

Rachid Wehbi

A life between form and atmosphere



Oil on canvas, 1940

RETROSPECTIVE

Over six decades, he built a body of work that balanced rigor and lyricism, form and atmosphere, discipline and introspection. His landscapes, portraits, self-portraits, and depictions of women stand as meditations on presence. They reveal a painter deeply rooted in his craft, attuned to the subtleties of silence, rhythm, and mood.

In a 1994 monograph ‘Rachid Wehbi (1917–1993): Artist of an Era and Teacher of Generations’, Farouk Saad notes that every work Wehbi produced began with careful structure and unfolded toward atmosphere. This harmony between construction and resonance became his signature, establishing him as one of the masters who gave Lebanese art a distinct modern identity. Critics would later describe his approach as a sustained interplay of abstraction, where realism, impression, and abstraction coexist on the same surface, fused into a poetic totality.

Early Encounters and Influences

Wehbi’s attraction to art emerged early. As a teenager in 1931, he exhibited a female nude in Beirut, a bold gesture in a conservative society, and a declaration of his commitment to sincerity in art. He studied under Habib Serour, acquiring a solid academic foundation, and later pursued formal training at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, where he also explored theatre and design.



Self Portrait, 61x45, 1957

Outside the classroom, encounters shaped him just as deeply. He sought the company of established artists, among them Moustafa Farroukh, a pioneer of Lebanese modern painting whom he frequently visited. At a young age, Wehbi was captivated by the art that surrounded him, observing the elder painter’s discipline and dedication. These visits connected him to the living heritage of Lebanese painting and affirmed for him the seriousness of the vocation he had chosen.

Landscapes: Lebanon as Memory

Landscape became one of Wehbi’s enduring themes. His depictions of the Bekaa Valley, Mount Lebanon, the Corniche, Ain el-Mraisseh’s rocky caves, and the Mediterranean coast were never literal reproductions of place. They were meditations, settings for pictorial orchestration. Villages with red-roofed houses, pine groves, cliffs, and horizons appear throughout his work, softened into memory rather than fixed into geography.

He approached landscape as atmosphere. Skies shift across greys and blues, trees bend in quiet rhythm, and horizons dissolve into haze. Color conveys sensation more than description: ochres radiate warmth, greens hold stillness, and muted tones suggest silence. His landscapes have been called “music of natural colors,” capturing how he arranged chromatic intervals, setting warms against cools, and layering greens over earth and stone so that temperature carried meaning as much as hue.

These landscapes oscillate between permanence and transience. Mountains rise with weight and solidity, while air and light dissolve across them. Villages seem anchored, yet the skies that frame them shift with every brushstroke. Through this balance, Wehbi expressed his country not only as land but as spirit and geography of belonging transformed into poetry.

Women: Silent Presences

From his youth, Wehbi placed the female figure at the center of his art. His early nude of 1931, exhibited publicly when he was only fourteen, set the direction for his lifelong pursuit of honesty and dignity in representing the human body. Throughout his career, women appeared in portraits, nudes, and seated figures, each rendered with restraint. They are rarely dramatic. Most often they inhabit quiet postures, seated and reflective, their gazes lowered or turned away. Their silence gives them gravity. They are painted not for spectacle but for presence. Softened contours and carefully balanced tones suggest thought, emotion, and resilience.

His nudes follow the same spirit. They are not idealized or theatrical. They are human, dignified, and introspective, marked by candor without display. Gentle light softens the contours, and color responds to mood rather than to formality or show. Some remained unseen for years,



Oil on canvas, 37x43

yet they belong to the same continuum as his portraits—studies in inner presence rather than outward allure.

His personal life reflected this same reserve. He never married, and his days were devoted to teaching and painting. At one time, he shared a discreet relationship with a woman who worked as his maid. It was a private companionship that revealed a quieter, more tender dimension of his existence. This solitude and intimacy echo in his female figures, whose presence on canvas carries both quiet strength and silence.

Portraiture: Faces as Inner Landscapes

Portraiture offered Wehbi a field for exploring humanity with the same restraint and depth he brought to



Qadisha Valley, Oil on masonite, 65x55, 1967

landscapes and women. His sitters appear calm and clearly modeled, often emerging from shadow or placed against luminous backgrounds washed in yellow or green. Their expressions convey introspection rather than outward display.

The portrait of Gibran Kahlil Gibran is a telling example. The likeness is there, but beyond it, atmosphere carries the presence of the poet—solemn, reflective, and dignified. Many of his other portraits, whether of acquaintances, friends, or students, share this quality. They are mirrors of character shaped through tone and light. Wehbi's portraits hold a careful balance between observation and artistic freedom. His sitters are often positioned slightly off-center, framed by

soft backgrounds of pale green or yellow that open a quiet space around them. This creates a distance that draws the viewer to read character and temperament in the tilt of a head or the turn of a shoulder.

Painter Joseph Matar often welcomed Wehbi into his home. Their friendship was nourished through conversation and painting. Wehbi produced several portraits of Matar's family, remembered for their sensitivity and intimacy. For Matar, these canvases captured not only likeness but also silence and presence, affirming the trust that bound artist and sitter. In this way, Wehbi made portraiture a counterpart to landscape. Faces became terrains of memory, spaces of silence, and interiors of human truth.

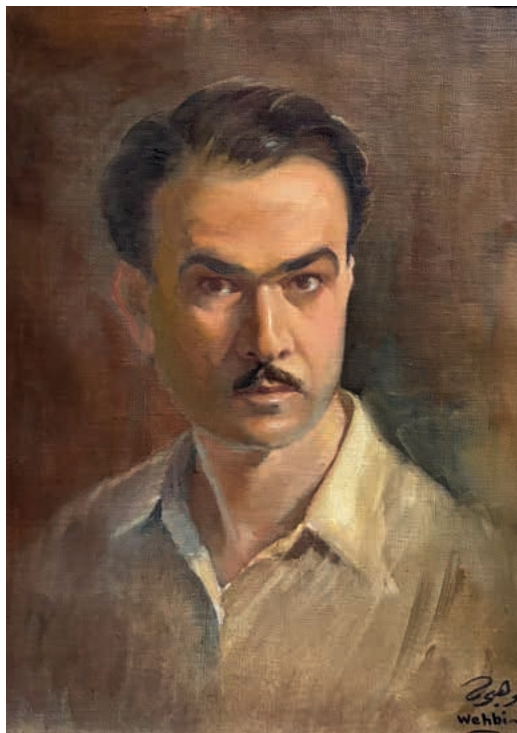


Oil on canvas, 106x75, 1963



Oil on canvas, 48x35

Courtesy of Joseph Matar

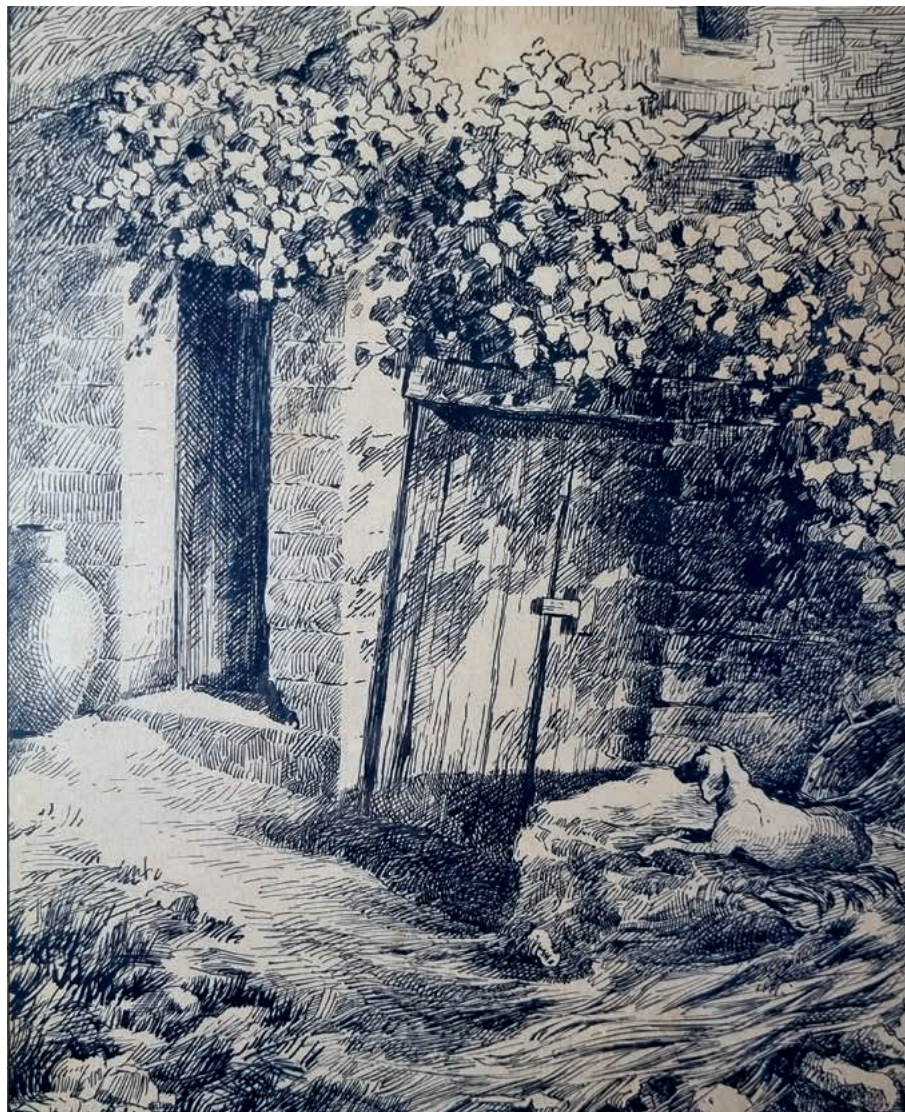


Self-Portrait, Oil on canvas, 52x40.5, 1957

The Self-Portrait: Painter and Witness

In his self-portraits, Wehbi applied the same approach. He shaped personality as much as likeness. These works hold a special place in his oeuvre. They are not images of vanity but reflections on the act of painting itself. Palette in hand, gaze steady, he presents himself as both craftsman and thinker. His features are modeled with precision, while his surroundings are rendered with freer brushwork that moves toward abstraction.

Through these contrasts, the self-portraits reveal his philosophy: the artist must remain disciplined yet open to change, anchored yet responsive to movement. They also situate him consciously within history, not as an assertion of ego but of vocation. In them, Wehbi appears both participant in and witness to his art, affirming the depth of his commitment to painting as a way of life.



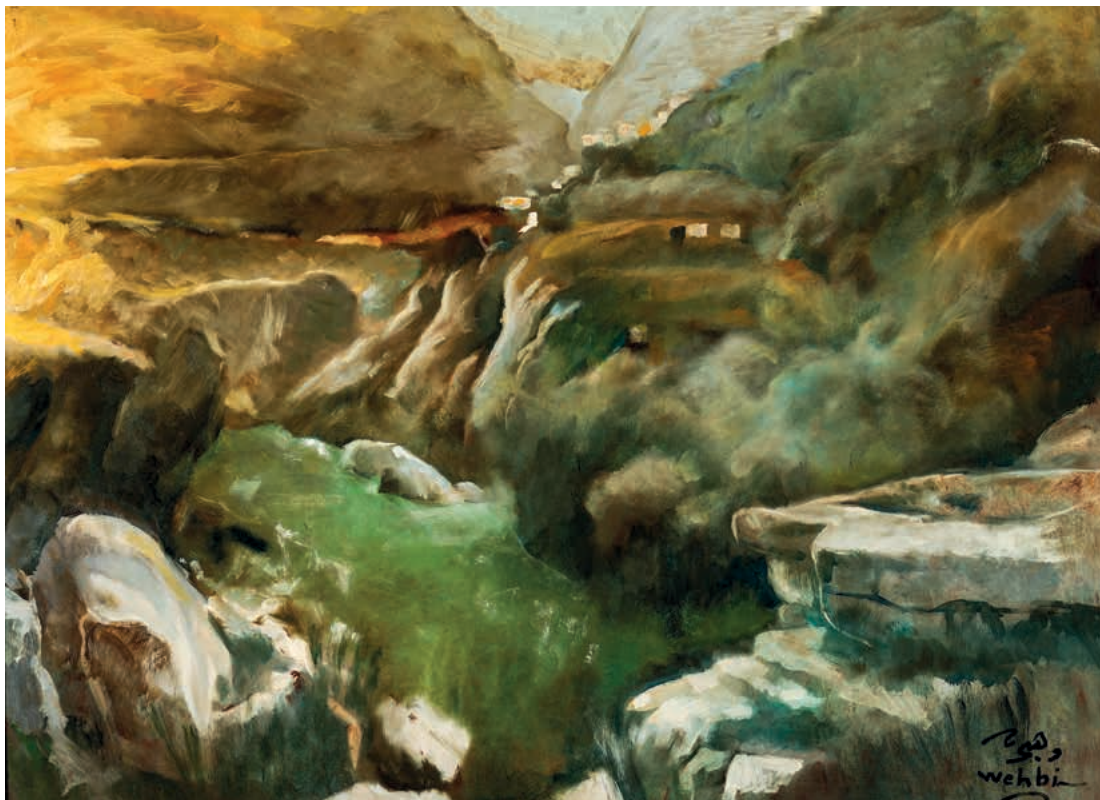
China ink, 22x18

**Wehbi's figures carry
solidity, his portraits
maintain proportion,
and his landscapes hold
compositional order**

Technique: The Balance of Structure and Freedom

Wehbi's training was rigorous. Under Habib Serour and during his studies in Cairo, he mastered drawing, anatomy, and classical composition. This foundation is always evident. His figures carry solidity, his portraits maintain proportion, and his landscapes hold compositional order. At the same time, travels through Italy, France, Spain, and the Soviet Union exposed him to European modernism. His brush loosened, his palette grew more expressive, and abstraction entered his language. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that his mix was never eclectic but fully integrated. Landscapes and portraits begin with observational truth, drift through impressionistic handling, and culminate in passages of abstraction that heighten both mood and structure.

He absorbed these influences without abandoning his foundation. Structure remained while atmosphere expanded.



Oil on canvas, 50x65, 1990

This synthesis defines his technique: clarity and discipline supporting freedom and emotion. His canvases feel both airy and architectonic, constructed through condensation and unity, reducing clutter while intensifying what remains. Color functions as syntax, atmosphere as subject.

His command of oil, pastel, and watercolor extended this grammar. Pastel, immediate and unforgiving, demanded precision. Oil allowed contrapuntal masses and accents. Watercolor often drifted toward abstraction, capturing veils, tides, and granular blooms while preserving structural cadence. His drawings were never mere preliminaries but rehearsals for tonal placement, a portable laboratory where form was continually tested against rhythm.

Later Works: Toward Essence

In his final years, Wehbi's work moved toward increasing distillation. Color became restrained, compositions sparse, and forms reduced to gesture and rhythm. These paintings present silence as their primary atmosphere. They are not austere but concentrated, canvases where minimal means yield depth.

Even when drawing from a storied site such as a church façade, a coastal cave, or a neighborhood, he resisted anecdote. The motif anchored the frame but dissolved into breath and cadence, leaving climate rather than story as the residue: salted wind, resinous heat, and autumnal light suspended between evergreens and rusts. Created in years when Lebanon endured upheaval, these late works offered calm and reflection, a counterbalance to noise and instability. In them, Wehbi pursued the essence of painting: presence without distraction.



Landscape

Rachid Wehbi RETROSPECTIVE



Oil on board, 68x56



Oil on canvas, 45x63



Oil on hardboard, 47.5x61.7

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art



Oil on canvas, 47x64, 1969

Bechara and Walid Mehajir Collection



Oil on canvas



Oil on masonite board, 60x50, 1988



Oil on canvas, 44x52



Oil on canvas, 44x52

Landscape

Rachid Wehbi RETROSPECTIVE



Oil on board, 50x40



Oil on hardboard, 59.3x68.4

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art



Oil on canvas, 57x42

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art



Mtein, 67.3x87.1, 1992

E. Hammouche Collection, USEK Museum, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik



Oil on canvas, 50x65, 1940



Oil on hardboard, 50x65

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art



Oil on hardboard, 72x56

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art



Oil on canvas, 39.5x56, 1959

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art

Scenes



Oil on canvas, 55x40



Gouache on paper, 37x30



Oil on hardboard, 28.2x41.5

E: Hannouche Collection, USEK Museum, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik

Drawings



The Palm, Oil on canvas, 28x20



China Ink on paper, 16.7x24



Storm, China Ink, 18x25

Courtesy of Joseph Matar

Portraits

Rachid Wehbi RETROSPECTIVE



Eveline, Oil on canvas, 44x37



Marina Matar, Oil on canvas, 49x43



Oil on canvas, 35x50



Oil on canvas, 55x45



Eugenie, Oil on canvas, 55x45



Andrée Matar, Gouache on Paper, 60x45

Courtesy of Joseph Matar

Courtesy of Joseph Matar

Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art



Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art

Abdallah Ghanem, Oil on canvas, 65x55, 1974



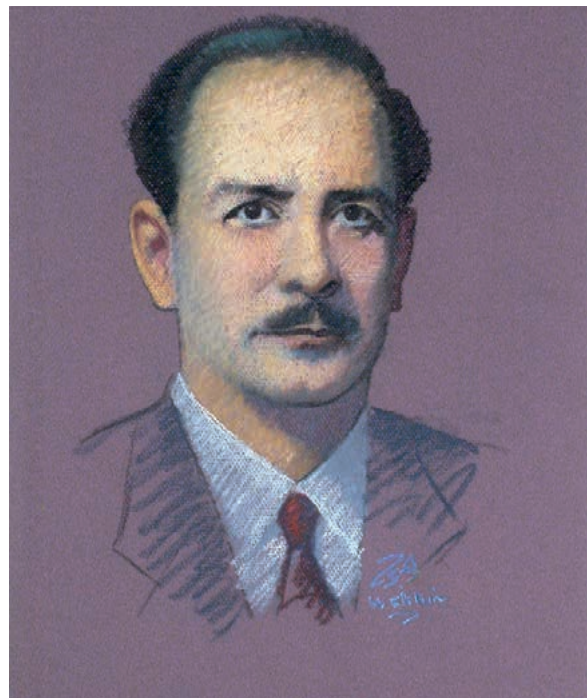
Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art

Le Kurde, Oil on canvas, 70x60.5



Image courtesy of BeMA - The Beirut Museum of Art

Cheikh Fouad Hobeiche, Oil on canvas, 65x55



Gouache on Paper, 46x34

Portraits

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Georgette Menassa, Ink on paper, 50x35, 1982



Jean-Pierre Matar, Ink on paper, 65x50, 1982



William Matar, Ink on paper, 65x50, 1982



Madonna Matar, Ink on paper, 65x50, 1982



Marina Matar, Ink on paper, 65x50, 1982

Courtesy of Joseph Matar

Women



Oil on canvas, 90x70, 1988



Oil on canvas, 70x95