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ARTS AND RENAISSANCE SCHOOL

ART AS A FAMILY AFFAIR

Lebanon offers a plethora of art schools but very few specialize in the art of teaching the fundamentals of technique, one that meticulously guides students to develop and progress their craft. One of those schools is Arts and Renaissance — a respected and established family-owned art institution that has taught thousands of art enthusiasts in Lebanon. HOME sat with founders May and Fouad Tomb to hear their remarkable journey that spans several decades — one that takes them from the Gulf to Canada, before returning to their beloved HOMELand.

On a sunny morning, May and Fouad Tomb greet HOME into their main art school on a leafy and quiet street in Kfarahbab, a town in the Keserwan district of North Lebanon. The school is encircled by its own private patio on the ground floor of a residential building. Spacious, warm, and inviting, plenty of natural light seeps into this space, making it ideal for spending long hours to reflect, draw, and paint.

Talking to the couple, it's easy to sense that they truly seem to complement each other — both in character and in their respective roles in the school. May, whose maiden name is Ziadeh, is expressive, vivacious, and gesticulates frequently as she speaks, while Fouad comes across as quieter and more reserved but with an equally warm demeanor. “For us to establish the school was really a cry from the heart for the arts in Lebanon,” explains May. “There was very little in Lebanon after the end of the Civil War so we felt like we needed to do something.”

May and Fouad launched Arts and Renaissance in 1994. Two branches currently exist, with one in Kfarahbab, and the other in Sin el-Fil in Beirut that have taught several thousand students over the years, and they even trained acclaimed artists, such as Nicole Mezher.

In May 2019, they celebrated the school's 25th anniversary with their students (both former and current) and their families and friends at the municipality of Sin el-Fil, under the patronage of Lebanon's Minister of Culture, Dr. Mohamed Daoud Daoud.

Double act: the working couple

Fouad is the school's principal teacher and is also an award-winning artist who has produced over 1,000 pieces of art. Most of his pieces are sold in private exhibitions around the world. Landscapes and portraits are his signature works. Fouad is also the son of the famous Lebanese painter Maroun Tomb. Born in Tripoli and raised in Beirut, Fouad discovered his affinity for painting early on and studied fine arts at the Lebanese University. “While I loved painting, I was afraid it would not support my family,” explains Fouad. He began his professional career in Dubai, UAE as an accountant for Abella, the international Lebanese catering company. After four years spent working in the Dubai, May and Fouad got married in 1978. The couple resettled in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia for the next 14 years where Fouad embarked on a successful career in insurance. However, he continued to practice both painting and professional calligraphy on the side. May worked extensively in education, where she specialized in psychopedagogy. At first,



she headed the French section of schools in Saudi Arabia. She also opened up their HOME in Riyadh for teaching students; she partnered with the Lycee Francais to accommodate the extra students who relocated from abroad.

Taking a leap of faith: switching to a career in art

By the late 1980s, everything seemed to be going well for the couple; they had secure jobs, a comfortable life and the family was expanding too (the busy couple had four children). However, something took place that served as the catalyst for drastic change. “One day I had to leave Riyadh for Beirut on my own for two weeks to attend to some family matter,” explains May. “On my return Fouad had made a portrait of me. It was by far the best art I had seen by him. I just knew then that he should be a full-time artist and should no longer practice art only as a hobby.” However, the real challenge was discovering how to sustain a living from art. The couple decided to take a major risk: Fouad went on a hiatus from employment for the next four years.

Shortly after, the Tombs applied for immigration to Canada and moved to Montreal in 1990. Once in Canada, May continued to work in education, while Fouad rediscovered his love of the



arts. He joins the Faculty of Fine Arts at L'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and specializes in techniques from the masters of the Renaissance and post impressionism. However, after a comfortable and financially stable life in the Saudi Arabia, the couple feared their latest move would strip them of their savings, jeopardize the family's wellbeing and compromise their children's schooling. “I honestly panicked,” admits May. “For the first time in my life, I wasn't sure about our future. I began to reflect on how we would go forward while Fouad embarks on his fulltime artistic career.” A two-fold strategy gradually became clear: The couple would market Fouad's art through exhibitions and simultaneously embark on teaching art to students.

In 1994, the couple decided to return HOME to Lebanon to fulfill their ultimate dream: to practice art and teach the new generation the technique they learned in Canada. “When I returned, I initially taught art theory at Notre Dame University - Louaize (NDU). I enjoyed teaching in a classroom, but I really wanted to work independently at this point. I also wished to spread what I learned to as many people through the applied techniques,” explains Fouad. A year later, he left teaching with the intention of bringing the Mission: Renaissance franchise to Lebanon. This U.S.-based fine arts school for children and adults has studios across California.

The response to their first school in Jounieh was overwhelming. “We had many students almost immediately,” says Fouad. “The Lebanese were thirsty for what we had to offer: professional art techniques in drawing and painting that allowed them to learn systematically and to progress quickly.” Two years later, they ended the franchise deal with the American art school and renamed themselves Arts and Renaissance.

“I decided to become independent and add my own touch to the teaching methods based on what personally worked for me as an artist,” explains Fouad. By 1998, they also closed the Jounieh branch and opened their main school in Kfarahbab in a larger, purposely-built workspace.

Fouad Tomb: the prolific artist

While running the art school alongside May, Fouad managed to teach his students and paint prolifically. Eventually, May took on the role of marketing Fouad's artwork and began to approach galleries in Lebanon. However, she soon found limitations. “Many of the galleries wanted exclusivity, so if we are represented by them we could not go elsewhere,” says May. As a result, the Tombs decided to represent themselves and deal directly with key art patrons. Over the years, Fouad's paintings have been shown in numerous exhibitions spanning Lebanon, France, Los Angeles, Boston, Montreal, UAE, and Qatar. The couple forged partnerships with cultural authorities and held over twelve successful exhibitions in the UAE and Qatar alone. “We had the great support of the Lebanese expatriates and Lebanese ambassadors,” says May with pride. One of them is the engineer Albert Matta who serves as the President of World Lebanese Cultural Union (WLCU).

Fouad was awarded the Said Akl prize in 2003 and was listed among the 100 Lebanese personalities in the book, *Pioneers from Lebanon*. In 2015, Fouad was asked to create a stamp illustrating the diplomatic liaison between Quebec and Lebanon by the Lebanese Consulate in Montreal. There have been numerous other awards and recognition locally and internationally both for his artwork and for his contribution toward teaching art.

Leaving a legacy

Without a doubt, May and Fouad Tomb's children have been profoundly influenced by their parent's strong work ethic and



trajectory, and art continues to play a key role in their lives. Their daughter Sandra is an accomplished artist who exhibited alongside her father. She now runs her own art workshops in Montreal. Their other daughter Joelle, who lives in Boston, is an avid art collector. She also sits on the board of her local arts education organization and is a docent at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston where she regularly engages visitors in dialogues about art. The third daughter Lorena, based in Los Angeles, is an artist and a keen art collector who heads Urbanlime, her own real estate company. She coordinated her father's exhibition in Los Angeles. Their son, Maroun, who is an electrical engineer in Montreal, enjoys art as a hobby. He is a professional chess player who has represented Lebanon last summer at the chess tournament in Batumi, Georgia (43rd Olympiad Batumi 2018 Open).

The couple currently has nine grandchildren, and are showing no signs of slowing down anytime soon. They hope to convert their family HOME in Batroun into a museum where they can showcase Fouad's art alongside many other emerging Lebanese artists. In addition, they are planning to launch The Fouad and May Tomb Foundation for the Arts.

“The Foundation will enrich Lebanon's artistic and cultural heritage. The public will have access to Fouad's works as well as his philosophy as an art educator. This will be achieved through continuous exhibitions, curated shows, residency programs and exchange programs with the Lebanese diaspora in the world,” says Joelle Tomb, the initiator of the project.

With their artistic success, it only seems natural that the couple would want to cement their life's work with a foundation. It is a fitting tribute and one that will hopefully expand their legacy in art indefinitely — in Lebanon and far beyond.

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