



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Innocents Abroad, Again: American Art in Beirut, 1953–75

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In 1964 the United States Information Agency sent American abstract expressionist John Ferren to Beirut as the first artist chosen for the agency's annual artist-in-residence program. Indeed, Ferren was one of many American artists—including sculptor Alexander Calder, ceramicist Jeremy Leech, and painters Tracy Montminy and John Colt—who spent time in Beirut in the decades preceding the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). A decade earlier, in 1953, American University of Beirut President Stephen Penrose had recruited Maryette Charlton from the Art Institute of Chicago to be the first professor of the newly established Department of Fine Arts. Within the politically tense climate of the cold war, the U.S. government struggled for cultural authority amidst the competing agendas of Lebanese nationalism, Palestinian Liberation nationalism, pan-Arab unity, and international politics. Significantly, this growing American presence in Beirut can be traced formally: It is precisely at this moment that abstraction and primitivism, dominant trends in American art during this period, emerged on the Lebanese art scene. This marks a radical shift from the previously dominant trends of figurative, still lifes, and landscapes painted *en plein air*. This project tracks the introduction of American art in an international context through the case study of Beirut, examining its aesthetic and discursive reformulations on both an individual and institutional level. The broader aim is to understand why, and how, influence travels across perceived cultural boundaries. Through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines close formal analysis of art works with an examination of primary sources, critical writings, and historical material, I account for both the American and Lebanese contexts, thereby proposing a model for a cross-cultural history.