



artist of the wild

# The Extraordinary Artist Zoha Nassif & Dieu Crea



I arrived early to, "La Maison des Artistes," thanks to the unusually light traffic on Beirut's internal roads. The art academy of, Zoha Nassif, is located on, Adib Ashak street, in one of the oldest and most charming districts of Ashrafieh. Externally the building appeared to be like any of the other upper market blocks around and the only outward indication that it housed a rather unique and prestigious art emporium was the blue colored sign affixed to the first floor balcony proudly declaring its name. However, that's where the normality ended.

I was greeted at the entrance to the academy by the delightfully elegant, Madame Zoha, herself, and as we progressed through the well illuminated rooms to her work station one could not but be impressed by all the paintings that graced the walls, with hardly a blank space remaining. I do not profess to be a connoisseur of art but, like wine, I know what I like, and can recognize quality and talent when I see it. I have never been impressed by the Pop Art of, Andy Warhol, with his, *Campbell's Soup Can*, portrait or the abstract expressionist, Salvador Dali, with his,

*Melting Clocks*. Whilst undoubtedly talented in their way, by and large their works are not to my taste. But the paintings of, Zoha Nassif, are to my taste. The subject matter ranges from, *Still Life*, *Landscapes*, *Seascapes*, *Portraits* and, what I was most interested in during this visit, portraits of *Wild Life* or, as Zoha calls the collection, "*Dieu Crea*" or "*What God Created*".

The compilation of the collection included studies of all manner of wildlife, from the Elephant and the Lion to the less physically impressive, but none the less inspiring, Parrots and Bee Eaters. The individual characteristics of each subject may differ, but when Zoha transforms them on to canvas the detail she is able to capture remains constant. From the rough creased and cracked hide of the elephant to the delicate feathering of the parrots, all aspects are reproduced, in oil or acrylic, in almost photographic detail.

So how did it all begin? Well Zoha told me that from a very early age she would communicate with her parents through a series of drawings or sketches, this is not to say that she had a problem speaking, quite the opposite was the case, but she found that she enjoyed communicating in this manner and her parents, whilst not artists themselves, did not discourage her in the activity but like so many parents who raise talented children they wondered how long it would last, so they advised her to focus on a "real" job whilst >



enjoying her art as a hobby.

However, she knew in her heart that art was her passion and she followed her heart, and after graduating from university in 1982, she moved to Paris and studied at the prestigious, L'Atelier de Sevres, from where she graduated in graphic arts, advertising and painting at, L'Ecole de Communication Visuelle, and it was whilst she was in Paris that she met her future Husband, Fouad Nassif.

Fouad was, and still is, an avid hunter having hunted all over the world and it was his interest in, and dedication to, wild life that encouraged Zoha to paint the animals that he hunted and which she was able to study as a result of accompanying him on his many hunting expeditions and safaris. Her affinity to the wildlife she was able to survey instilled the passion in her to want to paint these animals and to produce this extraordinary, "Dieu Crea," collection.

Zoha had a number of her paintings from the collection on display and I had to marvel at the beauty and detail that she is able to achieve in them, accurately portraying the subject

and transforming the different textures of the animals onto canvas. I was particularly impressed by the way she painted fur and feather and noticing that a birds plumage was

not just a block of color, but each vain painted individually to make up the feather as a whole. The contour feathers and flight feathers and tail feathers are all accurately painted with their different characteristics, colors and substance. The contour feather are painted close fitting and fluffy, whilst the flight feathers are shown stiff and asymmetric, all as they would be in real life.

Then at the other end of the scale I was drawn to the picture of the elephant. The subject is obviously totally different from the birds with its tough grey hide, but each wrinkle and crease is painted individually and in perfect proportion; and then the ivory tusks, smooth and white in complete contrast to its hide. As well as parrots and elephants, Zoha, has painted portraits of fox, lion, horse, panther, zebra, eagle and even polar bear amongst many others, each very unique and lifelike, but each having one feature that Zoha's painting are noted for and which your attention will immediately be drawn to and that is the eyes, and it is the eyes that she usually starts with when first laying out the painting.





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To be able to achieve this degree of accuracy, Zoha, uses a magnifying screen similar to that of a surgeon which she wears on her head like a visor. Accompanying this physical aid is, of course, a good helping of patience and a great deal of natural talent. Zoha Nassif is undoubtedly a very talented and passionate artist, her paintings are testimony to this, but she is not satisfied in just producing works of art. In her school she has over 300 students of all ages and backgrounds, some of whom come to assemble their portfolio of art which they are then able to submit when applying for acceptance to international art schools. Some just come because they love painting or sketching and the atmosphere at the school is, I have to say, extremely relaxed which is a testimony to Zoha's ability to put one at ease whilst communicating some pretty technical advice to the student.

Whether one is just starting out and learning the fundamentals by pencil sketching twelve lines on a piece of drawing paper to make up a three dimensional rectangle, or you have progressed to the study of a stallion in oil in

all its glory, Madam Zoha Nassif, will guide your hand and inspire your heart to ensure that what you produce is to the best of your ability.

