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nadia muhanna

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Words Nadia Muhanna

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Once a school rebel, Walid el-Masri could never have imagined that the experience he gained in woodcarving as a teenager might lead him to become one of Syria's most distinguished contemporary painters.



Whilst his classmates sat in school, 15-year-old Walid el-Masri was hiding out in the orchards of Jaramana suburb near Damascus. He would spend his days scratching peeling the bark of trees with his dagger and drawing in the soil of the Akrabani river bank. In contrast to the teaching methods and tired of studying, el-Masri often played truant from school as a teenager. Yet he remembers this rebellious period as one of the happiest times in his life. "I didn't want to go to school because I was too lazy to get up early. I felt that school was not my place, I wanted to build my life somewhere else," Masri explained.

After spending an entire semester in the orchards instead of the classroom, el-Masri's truancy was eventually discovered. Unable to play truant anymore, he convinced his father to let him leave school to work in the family's carving business. This was a decision which significantly changed el-Masri's life – although he could never have imagined that it would lead him to become a successful painter with exhibitions in Paris, Rome, Barcelona, Tehran and Istanbul.

Working with his father in the workshop, el-Masri left his childhood behind and entered the world of adults and hard work. In an attempt to expand his carving skills, he took on a project to make 200 small boxes within two weeks. For el-Masri, these 200 small boxes would eventually reveal him to be a talented carver or a disastrous school dropout.

El-Masri need not have worried however, for he carved the 200 boxes and also made 1,000 – all of which were equipped with a new mechanism for opening and closing them. These unique boxes highlighted el-Masri's carving talent and he was soon able to start his own workshop. "While my friends' mothers woke them up to go to school, I was directing my workshop where men older than my father worked," he said.

Despite his success as a carver, el-Masri decided after two years that it was time to return to his studies. "It was a disaster for my father," he said. "By then, I was responsible for a workshop, and I had my own customers."

As he combined work with study, el-Masri found himself being pulled into the world of art. He attended seminars led by some of Syria's most renowned musicians, poets and intellectuals. However, it was not until el-Masri reached university that he decided to become an artist himself. "I never thought of becoming a painter," he said. "My admission to Damascus University Faculty of Fine Arts was a great challenge for me."

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Astonishingly, el-Masri only started to paint 15 days before he took the entry exam for Damascus University in 2000. He passed the exam and over the next few years he studied the history of art, attended numerous workshops and experimented with different styles and techniques. El-Masri quickly gained a reputation as one of the highest achievers in the art department. While most students would only submit a couple of paintings for each project, he would hand in some 160.

However, el-Masri found it difficult to connect with other students at the university. He was the oldest when he began his degree and most of his classmates were younger. "Many of my art friends were about 30 or 40 years old, even those I worked with were much older than me," he says. "I guess I grew up a bit early."

A workshop held by renowned Syrian painter Marwan Kassab Bashi formed a turning point in el-Masri's artistic development. He explained that Bashi's workshop taught him how to work with a chair as a subject matter.

In 2006, el-Masri presented his first solo exhibition at the French Cultural Centre in Damascus, the first of many shows in Syria and abroad. In most of his work, el-Masri uses a chair as a subject matter – revealing his belief in the theory of repetition, a position advanced by philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze's theory stipulates that by replicating a certain object, different connotations can be attributed to the same object.

The exhibitions also demonstrated el-Masri's use of Japanese perspective in his paintings, depicting only part of the chair. El-Masri explained that the point of this technique is to blur any boundaries in the painting and make it part of the whole. "This way the painting is not restricted to my idea, the viewer can add numerous connotations," he said.

With several awards to his name and more exhibitions expected, el-Masri's painting career continues to soar. "An English artist once told me that when a dancer goes on stage he must ignore the audience in order to overcome his fear and give a flawless performance," he explained. "Nevertheless, he can never get rid of this strange feeling at the bottom of his heart during the performance. This is how it feels to watch my paintings – it's a summary of the show."

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