphere: a jasmine-covered patio open to the sky, a ring of white tables around a central pool with small groups of intensely conversant people clustered round as Beethoven's Fifth swells up the patio walls and spills over into the night.

Rumor has it that the owner once stocked the pool with trout and allowed customers to choose their dinner. But no longer and no matter. Because it's like Paris must have been in the 20's, and how can you beat that? The proprietor, for example, stops by to tell you his views on art, poetry, the country, the future and education, and nearby, at those white tables, you can see that the discussions are as fervent as anything in Paris. You can't hear, of course, but you know they're important because everyone is so intent. And suddenly, when some Arabic overrides the 1812 Overture, you remember where you are. It's not France. It's Syria.

What's it like in Syria? If you're an artist, I mean. Are there any artists over there who really create? Meaning: do the arts flourish as they once did? Judging from what I found, the answers, in order, are Yes and Yes. And since I went there specifically to meet the artistic and museum community – and to explore the possibility of exchanging exhibitions of contemporary art – my findings are at least informed. Despite changes, the traditions and heritage of Syria and the Middle East tend to insure the continuity and continuation of the arts as do such institutions as the Academy of Fine Arts, the Syndicate of Syrian Artists, the Damascus Museum, as well as exhibits sponsored by the Ministry of Culture.

Syrian contemporary art, in fact, is rich. As it should be. It partakes of past splendors – dazzling formats, delicate threads of gold, bold strokes of calligraphy – and messages abound. In Syria there are no statements of artistic boredom or attempts to show the futility of the creative process; they haven't yet begun to mock themselves. In Syria, the artists are still concerned. Concerned with identity, growth and talent.

In their traditions, they find their themes

Take identity. All the artists I spoke with were quick to point out the Middle Eastern themes in their works: the influences of traditional form, substance, balance and design. Of the major artists I visited, not one failed to stress his "Arab-ness" – his identity. Some found it natural. An easy extension of their fingertips. Others had to theorize and adapt ideas from other cultural classrooms. But all were eager to draw upon the Arab land and the Arab experience as their format.

This search for continuity of theme from yesterday to today takes many forms. To some artists the theme is the land itself: the timeless land that insistently demands recording. Perhaps because one knows that tomorrow it will not look exactly the same – yet will always be there.

Certainly the land, and the dramatic way the sun plays with the land, are inspiring. Even the desert. Seemingly unchanging the undulating and stony emptiness is endlessly fascinating.

In many cases the format of pure color and basic geometric design has developed into the shapes and simple letter combinations of Arabic script. To the Westerner, a balanced abstract of the letter *ha* is merely good design. To the artist, it has depth and meaning beyond the two-dimensional – for it's one of the mysterious letters that occur at the beginning of some chapters of the Koran.

Then there's growth. Continuity notwithstanding, the artists of Damascus are striving to grow, too. Almost all of them feel the necessity to "change their style" occasionally and carefully explain that today's style is a development over yesterday's. In some cases it is a completely opposite approach: today's delicate brush work and pastel figures after yesterday's hard-edged abstracts.

The way I understand it, they think an abrupt about-face is often vital to break the shackles of an identifiable, monotonous style. All mentioned it, but I'm not so sure. You can develop "style" by taking exploratory detours. But is it necessary to hop on a bus going the opposite way?

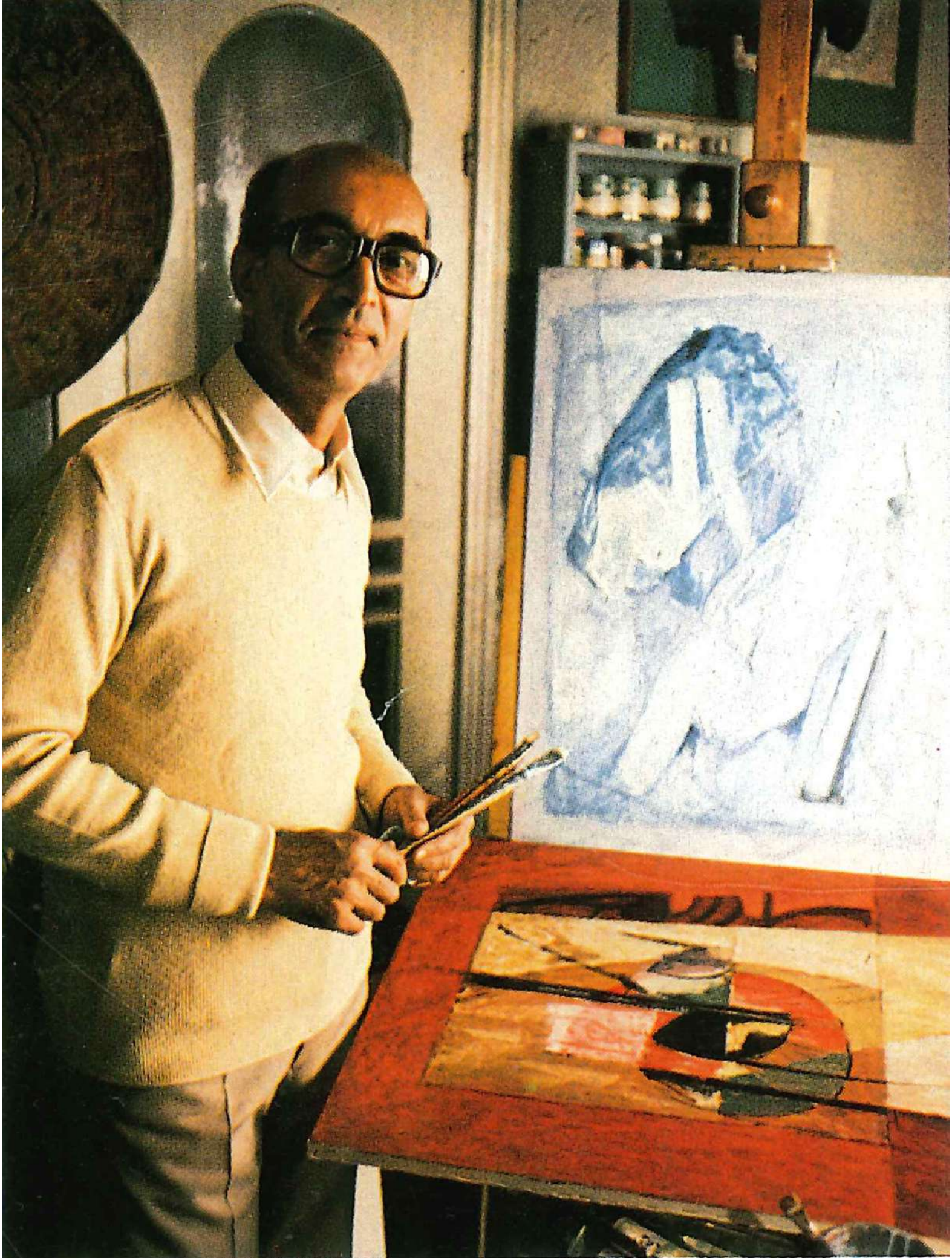
For some artists in Syria the internal problems were simply the latest in their struggle to become artists; years ago, according to several I interviewed – some in positions of authority or in the professions – their desire to become artists was met with derision. Naturally, families in a developing country prefer doctors, lawyers and engineers, so all of them had to go abroad to receive their artistic training. To Egypt, say, where such training was available.

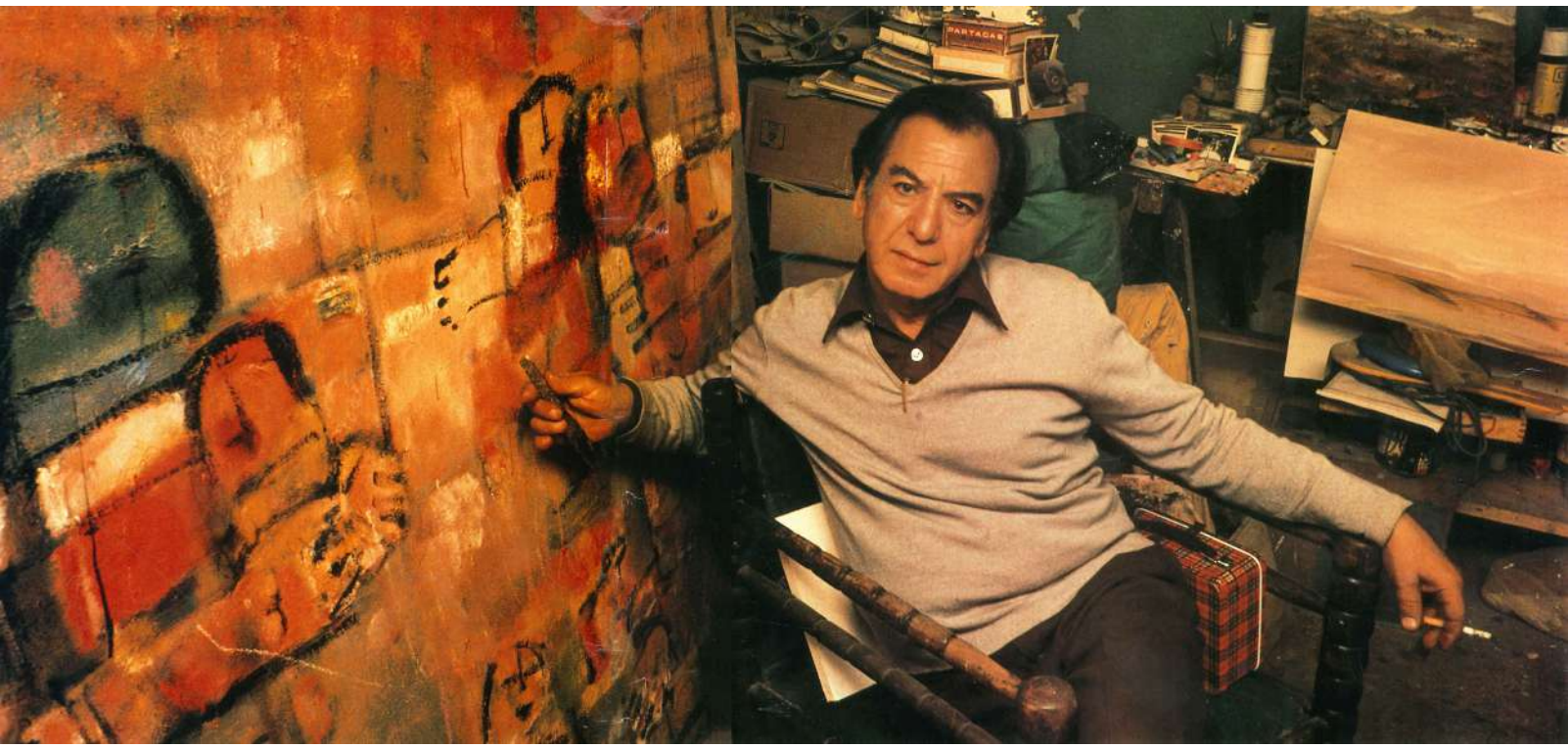
Today this has changed. Between 1962 and 1977 the Academy of Fine Arts graduated more than 900 men and women. And these artists, now professionals with positions in government or the university, laugh about it. But when they speak of the problems they faced, you understand more fully that the life of the creative person is seldom easy, regardless of the country or the times.

In Syria I also learned that the search for the arts and artists is more difficult than, say, in Europe where you start with a quick glance at the local paper's listing of the lively arts, amusements or showings at galleries or openings at museums. Or possibly your hotel will provide a copy of *This Week In...* wherever. But not in Damascus. In Damascus such listings are scant. So you ask around, or go to the university or to the museum.

I learned, however, that those involved in the arts are as eager to develop as the university, the academy, and the Ministry of Culture are to promote development. Before I left, for example, I was asked to stay and help with several projects. One was an English-language magazine of the arts, another was development of the contemporary art gallery at the National Museum into a self-sufficient, autonomous part of the museum – complete with support groups and local patrons. In short, make the museum a popular institution alive with activities of a cultural nature, and not just a repository of art from the past.

All that will come. For in Syria they still remember their cultural heritage and this memory is a force which will promote the continuation of the arts: folk art, folk dancing and music, yes, but the fine arts, too. There's a place for all of them in Syria, and the Damascenes are receptive. If you don't believe it, go to that cafe I told you about. At night. The artists, the owner and the music are still there, and so, you'll find, is the spirit behind the arts.




PARTAGAS

Ahmad Madon – *Madon feels the artist should discover as he works. It is the physical act of applying paint that creates the challenge and eventually forms the image of a work of art. For that reason he does not sketch first.*

The image is in his mind or in his memory and starts to reveal itself slowly on the blank canvas. He establishes a scientific set with his canvases. Trained in business and science as well as the arts, he says he uses the laws of supply and demand, distribution and scarcity, the rules of economics and of balance in his works. That calculated awareness calls for a touch of scarlet here, of black there.

His style is the subtle abstraction of nature, and seldom figurative. Science and the expansion of awareness through scientific knowledge are often vast challenges to today's artist. Using not only what our eyes perceive of the natural world around us, and adding an understanding of life's basic units, structure and patterns, gained with the aid of microscope, telescope and computer, we have no limit he feels, on future creativity.

Rida Hus Hus – *Desolate, alone, awkward in a world of their own, Rida Hus Hus portrays our hope — our children — in a sterile world, filled with our products but not our real accomplishments. His faceless children haunt the viewer. They remind us uncomfortably of our own emptiness or our own greed as adults. They say, perhaps, "I have, you have not. Because I do not have, I am no one, I am faceless. I want my name, I don't want my things." These children — his theme during the Year of the Child — are shown at play. Their play is simple — a toy wagon, a stick and hoop — with the excesses of the adult world's toys juxtaposed. Both the technique and the format are subtle; there are no brassy statements, and subdued shading becomes an innuendo of defiance of a product-oriented society.*

Hus, born in 1939, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Damascus and in France.

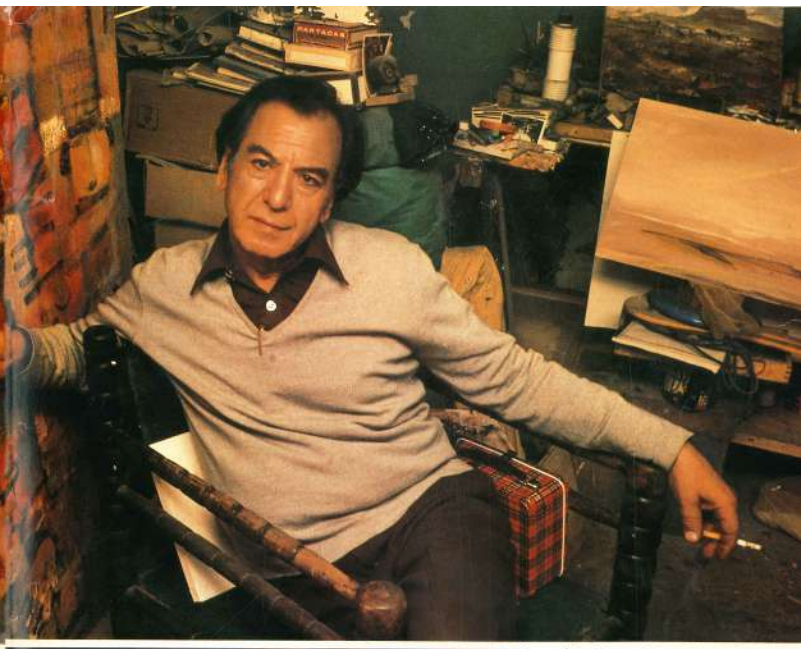
Georges Ganoura – *In his paintings, Ganoura uses light as the scaffolding upon which to create his images. His early desire to paint was reinforced by his own reading. Whenever he could, he would study the works and lives of artists. His style has changed over the years: architectonic, figurative, impressionistic. Throughout these periods, his work describes the land and its peoples, touching on the pride and enthusiasm of new construction, the continuity of life, the bustle of the world. Ganoura also creates icons for local churches in Syria.*

Those nine, of course, provide only a sampling. I could just as easily add others. One who comes instantly to mind is Abdul Kader Arnaout, another member of the University of Damascus faculty. Another is Laila Nseir, 40, a secondary school teacher born in Lattakia who paints in an abstract style with an expressive use of color. But my focus was on the more prominent forerunners of today's artists. Their work, I believe, testifies to the vitality of Syrian art today.

Carol Hotchkiss Malt is director of the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, Florida.

Fateh Moudarres – *The artist defined his art as surrealistic in the past, but now figurative and inclined to abstraction. He is concerned with building a uniquely Syrian style based on folklore. This means the themes of art should start with the land itself. Only a few of his works live up to his goals and when they do, he says, the experience is exhausting. He began painting in his current style, described as "totemistic," in 1950. The squared, stoic, silent faces of patterned totems of women in various costumes fill the entire canvases. The texture looks rich, the women appear regal – yet he wants to show their anger. This inner meaning – a message to the world – keeps his art alive. In his opinion, the secret of good art is originality. Every work of art has a life of its own, a "viewing life." Sometimes the viewer passes over a work in a second; when the viewer feels he understands it or categorizes it then there is no more stimulation and it is dead. If a work of art includes borrowed information, it is already condemned. The influence of the "School of Paris" shows in his works. He is also a composer of music for the piano, the sound of which is reminiscent of recent recordings of whale "talk."*

Moudarres, born in Aleppo in 1922, studied art in Italy and France. He is currently on the fine arts faculty at the University of Damascus.



Nazir Naba'a – *Naba'a's delicate canvases not only portray the beauty of woman, but also symbolize woman's eternal strength and power. His women are frozen in some symbolic position of a remembered state of power as in ancient icons and statues. Often the entire background is a textured field of cloth, randomly strewn. His fascination with texture and material is not limited to women's costumes but often portrays the land.*

He seems fascinated with contrast. He juxtaposes stone with draped cloth, flesh with rock. His themes are chosen from childhood memories, although influenced by his training in Paris and Egypt. His early works portrayed a loneliness or isolation of imagery much like that of de Chirico. From this he has developed a unique style in which delicacy of technique and contrasting imagery weave a subtle statement drawn from ancient, Pre-Raphaelite and modern influences.

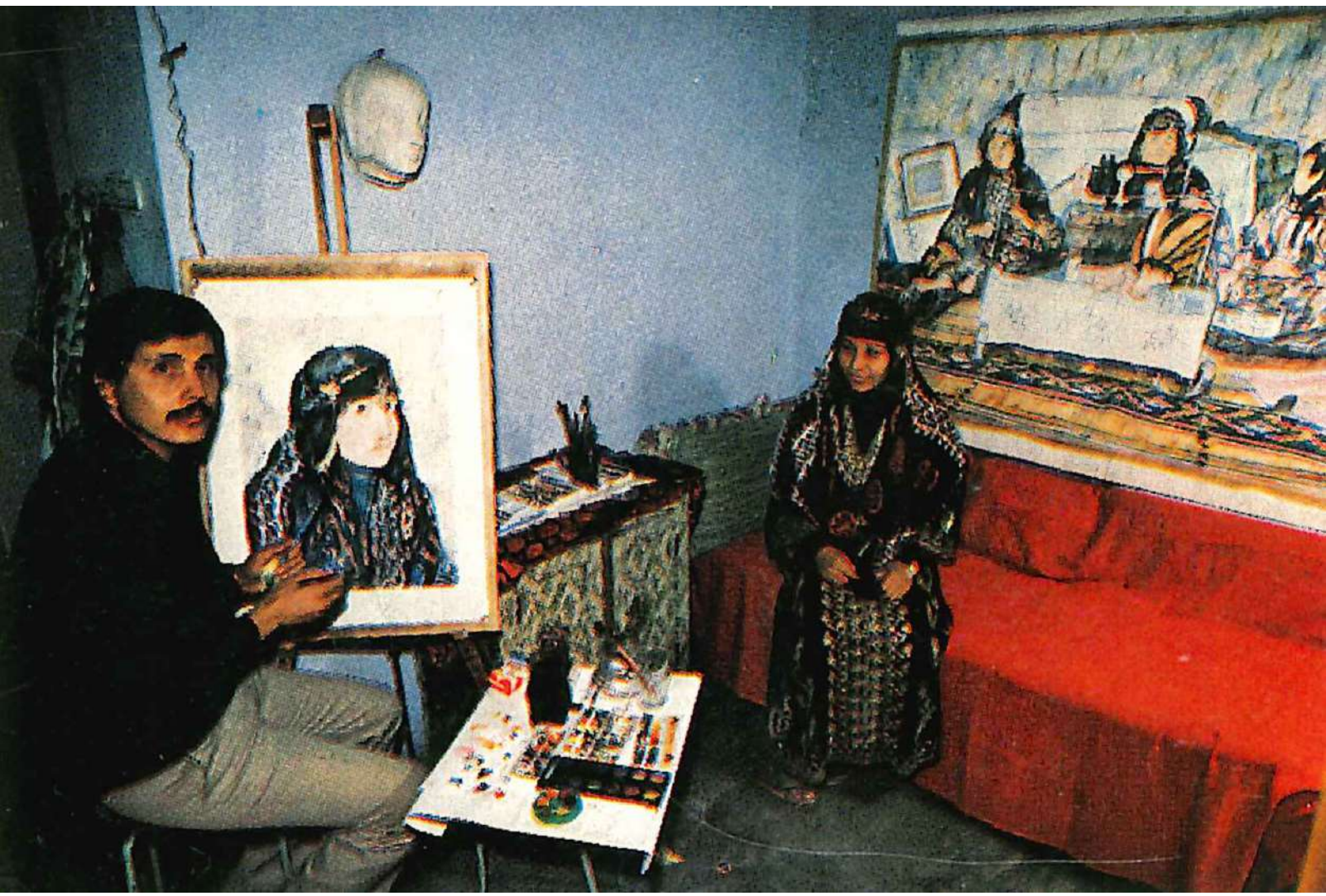
Nazir Naba'a, born in Damascus in 1938, studied at Cairo University and in Paris. He is currently on the fine arts faculty at the University of Damascus.

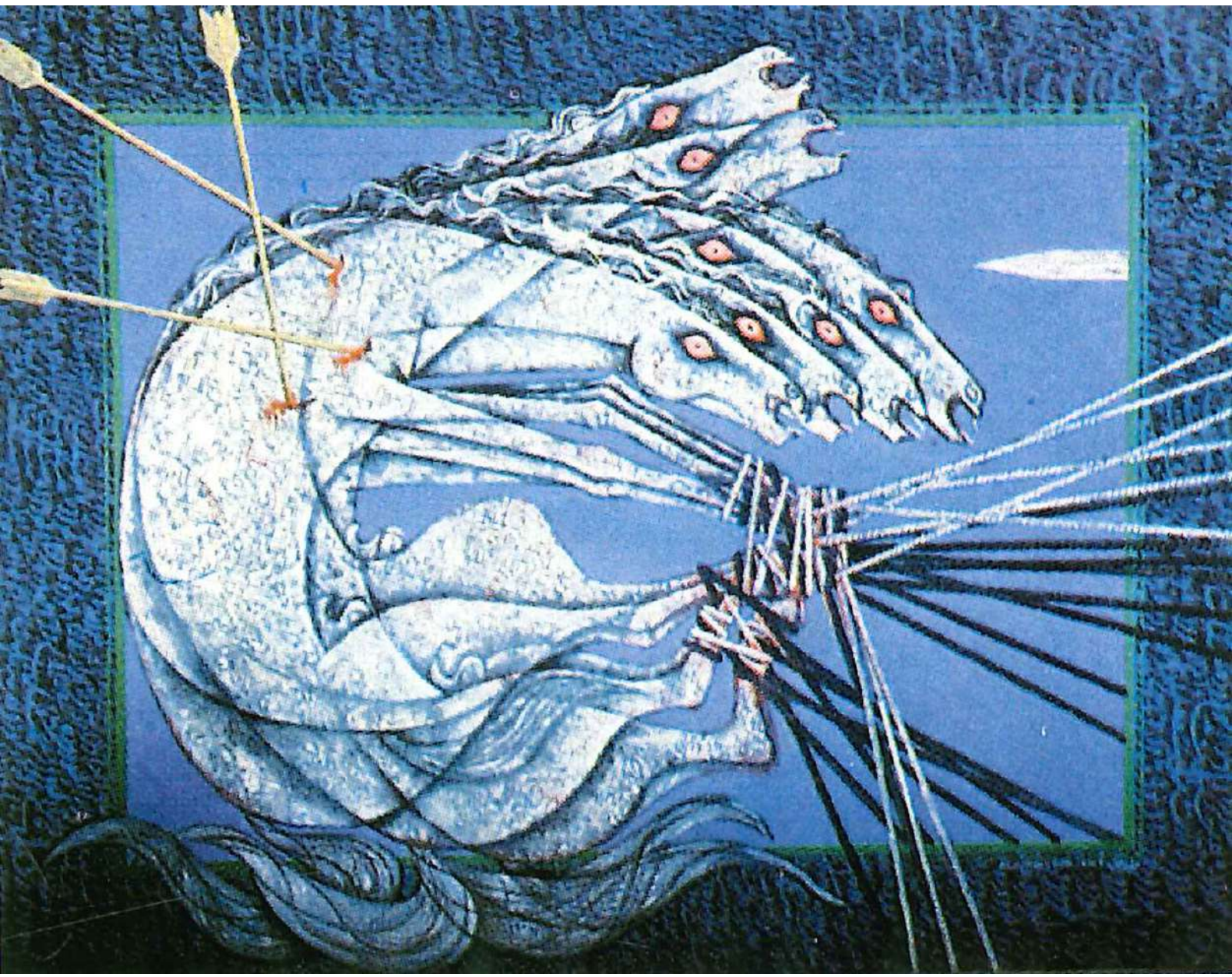
Elias Zayyat – *Zayyat is figurative, concerned with portraying the drama of mankind's needs and wants. His work is often symbolic yet the underlying story line needs little introduction or explanation. There can be no denying that the artist should speak for mankind – and both social and political themes are traditionally the preoccupation of the artist. Zayyat believes there is no difference between the social and political sphere in life.*

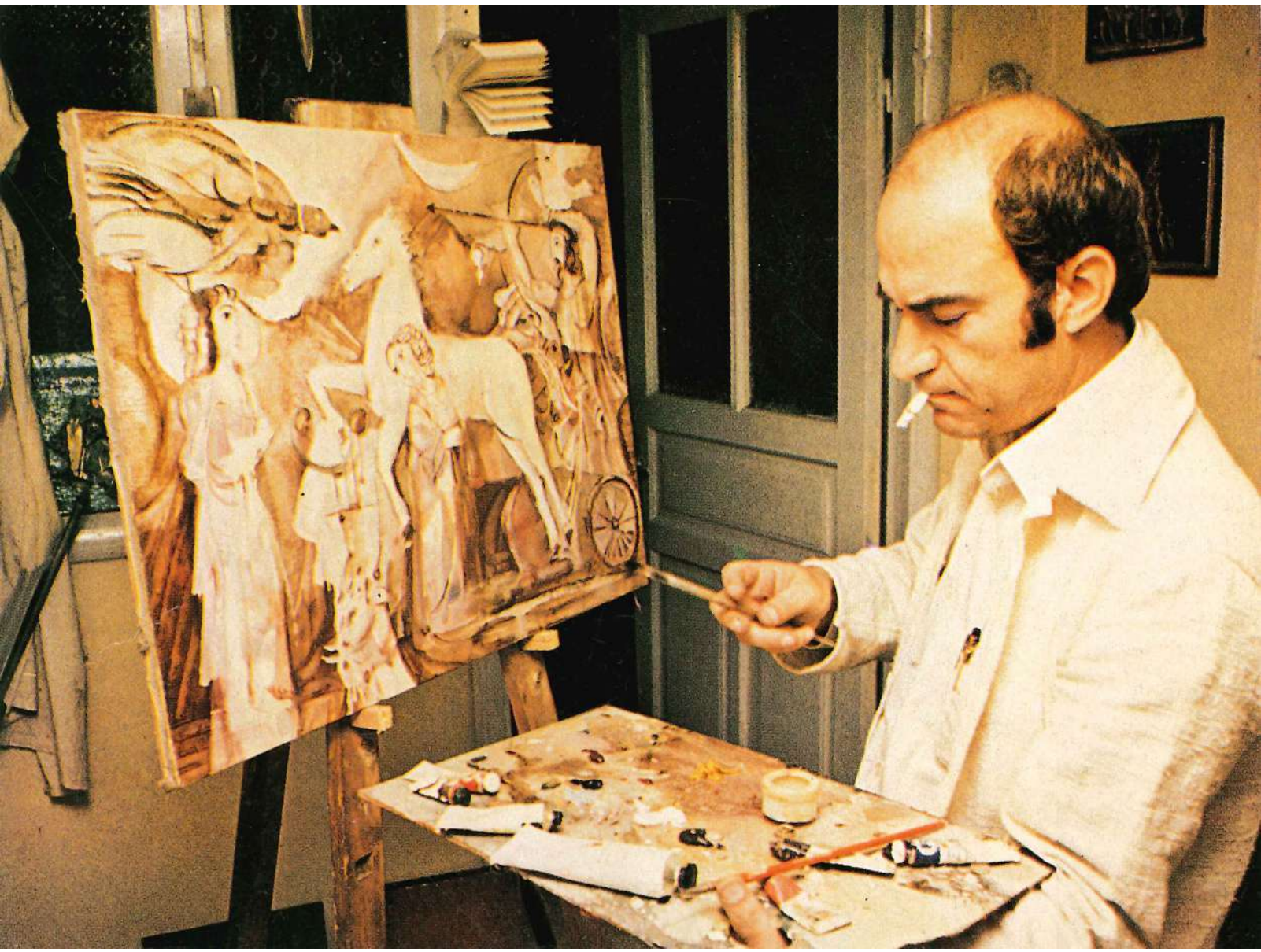
Zayyat's four years of study in Bulgaria have influenced his art. His forms are solid. There is no flight of Dali-esque fancy in his portraits; his palette supports the serious nature of his intent. The artist also creates and restores icons for churches in Syria.

A professor of painting and the technology of printing at the University of Damascus, he uses the same timeless professional technique in the creation of these icons as did previous Syrian masters.

Born in Damascus in 1935, Zayyat studied in Sofia, Cairo and Budapest. He is currently on the art faculty at the University of Damascus.





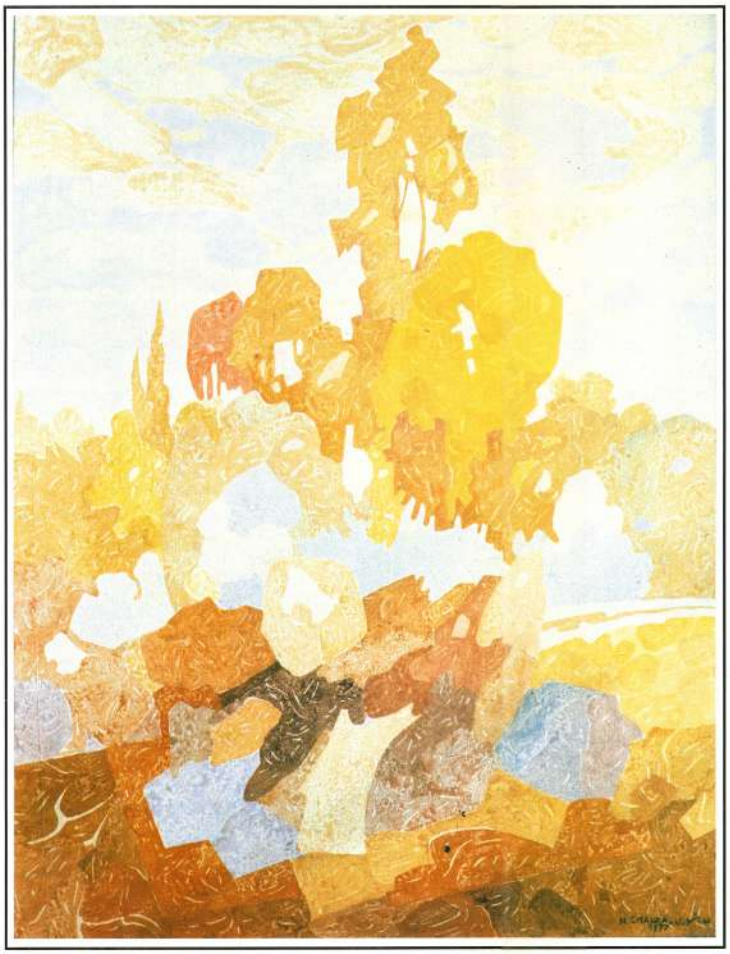



N. CHAURA
1977

Like artists everywhere, the artists of Damascus like to talk almost as much as they like to paint. Of those I talked to, these nine suggest the feelings and commitment I found in all of them — and which were expressed as well in their work.

Nasir Chura – *Patterns of life and patterns created by nature's forms are boldly stated by Chura. He is less concerned with the content of his paintings than with the honest use of nature's patterns – leaves, trees – in either silhouette or subtly shaded dots of soft earth colors. Like many of his colleagues, he feels the need to experiment, to consciously change his style – often radically – in search of that elusive goal of oneness with his land, his people, his time.*

Early on, for example, his work showed a concern for flat defined patterns of people, animals and plants in delicate realistic landscapes, but his later works are reminiscent of Matisse's organic cutouts. Color often creates his perspective as he experiments with form and mass.



PAINTINGS PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE AUTHOR
ARTISTS PHOTOGRAPHED BY KATRINA THOMAS

Mahmud Hammad – *The balance of composition through negative space and color is part of Hammad's paintings. Many European artists devised their own vocabulary and used its symbols and letters in their art. Perhaps Miró and Klee invented their own symbolic language, to which we have not yet found the key, but there is no question as to the intent and meaning of the comparable forms in Hammad's work. They actually are letters – or symbolic letter associations – from Arabic script.*

Hammad is concerned with the relevance of his art to his countrymen, and aware of his influence on younger artists. He, like Chura and many others, has felt the need to change direction, style and technique so that there is less chance of stagnation in his work and more chance for inventive growth.

"Today's art is conscious of historic production – and from it we try to create a style for today. The Arab artist is fortunate to have both the Occident as well as the Orient for his inspiration, as the riches of both created Arab art in the past."

Hammad, born in Damascus in 1923, studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome and he is currently dean of the art faculty at the University of Damascus. Hammad is well versed in many media – he is a graphic designer, and has his own etching press.

Khouzayma Alwani – *Delicate horrors so exquisite they beguile the viewer into fascination with intricate imagery.*

Humanity, with its justice and injustice, is always the theme in Alwani's work. The format is deceptively simple and the technique straight-forward. Each painting freezes its statement in a border of color which serves also as foreground to the action taking place inside.

Often figures reach outside the borders – trying to enter the main scene or trying to escape it. His themes are universal, yet are drawn from the past and present of the society in which he lives. It may be that he detaches himself from his work by setting the stage in the traditional form of the "miniature."

The men, horses, beasts all become impersonally precious, and allow us to pass through his elaborate stage without danger, but with added wisdom.

Khouzayma Alwani, born in Hama in 1935, studied painting and theatrical design at the Accademia di Belle Arti and in Paris. He is currently on the fine arts faculty at the University of Damascus.