

arts & THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Volume 35

Egypt

the arts in view



GUEST EDITOR IN CAIRO – Elizabeth Rodenbeck

COORDINATING EDITOR IN LONDON – James Parry

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EGYPT: the arts in view

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Email arts@iibi.demon.co.uk

Sales, Subscriptions, Advertising:

Director, East-West University Press

816 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605
(USA)

Tel 312 939 0111 Fax 312 939 0083

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Representative Office in South Asia:

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Representative Office in North America:

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E-mail jalal@home.com

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Acknowledgements

CONTINUING THE current series of theme volumes, this issue of Arts & The Islamic World, is a particularly timely one. It is several years since AIW looked at the arts scene in Egypt, a country which continues to occupy centre stage in the artistic life of the Middle East and Arab world generally. A reprise is therefore long overdue, and it is particularly appropriate that this should take place at a time of so many exciting developments in the arts in Egypt. These do, of course, mirror changes and trends that are emerging within Egyptian society generally, but the advent of a vibrant private sector for the arts, free from the shackles of the traditional systems of patronage and of government control, is an encouraging development and one that will hopefully prove both sustainable and a model for others to follow. We are especially pleased that it has proved possible to present features in this volume on so many different aspects of the arts, and particularly on the more contemporary media such as cinema, experimental theatre and modern dance. This approach should serve AIW well in the future, as we prepare similar monographs on the arts in other countries within the Islamic world.

This special volume has taken many months to complete, and we are grateful to the various authors and contributors for their patience. Publication has been made possible by the kind sponsorship of the Ford Foundation, and we are also grateful to the British Council for their advice and assistance. Thanks must also go to our Guest Editor in Cairo, Elizabeth Rodenbeck, for identifying the original concept for this volume, and for drawing together so many of the contributions.

JAMES PARRY

Coordinating Editor in London

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the state of the arts in egypt

RICHARD WOFFENDEN



ADVENTURES IN COLOURS – Basem Magdy's huge painting won many admirers at the Townhouse.

IT MIGHT NOT BE HAPPENING very quickly, but things are changing on the Egyptian art scene. And more importantly, they are changing for the better. The governmental sector, which for so long controlled the arts, has not only loosened its grip but has even renewed itself and started to prosper. Anyone who remembers the early 1990s will recall the heavy self-censorship imposed by gallerists and artists alike. The cinemas were not the most hospitable of locations, and the films tended to be either foreign productions over a year old or so-called 'blockbusters' featuring big name stars such as Fifi Abdou, Nadia Al Gindi, Nabila Ebeid and Adel Iman. Meanwhile, the Cairo Opera House was a mess of inefficiency, with chaotic scheduling and less than amazing productions. Theatre was varied, but again tended to be dominated by big name stars, although things were already changing. Over the past decade however, new faces have appeared and younger talents have begun to be recognised. Characters like the new Opera House head Samir Farag, opera productions chief Sobhi Bedair, gallerists Karim Francis and William Wells, as well as the current cinema boom, have all changed the way we look at the arts.

Ten years ago, in the midst of the conservative mood of the time, it was unthinkable to have a painting of a nude hanging in a gallery. But now the government-owned Museum of Modern Egyptian Art (see p.19) has held a retrospective of the works of pioneer artist Mahmoud Said, featuring some of his more provocative works. This new freedom has allowed major artists like Gazbia Sirry to exhibit some of her earlier studies, as well as encouraging younger artists to explore this avenue of expression. Unfortunately, in many cases artists have relied on magazine images for their inspiration and the end results can be less than impressive.

More important than these paintings is the move away from the established venues of the Centre of Arts or Akhenaten Galleries, which for years dominated the government art scene. At the beginning of the nineties there were very few private galleries exhibiting contemporary art, with Christine Rouillon's La Part Du Sable Gallery, Renate Jordan's Cairo Berlin Gallery and

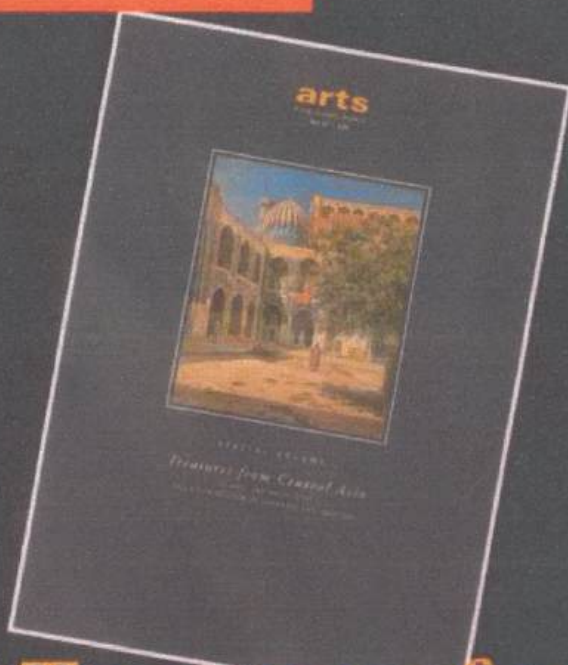
Stefania Angarano's Mashrabia gallery almost the sole torch bearers. During the following few years several new private and public sector galleries opened, most notably in the last half of the decade. Artists who had been spotted in the annual Salons of Youth, as well as more established artists, now had a place to show their work. The salons of the early nineties had thrown up such artists as Mona Marzouk, Wael Shawky, Shady Nashoukaty, Aliaa El Geredy, Sameh El Halawany and Amina Mansour, who could not always find favour or space at the Centre of Arts. These artists – along with their contemporaries – took a while to establish themselves fully, but have since taken advantage of new gallery spaces like the Townhouse or Espace Karim Francis, and are proving their worth. The youngest generation of artists, which includes Basem Magdy with his unconventional graffiti-style expression and Basem Al Baroni, noted for his introspective self-portraits, also found a home in these galleries. Equally, serious foreign artists based in Cairo were given gallery space for the first time. Previously only Mashrabia had shown this category of work in the form of Barbara Graff, but nowadays artists like Scott Bailey and Martin McNally are often shown in Cairene galleries.

These trends were most clearly seen in the Townhouse show during the recent Al-Nitar Downtown Arts Festival, which showcased the work of three Alexandrian artists: Marzouk, Shawky and Mansour, along with Nashoukaty, video artist



Hassan Al Baroni is part of the strong wave of young artists from Alexandria

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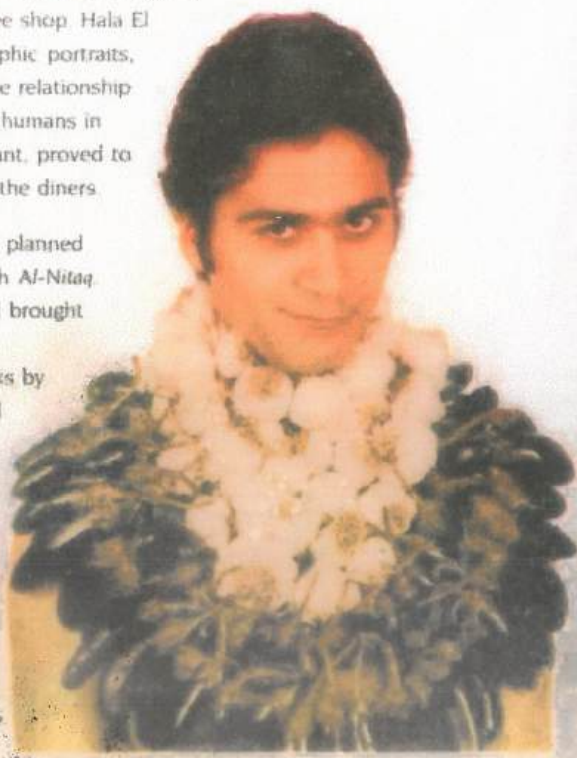
Above: Mostafaz Nasr's award-winning Biennale work with video and installation techniques found the audience all eyes as well as ears.
Below: At the Nitaq Festival, Hala El Koussy's look at food and its relation to consumers found an appropriate home in the Estoril restaurant

Hassan Khan and photographer Lara Baladi. The show was seen as one of the focal points of a festival that gave a representative vision of the current Egyptian art scene. The exhibitions were impressive, and the three male artists used video to great effect in their installations. Amina Mansour continued her exploration of the texture and symbolism of cotton, whilst Marzouk showed her architecturally inspired pieces. Lara Baladi, who has already received recognition outside Egypt, veered into the world of computer games for her exhibition of photographs as visitors were encouraged to search out her cast of characters, leading to a huge photo-montage of images from the 'game'.

Al-Nitaq came into being through the work of William Wells, the owner of the Townhouse gallery, along with fellow gallerists Karim Francis and Stefania Angarano. This gallery has been seen as a centre for innovation since opening in the late nineties, with Wells giving space to many artists who did not 'fit' into the visions of other galleries. He has also set new standards in terms of publicity and promotion, and brought together the downtown galleries in a way that had never happened before. Al-Nitaq, for all the hiccups,

sparked enthusiasm right across the artistic scene from established artists like Sobhi Guirgis and Mohamed Abla to young artists like Sami Elias and Doaa Ali. Mohammed Abu Naga filled a local bookshop with his paper-based pieces while Yasser Grab's huge figure towered above a local coffee shop. Hala El Koussy's photographic portraits, which looked at the relationship between food and humans in the Estoril restaurant, proved to go down well with the diners.

Another event was planned simultaneously with Al-Nitaq. The British Council brought over the 'invisible museum' with works by artists such as Paul Morrison and Mark Pimlott. Marc Quinn also came, and created bread hands at a local bakery to exhibit in the show. What was particularly



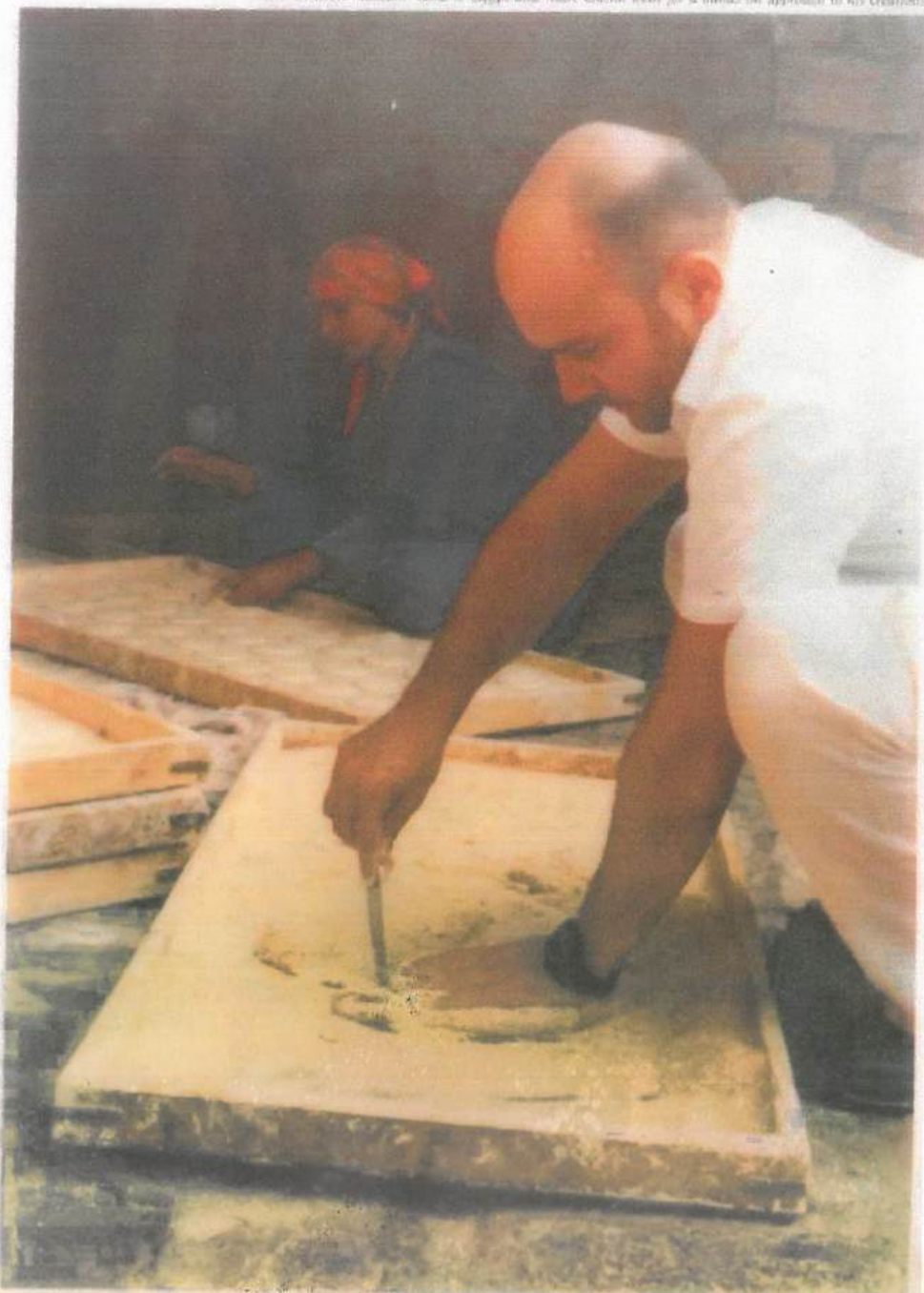
important about this event (apart from the calibre of the artists) was the choice of the Zeinab Khatoun House in Islamic Cairo. This fitted in perfectly with Al-Nifaa's objective of taking art to the people. The house had been used for avant-garde plays in the past, most notably *Rihla*, the disturbing and intriguing work of Hany Ghanem. This particular exhibition proved a challenge to visitors, and sparked a debate over its contents, which was precisely its intention. However, it was rather too subtly curated for some visitors, and certainly did not enjoy the success of Karim Francis's exhibitions of George Bahgoury's work, held in public spaces – such as restaurants – across the capital and also in Alexandria. Meanwhile, Sameh El Halawany and Aliaa El Geredy's art development project in El Max village is another important example of how art is now being taken to people who do not normally have access to it. Such initiatives also allow the artists concerned to further develop their talents in new directions.

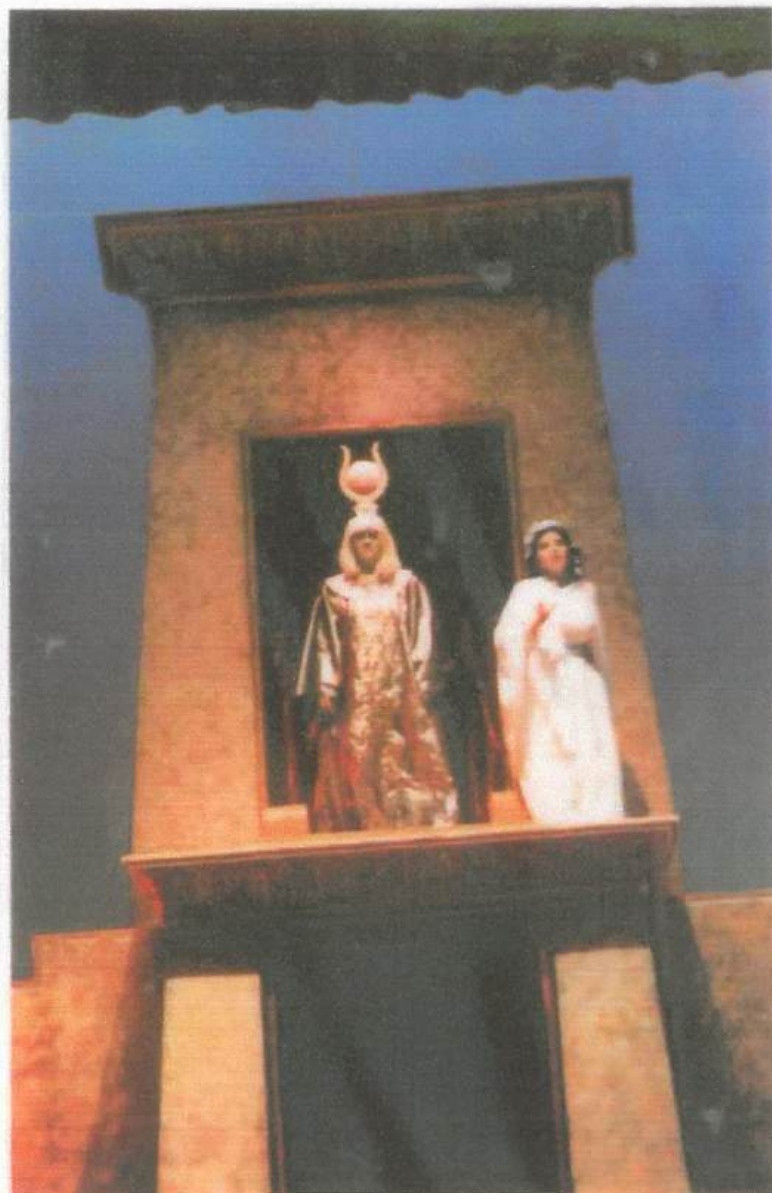
As for this year's Cairo Biennale, it garnered very much the same mixed response that it has received for years. Of the local artists who participated, the works of Mostaz Nasr and Vahan Teipian proved popular, but the foreign artists tended to be a very mixed bag. Organiser Ahmed Fouad Selim hopes that next year a more themed approach to the event will improve its standing, both locally and on an international level. One aspect of the Biennale that visitors did appreciate was the prominence of the Palace of Arts and Gezira Arts Centre galleries, which have become two of the most popular venues for artists in the government sector. In particular, the enthusiastic management of the Gezira Arts Centre by Mohamed Rezk has really upped the stakes in public galleries, thereby prompting new initiatives from the older Centre of Arts.

Meanwhile in the film world there is a similar buzz, as a new burst of activity has flourished with the arrival of new talent. As Yousef Shahin's films seem to deteriorate in quality, films by those directors who worked with the veteran film-maker are now coming to the fore. Khaled Youssef's *Al Asifa*, the first Egyptian film about the Gulf War, and *Al Madina* by Youssef Nasrallah,

have been two of the high points of recent Egyptian cinema. Another breakthrough has been the arrival of a new generation of actors. With the success of films like *Ismailya Rayeh Gay* and *Saudi Fi Al Gamasya* Al Amrekeya, new comedian Mohamed Henaidi became a major box office star. Not far behind him was the rotund figure of Alaa Wali El Din, whose comedy *Aboud Alia Hadud* took cinemas by storm. A host of their younger co-stars also came to the fore, including Karim Abdel Aziz and Mona Zaki, who were to star in their own vehicles. Such was the enthusiasm for young actors and fresh films that a production starring three unknown twenty-something

The 'invisible museum' came to Egypt and Marc Quina went for a hands-on approach to his creations.





The Cairo Opera is finally getting its house in order.

actors was not only made but proved a viable product in the market. While not an all-out smash hit, Mohamed Ameen's film *Thaqafi*, a tale of a group of young men searching for a place to watch a porn movie, broke new ground in terms of the risqué nature of the content and the gamble involved in using unknown stars. The very recent success of *Asrar Al Banat*, a much more serious film looking at the issue of teenage pregnancy but also featuring relative unknowns in the main roles, is further evidence of the increased commercial viability of films that challenge the traditions of Egyptian cinema.

In the Opera House, things have also begun to look up. Following a period plagued by scandals and corruption, an ex-general was appointed to run the building. Replacing cellist Mostafa Nagui, Samir Farag began with a policy of widespread consultation, but soon realised that this was not practical and that successful management of this venue was dependent on tough executive action. Accordingly, he placed very tight controls on spending and activities, and whilst there is still concern over his style, both performers and audiences feel that there are already tangible improvements.

The operas produced by the Cairo Opera Company are now of a higher standard, and offer more variety. Sobhi Bedair, who took over the running of the company before Samir Farag arrived, has been allowed to stay, continuing his work for the Verdi anniversary and the various co-productions with Italian performers, artists and directors. The end result has given much greater opportunity for local singers to take to the stage more regularly. This has in turn meant that audiences have been able to see established singers like Neveen Allouba and Reda Wakil alongside new talents such as Amira Selim. Farag has also devoted more time to Arabic music concerts, given a higher profile to the annual Arabic Music Festival, and has also introduced a programme of more regular recitals. All these initiatives have been well-received by audiences.

Perhaps it is in the world of literature where things look rather less rosy. Following the scandals and demonstrations over *A Banquet of Senned*, and the conservative role played by the traditionally liberal Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, Egyptian literature is still struggling. Sales of fiction are usually very modest, and there is fierce competition for works to go into translation. Prose writers like Sahwa Bakr, Ibrahim Abdel Meguid and Bahaa Tahaa still have strong influence through articles and TV appearances, while one younger prose writer has turned to film scripts to try and reach a wider audience. Mostafa Zikry's two screenplays *Gannat Al Shaitan* and *Alaret Al Asjeli* have both proved critical successes and modest commercial hits.

Writer, director and actress Nora Amin transformed both herself and the Townhouse for her drama.





A reverential look at the changing human condition by Tarek Maatoum at the Cairo Atelier (Nilag 2001).

Poetry meanwhile, remains popular and figures like Farouk Shousha, Mohamed Ibrahim Abu Senna and Farouk Guwieda are among the best-selling writers. Familiar to a wide audience via radio and television, their poetry is very accessible, rather like that of the powerful colloquial Arabic poets Abdel Salem Amin (who died this year) and Abdel Rahman Ai Abrioudi, both of whose poetry is interpreted through the medium of singing.

Younger poets are also making an impression, although their great number makes it hard to categorize them. Whilst not yet widely known, straight-talking poets like Ahmed Yernani, Hoda Hussein and Osama Al Danasouri are involved in many public readings and poetry events.

Meanwhile, many writers have crossed the boundary into drama. Poet Mohamed Metwalli wrote a successful translation of Milan Kundera's *Jack and his Master*, which was produced by the Shrapnel Theatre Company. Equally, novelist Nora Amin worked with innovative dancer Karima Mansour in her piece *Taming*, which proved a major hit, pulling in audiences to pack out the Ghumhariya Theatre.

Serious theatre generally has been showing a steady improvement in terms of quality although

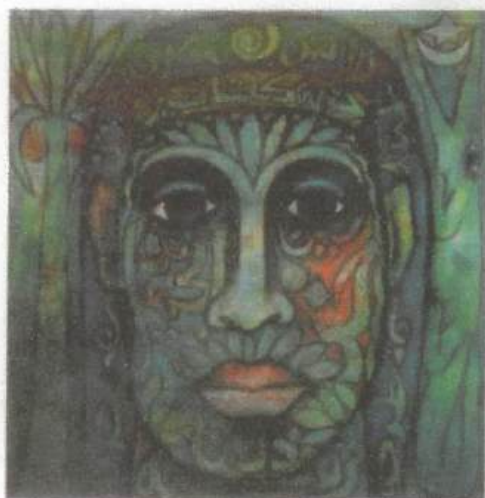
there are still a lot of weak shows around. With the freezing of grants from the Cultural Development Fund, many directors – Khaled Al Sawy, Maher Sabri and Effat Yehia among them – are in despair. Furthermore, many backers are scared of producing anything controversial in case the play is attacked in the gutter press, which is often eager to cause a scandal. However, the Cairo Experimental Festival, despite the patchy quality of the entries, does allow talent to come to the surface. Dancer and director Mohamed Shafiq's *Where Things Happen*, a movement piece which was both witty and clever in its combination of

IMAGES OF THE CITY – Sahab Naim's work at the Goethe Institute during the Nilag Festival focussed on city life.



Egyptian Painting in the 1990s

CAROLINE
WILLIAMS



EGYPTIAN PAINTING is just over ninety years old. The first School of Fine Arts was founded in 1908 in Cairo. Since its beginnings as a new subject fostered by imported European teachers, painting in Egypt has evolved into an authentic and vibrant mode of visual expression, reacting to, and being formed by, the main political, social and economic forces of 20th-century Egyptian history. The Pioneers – Ragheb Ayyad, Muhammad Nagui, Mahmoud Said – emerged as distinguished painters during the struggle for independence against the British from 1920-36. The Nasser Revolution of 1952-67, which saw Egypt for the first time in two thousand years in charge of its own affairs, dominant among Arab states, and a leading member of non-aligned power politics, was a time in which new artists and new themes came to the fore. These euphoric and creative years were followed by the sombre realities and the soul-searching engendered by the two wars of 1967 and 1973. In the years that followed, the mid-1970's to the late 1980's, Egypt became increasingly dependent economically on the West as a result of the 'Open Door' policies, while the Camp

David peace agreement with Israel isolated Egypt politically from the Arab world. The past twenty years under President Mubarak has been a period of relative stasis in Egyptian politics, and to some extent this is reflected in the arts.

Current exhibitions at private and public galleries, in any week of the season, display a wide variety of works. Many of the artists who shaped the development of Egyptian painting are still alive and producing. Subsequent generations have added new impetus and new directions. As a new century begins, self-expression in painting is at a crossroads. For the older artists, the mood is one of re-capitulation, of new re-formulations and re-interpretations of what has gone before; for the younger artists the momentum is a forward one, but there is no agreement on the direction.

The lively debate over the question of identity in the world of contemporary Egyptian painting continues. What is an Egyptian artist? What are his or her roots? How should one reformulate, reintegrate old themes and make them original and authentic? What is a modern artist? How can an Egyptian artist preserve his or her identity in the face of multi-culturalism and globalisation? How can an artist be Egyptian AND international, or does one have to be either one or the other? And finally, how can the artist explore the techniques and styles of an alien art form without being considered an imitator instead of a creator?

During the past decade, that of the 1990's, the main answers to this question as manifested in current styles of painting and in Cairo's main galleries, are three:

The Authentic Egyptian Matrix

THIS IS THE DOMINANT and most complex of the various painting modes. It is subdivided into the Pharaonic/Indigenous and the Arab/Islamic forms.

The Pharaonic/Indigenous is the oldest of the Egyptian styles. It goes back to the days of the great Egyptian Pioneer artists, to the 1920-1940's, when Ragheb Ayyad, Mahmoud Said and Muhammad Nagui painted the Egypt they knew and saw: the peasant living and working along the Nile Valley as he had done since Pharaonic days; Egyptian women newly emancipated, in various guises, made universal; vignettes from the urban worlds of Alexandria and Cairo; and the epic notion of nation. This indigenous theme, expressed in the outward, visual elements that defined Egypt historically and culturally, became especially strong during the years of Nasser's Revolution, when the *sha'bi*, or people, were emphasised. Many artists working now are moving back to 'the memories', 'the energy' of their culture and their past. As one artist described it, "artists must be a link in the chain of transmission," or 'he who has no father, has no future'.

Above: **HEAD OF AN EGYPTIAN WOMAN** Esmat Dawastaki.
Below: **ORGANIC-GEOMETRIC INTEGRATION No. 209**
Abd al-Rahman Nashar.



The other aspect of this Egyptian theme is the Arab/Islamic element derived from the language, religion and civilisation which has shaped Egypt since the mid-7th century. As a strain it has always been reflected in subjects of Egyptian painting, but it became especially pronounced after the cultural rethinking and reassessments of the 1970's. The Islamic matrix provides a rich source of inspiration. There are two subgroups of this Islamic expression: the decorative/calligraphic and the architectural/urban.

Artists in the decorative school base the textured surfaces on the principles of Islamic art. Compositions alternate geometric and organic elements; the pattern often has no focal point; the foreground and background merge and blend, suggesting equality and infinity, and sometimes the work is executed on several superimposed levels.³

Another adaptation of Islamic principles is the use of wood, a very old Islamic technique: it is used in inlaid and figurative ways; in its geometric forms; and as coloured patterns on wooden panels which play tricks depending on the angle they are viewed from.⁴

Calligraphy is the most truly Islamic of all decoration, and in the modern period it expresses itself with great originality. The calligraphic school in its secular, religious and abstract forms is an authentic way in which the Egyptian/Muslim artist can be true to his religious, literary and cultural roots while at the same time using modern techniques. It is a way of reinterpreting his culture in a contemporary way. The irony is that it creates two audiences: the literate and the illiterate. The literate viewer can understand and appreciate the piece of art on two levels, the level of meaning and the level of decoration. This dual strand, motif and message, pattern and statement, is also profoundly Islamic. Although the 'illiterate' viewer can only appreciate the scripture as design, this beautiful and creative use of the Arabic alphabet has great cross-cultural appeal.

The other strand in the Islamic strain is the imagery derived from the architectural/urban context. These are paintings which depict the old city of Islamic Cairo, Islamic folklore and legends, but the theme is no longer as vital as it once was.⁵ Contemporary artists perceive the old city of minaret and domes as crumbling, decadent, passé, and as a subject it falls into the nostalgia/postcard/souvenir category. Only one current artist really centres his work on the Islamic past. Awad al-Shimi derives his inspiration from the Mamluk era in Egypt, a time of military triumphs and great architectural grandeur. His best known series depicts the Mamluk warrior and the Concubine. His figures are swathed in rich fabrics, and framed by architectural fragments. They are headless and faceless, a commemoration which stresses the generic and collective rather than the specific.

It is a misconception to think or state that Islam has no figural tradition or representative art. Secular Islam appropriated and adapted figures from the representational traditions of the empires it had conquered and into whose lands it had moved. Islam does have its own figural tradition, but the motifs such as courtiers, mulid dolls, or legendary horsemen are simply swept into the folklore category.

The current difficulty in assessing what is for sale is that more and more Egyptian art is driven by market forces. Today the artist who can support himself with his art, or without regard to the market, is rare. Many artists work hard to reinterpret their

Egypt. Being heir to such a long and rich history places a tremendous burden on the artist. How to make old identifying images into new ones is one of the present challenges. One young artist⁶ worked up a series of interpretations in which images of cars and handsome youth taken from modern advertisements loomed out of a background composed of nineteenth century photographs of old Islamic Cairo. This theme of current consumer aspirations dominating traditional urban sites does indeed represent an 'awakening' that is both evocative and novel.⁷ However, there is a lot of work for sale that is commercial in theme and intent. These paintings present copies or imitations of the work of the nostalgic or Orientalist genre, or of big-eyed, artfully draped peasant or Bedouin women which, while appealing as wall coverings, have little artistic merit.



MUHAMMAD, Omar al-Nagdi

The Abstract

THIS STYLE has been part of the Egyptian art world since the late 1930's. Since then the abstract strain, in its expressionistic and non-objective forms, has been especially strong at moments of

THREE GIRLS, Kamal Yahmur



radical change, such as the late 1930's, the 1952 Revolution, the 1967 War, or whenever a crisis leads a new generation of young painters to choose abstract art as a means to find new values, a new identity, different answers to old questions and solutions to new problems. Egypt under Hosny Mubarak is stable and calm, but many of the Establishment artists, those connected with government ministries or in

charge of public galleries, lean towards the abstract. They paint in a style that is post-modern, fashionable and seemingly quick. It is a style which reflects Egypt's integration in the dominant technological, commercial and communicative world of the American and Western nations. It is a style that many young artists emulate.

Mixed Media

THE THIRD ANSWER to how the artist of the 1990's conceived his work lies in the mixed media installations favoured by the younger artists, i.e. those born in the 1960's and 1970's. The use of papyrus, of palm fronds, of old material, of *ouima* or braid, added to paintings beginning in the 1960's, has now taken on a life of its own and has been transferred into whole benches, walls and machinery parts. These are used to make artistic statements whose meaning depends as much on the viewer's subjective interpretation as it does on the artist's objective intent. For example, the artist⁸ himself described a painting which was part of a large exhibition of creatively wrought automotive parts. He explained that the juxtaposition of nude female bodies among the carburettor and exhaust pieces sprang from his wish to see Egyptian women liberated from the bondage of drudgery and fundamentalism. An outsider, however, might have been tempted to see in his imagery the subjection of the Eternal Feminine to monstrous modern forces.

Young artists who are showing at exhibitions today come from more diversified directions than their predecessors, but are perhaps more narrowly formed

Education and experience shape their outlooks. For example, the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo continues to produce aspiring artists, but the use of live nude models has been banned since the late 1970's, and it was only in September 1998 that Art History became part of the formal curriculum. Furthermore, many of the instructors have had no other academic exposure than the system which produced them. Graduates turn more and more towards the commercial worlds of journalism and advertising as financially more rewarding, and produce 'fine art' on the side. Other young artists, rebels against the academic system, are self-taught. Since it is expensive to travel, their viewpoints are shaped by

CASTING THE NET, Saggiat Sa'd al-Din



Work by Mahmud Moneissi

their own contexts. On the other hand, those favoured with scholarships who can study abroad, if they come back, often come back as 'other'. As aspiring members of the new internet society, there is a new spirit of individuality and personal experimentation which means that the unifying features of contemporary Egyptian painting are dissipating. Of the 1998 Tenth Salon of Youth, one critic wrote: "There really are no standards".⁹ Another critic characterised a show at the Gezira Arts Centre as "aimless vitality", wherein eighteen artists engaged in a "pluralistic, exploratory vision, in which the search for roots in an increasingly rootless environment is challenged by the struggle to attain an idiom sufficiently articulate to be understood by the international art world."¹⁰ There are new forces and visions in the Egyptian painting scene, but at the moment, the present awaits the future.

Work by Khalid Hafez



1. Farhali Abd-al-Hafiz
2. Old Arab proverb frequently quoted
3. Such as in the work of Abd al-Rahman Nashar, Ahmed Nawar
4. Yusef Murtader, Mahmud Abd al-'Ati, Mervat Zaki
5. Artists in this tradition go back to Yusuf Kamil, one of the Pioneers; Hany al-Banany, Zainab Abd al-Hamid, Muhammad Sabry, whose scenes of the old city are clean and tidy.
6. Khalid Hafez
7. Compare this image with that of Mahmud Mukhtar, *The Awakening of Egypt*, 1921.
8. Mahmud Moneissi
9. Nihad Ruan, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 24-30 September, 1998
10. Yusef Rifaat, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1-7 July, 1999



The Nubian Museum

AT THE BEGINNING

At the beginning of December 1997, the Nubian Museum in Aswan finally opened. Its planning and building took nearly thirty years. In it are preserved treasures from 5,000 years of Nubian history and culture, as well as mementoes of the everyday life of the great nation whose narrow land along the banks of the Nile in southern Egypt and northern Sudan is now drowned forever under the

waters of Lake Nasser. The ceremony was finally staged only two weeks after a catastrophic terrorist attack in Luxor, which reduced foreign tourism throughout the next several months to almost nil.

The Aswan High Dam was built by the Russians between 1960 and 1971. As the waters of Lake Nasser rose for 500km behind it, 100,000 Nubians were evacuated to high ground in Egypt and the Sudan; and in 1961 an extraordinary international campaign was launched, under the sponsorship of UNESCO, to record or rescue doomed monuments ranging in date from pre-history to the sixteenth century AD. Scheduled for physical transference to new sites were the important pharaonic temples of Abu Simbel, Kalabshah, Derr, Amadah, and Wadi al-Saba'a. Four smaller temples were donated to museums in Turin, Madrid, Leiden and New York. At the same time a museum was conceived that would house a selection from the thousands of antiquities rescued from Nubia, together with others from the old Aswan museum and treasures that had languished in the basement of the Cairo Museum for decades.

The Museum is a large low sandstone building on the crest of the hill at the southern edge of Aswan. It was originally envisaged in this form and on this same site by Egyptian architect Mahmoud al Hakim, designer of the widely admired Luxor Museum, which opened in 1975. In 1980 al Hakim participated in the ceremonial laying of his new building's cornerstone, at a different site from the one he had first chosen. Prior to his death in 1985, the designated site had been changed several more times, before returning to this hillside. Meanwhile, however, al Hakim's role in the enterprise had been usurped, his designs and final plans had been illegally appropriated, and the building had still not been erected.

Above: **VESSEL** decorated with geometric designs, 4-6th century AD. *Gabriel Auda/Nubia*
Below: **THE NUBIAN MUSEUM** boasts eye-catching architecture in traditional materials



Only several years after al Hakim's death were his plans, made use of by others in highly suspect circumstances, finally realized. In the interior design the official builders made some unfortunate alterations, eliminating features that al-Hakim had carefully calculated to provide traffic control, safety, and visual drama. The site remains splendid, however, and the exterior makes it one of the most beautiful and impressive buildings in Egypt. Approached by stone walkways and ramps, it is surrounded by a landscaped park of 43,000 square metres, which incorporates a Fatimid tomb and a replica of a painted Nubian house, an obelisk and other statuary, and overlooks Aswan's ancient quarries and medieval mausolea.

The main entrance is through a series of elliptical arches in the western facade, reminiscent of Nubian vernacular architecture. The only decoration is composed of what Hasan Fathy called *sahatal* or V-shaped openings. The interior is lined appropriately with polished Aswan marble, which minimizes the sunlight and heat of this southern latitude during most months of the year. Instead of the gentle ramps planned by al Hakim, however, a grandiose stone staircase plunges directly from the entrance foyer down into the main exhibition space. This space is dominated by a colossal statue of Ramses II, which has had to be fitted in vertically by sinking its feet below floor-level into a stone-lined pit; nevertheless the Pharaoh looks decapitated from the top of the stairway.

The objects and their exhibition represent a valiant effort to elucidate 5,000 years of history, demonstrating multiple incursions and excursions of several different ethnic groups, accompanied in each case by the ebb and flow of complex influences. The arrangement is not always entirely logical and some of the periods, including the five hundred year Islamic era, are poorly represented.

The labels of exhibits and the mounted texts accompanying them were clearly quite expensive to produce, but are full of solicitors. The level of information they offer suggests that they were commissioned by a government or a private institution, rather than by a local community. The museum's architecture, however, is a masterpiece of traditional practice, built from local materials and in a style that is both functional and beautiful.



THREE CROWNS studded with precious stones, 3rd-6th centuries AD, Ballana/Nubia

have no interest at all in specialized academic debate. They are concerned with the objects, however, and with the historical continuities and influences they represent, and thus with chronological and geographical precision; and the labelling may leave them feeling disappointed. A booklet about the museum compiled by Dr Gaballa A. Gaballa, the well-known Egyptologist, although not a complete catalogue, is attractive, well written and extremely informative, and any visitor would be well advised to buy a copy. The hall for temporary exhibits, on the right of the entrance foyer at present, offers statuary and sarcophagi of governors and officials at Elephantine from the Old Kingdom to Ptolemaic and Roman times. The Kushite or 25th Dynasty, who ruled Egypt from 712 until 664 BC, until they were beaten back by the Assyrians, were in fact Nubians from Napata. The objects here are sculpted from the marvellously rich and varied coloured stone of the region, including basalt, diorite, steatite, black, pink, green and purple granite, schist, gneiss, and

carefully done. There are clear explanations of agriculture, the manifold uses of the date palm, boat building, fishing and mining, as well as other everyday activities and ceremonial life. One can look into several decorated mudbrick houses and see what is going on. Lifelike figures of men, women and children engaged in various pursuits are realistic without being trite.

The Museum has a spacious entrance foyer with a well-managed bookshop and adjacent lecture halls and studios. There are also a library, a cafeteria, and offices. The building can accommodate large groups without difficulty and is within easy walking distance of major hotels. It is a great pity that al Hakim's elegant conceptions of space, circulation, and drama were interfered with: they would have helped make this new museum a world-class institution. In spite of such criticism, the Museum remains an undeniably impressive addition to the charms of Aswan, Egypt's best-kept and best-planned city, and a welcome sight for any visitor.

sandstone. Aswan is still a sculptor's dream – a month-long international gathering of sculptors is held in one of its major hotels each winter.

Fortunes have been spent on moulded glass cases in this part of the museum and the design of the spotlighting is highly sophisticated. The specialists who did the installation seem to have departed, however, leaving no trained expert behind: levels and focus of lighting are occasionally so inadequate that visitors can hardly see an exhibit or read its label.

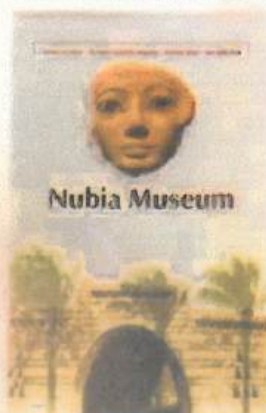
Downstairs, sequences of pottery, the prized Nubian gold, silver and semi-precious stones, bronze weapons, tools, and other artifacts from the Prehistoric and Early periods are arranged in chronological order along the left-hand side of the gallery. The right-hand side leads the visitor back through a succession of objects from Meroitic, Greco-Roman, Christian and the relatively short Islamic era (Islam was not officially established in Nubia until the 13th century.) The display is quite coherent and includes outstanding exhibits such as fabric from Gebel Adda with Koranic verses finely woven into it. But one wishes for more.

It is the middle section, covering the Pharaonic period between these two sequences, that lapses into confusion, and the flow of visitors, up to this point well-directed, also breaks down, in an apparent muddle of very beautiful, but ill-explained, statuary and small objects.

The ethnographic section, illustrating Nubian folk culture, is under and behind the staircase.

Dioramas of life on the banks of the Nile are

THE MUSEUM GUIDE gives an attractive introduction to the collections



MOHAMED ABLA...

A CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ON THE MOVE

JAYNE COOKSON

WHEN MOHAMED ABLA is not in his studio painting or creating original prints, he is travelling. One might find him in Europe, the United States or somewhere in the Near East teaching or exhibiting his work. His paintings have won awards at Biennales in Kuwait and Egypt, his original prints have been exhibited, by invitation, in Japan, Finland and Poland, and Mohamed was one of several Egyptian artists invited recently by the U.S. government to tour some American cities. Travelling is not new to this highly motivated artist, whose repertoire also includes three dimensional work in bronze and ceramics. In 1978, after finishing art school in Alexandria, Egypt, Mohamed spent seven years in Europe studying, teaching and meeting his peers.

His return to Egypt involved an agenda. During an interview Abia reminisced about the art scene in Egypt at that time as being very boring, slow and traditional and told me that he wanted to return and attempt to make some changes. He began by experimenting with new techniques and new ways of exhibiting his work, with no frames, simple materials and paper. "For me it was a kind of duty to come back and try to change some things," he says. "I think there are a lot of artists who have been influenced not exactly by my way of creating art but by my way of living, my way of experimenting and being brave; and I feel that this is very important." Mohamed belongs to a small group of painters, writers, poets and artists from other disciplines. They meet to discuss and exchange ideas. Sometimes they work together on projects, experimenting as a group, and sometimes they work independently, experimenting within the group.

Occasionally a young artist expresses his gratitude to Abia for being his role model. "It happens sometimes," he says "and when it does I feel

that my decision to return to live in Egypt was not in vain." Mohamed's admiration of art has run the gamut, from the ancient Egyptian art of his homeland to the works of British landscape artist J.M.W. Turner and Spanish artist Pablo

Picasso. European art movements such as *Earth Art*, *Arts Povera* and arts dealing with the environment have profoundly influenced Abia and prompted him three years ago to address the pollution of his own environment.

His concern about garbage pollution in Cairo, with its increasing population of around 20 million and a plethora of related problems, led him to the nearby garbage collectors or *sabaleen*. The *sabaleen*, squatters and landless migrants



THE NILE, encaustic wax, 40x50cm

THE NILE, encaustic wax, 40x50cm



from Upper Egypt whose total livelihoods have depended upon garbage collecting, lived in a settlement with their animals until two fires in 1976 totally destroyed the settlement. Within the year UNICEF was instrumental in initiating a plan which helped the people rebuild and develop their settlements. Some learned new skills such as recycling and later benefited from the enormous upgrading which took place during the 1980s. With help from the World Bank, the Egyptian Government, several societies in the community and other organizations, the *sabaleen* community of 8,000 received a new infrastructure and became transformed into a more self-sufficient community.

The Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival 2000



HANAN SAMAHA

CULTURAL LIFE IN EGYPT thrives with activities and festivals covering cinema, folkloric arts, ceramics and many other fields of artistic expression. But the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre is definitely one of the most important arts events of the year. As with all festivals, it is a commonly known fact that its organisation could do with a bit of improvement. Theatre lovers find it disheartening to discover at the last minute that shows are cancelled without notice or even the slightest attempt at an apology. This year some companies were invited to the festival with the promise that their plays were to be included in the main competition, only to discover upon arrival that they would be performing on the fringe. In spite of such problems, the festival has managed to garner for itself big audiences from all over Egypt and the Arab world.

In 2000, the festival's 12th season, over 40 countries took part, with most sending more than one production. There was also a greater Arab participation than ever before, with 17 productions by 13 countries. Lebanon entered two performances: *Archipelago* by Essam Bu Khaled, and *Three Tall Women*, directed by Nedal Al Ashkar and adapted from Edward Albee's famous play. In a recent interview to *Al Ahran Weekly* the indefatigable Lebanese director explained why she chose *Three Tall Women*: "In my dramatic work I try to focus on the romanticism that dominates the dreams of young girls". Al Ashkar has adapted the play to address the particular problems of Arab women, and specifically the way in which parents bring up their daughters with the main objective of securing a rich husband. "I wanted to expose to the public what hypocrisy and fraud are all about." Indeed, in the play the three women are in fact just one, but depicted during three different stages in her life: young, middle-aged and old. "Each phase reflects on the other and strips it bare to cleanse it of pretence and falseness", says Al Ashkar, who is known to Egyptians as an untraditional director. Not surprisingly, her performance was met with acclaim from both the audience and the critics, but failed to

get any awards. Other Arab participants in the festival included Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Kuwait, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia, Palestine, Jordan, the UAE, Oman and Yemen. Notably, Iraq brought its first production to Cairo since the Gulf War of 1990.

Women's issues in Arab countries were the focus of many performances at the festival. These included the Syrian entry, *Aysha*, directed by the young artist Rolla Fattal. A one-woman play starring Maha El Saleh, the play is a reincarnation of Dickens's Miss Havesham in *Great Expectations*. For *Aysha*, time stopped on the night of her wedding party, when her husband deserted her. She continues to wear her wedding dress under a black coat, and in front of the audience gets out her many rag dolls, each representing a person in her life. Out of the wardrobe, the story of this poor woman unfolds to reveal her past with all its oppression and violence.

Top: **MODEL OF THE WORLD**, Russia
Below: **ABEL & ABEL**, Algeria





AN INSTALLATION: On the wall, **THE NILE**, oil, 4.8x1.4m; beneath, **NILE BED**

At the settlement Abia began collecting things, "found objects" that he liked which had been discarded for garbage, such as plastic flowers, flattened Coca-Cola cans and small broken items. He gave advice to the garbage collectors, who were learning to make paper at the time and organized an exhibit about their papermaking and his objects. "I feel that this is a way for artists to become involved in this society," he says. "This is a way in which artists can help society think about solutions. I don't know how to find the solutions, but I know how to illustrate the problem and that's what I've tried to do. The exhibit was about what man will find from our society in a thousand years, which is a lot of garbage." Abia was awarded the Grand Prize at the Alexandria Biennale in 1997 for his exhibit, which was called *Future Fossils*.

In November 1997 at the Mashrabia Gallery in Cairo, Abia exhibited new paintings, smaller in format than his monumental work of the early '90's. His love affair with colour was still evident in this new work, as was his ongoing quest for space. Yet one was invited to view his space in a new way. Abia discussed the evolution of the images in the show and their relation to the Nile, a subject very important to him. For months he made daily trips to ports on the Nile to study the shadows and reflections on the water from the trees, boats and buildings. Mesmerized by the interplay of the light reflections on the river, he imagined himself dead on the bottom of the Nile yet being able to view

everything above him over a long period of time. Looking through layers of history he saw objects that people had thrown into the Nile. "This told me a lot about the people of Egypt and especially of Cairo," he says. Later Mohamed imagined himself floating to the surface of the water and then realized what his project was all about. "It was about the water, the Nile roses, the flowers in the Nile and reflection. Back in his studio, emotionally charged with ideas, he

began to work quickly with a spontaneity which enabled him to create a lot of work. "Working in this manner it was easier to produce small sizes to reflect my feelings of the moment," he said.

Abia's studio was one of five hareem rooms at Musafirkhana, a three-storey former palace built in the 18th century, which had served as a guest house for a Mamluk. In 1997 Abia commented, "This has been home for my artistic life for thirteen years and allows me the privilege of special quiet in the middle of Cairo." However, in 1998 the building burned to the ground along with his beloved studio and much of his work. Fellow artists rallied round and organized a special auction to raise funds for him and his family; and, within a short time, Abia was working in a new studio in another section of Cairo. His current working space, on an island in the Nile, now provides a quiet oasis.

With typical perseverance Abia produces prodigious amounts of work, continuing to exhibit his work frequently. In May 2000 *Cairo Streets*, a body of prints, was shown in one of the government buildings in Cairo, and the following November Abia exhibited (at the Sheba Gallery in Zamalek) a series of images depicting the dramatic landscapes of Yemen, a country he visited earlier that year and which visually captured his heart.



THE ARTIST, 2000

Meanwhile, the Egyptian winner of first prize in the 1998 festival (with the feminist production *Mekhadet El Kohl* or *The Kohl Pillow*) took part with a show on the fringe: Walid Aouni's *Shahrazad*. Set to the music of Rimsky-Korsakov and *Makamat* by the Iraqi oud player, Nasir Shama, the play enjoyed a full house for five consecutive nights. The magic of blending Western classical music with the beautiful Oriental melodies of Shama was the strongest element of the performance. The experimental aspect did not stop with the music alone, as Aouni chose to have two Sheherazades on stage instead of one, in what seems to be another feminist reading of the original tale.

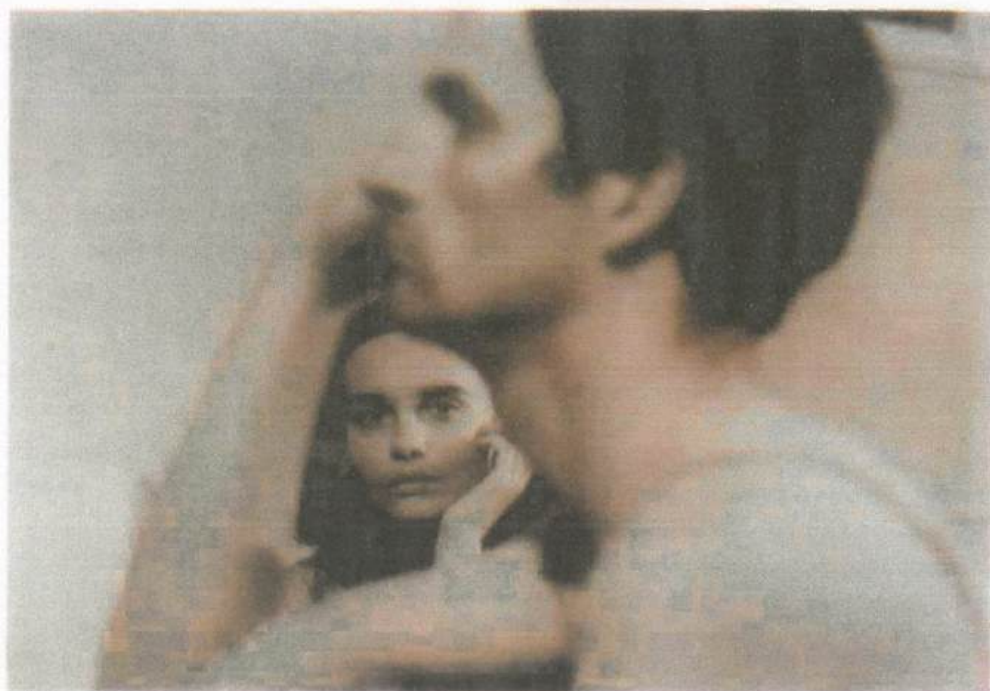
Another impressive Egyptian entry in the competition was *Risalet Al Tayar* ... *Epistle of the Birds*. The play is adapted from three classical texts: *Risalet Al Tayar* by Al Ghazali, the 11th-century Persian theologian, another text with the same title and written by the Andalusian Avicenna, Ibn Rushd (980-1037), and the allegorical poem *Manteq Al Tayar*, *Conference of the Birds*, by mystical poet Farid Eddin Attar (1142-1220). Iraqi director and writer Oasim Mohamed employs the classical texts to address political issues in the Arab world. The play describes a journey undertaken by birds in a quest for freedom and carries a direct attack on dictatorship.

Since it first took off in 1989, the festival has always caused controversy. People were at first reluctant to voice their opinion, lest they be deemed ignorant or at least unimaginative, and besides, the concept of experimentation is not yet clear to most theatre-goers in Egypt. But still a large number of the performances seem like jokes. The motto may as well be 'the more mind-boggling, the better'. Lots of plays at the festival seem to have no reason, no drama, no theme – just groups of people pretending to be artists in the name of 'experimenting'. However, this year that outlook came under attack, as renowned actor and jury member, Nour El Sherif, who is preparing to direct a play for the experimental

theatre festival next year, was courageous enough to say that he rejected any experimentation if it has no drama.

Yet in 2000 there were some bizarre productions that nonetheless had clear theatrical outlooks. Among the strangest performances was the Czech Republic play *My Life with Dogs*, adapted from a British newspaper story about a young boy, Ivan, who left his home and became the leader of a pack of wild dogs. After spending two years with the dogs, he was found and put into a children's home. Difficult to categorise, it stood at the edge of comedy and tragedy, rather like the German performance *Disco Pigs*.

The Russian performance got mixed responses from the audience: some people just loved it, while others found much to criticise. A modern ballet in two acts – *Module of the World* and *Alan Vital* – and set to the music of Jean-Michel Jarre, it attempted to address a very ambitious topic, presenting its theme as 'a man placed at the centre as part of this macrocosm, a man



LAVA, Slovenia

interacting with the world'. The second act dealt with two souls who, in love with each other in another life, come back to earth to offer people freedom. Perhaps the Russians were hoping to build upon the fame of Jean-Michel Jarre, who performed at the millennium celebrations here in Cairo. This was precisely the reason most of the viewers went to see the performance, but the over-ambiguity of the themes found the audiences less than tolerant.

Finland also gave a silent show, *Objects and Emotions*, which the audience agreed was too difficult to understand. The play had no story line, but consisted of a number of flashes that were supposed to be addressing the same idea. A woman's hat triggers within her the emotions of a three-year-old child. Producer and actor Marko Hoikkala admitted that it was only the second draft of the show and that more work is required to give it more depth and maturity – which I hope does not mean more vagueness. Finding it too long and repetitive, the audience (as is customary at the festival) gradually filtered out of the auditorium. But in my opinion, and compared with the other

shows on offer, the Finnish production was both amusing and well performed.

At the other extreme in terms of approach stood the Omani play *A Man without Immunity*. A real eye opener, it came with a message and a clear one at that. Addressing the problem of Aids, and especially how it is stigmatised in the Arab world, the play's only experimental aspect comes when members of the audience are invited to go on stage and stand among the actors, who are mimicking apes. The clear message is that Aids is not too far away from you. Afterwards the audience is treated to a straightforward didactic play about how Aids victims should be helped rather than punished, as they have enough to contend with without suffering the rejection of their family and society. In spite of the didactic element of the play, it is very simple, down to earth and chillingly effective. At one point the actors hand miniature stones to the audience and ask them to take part in casting stones at the sinner – the Aids victim. Although a few people joined in, the majority refused and I could sense then that their outlook had changed as a result of the performance. Interestingly, the director and writer, Abdul Karim Jawad, said that the play had not been well received in Oman, as it deals with such a sensitive issue.

It is plays like *A Man without Immunity* that make the ten-day event a real contribution to theatre, culture and education in general. The festival does not only include performances, but also panel discussions following the shows, general symposia on the art of theatre, and most importantly, many publications, including translations of plays from different parts of the world, critiques, and the results of research into the history and development of theatre. This year's main symposium discussed major experimental trends in 20th-century theatre, and the role of various forms of theatre workshops and laboratories in developing acting techniques.

However, if the festival is to keep its credibility the jury must be more careful with the distribution of the awards. These came under heavy criticism this year, amidst rumours that politics was playing a role in the process. The main reason for this was the fact that the Best Production award went to Egypt, for *Where Things Happen*, performed by the Youth Theatre and directed by Mohamed Shafeek. Although the play had a lot to recommend it, the festival certainly included other more worthy works. Some cynics suggested that even if the Best Production award has to go to Egypt, there were still better Egyptian performances to choose from.

Poland received the Best Group award, given for the first time in 2000, for its production *Dong*. The play is adapted from Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* and a painting by French surrealist Rene Magritte. The Best Actor Award was given to Romanian Gabriel Fautuh for his part in *Night Traveller*, with the Best Actress award going to Lebanese Bernadette Hodieb for her excellent performance in *Archipelago*. Greece received the Best Director award for director Michael Seibel and Orestia in *Fragments of a Tragic Language*. The play



THREE TALL WOMEN, Lebanon

was very obscure, since it was presented in Greek and had no introduction to assist the non-Greek-speaking audience, other than that it addressed 'universal themes'. Consequently, most of the audience left after a few minutes. As I was leaving, I threw a pitying glance at the jury thinking that they did not even have the option to get up and leave. But apparently they saw more in the play than we had. Meanwhile, the Best Theatrical Techniques award went to Syria's impressive movement play, *After All This Time*.

As the festival ends, and 2000 was no exception, one cannot help but heave a huge sigh of relief. This is not because the festival fails to deliver an enriching experience, but because with something so disparate and varied one needs time to digest all that the various performances, both obscure and successful, have brought to Cairo. Always a journey marked by highs and lows, with sometimes rather more of the latter than one would like, the festival has clearly established itself as a useful and rewarding forum for theatrical expression. Egypt needs arts events such as this. However, continued misgivings over the whimsical and erratic administration of the event must beg the question, what does the future hold? The festival must continue, but the management of the programme and venue co-ordination have to be improved, whilst it is equally important that the jury is seen by all to be both competent and impartial, and not swayed by considerations other than the artistic. Once these issues are dealt with, we can hopefully look forward to many more years of innovative theatre entertaining, and doubtless sometimes perplexing. Cairo's theatre-goers.

selected highlights of the museum collection...

MARGRET NAKHALA (1908-1979)

Born in Alexandria, Nakhala is considered the pioneer of women's painting in Egypt. After studying in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Nakhala returned to Egypt to teach art in Cairo, where she encouraged and trained a large number of women artists. Her works span a wide range of subjects, from Parisian subjects to religious tableaux, and including celebrated representations of Egyptian life and a famous series of works inspired by Nubia.



Right: **FLOATED VALLEY**
Below: **STOCK MARKET** – oil on canvas, 82 x 100cm



MOHAMMED NAGUI (1888-1956)

Born in Alexandria, Nagui spent most of his life abroad and his continuous travelling – including within his own homeland, where he set up studios in Luxor, Memphis and Alexandria – was a natural consequence of his insatiable curiosity. His works portray Egyptians in all their ethnic variety, with the artist integrating his impressions in thematic and historic reconstructions.

THE BREAD BREAKERS – 1934



MUSEUM OF Modern Egyptian Art

THARWAT AL BAHR & JAMES PARRY

ON 28 OCTOBER 1991 President Mubarak inaugurated the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, the foundation for which was laid in 1983 and which cost six million Egyptian pounds. The museum was designed to house works by those Egyptian artists who have contributed to the modern Egyptian art movement since the early part of this century. So far, the museum collection exceeds 10,000 pieces.

The history of the museum actually dates back to 1925, when a group of artists, including Mahmoud Mukhtar, Yousef Kamal, Mahmoud Khalil and Ragheb Ayyad, met at the headquarters of the Fine Arts Society and called for the construction of a museum dedicated to contemporary art. Eager to exhibit the collected works of Egyptian and resident foreign artists, the group installed these works at Tigran Palace, which served as a nucleus for the future Museum of Modern Egyptian Art.



VIEW OF THE MUSEUM & SCULPTURE PLAZA
taken from the Opera House.

On 28 February 1931 the museum was reopened in Moseri Palace in Cairo, at the junction of King Fuad I and Emad Eldin. Four years later, on 7 February 1935, the first catalogue was published, in both French and Arabic. This catalogue, funded by the Ministry of Education, included information on a total of 584 works, covering painting, sculpture, graphics and porcelain, and on 29 Egyptian artists, including Mahmoud Mukhtar, Ragheb Ayyad, Mohammed Nagui, Yousef Kamal and George Sabagh, all of whose works were displayed at the museum; 25 resident foreign artists were featured, including the Swiss Mergesheim and Joseph Sbasetti, for whom the museum housed 26

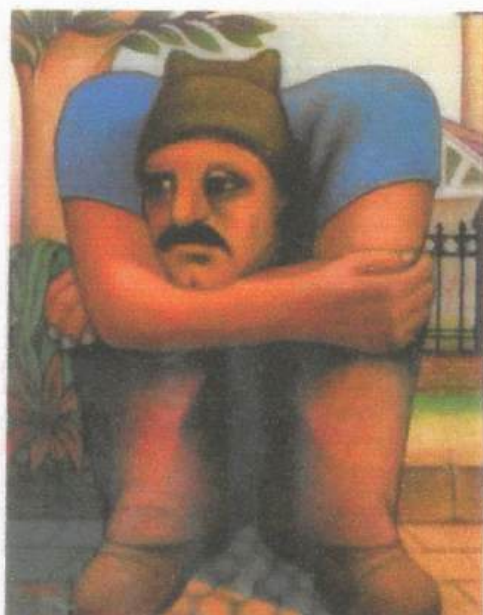
works, plus 120 pieces by other foreign artists, including Van Ryn, Rembrandt, Jean-Baptiste Corot, Theodore Rousseau, Gustave Courbet and Paul Signac.

In 1936 the contents of the museum were moved to Bustan Palace from

where, four years later, they were transferred to the new headquarters at Count de Zogheb Villa near Huda Shaarawi Palace. The museum was moved, yet again, to Ismail Aboul Foutuh Villa in Dokki, where only works by Egyptian artists were on display (those by foreign artists were kept at Gezira Cultural Museum). Finally, the museum moved to its present premises at the Gezira Exhibition Complex.

With its extensive collection covering Egypt's most influential artists from the early pioneers to the present generation, the museum serves as an archival centre for Egypt's fine arts. It comprises 22 halls covering three floors, in addition to an open air sculpture display in front of the premises. The works are classified as follows:

- the ground floor displays sculpture representing the various stages of the development of the medium and different generations of sculptors, and includes works by Mahmoud Mukhtar, Al Segini, Mohamed Mustafa Hagra, Saleh Reda and Abdel Fatah El Azazi. Paintings by the early pioneers of Egyptian painting are also on show here, including works by Ragheb Ayyad, Mohammed Nagui, Seif Wanli, Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar and Hamed Nada;
- the halls on the first floor house further works by pioneers such as Ahmed Sabri, Ali Ahmwan and Mahmoud Said, in addition to pieces by middle generation artists such as Effat Nagui, Kamel Al Tilmsani, Fouad Kamel, Ramses Younan, Hamed Nada and Samir Rafeh;
- the second floor galleries display works by artists of the last fifty years who have influenced both art and thought, such as Abdul Hafeez, Mustafa Al Razzaz, Ahmed Nawar, Kamal Al Sarag, Taha Hussein and Saleh Reda;
- there are also galleries housing sculpture by artists of the 1960s, as well as a porcelain gallery exhibiting the works of Said al Sadr, Mula Hussein, Nabil Darwish, Taha Hussein and Saleh Reda.



FELLAH Hamed Oweis, oil on canvas, early 1960s, 49 x 62.5cm



THE MAIN SCULPTURE DISPLAY, GROUND FLOOR



RAGHEB AYYAD (1892-1982)

An Expressionist by temperament, Ayyad was a witty observer of the tragi-comedy of human interaction. He focused his energies particularly on the depiction of folk society in markets, cafés, fields and public baths.

COFFEE IN ASWAN – oil on canvas, 69 x 60cm

A. SALAH EL ALFY

A conventional painter of the mid-20th century. In this typical work, the deep shadow of the flute seller contrasts with the glare of the sun.

FOLKLORIC MUSIC – oil on plywood, 100 x 70cm



ABDEL HADI AL-GAZZAR (1925-1966)

Noted for his tendency to experience art more through his emotions and senses than through optical memory and reasoning, Al-Gazzar created works strong on fantasy, which were once memorably described as "a combat between the angel and the beast". His non-representational approach was in marked contrast to the works of many of his peers.

EL MISSAK – oil on wood, 1961, 183 x 132cm





HAMED NADA (1924-1990)

One of the darlings of the 1952 Revolution, Nada continued for the next three decades to express himself in compositions in which pictographic figures of humans, animals and objects float weightlessly on a neutral background.

LIBERATION OF THE SUEZ CANAL – oil, 1956

MAHMOUD SAID (1897-1961)

Although he pursued a career in law until the age of 50, Said was one of Egypt's foremost artists. A complex personality, he came to epitomise the conflict between individual personal desire and the values of collective society. His paintings became viewed as the space in which the range of contradictions of the Middle Eastern man could express themselves.

THE PRAYER – oil on plywood, 1934, 57 x 78cm



SEIF WANLI (1906-1979)

One of the best of the Alexandrian artists, Wanli was a comic expressionist, painting whimsical characters in scenes overlooking the sea, on the beach or in cafés. He and his brother ran a very influential private art school.

A NIGHT IN SIDI EL RAHMAN – oil on canvas, 59 x 80cm

they are caught in time, breaking down the distinctions between old and new. For a more encompassing effect, Dahoud often incorporates these pieces in installations that include wall pieces and other sculptures.

SHADY NOSHOKATY is a painter's painter. His handling of the media has won him praise and recognition among his peers, but his expressiveness and freedom using paint is no accident. Noshokaty paints religiously, repetitively, and prolifically. He often works with images of abstracted interiors containing painted figures, in bright and splashy colours which exude a moving psychological heaviness and demonstrate a knowing command of the elements of design. Noshokaty, like most of these artists, is not content to limit himself to painting. Along with sculptor Gamal Abdel Nasser, he represented Egypt in the 1999 Venice Biennale with a series of paintings applied directly to the walls among various sculptural elements, including an installation of tube-shaped fabric which suggested ephemerally floating columns of a lost temple.

A spirit of temporality and fragility permeates **REHAB EL SADEK**'s work. With delicate materials such as gauze and aged paper from old books in various languages, Sadek introspectively explores the transparent layers of information that make up her culture. Often in the form of sculptural wall pieces, the books are splayed out, scribbled on, and deteriorating before our

Mona Marzouk (opposite). **UNTITLED**, 360 x 80 x 180cm, wood, white acrylic, 1997.
 Rehab El Sadek. **ART BOOK**, 20 x 30cm, wood, paper, gauze, pigments, 1998.



Wael Shawky, installation, 2001

eyes, given ironic titles such as *Art Books*. Her residency at the Gasworks Studios in London appears to have been a significant experience which led to a series of sculptures and installations of evanescent house forms. The outsider/viewer towers over these as a giant, who could crush them underfoot in one accidental trespass.

In the work of European-educated medical doctor turned painter/installation artist, **KHALED HAFEZ** there is a struggle between sacred and profane playing itself out through characters which are hybrids of images from Egypt's ancient history and modern fashion magazines. In a post-modern juxtaposition of images where contemporary icons/super-models are 'morphed' together with animal-gods, everything is being recycled and re-contextualised. But in Hafez's paintings, the traditions of painting are strong and venerable, so the mass-produced media images serve to emphasise the painterly marks and the large, pure, untouched areas of canvas provide a contrast of emptiness versus content. Installations and paintings alike have an intelligent, wry sense of humour, and all strive to cope with the alienation and confusion that accompany the seduction of technology and information in this part of the world.

Even **WAEEL SHAWKY**'s large rectangular paintings are more like sculptures, but while they employ an array of non-traditional materials like wire, metal and sequined fabric, they also reference the struggle to comprehend the traditional 'sacred civilisation' and contemporary consumer culture. Chaotic plumes of wire project themselves from the surfaces of some of these paintings in a metaphorical reference to the random paths of pesky flies. A large-scale installation of four whitewashed concrete huts derived from Nubian architecture won him a major prize at the Sixth International Cairo Biennale. As the buildings have no doors, the viewer is allowed only to peer into the four different scenes through a small window as a voyeur on a surrealist world which mixes icy

Young Egyptian artists blazing a new path

SCOTT BAILEY

WITH A RECENT BURST of development and attention to the contemporary art scene and the emergence of a new wave of highly motivated and savvy young artists, Egypt seems poised on the verge of a renaissance of art. Serious new galleries are opening, education is improving, interest is growing and artists here are finally being better appreciated locally and abroad. These factors are ushering in an atmosphere of excitement and vitality, and the resultant growing pains are providing sincere and powerful expressions.

The richness and depth of Egyptian history is unsurpassed and often overwhelming for Egyptian artists, who strive to define both themselves and the messages they need to communicate through their art. One thing is certain: these artists are not content to be seen merely as custodians of an archaic culture. The onslaught of continual types of colonialism has left its mark on this country, for better and for worse. Residents of Cairo and Alexandria are incredibly cosmopolitan, with influences from the Arab world, Europe, and America (among others) forming a complex and elaborately woven set of influences for this generation of young artists. Few other centres can boast the breadth of inspirations and confluence of interests that are found here.

In spite of highly individualised forms and messages, there are threads of similarity which tie the work of these artists together. Egypt's rising stars of visual art are well educated, well connected, and well aware of the trends in the international art world, yet they live in what can also be a very isolated country. In Egypt, traditions are strong and deep-seated, but values today are constantly being challenged as information on the rest of the world is beamed in by satellite and by internet sources, both graphically and instantaneously. Contemporary artists here are reacting soundly to this age of contradictions and to questions regarding tradition and technology, sacred and secular, allegiance and resistance. They embrace international contemporary forms of art, including installation and new media processes, in their endeavours to help redefine their identities and to understand what it means to be alive in this time and place.

In addition to the important domestic influences, many of these artists have studied or worked abroad and clearly understand the importance of professionalism, quality, and work ethic. Many are also increasingly using their connections to maximise attention and opportunities. Consequently, Egyptians are more often participating in international exhibitions, being written about in foreign publications,

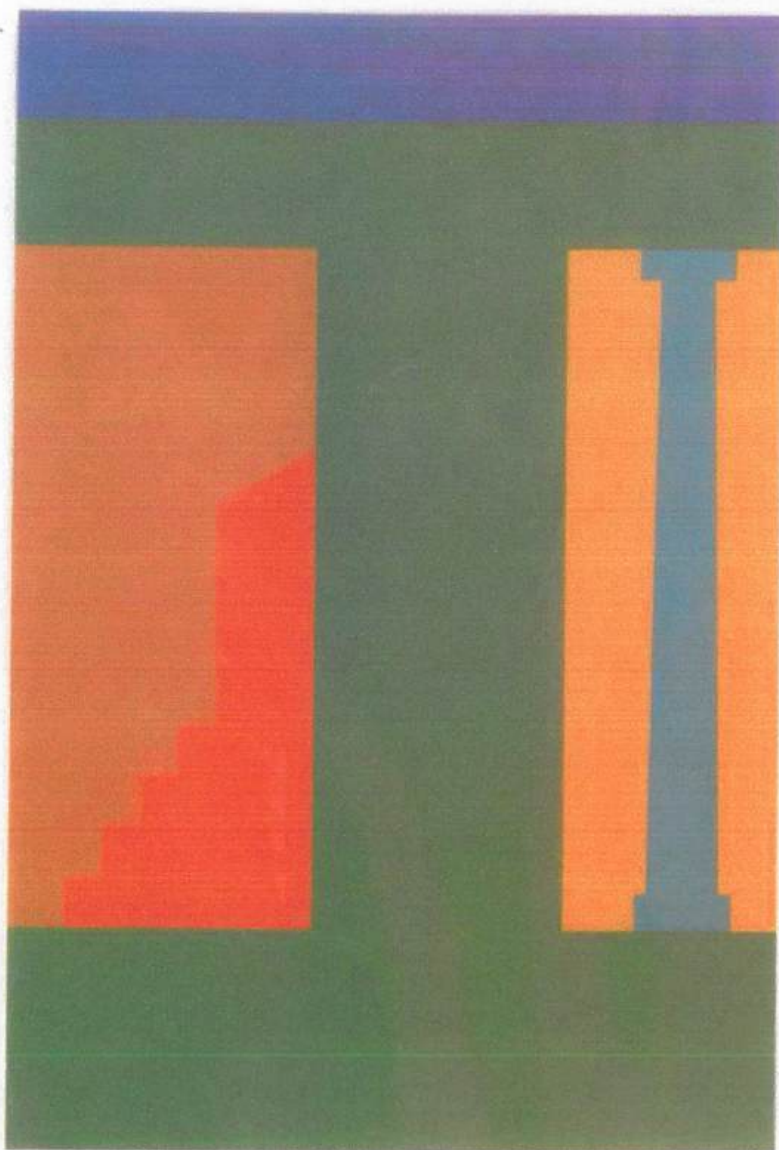


Shady Noshokaty - an expressive and psychologically charged painting, c.1998

and being invited to take part in residency or educational programmes around the world.

Whether in painting, sculpture, or architecture, there is a strong respect for traditional art forms, even among many of the progressive Egyptian artists. **DIAA DIN DAHOUD** crafts sensual and powerful works of sculpture which betray our expectations of what the historic and unassuming media of ceramics can do. There is an uncommon irony in the way his mud shapes resembling cushions, mattresses, or loaves of bread are soft and inviting, and hard and rough all at the same time. Though they are built up of the raw, weathered surfaces familiar in Egypt in bland, neutral colours, they are visceral and tactile objects of beauty. Cracked and disintegrating, sitting on a gallery floor,





Mona Marzouk: **UNTITLED**, 92 x 62 x 5cm, acrylic on canvas, 1998

Hassan Khan (opposite): **I AM A HERO/YOU ARE A HERO**, video installation, 1999

Khaled Hafez: **HALFWAY HOME & THE ELECTRONIC GODS**, installation, 1999



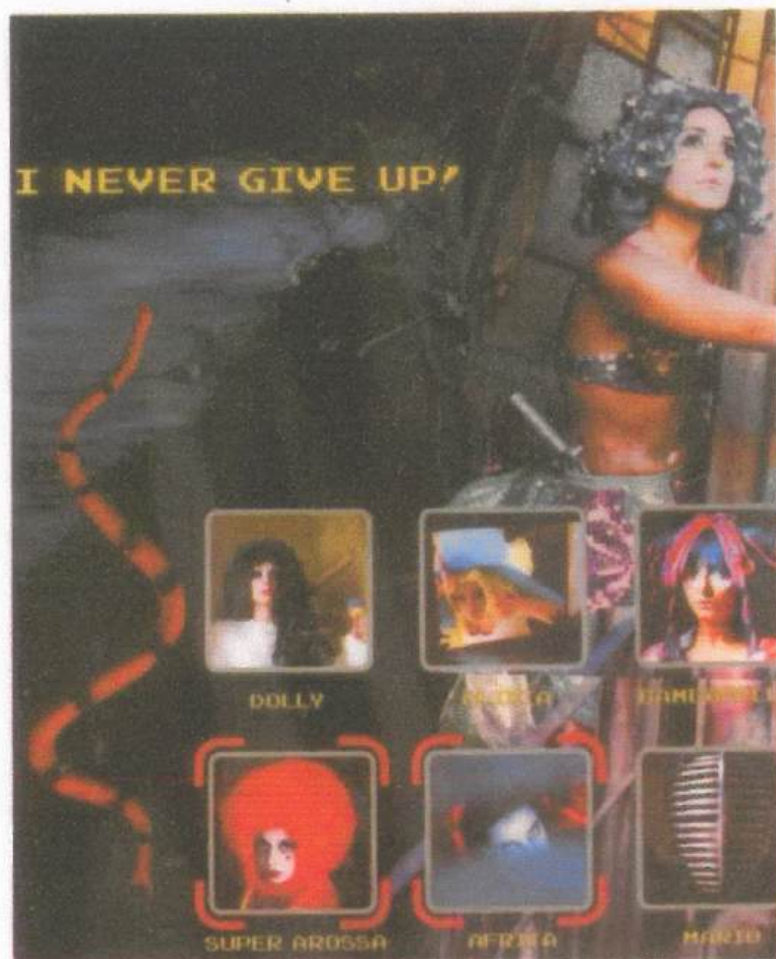
white symbols of life from the lost culture and the here-and-now.

With a background of influences from Greece, Germany, and her native Alexandria, **MONA MARZOUK** is an excellent example of the complex multi-cultural flavour of contemporary Egyptian art. Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, and Islamic cultures collide in her minimalistic architectural sculptures. Participating in a number of important recent exhibitions both in Egypt and abroad, she is rapidly gaining opportunities and important critical international attention and recognition. Her large wooden structures are clearly products of a dialogue with architecture, but they are uninhabitable and coolly conceptual. Set in a space altered deliberately by the artist, they are beautifully polished geometrical arrangements of columns, arches, pediments, and turrets which are classical, but as Marzouk admits, "tempered by a particular touch of irreverence."

AMINA MANSOUR's sculptures are striking autobiographical metaphors delicately and methodically crafted of pure white Egyptian cotton. Mansour is particularly compassionate about a part of history in which aristocracy and poverty collide, especially as she has familial roots in the cotton industry, both in Egypt and the southern United States. Her attention to detail is impeccable and the exquisite forms can easily be appreciated for their aesthetic merits, but it is the conceptual foundation of the work which encourages multiple readings and invites connections with deeper political motives. Her self-designed, elaborate, wooden Louis XV-style vitrine (complete with personal touches such as carvings of her own fingers where lion's paws would be) holds a fragile arrangement of cotton flowers which are surely not long for this world. This piece exists as if caught between dimensions of time and place, or as if a nostalgic, disquieting, and sarcastic shrine to days gone by.

For her images from frequent travels and ties to Cairo, Beirut, and Paris **LARA BALADI** joins the international dialogue of artists who use the immediacy of the camera for artistic expression. Baladi's work is of fleeting and fast-paced experiences in active, crowded environments. The immediacy of the images and the low technology of the process she uses are discretely veiled conventions of contemporary culture - high art hidden within Everyday's art form. These are colourful snapshots taken in a slick, from-the-hip style, often of frenetic and noisy scenes, with sub-





Work by Lara Baladi, 2001

plots involving mystical, spiritual settings and transitory personal relationships. When placed side by side in a series, they appear as clipped film-stills.

HASSAN KHAN is another artist who attaches himself to contemporary technology in his video installations. Khan is a product of the complex mix of values which are raised through an education at the American University in Cairo. At home with the media of video editing and intrigued by the language of the streets of Cairo, his pieces have a distinct flavour of the urban

Die Dür Daboud installation, 1999

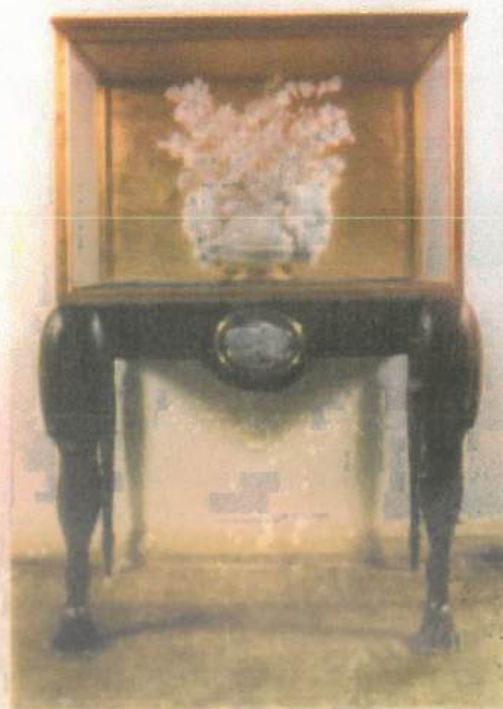


environment's flashy commercial side, portrayed in a gritty, low-budget technology. The videos often have a documentary journalistic feel to them, but derive tension and energy from scenes which hint at oppression, social codes, and cultural expectations.

Many other artists are exhibiting interesting work in Egypt, and one can expect that as the gallery system continues to mature and develop, still others will emerge in what is becoming a much more fertile atmosphere for the visual arts. Artists here still face difficult conditions with low prices on works and a sceptical public, but increased exposure and a concerted effort to educate residents about the exciting possibilities of contemporary forms and messages are unquestionably opening minds and markets.

Lately, curators and dealers in the major art centres seem to be more receptive than ever to ideas coming from less developed nations. With blockbuster biennial exhibitions cropping up in every corner of the world and spotlights trained on artists from countries never before associated with cutting-edge contemporary art, it will be no great surprise to soon find Egyptian artists taking centre stage as well.

Amina Marmour - sculpted cotton, antaphors for Egyptian and Southern US history.



stepping out

contemporary dance in Egypt

ADAM OXBOROUGH

EGYPT AND DANCE go back a long way. Traditional dance plays a long-established role in Egyptian culture, and most famously includes the often misunderstood art of belly-dancing. Every wedding and special event is likely to feature an opportunity for dancing, regardless of sex, age or ability. But for those interested in pursuing a career in serious dance, what are the options in Egypt?

During the Nasser era, when Russian thought and values were prominent in Egypt, the Academy of Arts established the Egyptian Ballet Institute. Initially staffed by Russian teachers, including ex-dancers from the Kirov and Bolshoi, it taught only classical ballet and to a generally high standard. However, as the years have passed, so the star of the institute has waned. Like a faded ballerina, it is now a sad shadow of its former self. The teaching of poor technique, and ignorance of the importance to dancers of diet and nutrition, are just two examples of why there is currently little at the institute to encourage aspiring local dancers.

However, the institute does feed the resident ballet company at the Cairo Opera House, which has a regular if predictable repertoire of the 'classics'. As the ballet company cannot take on all the institute's graduates, many of them turn to the commercial sector for employment, playing parts in video clips for singers or in TV adverts. Some work in variety shows. Others join Walid Aouni's Cairo Opera Dance Theatre company, which although capable of staging impressive productions, is not focused on dance as an art form *per se*. The company's productions depend more on the visual aspect of a performance – set, costume and lighting – rather than on movement and choreography.

Overall, the local context for modern dance is not encouraging. Cairene theatres do not generally lend themselves to dance, being mostly designed for music and theatre. Few can claim to have the appropriate surfaces, with dancers often having to perform on wooden floors, with the attendant risk of splinters! Audiences tend to be uninformed about modern dance – "Their eyes are not trained visually and they haven't seen enough to be able to tell the difference between good and bad dance," one local arts-watcher commented. The generally low level of appreciation of what might constitute real quality with regard to dance has arguably served to open the door to 'dancers' (often



Karim Tonsy trained as a professional dancer in both Rome and London.

expatriates) of dubious ability and training, thereby further undermining the status and standard of dance.

Although exposure to professional contemporary dance companies is growing in Egypt, mostly as a result of overseas groups visiting Cairo and, to a lesser extent, Alexandria, such events are often inadequately marketed and audiences remain small.

In such an unpromising environment, it is something of a revelation to discover two talented Egyptians who are specialising in their own individual interpretations of contemporary dance and are working hard to raise awareness of their art form, both within Egypt and on the international stage.

Karima Mansour trained in Italy and England, including a four year stint at the London Contemporary Dance School, where she obtained a Masters in Dance. On her return to Egypt she found the opportunities to do interesting and creative dance were virtually nil, and to begin living started teaching technique classes with Walid Aouni's company. Although this enabled her to keep contact with the subject, she felt stultified both physically and emotionally, and was often

depressed by the attitude of those she was teaching: "People don't have to fight here. Success is nothing to do with qualifications or talent, but more about charm and *wasta*." With other obstacles such as government bureaucracy to contend with, Karima left Egypt for France, where she spent some time with Danse Bassin Méditerranée before resolving to return home and start doing something constructive to develop modern dance in Egypt and try and elevate it beyond its immediate role as 'entertainment'.

In February 1999 Karima formed the Maat Dance Company (*maat* is the Pharaonic symbol for tone, harmony and equilibrium) and performed in the opening ceremonies for both the Alexandria Film Festival and Experimental Theatre Festival in Cairo. Then, early in 2000, came the big breakthrough, when Karima scored a major success with *Taming*, based on an unpublished work (*The Text*) by Nora Amin. Neither prose nor poetry, *The Text* is essentially about personal liberation, focusing on the taboos and restrictions that are imposed both by society and by individuals on themselves – a combination that results in communication

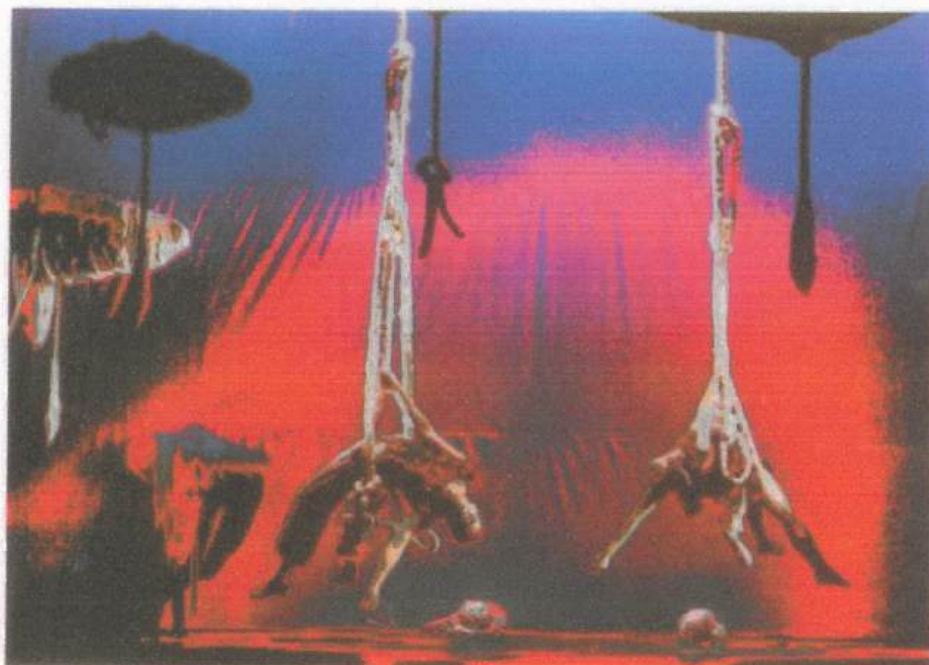
breakdown and lack of achievement. Expressing such ideas through dance is an innovative concept in Egypt. Anxious to ensure the totality of the work, Karima took complete charge by directing, choreographing and performing in it. To ensure that the music was unique and dedicated, forming another layer of the performance rather than something grafted on, the choreography was actually completed before the music was composed.

Performed at Cairo's Ghumharya Theatre to sell-out audiences, the show subsequently toured to Amman, Beirut and Damascus, where it was equally well-received. For the first time in a meaningful sense, modern Egyptian dance was able to hold its own – and more – in front of an international audience. *Taming* returned to Cairo in February 2001, to ecstatic reviews, and Karima was also able to work with Beatrice Kombi, a successful collaboration that produced a short show in Alexandria in November last year. She is now working on a string of potential future projects, in a mood of guarded optimism about what the future development of modern dance in Egypt might bring, and how she might play a role within it. Her exacting standards and keen professionalism certainly set an appropriately ambitious example for others to follow.

Karim Tonsy is an interesting pair to Karima Mansour. Although there are some similarities between the two in terms of training and background, the professional direction Karim has taken is different. He started dancing at an early age when living in Rome, and continued his training when his family moved back to Cairo. He choreographed his first performance at the age of 16, and after graduating in theatre at the American University in Cairo, furthered

Below and opposite, top: Karima Mansour's dramatic production *Taming*, in which she performed with dancer Hany El Metenmany, enthralled audiences both in Cairo and outside Egypt.





his dance studies at the London Contemporary Dance School. On returning to Egypt he took up a position as assistant director at the Cairo Opera House, subsequently leaving to establish the Karim Tonsy Dance Company, currently the most prolific experimental dance company in Egypt (with nine successive shows and counting) and arguably the most thought-provoking.

Karim sees his dancing as an opportunity to raise issues that in normal local circumstances are at best controversial: identity, sexuality and estrangement are all favourite themes of his. He has even touched on one of the biggest taboos of all, suicide. In exploring such territory he has managed to extend the realm of dance into experimental theatre, particularly as reaching his targets requires the stripping down of dance to its bare essentials, to movement, and the physical impulses that lay behind the structure that 'dance' inevitably confers. Critic Nehad Selaiha described this as "a post-modernist impulse to break through the defined categories of meaning and discursive thought and reach towards a kind of concrete thinking through the body." Certainly the acclaimed production of *Thoughts and Impressions*, presented at the Manager Theatre, relied heavily on raw energy, spontaneous actions and movements that had an almost pagan and primeval cast to them. Everything about the work was confident and robust, and yet central to the production – and, indeed, to all of Karim's work – is the essential vulnerability and openness of the human body and the way it

comes from physical touch, from interacting with others and sharing common energy.

Isolation is a recurring theme, and one that Karim feels quite personally – "Society is not open to men who take a career in dance, not in Egypt. Especially if a man uses self-expression to talk about contemporary issues."

And yet Karim has been using his insight and prowess on the dance floor and theatre stage to work his way – and that of his chosen art form – into wider public acceptance. The extent of this success came into perfect focus with *Vs.*, a stunning work presented by Karim and his dancers in collaboration with Frantic Assembly,

a UK dance group brought to Egypt by the British Council in September 2000. Billed as a battle between identity and ego, life vs. death, men against women, the production played to packed audiences at the Cairo Opera House and featured exceptional energy, humour and pathos. In the eyes of many local arts commentators it marked a new departure in the world of modern dance and theatre in Egypt. For Karim, the challenge to extend the boundaries further remains: "We are considered a daring company... I want to create new styles and influence the world of experimental theatre so that Egypt has something to carry on with, something of its own."



The Karim Tonsy Dance Company's acclaimed production *Maqamat* explored a fantasy-driven world in which time and place are immaterial.

Mahmoud Mukhtar...

SUHAIL BISHARAT

Former Director, London National Gallery

Memories Modernity

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS in Egypt today work in daily contact with the richest of cultural resources, known and appreciated the world over. Yet, this historic environment bears special meaning for them because it belongs to their own soil, to their own personal legacy from the past. In Pharaonic Egypt, in Coptic society and in the world of Islam encompassed by the Ottoman Empire, there was little place for individual expression. Expression was an act of worship, of submission. To use one's talents otherwise would have been hubris. The world today has provided an environment for the artist to express himself and to share his own identity

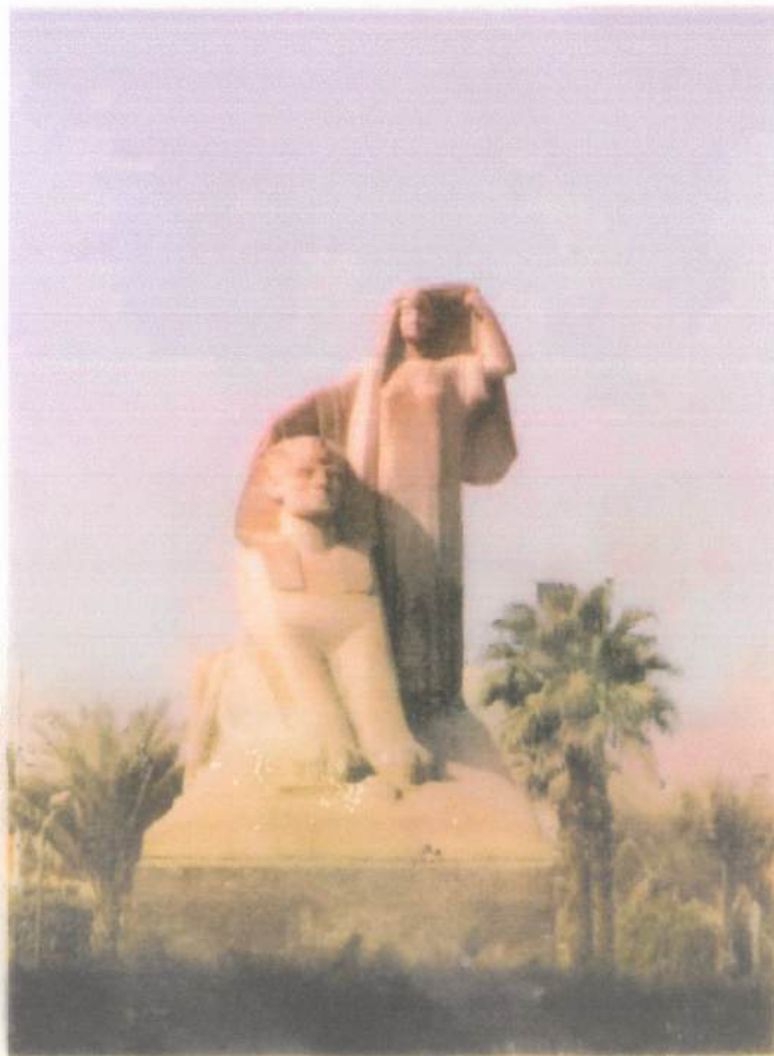
with the public and with the future. This is in contrast to the artists of Egypt's ancient past, who humbly created masterpieces and then modestly slipped away, leaving them behind in tombs, temples and mosques, with no notice and no signature.

The Egyptian sculptor, Mahmoud Mukhtar, who died in 1934, left a legacy that links the present and future with the past in symbol, substance, and vision. The pieces of sculpture he shaped so masterfully from the granite of Egypt provide a link between memories and modernity, one that is vibrant and alive today in the city of Cairo. Mukhtar's vision has been shared with the public at large, in monumental form amidst the bustle of Cairo for the past three generations. His monumental sculpture, *The Awakening of Egypt*, and his statue of the national hero Saad Zaghloul, are an intimate part of every Cairene's daily life. There are no other examples of contemporary artistic expression that are so forceful, so much a part of the urban scape as these two sculptures. Together they offer an opportunity to understand the psyche of this artist and its effect on the consciousness of civil society.

The Early Years

MAHMOUD MUKHTAR was born in 1891, in the village of Tanbara, near Mahala El Kobra, in the Nile Delta. From an early age, Mukhtar moulded the clay of his native soil on the banks of the canal into the figures of ancient folk tales. In 1902 he moved to Cairo with his mother, and lived in the older quarters of the city where he encountered the popular traditions and customs. His mother's divorce by his father, and her subsequent struggle to maintain her dignity deeply affected Mukhtar. The attachment between them became an exceptionally strong one.

THE AWAKENING OF EGYPT - Mukhtar's masterpiece.

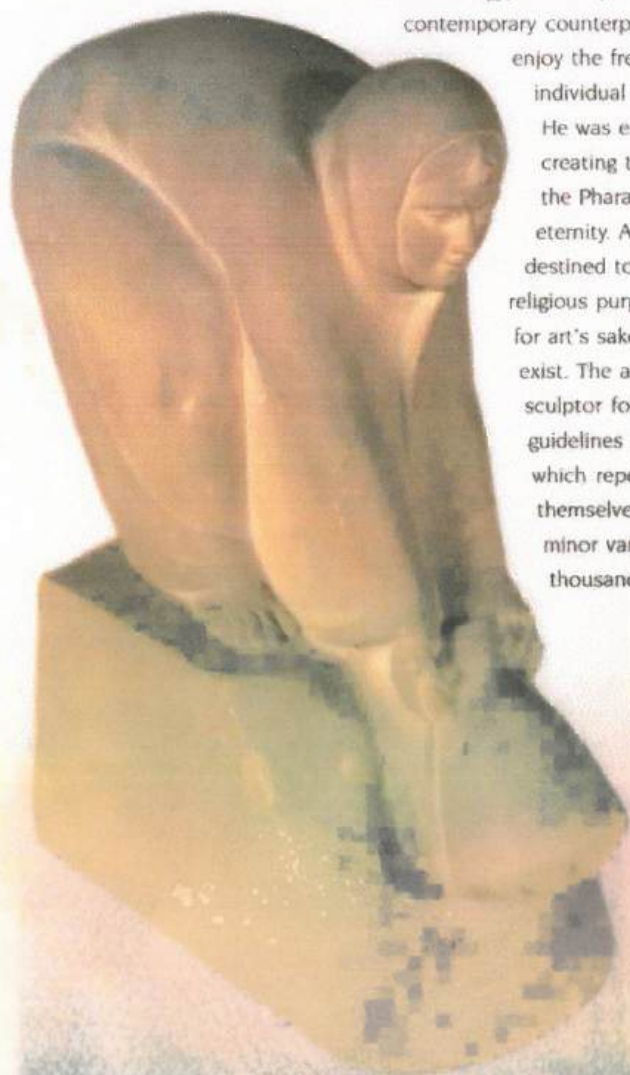


The Symbolism of the Monument

THE EGYPTIAN AWAKENING stands today as a symbol of Egypt's past glory and her future aspirations for freedom, dignity and justice. Mukhtar came with an idea, not an image of a king or pharaoh, even though the statue was executed during the reign of King Fuad. It also symbolized a revival for Egypt and the Egyptian people. The Sphinx is rising up in a rampant position and standing tall and proud by its side is the peasant woman, symbolizing the land and nationalism. The peasant woman unveils herself to the world, confident of her traditions, identity, opening her arm with grace and simplicity. The Sphinx rises up from its glorious past, in a youthful, vigorous, strong attitude that clearly expresses the power and pride of the Egyptian people.

It is no longer the deities that would protect the pharaohs and kings, as we see in one of the charming diorite statues of the Pharaoh Chephren that shows the pharaoh protected by the falcon. Instead, it is the dignified strength of the Egyptian people, symbolized by the woman, that in *The Egyptian Awakening* shows them in charge of their own destiny, protecting their freedom.

The ancient Egyptian sculptor, unlike his contemporary counterpart, did not enjoy the freedom of individual expression. He was entrusted with creating the image of the Pharaoh for eternity. Art was destined to serve a religious purpose, and 'art for art's sake' did not exist. The ancient sculptor followed strict guidelines and canons, which repeated themselves with only minor variations for thousands of years.



WOMAN CARRYING WATER

Mukhtar was a master sculptor. He had studied and contemplated Pharaonic lines with their characteristic aesthetics and simplicity. He had also been exposed to the diverse artistic movements of the early twentieth century. He was well aware of how western influences might be adapted to Pharaonic art. Yet he was sensitive about retaining Egypt's own authenticity, the essence of its soul. This went far beyond the superficial selection and use of ancient figures and forms in a modern context. The Egyptian peasant woman remained an important element in Mukhtar's work throughout his life. She appears and reappears frequently in his work, expressing his close bonds with his native village and his own mother. Mukhtar strove to express an authentic Egyptian identity in a contemporary form, far from dogmas and mythologies. His idealism became a spiritual force, a torch for translating his artistic abilities into sculptural forms.

Urban Scape: Art among the People

DURING THE NINETEENTH and early twentieth centuries Cairo had many of the rulers' heroes displayed in public urban spaces. Yet this was the first time in the history of modern Egypt that a monument symbolizing Egyptian national aspiration was put on public display. It is all the more striking that this happened during the reign of King Fouad.

The Egyptian Awakening occupies a strategic site at the gates of Cairo University. It stands in a majestic position, with a long ceremonial sweep behind it towards the gates of the university. It stands as a welcoming monument on the bank of the Nile, and at the crossroads for all traffic flowing north and south along the main urban spine of the Nile's West Bank. It is one of the few locations in Cairo where there is a broad promenade on all sides, comfortable enough for students and families with children to stroll at the weekend, visiting the zoo or heading to the university. On weekdays all Cairo revolves around the "road point" of the statue. As traffic inches its way around this great nexus, truck drivers, taxi riders, the young and old of Cairo packed into buses, the well-heeled drivers of luxury vehicles, all have ample time to contemplate *The Egyptian Awakening*.

Egypt's first School of Fine Arts, founded by Prince Yusuf Kamel, was established in 1908. Mukhtar was among the very first students to apply. Mr Laplagne, the Director of the School, and a professor of sculpture at that time, saw a promising future for the young Mukhtar. Laplagne proved to be instrumental in the young student's artistic career, encouraging him to display his first sculptural works at an exhibition at the School of Fine Arts. This won him a scholarship funded by Prince Yusuf Kamel to study in Paris.

Mukhtar became the first Egyptian to be admitted to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1911. He was an active young man, full of intellect, imagination and curiosity. In 1913, he exhibited his first sculptural piece, *Aida*. It became the first work of art by a modern Egyptian artist to be included in an international exhibition in Paris.

Paris was the unrivalled international centre for artistic creativity at the time and attracted artists from all over the world. Mukhtar was no exception. But few settled into the milieu as confidently as he did. He studied, experimented and exercised his talents with ease. Paris was filled with artistic diversity; and offered exposure to the full array of experimentation with cubism, futurism, expressionism, Fauvism and abstraction in a wide range of forms. At the same time, Mukhtar was deeply conscious of and sensitive to his own ancient Egyptian culture. He drew on these resources, adapting ancient Egyptian art and integrating it into the latest contemporary forms. His intimate knowledge of both Pharaonic art and the heritage of Europe in the fine arts, as well as his own innate artistic talents, gave him the confidence and courage to express himself forcefully. There was Bernini in the seventeenth century, with his four rivers of the world supporting the Obelisk in Piazza Navona in Rome. There were the French artists who illustrated the *Description of Egypt* and British artists, such as David Roberts and others, who recorded contemporary life in nineteenth century Egypt amidst the ruins of her antiquities. None could claim, in his view, to have a closer, more intimate relationship with Pharaonic art than Mukhtar himself. And certainly none could draw on the soul, the energy and creativity of Egypt's people as he could.

From Model to Monument

DURING THE OUTBREAK of the First World War, Mukhtar was offered the position of Director at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo. Instead, he accepted a position in Paris as the Director of the Musée Grévin. It was there that he executed many of his wax sculptures of famous leaders. But the Egyptian Revolution in 1919 prompted Mukhtar to rechart his course. He left his post as director and channelled his dreams and energies towards a single statue *The Egyptian Awakening*. The need for Egypt to gain its own freedom and identity preoccupied Mukhtar. Egypt was under British rule and faced a political and historical crossroads. It was a crucial moment of national awareness.

Mukhtar seized the opportunity and began his statue *The Egyptian Awakening* amidst the uncertainties of the Paris Peace Conference. In executing this idea he knew his artistic abilities would be put to their greatest test. He was determined to create for Egypt a meaningful and enduring work of art. His long perseverance and labour culminated in a marble model which was selected on its artistic merit alone and exhibited in the French Artists International Exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris. It won the gold medal. The exhibition attracted many visitors. By coincidence, Saad Zaghloul Pasha, who was heading the Egyptian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, was informed about the young Egyptian, Mukhtar. He visited the exhibition, met Mukhtar, and was immediately impressed by Mukhtar's marble model. Saad Zaghloul Pasha enthusiastically decided to give his full support to seeing the model become a monument in Egypt.

The Monument

MUKHTAR BEGAN with an idea that would reflect the Egyptian people and their national aspirations and feelings. He sought to bring together the glorious past of Egypt and the future aspirations of the Egyptian people. The symbols he chose to combine were the Sphinx standing side by side with a simple Egyptian peasant woman. He was highly conscious of ancient Egyptian art forms and lines in granite as he adapted them to the milieu of the twentieth century. Ancient sculptors had the skills to use a wide range of rock types from granites to diorites, limestone boulders and sandstone. Mukhtar purposefully chose Egyptian granite to create his masterpiece, the same material used in the most imposing of Egypt's ancient temples, monuments and sculpture. The granites of Upper Egypt that had lain dormant beneath the sands since antiquity were brought to life once again.

A national campaign raised funds to pay for the cost of the statue. Egyptians from all walks of life donated whatever they could. Even farmers from rural villages sent in money, demonstrating their support to this national event. There was much opposition, debate and delays before the actual work was commissioned. However, in June 1921, the Government issued a decree giving Mukhtar approval to go ahead with the statue. The rich granite of Upper Egypt was being carved into *The Egyptian Awakening*. King Fuad unveiled the monumental statue on May 20, 1928. Thousands of Egyptians from all walks of life gathered to celebrate this national event.

EGYPT'S NEW GLAMOUR

photographer YOUSSEF NABIL

JAMES PARRY

IN THE ROUGH AND TUMBLE of everyday modern Cairo life, it can sometimes be difficult to find objects or scenes of peace and beauty. Countless millions of people are crammed into an increasingly choked city, each enduring the daily struggle to make ends meet in the face of constant pressure and a hassle factor that seems to grow by the day. Life can be unrelentingly hard and, whilst interesting, it can certainly be rather short on aesthetic appeal.

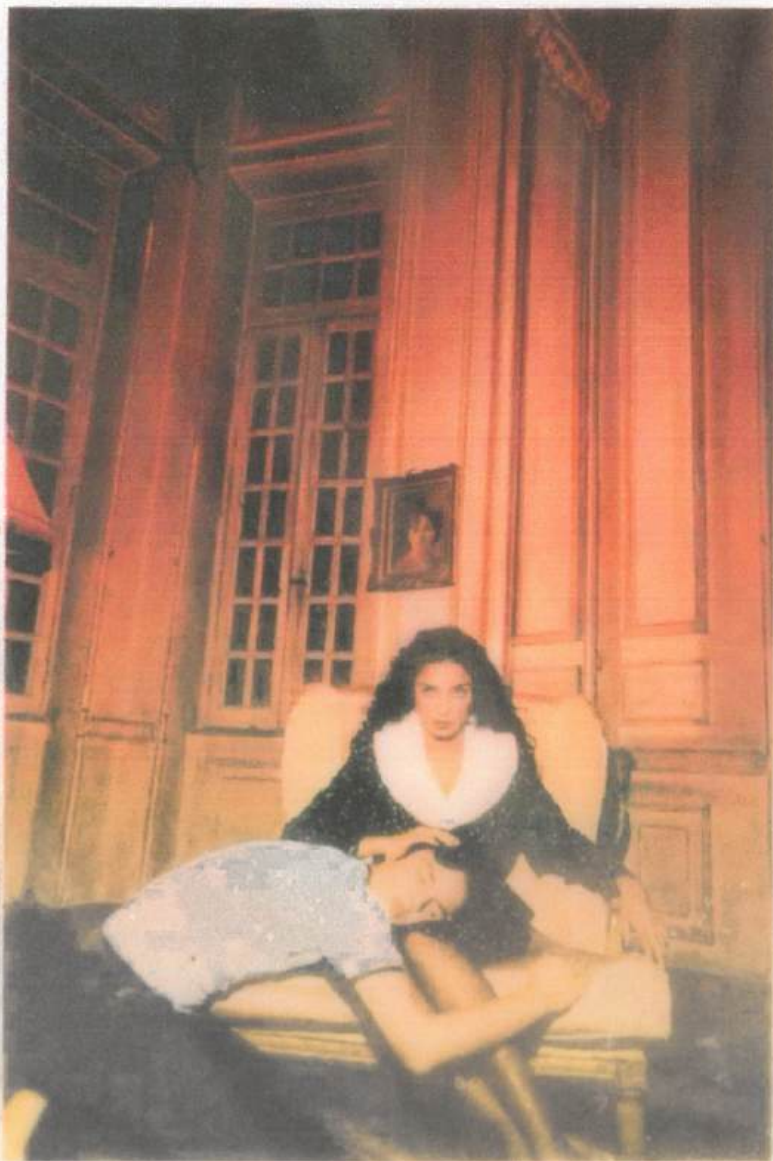
And yet there is a sense that this was not always so. The Cairo of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, was both more spacious and gracious, a place of glamour and exotic appeal, when the beautiful people gathered at Shepherd's or strolled along the Nile corniche. Of course, such halcyon days

never really existed for more than the gilded few, but the impact of Cairo's *belle époque* was felt far beyond its immediate impact, later reaching an international audience of millions through the celebrated Egyptian films of the 1940s and 50s, featuring stars such as Faten Hamama, Hend Rostom and Laila Mourad.

Yet in the maelstrom of the daily grind, there are glimmers of a more refreshing artistic light. One such beacon is Youssef Nabil, a young Cairene photographer whose individual style has both helped rekindle something of the panache and style of the old days and brought new artistic and professional standards to the world of Egyptian photography. Through his astute selection of subjects and moods, and extensive use of a technique popular at the turn of the last century – the hand-colouring of black and white images – he has succeeded in creating works that speak to both the present and the past, and also mark a transition between the art of photography and that of the cinema.

That Youssef should be drawn to a cinematographic style is entirely consistent with his early plans to study at the Egyptian Academy of Cinema. Thwarted in this ambition, he instead studied French literature, only starting his photography in earnest in 1992 at the age of 19. Initially making money by taking publicity shots for friends who were doing modelling work, he hoped in some way to satisfy his desire to make movies. Self-taught (he had received no formal instruction in photography at this point) and learning on the job, he soon made a niche for himself in the somewhat limited fashion and style world of Cairo. Clearly however, to develop further he needed to get onto the international stage.

His big break came when celebrated photographer David LaChapelle came to Egypt on an assignment for a travel magazine. LaChapelle needed a local assistant, and Youssef jumped at the chance. So impressed was LaChapelle by Youssef's ideas and ability that he subsequently invited him to train



Left: INNOCENCE PROTECTOR, 1995
Opposite: SWEET TEMPTATION, 1993



Mukhtar's celebrated sculpture of **SAAD ZAGHLOUL**

Traditional as well as modern urban spaces in Cairo were not designed for artists to display their works. Mukhtar became the first Egyptian sculptor to have his work displayed in public in the heart of Cairo. Mukhtar's talents and imagination were challenged again in 1930 when he was asked by the Egyptian Government to prepare two statues to the memory of Saad Zaghloul Pasha, the very man who had brought Mukhtar back to Egypt to carve *The Egyptian Awakening*. Now Mukhtar was given the personal task of glorifying him as a great leader. The relationship between Saad Zaghloul and the Egyptian people was a bond of mutual respect and admiration. Zaghloul had inspired the Egyptian people.

Mukhtar needed no encouragement to set himself to the task of creating a memorial to this great man. Mukhtar drew on his own resources and those of the Egyptian people to create the statue. Saad Pasha had been a controversial political figure and Mukhtar faced many problems and delays caused by political infighting. Rather than let the idea fall victim to factionalism, the sculptor set out on his own campaign to raise enough funds to pay for the costs.

This statue of Saad Zaghloul Pasha stands in Cairo today as noble testimony to Mukhtar's vision and perseverance atop a four-cornered columnar pedestal at the western end of Kasr El Nil Bridge.

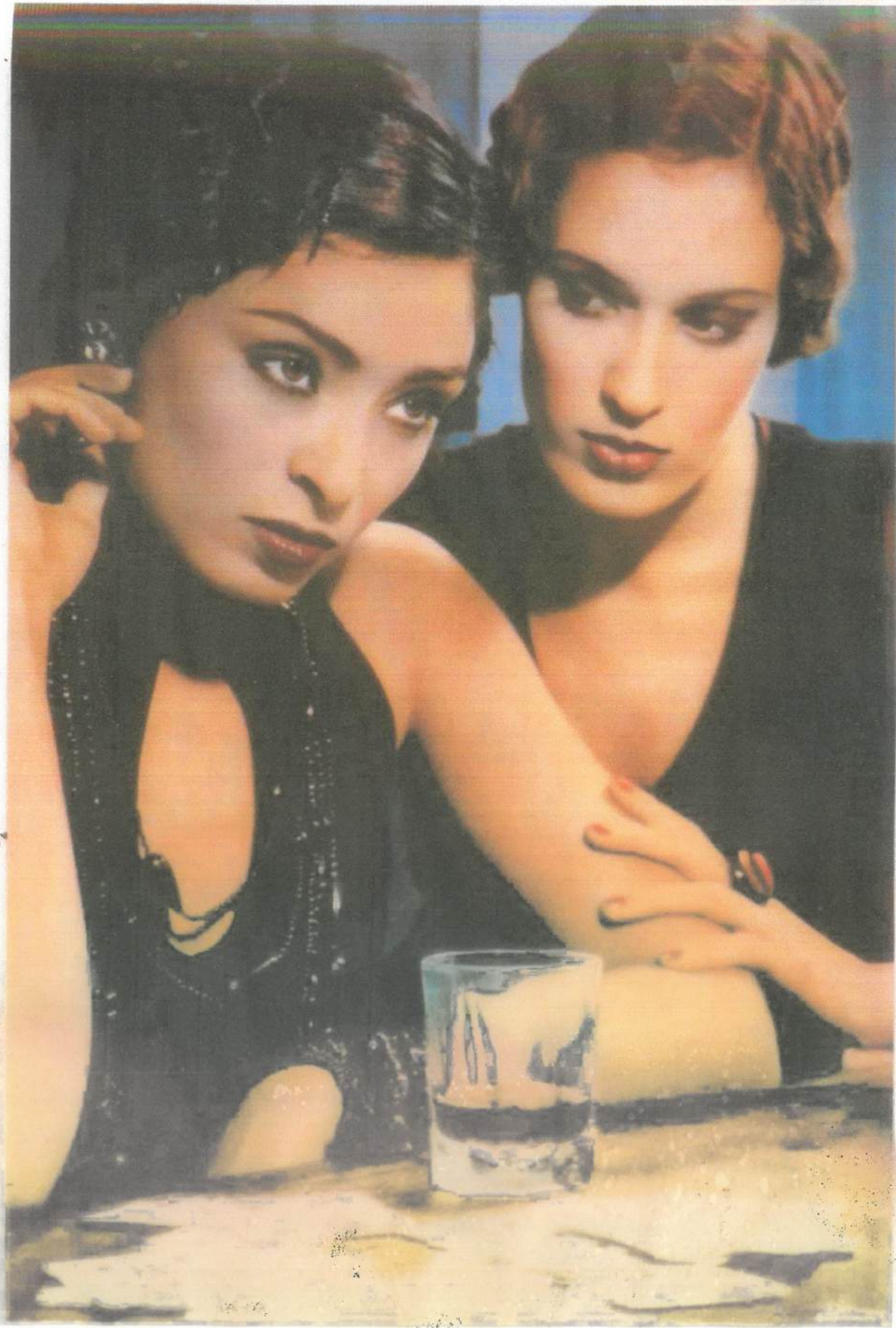
in front of the gate to the Opera House. It is a full figure, high above the street below but not overwhelming, not designed to intimidate. The head of Saad Pasha in this statue is a unique work of contemporary sculpture. Zaghloul stretches out his hand, symbolizing revival and victory. Mukhtar wanted to glorify him and share his inspiration with the Egyptian people. Sabri Nashed, the sculptor and critic, writes, "This statue is very important to me. It is the synthesis of two great men."

Mukhtar executed a second statue of Saad Zaghloul Pasha for Alexandria, where the Pasha stands firmly, leading his Egyptian people and nation. The two statues continue to inspire today's citizens and encourage artists to look within themselves and dare to express their dreams for Egypt on a grand scale.

The Legacy

MUKHTAR WAS A PIONEER in his time. He had struggled to become the great sculptor of Egypt. He built the foundation for modern sculpture in Egypt. He paved the way for the Egyptian artist to liberate himself from restraints and to express himself freely, to be a fully-fledged member of civil society. He demonstrated that one can be an artist and remain true to one's principles, without becoming dependent upon the whims of patrons. Art today, unlike in Ancient Egyptian times, has started to serve itself, to create its own dynamic. The individual artist is recognized and is sought after for his or her own uniqueness. The artist can choose the subject, materials, form of expression. Individual perspectives on the contemporary environment, on the tensions between memories and modernity strike a chord with the viewing public. Artists can express themselves in their own terms. There is no Ptah or priest to dictate canons. The legacy Mukhtar left the Egyptian people goes far beyond the community of artists. It belongs to the people of Egypt, with whom it is shared every day in the urban spaces of Cairo and Alexandria.

The statues of *The Egyptian Awakening* and Saad Zaghloul stand as witnesses for an Egyptian nation that has pride in its past and is proud of its present. Unlike the ancient Egyptian artists and sculptors who remained anonymous and forgotten, the name of this sculptor is often on the lips of Egyptians. The winds of time have changed to grant the individual artist recognition in life and remembrance and dignity after death. Mahmoud Mukhtar died in Cairo in 1934 while still in his prime. The legacy that he left behind is intact today due to the generosity of the Egyptian people and the many patrons who decided to build a museum in his memory. The Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum opened in 1962, located just behind his statue of Saad Zaghloul, in Gezira. The museum, built in the style of a temple, echoes the architecture of ancient Egyptian temples. It houses some of the great masterpieces of sculpture that Mukhtar executed during his lifetime. It is not a forbidden temple, hiding away its art trophies for eternity. Instead, it is a museum open to all those who would like to step into and pay tribute to one of the greatest sculptors of our time. But it is also there for quiet reflection amid the whirl of modern Cairo. It is a resource enabling all to draw on Mukhtar's confidence in his individuality, his creative abilities, and his strength to express his views and love for Egypt in forms that bind together memories and modernity.



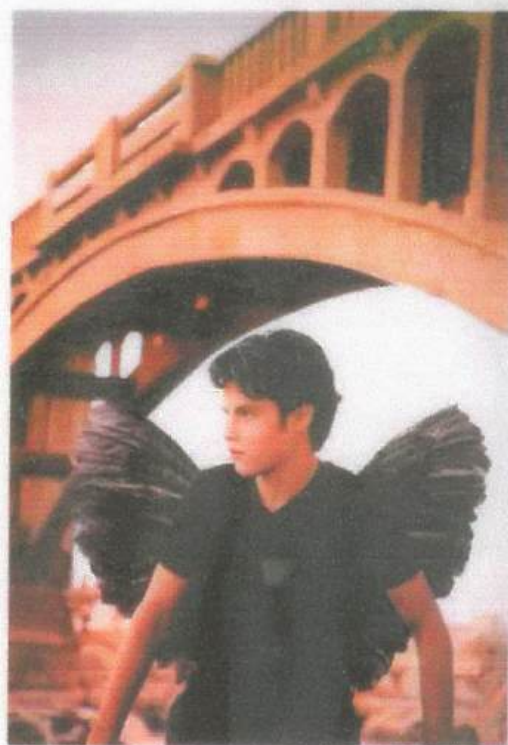
at his studio in New York. From there Youssef went to Paris as an assistant to the great fashion photographer Mario Testino, working with him on a series of high-profile projects for clients such as *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. This was a seminal time in Youssef's development – his first time out of Egypt for such a long period (he spent a total of six years overseas), first real exposure to contemporary trends and thinking in photography, the invaluable benefit of working with leaders in their field, learning by association and observation, and – again, for the first time – really beginning to think about and understand his own artistic motivations and emotions. He looks back on this time as very happy and productive one: "I consider myself lucky to have worked with two of the world's most talented photographers. We were like a family. Everyone knew their role and we worked so well as a team."

In 1998 Youssef returned to Cairo and started trying to make photography his career. He was not overly optimistic of being able to do so in Egypt: "I was a nomad. I had seen how it was to be appreciated as an artist, and so I dreaded returning to Cairo." In terms of subject material for his art, he found himself fascinated by two main areas, one being the sumptuous world of *fin de siècle* Egypt, the other being the altogether more immediate icons of contemporary Egyptian culture – figures such as singer Natacha Atlas and screen-idol Yousra. Initially Youssef wanted to shoot in black and white only, but the market demand for colour images was so strong that he decided that in order to try and make his work more attractive to potential buyers he would hand colour the monochrome images – a technique which had enjoyed enormous popularity in the early 20th century, the very era that he was already fascinated by.

The result was a stunning suite of images that marked a new departure in photography in Egypt. Many of these were exhibited in Youssef's first show *Premiere*, held at the Cairo Berlin Art Gallery in May 1999. They range from the evocative and nostalgic *Sweet Temptation* to the powerful *Innocence Protector*, in which a highly contemporary subject is juxtaposed with the fading grandeur of an old *belle époque* villa. Equally absorbing, and deeply poignant, is *Can't wait to fly again*, in which a young man with wings sits patiently against an Alexandrian backdrop, somehow symbolising the city's long wait to recapture its previous glories. And there also is *My Frida – Yasmeen*, Youssef's own tribute to a personal heroine of his, Frida Kahlo.

The recurring theme throughout these works is one of elegant film star-style characters, always beautiful and sometimes androgynous, acting out parts of a story within an opulent and timeless dream-world. They are simultaneously Egyptian and international, harking back to the days when Egypt – and Cairo in particular – enjoyed a particularly colourful and cosmopolitan role on the world stage. And yet despite the manual retouching, black is the predominant colour, particularly in terms of the characters' dress. "Sometimes I feel that I have black skin under my own, that I am in fact black" says Youssef, highlighting the paradox that exists between the vivid tableaux he creates and the underlying simple and direct appeal to the senses.

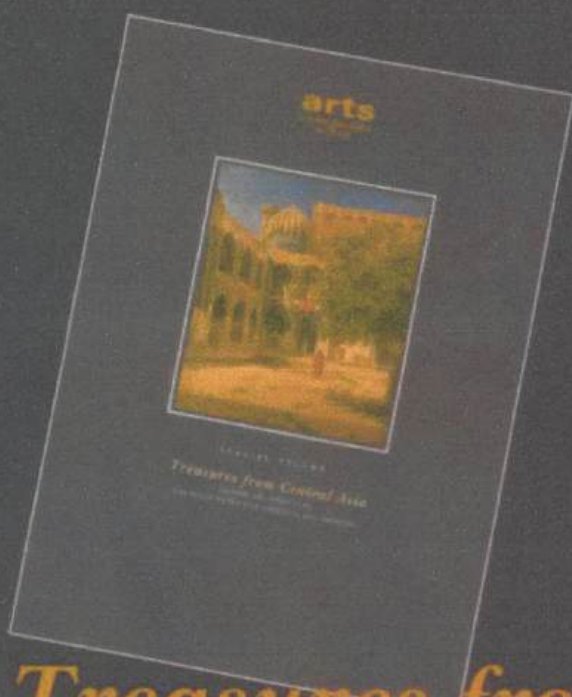
Yet this highly stylised and carefully staged world of escapism, not without its hint of kitsch, is not the only medium through which Youssef works. In spring 2000 he participated in the ground-breaking Al Nilaf festival with a small personal exhibition entitled *Secret Side*, in which he exhibited a series of fascinating snapshots, taken in full colour and the result of opportunistic forays onto Cairo's streets. This was something of a new departure for him, and although the images are of subjects that, ostensibly at least, are in the public domain, Youssef regards them as more revealing of himself than any of his previous works.



CAN'T WAIT TO FLY AGAIN, 1997

He is now planning a new exhibition, and considering ways in which his art can be strengthened within Egypt. He feels strongly that Egypt should have its own photography institute, for example, and that young Egyptians will only be attracted to photography as a career if the right training structure exists and the appropriate facilities – such as properly professional photo laboratories – are in place. Until this happens, photography will continue as one of several Egyptian Cinderellas to other, more heavily supported, art forms. Which all seems rather ironic in an age when image and visual appeal is so important.

As for public reaction to his art, Youssef detects an upturn in appreciation, and is increasingly positive: "Things have improved so much in the last few years. What I do was well appreciated before, in the 1930s and '40s, much more so than now, when at first people were asking me 'Why spend time retouching when you can use colour film?' But now things are changing. The world needs to see more Egyptian artists and more Egyptian photographers. Meanwhile, I'm busy and happy with what I do."



arts

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IN HER OWN WORDS

Huda LUTFI

Edited by
JAMES W. STONE

I WAS ALWAYS INTERESTED IN AESTHETICS, in the harmony between space and form. In my twenties I developed a liking for old and beautiful objects. I was very attracted to such things. When I was at McGill as a Ph.D. student, I started doing calligraphy. I got more into books of art. They had a fantastic library there, and I acquired the habit of browsing the large collection of books on Arab and Islamic art and calligraphy. I was fascinated by such art forms and I started doing calligraphy as a relaxation exercise. That was more than twenty years ago. I observed that when I did that, the mind became empty, it is an act of cleansing thoughts, an act of meditation.

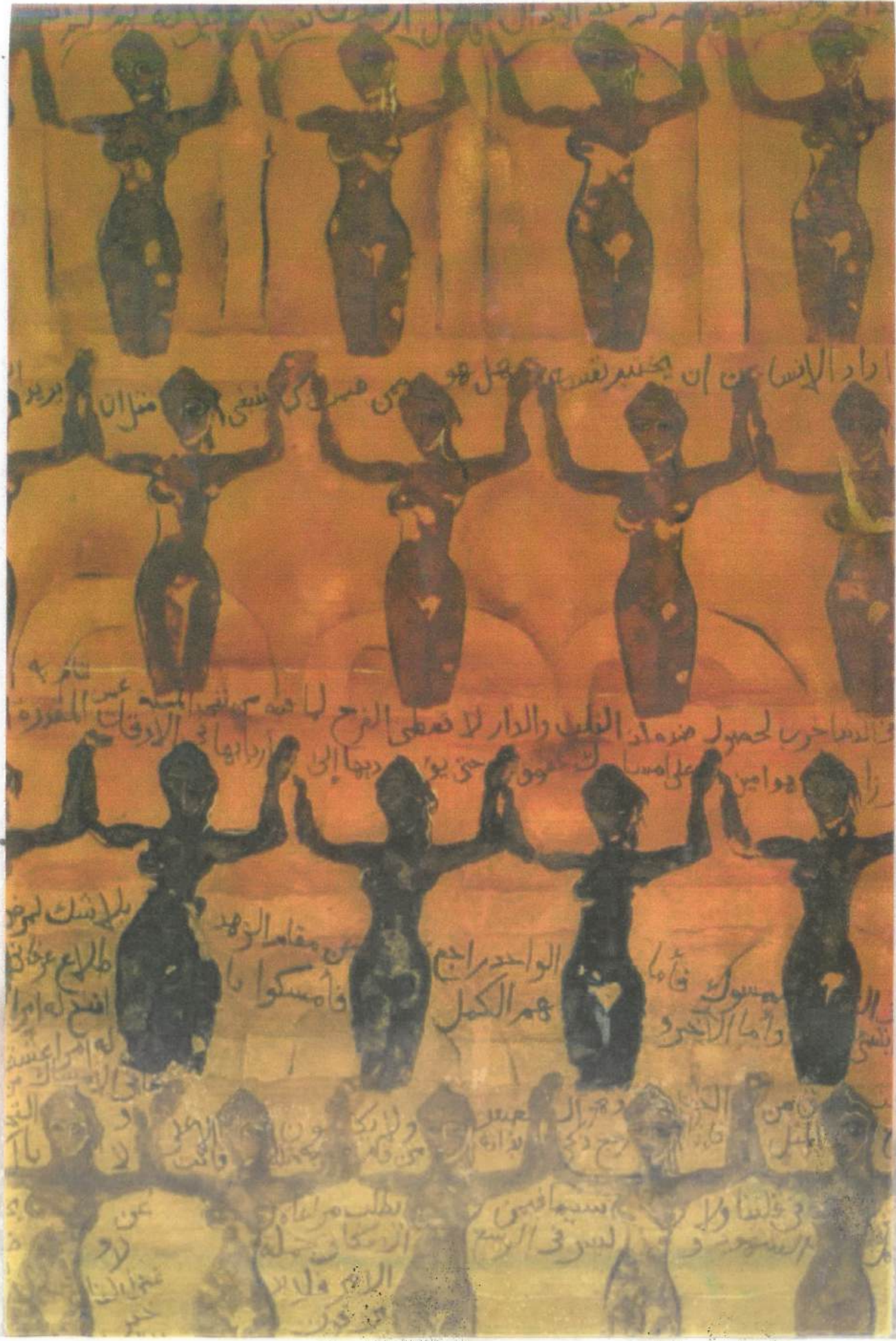
I returned to Egypt in 1983 and two years later I bought land in a small village in Fayyum and built a house there. It was then that I discovered mud brick moulds and mud plastering. It was inviting me to play with it, for clay is so malleable. But not just to make shapes out of it, I felt I wanted to paint on these mud walls. So I started doing calligraphy on mud walls and I chose my favourite verses of poetry, especially poetry with humour and irony. I also started doing figurative representations. Colour also captivates my attention: colours in clothes, furniture, jewellery, in the arrangement of things; it's so much fun to play with colours. So I started mixing things: colour oxides with clay, collecting shells and pieces of stained glass, old pottery, anything. And then I arranged them together as a piece on the walls.

Then I went to the States in 1991-92, where I was teaching at Harvard. I missed home, my family and my house in Fayyum. I was alone and I had more time on my hands. So I went to museums and I used to collect art brochures, and I collected cards of my favourite artists. After six months I had to go through a major operation. It wasn't easy because it was like losing a part of your body. I remember, after the operation, I couldn't do very much, I was in pain, you know, but a week later I sat at my desk, and I got the cards and the art brochures and I started cutting and pasting. I started doing a collage, when I was finished with it, it looked like a coherent piece. I remember the first one I did was about the mutilation of the body: the figure of a woman's body cut in half. Perhaps I did that as a way to face my pain and fill my time. And I think that was the beginning.

I continued doing collages for a while, and then I discovered another technique. But I still love doing collages very much, because it's so much fun to cut and paste the pieces, throw them together and see what happens. I was in Mallorca staying with some friends, and Xavier Pugnart, a Spanish painter, was experimenting with a new technique: he got styrofoam and he carved



Opposite: **SUFI DANCE** – collage & acrylic, 35 x 50cm, 1996
Right: **SEARCHING** – painting on wood, 25 x 80cm, 1998



راد الانسان ان يحسب نفسه حلال هو من قسوتك كمنسفي مثل ان يريد

في الدنيا حزن لجمال مندماد القلب والدار لا تعطى الفرح لها فمة من نصيب المسنة عين الثامر
زا هو امين على امساكك فهو حتى يود دها الى اربابها في الاوقات المقدرة

بل لا شك لفرح طالع عكازي افصح له امرا له امر اعشقه
من مقام الزهد فامسكوا يا الواحد راجع هم الكمل
يا ما الاخر ويا ما

من المثل في الدنيا ولا في السموات لا تسبق في الرسم
من المثل في الدنيا ولا في السموات لا تسبق في الرسم
من المثل في الدنيا ولا في السموات لا تسبق في الرسم
من المثل في الدنيا ولا في السموات لا تسبق في الرسم

whatever motif he wanted in order to use it as a stamper. I thought this was a great idea, because I can use this and still produce the effect of repetition but without cutting and pasting. Technique is experimentation: you learn more as you do it and this is something that I enjoy because in terms of colour and media, you are free to use what you want, and wait for surprises. This sense of freedom is quite fulfilling. I am not bound by any rules. Apart from what the process of doing art gives you in terms of peace of mind or observing the emotions that you are experiencing at the moment, it is wonderful because it is like an experimental play. Also when negative emotions are experienced, that comes out as well in the paintings: the stabbing, the cutting of feet, evoking the image of helplessness, etc. At certain moments I strongly feel the helplessness of the human being, we always think that we can control things and when we can't, we feel helpless. In art, you can get away temporarily from this sense of helplessness because you create your little space of playing, of feeling free. ”



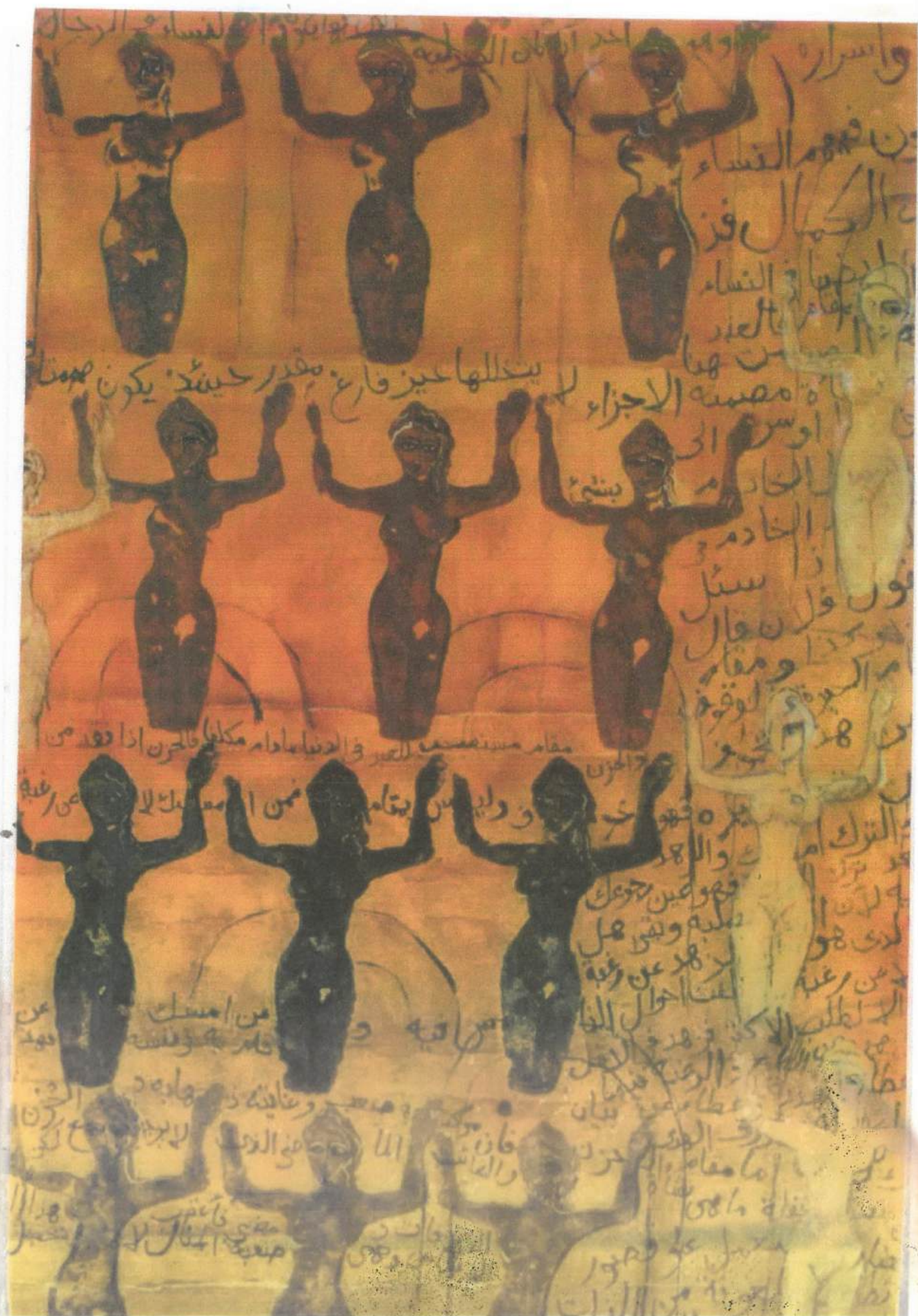
Previous spread **GODDESS OF KNOWLEDGE**
mixed media, 80 x 50cm, 1997

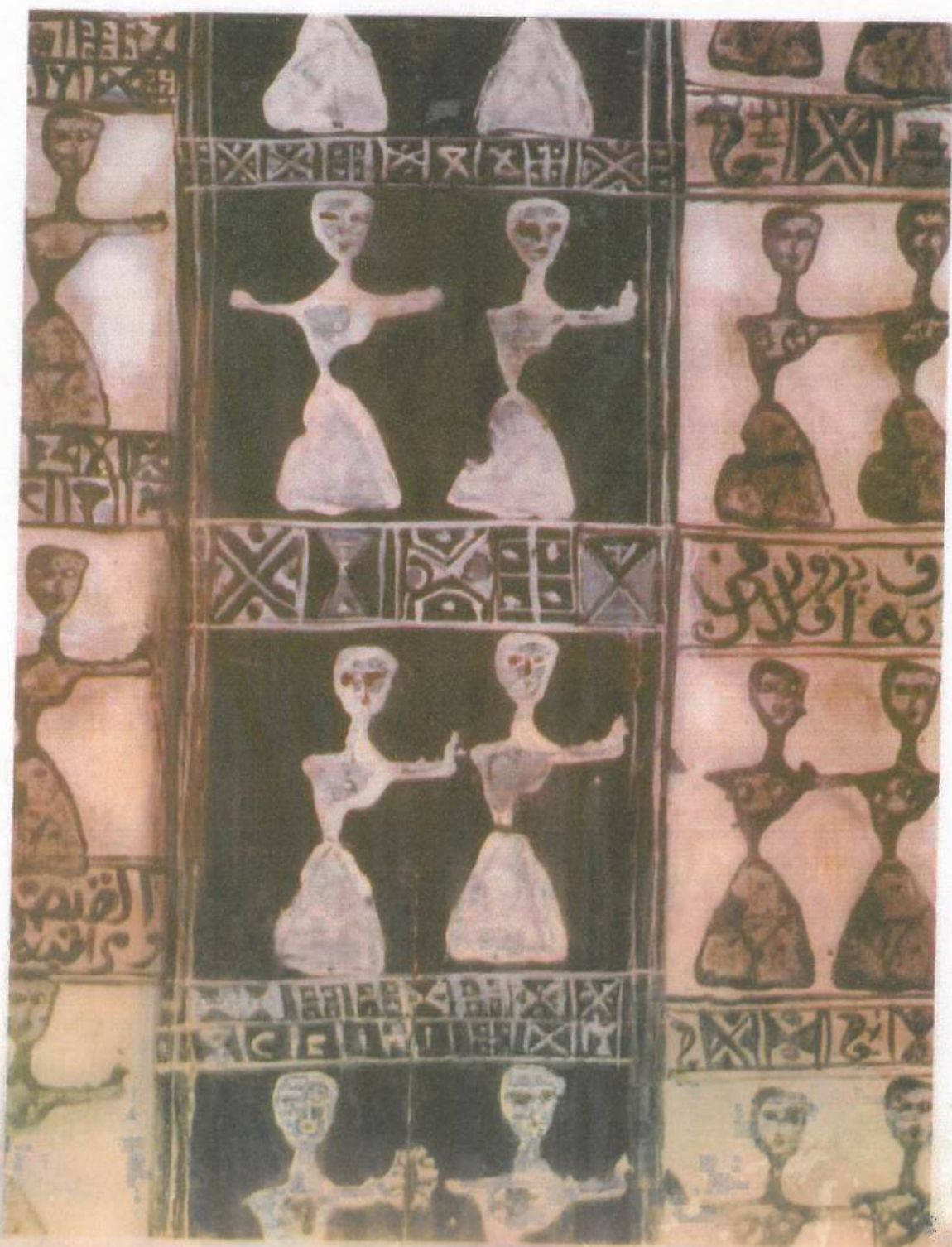
Above **SEEING** – painting on wood, 60 x 35cm, 1998

Below **BLUE NIGHT** – acrylic, 55 x 40cm, 1995

Opposite **COPTIC DOLLS (detail)** – acrylic, 55 x 35cm







CONTEMPORARY Cinema IN Egypt

HANI MUSTAFA

DIFFERENT RHYTHMS ON THE REALIST TUNE

NO-ONE CAN DENY the effect that the realist movement has had on cinema in Egypt. Ever since Kamal Selim's film *Alazima* (Willpower) in 1939, the trend towards realism increased, reaching a peak in the 1950's and 60's with directors like Salah Abu Sief and Tawfiq Saleh. There was, however, an ebb in the realist flow in later years. The defeat of 1967, and the breaking of the Arab Nationalist dream that came with it, touched many realist directors. This period of decline continued throughout the seventies, until a new wave of realist cinema arrived, featuring directors such as Atef El Tayeb, Mohamed Khan, Daoud Abdel Said, Khairy Bishara and Rifaat El Mihi in his early work.

There were several reasons for this resurgence in realism, among which was the dire need to record the chaos prevalent at that time in Egyptian, and especially Cairene, society. Cairo and its frenzied streets appeared to be the perfect raw material for realist films. This chaos was prompted by the arrival of a new social strata of small-scale traders, who appeared thanks to the 'open door' economic policy of the mid seventies. A culture of 'quick money' rapidly ensued, based on smuggling and illegal trading in various commodities. Many of these so-called businessmen extended their influence to the cinema screen, turning to film as



GANET AL SHAYATIN. Osama Farazi

a further means of making a quick profit. The result was a large number of films that fell below acceptable standards, both in terms of content and artistic quality.

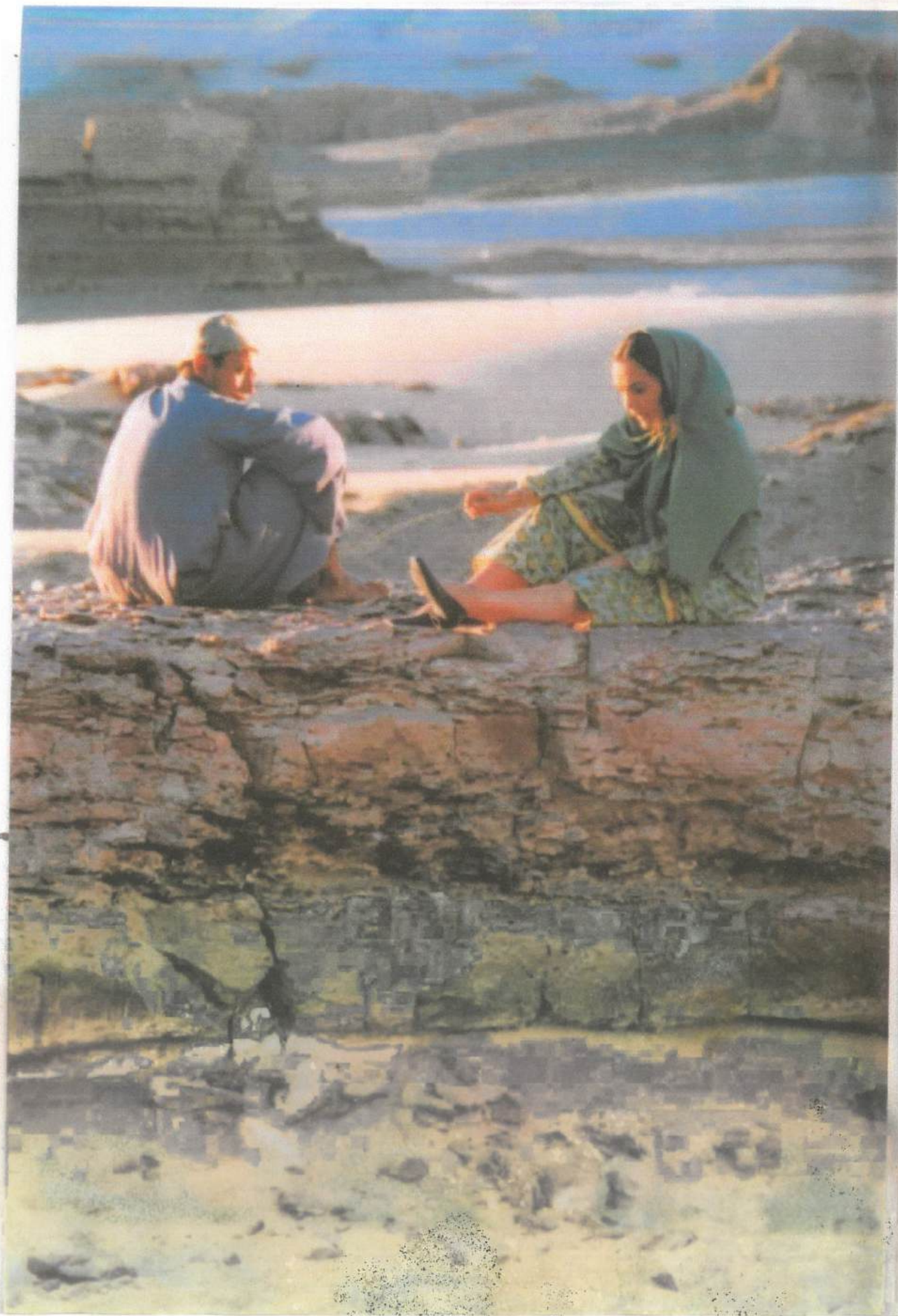
By this time the film industry generally was in economic crisis, which led to the minimising of the use of expensive tailored sets. Instead, directors started shooting in real locations, which added to the realist spirit of their films whilst also reducing costs. Even so, by 1993 the crisis in the industry

had reached such an extent that Egyptian film output plunged from around 100 films annually to a mere 7-12 films each year between 1993 and 1997. The vast majority of these films were highly commercial and lacking in artistic craftsmanship, their sole purpose being the provision of entertainment during the summer season, festivals and holidays.

The fundamental problem for film-makers was the lack of a producer, and more importantly, lack of funding. Two trends emerged from this quest for finance. First was increasing use of foreign, especially European, funding. This type of financial support usually came through the International Productions, known among film-makers as 'Omar Chahine's office', due to its connections with French producers such as the television channel Canal+. This type of foreign investment became popular due to its prevalence in the films of the Maghreb (Morocco).

AFAREET AL ASFELT. Osama Farazi







GANET AL SHAYATIN, Osama Fawzi

Algeria and Morocco), which enjoyed their golden age in the 1990's. Logically, therefore, contemporary Egyptian directors started exploring this avenue, which until then had been restricted to films directed by Yousef Chahine.

The second trend was increasing private sector support for film-making. In the mid nineties, with the phenomenal prevalence of satellite television, audiences deserted cinemas. This led to a further decline in film production. For some time during this period the state denied the existence of any problem, until a sudden change of direction in 1997 saw it attempt to convince businessmen to invest in the film industry. There were two reasons behind this change, the most important of which was the privatisation plan which the government had initiated at the end of the eighties. As the plan took effect, the government was prompted to enter state-owned studios into the arena of 'saleable' assets and attract commercial buyers. However, businessmen are by their very nature profit oriented and so find it difficult to perceive the film industry's lengthy cycle of capital. The result therefore has been the appearance of a new genre of 'popular' films, farce comedies, which can be produced quickly and are aimed solely at entertainment. A series of comedies has ensued, all of a regrettably low artistic standard, but which have generated high box-office revenues; examples include *Saidi Fi Al Gamiya Al Anwekeya* (An Upper Egyptian in The American University), *Hammam fi Amsterdam* (Hammmam In Amsterdam) and *Billa wa demaghoh al alyah* (Cool Billa), all starring Mohamed Heneidi, as well as *Abood Ala Al Hala* (Abood on the Borders), and *Al Nazer* (The Headmaster), starring Alaa Walei El-Din.

There is no evidence that the businessmen have made a positive contribution to the Egyptian film industry, apart from the establishment of some highly

equipped cinemas (with equally expensive entrance charges). However, a limited number of films were able to escape the wave of farce comedies. These were sporadic endeavours by a number of producers, and included *Afari Al Asphelt* (Road Devils), directed by Osama Fawzi. This film portrayed the lives of a number of private bus drivers in a frame of realism, interwoven with magical storytelling and a number of highly complex relationships and affairs. This film was produced by the director's brother, Hani Girgis Fawzi, but even he was not in a position to contribute to the director's next – and more experimental – film *Ganet Al Shayatin* (The Paradise of Fallen Angels). The famous film star Mahmoud Hemaidah, who finally financed the project, played the role of a corpse throughout the film. The script is an Egyptianised treatment of George Amado's novel *The Man Who Died Twice*. In *Afareet Al Asfelt* Osama Fawzi was unable to totally divest the film of the realistic perspective when dealing with the form and the location. Despite that, the script effectively narrates the lives of a marginal sector of society and avoids doing so in a traditional way. In *Ganet Al Shayatin* on the other hand, the form used is highly traditional in describing the outcasts who are the (dead) protagonist's friends and the upper middle class that is his family.

The funding that came to the Egyptian film industry via joint productions with European companies has gone mostly to directors and films aiming at socio-political critique, such as Radwan El-Kashef. Like Fawzi, El-Kashef uses a traditional treatment, but

ARAO EL-BALAH, Radwan El-Kashef



The Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil Museum

JAMES PARRY

THE MOHAMED MAHMOUD KHALIL collection is one of the most important in Egypt. Housed in Mr Khalil's former residence in Giza, it contains exceptional works of art displayed in an appropriately historical setting. Few other museums in the Middle East can claim to have a wider range of high quality artworks on public display, and certainly no gallery in Egypt can rival the masterpieces of Western art that the museum holds.



Born in 1877 to a wealthy landowning family, Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil was an enigmatic figure, rather mysterious and prone to controversy. A gifted politician, he served as a minister and was then elected as President to the Egyptian Senate for three consecutive terms of office. He could be a difficult man, and during his lifetime had a reputation for being rather parsimonious, all the more surprising given the fact that, upon his death, he generously bequeathed his outstanding art collection to the Egyptian people.

Khalil always felt a close affinity with France, having studied law at the Sorbonne. In 1901 he married a Frenchwoman, Emilienne Hector Luce, and it was at about this time that he started to develop an interest in art. Two years later, on February 3rd 1903, and on the advice of his wife, he purchased his first painting: Renoir's *The Young Woman Wearing The White Tulle Tie*. This was one of five works by that artist that were eventually to find a home in Khalil's collection. For the next fifty years Khalil continued to add to his collection, until his death in Paris in 1953.

Most of the works in Khalil's collection were purchased from the famous art salons of Paris, on the advice of art experts, and include works by most of the prestigious names of 19th century French art: Renoir, Degas,



Millet, Courbet, Lautrec, Pissarro, Van Gogh and Rodin. The total collection numbers over 300 paintings and 100 drawings, as well as a large number of other objects of great interest and value, ranging from Japanese ceramics to a 17th-century Flemish tapestry. But it is for its French paintings that the collection is justly celebrated.

After Khalil's death the future of his collection was in some doubt. It was clear that its importance was such that it merited care of the highest standard, but the cost of providing appropriate curatorial facilities and security was prohibitive. For a time Khalil's villa was in use by President Sadat, and the collection was removed and put on semi-permanent display in Zamalek. However, the Ministry of Culture eventually succeeded in regaining the villa and in securing the funds required to convert and maintain it as a world-class museum. In 1995 the collection was returned to its erstwhile home and the villa opened to the public in its present form in October of that year. It is now firmly established as both a centre of international art and as one of Egypt's most important cultural attractions.

THE MUSEUM'S WORKS are displayed holistically in a series of rooms, thereby reflecting the building's past as a private villa.



prefers to explore topical national issues. In his second feature length film *Araq El-Balah* (Date Wine), he tells the story of a secluded Upper Egyptian village, from which the men all emigrate in search of a better income. This is a clear reference to the period during the 1980's and 90's when large numbers of Egyptian peasants emigrated to the Gulf states. Interestingly, El-Kashet (who was also the scriptwriter) used a traditional treatment to tone down the direct critical nature of some of the film's scenes.

In Atef Hatata's *Al-Abwab al-Moghlaqa* (Closed Doors) we find a cocktail of Egypt's problems

at the beginning of the nineties. The main character of the movie is a high school student. His mother works as a housemaid, and his brother went missing several years ago in the Iraq-Iran war (the first Gulf War). The film is a straightforward narration of the factors and influences which combine, in the end, to produce a terrorist. The script is a melange of issues such as women's separation, sexual frustration, and the national crisis engendered by the second Gulf war of 1990/91. Even though the film was skilfully crafted, the treatment of the issues involved was considered too direct by some, and did hint somehow at a Western point of view.

On the other hand, Yousry Nasralla's film *Al-Madina* (The City) moves from the private sphere to the public domain. The film starts with consideration of an issue specific to one of Cairo's neighbourhoods, Rod El-Farag. The governorate has decided to move Cairo's main market from this area to a distant suburb. Nasralla follows his protagonist on a journey from the neighbourhood, and then ultimately outside the city, all the way to Paris, where he hopes to fulfil his dream of becoming an actor. Here Nasralla's brilliance is most apparent in his ability to portray the run-down areas of Paris where many illegal Arab immigrants live. On film these areas can look strikingly similar to the poorer districts of Cairo, such as Rod El-Farag. The film supersedes the private to the public through exploration of a semi-philosophical issue: society's rejection of a person whose dream extends beyond its limits.

Even though these joint production films have emerged from within the existing crisis of film production in Egypt, they have lasted no more than two weeks in the film theatres. The most puzzling was the film *Araq El-Balah*, which played for only five days (actually less than the legal minimum period for a film run). However, all of these films lacked sufficient advertising and publicity which is essential if audiences are to be made aware of the existence of films of cinema other than the omnipresent comedies.

It does seem that the recession in Egyptian film production which ran through much of the 1990's has come to an end: what happens next is less clear, no-one predicted the decline, so how can we foresee development over the next



AL-MADINA, Yousry Nasralla

few years? However, there are some pointers. The increase in small-budget films and co-productions is likely to be sustained, as is the wave of immensely popular comedies. A whole new raft of actors and actresses (many in their early to mid 20's) are coming onto the scene, which is serving to cement new bonds between contemporary cinema and Egypt's huge population of younger people. It has also made film more convincing and relevant - the days when we saw people of over 40 years of age playing characters half their age may be on the way out. Both these factors should prove to be of positive benefit to the local film industry. Finally, it is likely that the next decade will be a period without distinct 'schools' or types of film - each director is bringing his own style and point of view, and this is bound to make for some very interesting film-going in the coming years.

Below: AL-ABWAB AL-MOGHLAQAH, Atef Hatata

Opposite: ARAQ EL-BALAH, Radwan El-Kashet



ART IN EGYPT:

Spheres OF INFLUENCE...

Signs OF LIFE

WILLIAM WELLS, KARIM FRANCIS & MARIA GOLA

CONTEMPORARY EGYPT'S RELATIONSHIP to the continent of Africa and to the more immediate region in which it lies is complex. There are the obvious historical, political and economic ties. It was a North African Fatimid tribe that founded Cairo and named it *The City Victorious*, after the planet Mars; they left their mark on the city's architecture and are part of its footprint. Then there is the Nile, the lifeline that unites us with nine neighbouring countries. Less obvious are the shades of African influence on art and other cultural expressions. To paraphrase a Sufi saying, in many ways, today "Egypt is in Africa, but not of it".

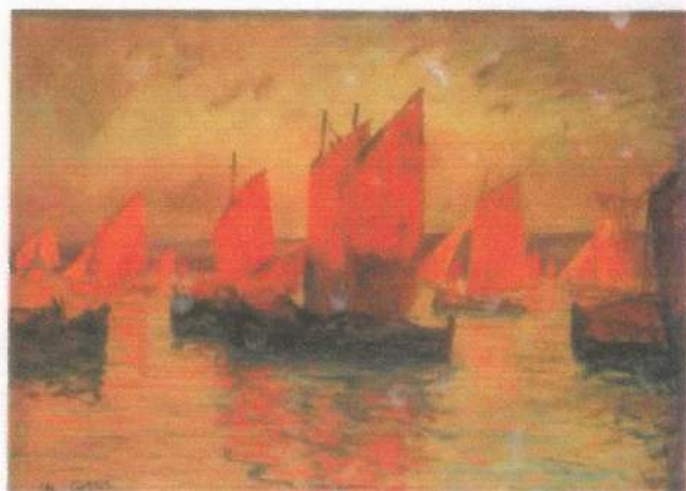
The evolution of Egypt's modern art scene dates to the 1920's and 30's, beginning with what may be referred to as a 'first generation' of Egyptian artists including sculptors Sobhi Girgis, Adam Heinein and Mohammed Hagrass and painters Mahmoud Said, Seif and Adnan Wanly, Elfat Nagy, Mounir Canaan, Said Adawy, El Ghazzar and Hamad Nada. They fused western mediums and methods with

root African cultural themes. The emergence of more Arab, and nationalist, themes marks the work of the second generation of artists, many of whom were also influenced by travel to Russia. Beginning in the late fifties and sixties (and still current), it was in many respects a reaction to the Officers Revolution of 1952.

The third generation of Egyptian artists are the young people of today. They live in one of the world's most densely populated, predominately urban countries whose demographic is overwhelmingly young. Over half of Egypt's population of 64 million is under the age of twenty-five, a third is under the age of fifteen. Although Egypt is still a country where traditional, conservative values reign, a new, economically-

YASSER GERAB, sculpture





Clockwise, from top left:

STAINED-GLASS WINDOW

*in the Art Nouveau style, over the
Bellevue-Bain staircase*

LES VOILES ROUGES

Charles Cottet - Oil on card, 52 x 74cm

GENETS ET COQUELICOTS

*Vincent Van Gogh - Oil on cloth, 64 x
53cm*

**CARICATURE DE MAHMOUD
KHALIL**

Saroudjian

CHEIKH ARABE DU CAIRE

*Charles H. Joseph Cordier - Bronze, H.
40cm*



Above: **NASSER EL-MASSADISSY**, paintings

Below: **AMAL & ABDEL GHANY KENAWY**, installation

Opposite: **DOAA ALI**, installation

The long-term plan envisages *Al-Nitaq* as a regional festival. Its role in the global arts scene would be that of portraying the issues and aesthetics unique to the participant's cultures. Middle Eastern art is often produced by artists in exile and/or judged by western curators. This work is therefore subject to influences that reconfirm certain preconceptions and reinforce them with market success.

The first Nitaq festival was in many ways an attempt to acknowledge locally the achievements of a new generation of contemporary artists who had hitherto been marginalised by the formal government infrastructure. By staging the second Nitaq to coincide with the official Cairo Biennale, the organisers were attempting to offer an alternative platform by which Egyptian contemporary work could be judged by both a local and international audience. For this reason Nitaq 2001 concentrated heavily on the the visual arts, with music, theatre and literary performances playing a secondary role. With the festival's success now acknowledged by several offers of shows abroad, and by a commitment to the development of 'criticism' in the region generally, Nitaq 2002 will be able to focus on the importance of the other disciplines and prepare the groundwork for a more diverse festival to support the Biennale in 2003. The need for regional co-operation was a significant outcome of this year's festival, and collaborative projects between Lebanon and Egypt, scheduled for September and October 2001, are a direct consequence of this year's success.

The future of Middle Eastern art (and that of the region itself) is a question of expressing and establishing an identity that is free from preconceptions. Developing a regional forum for artists, produced by and for local artistic communities, is a step towards accomplishing this goal. Artistic communities will never thrive in isolation.





AHMED ASKALANY. Installation

spurred openness has exposed its young people to the values of the West and in particular to the information age.

While themes of previous generations may be inherent in this generation's work, there are other influencing vectors. These include the contradictions today's artists experience in a new global climate, and a stronger identification with the modern Arab world to which they feel they belong, and indeed are helping to shape.

Egypt's artistic infrastructure, in terms of outlets, finance and media attention for artists, lags behind the times. Government-funded galleries and public shows suffer from endemic restrictions, such as low priority funding and bleak conservatism on the one hand and favouritism on the other. Only the non-confrontational work of a handful of accepted artists is fostered; new opportunities exist but are very rare. There is a lack of motivation and a subsequent lack of professionalism in curating, exhibiting and promoting art. As a consequence, public awareness and participation in art is reserved for the privileged few. Western cultural centres operating in the capital have little more freedom, in this case the restraints tending to be financial. In any case, their policy is usually one-way – showing artists from their own countries – and there is little by way of exchange.

Over the last five years, private galleries have taken the strongest initiative in decades to promote Egyptian artists locally and internationally. The last two years have seen co-operative efforts between these galleries. An important product of this collaboration was the first privately-funded Downtown Arts Festival in 1999, repeated as an annual event in March 2001. The pilot festival took art to the streets of Cairo's gracious late-18th and 19th century downtown, where several of the private galleries are located. It garnered neither the co-operation nor the undue interference

of the state. Combining art shows with musical, literary and theatrical events, the Downtown Arts Festival, called *Al-Nitaq* (Arabic for 'sphere' and 'area', or in this case, 'neighbourhood') won a higher profile for art in a wider portion of the community.

The primary feature distinguishing *Al-Nitaq* from government-operated events is the participation of new artists. Over 100 visual artists were selected by three private gallery curators to show in the galleries, rented spaces, restaurants and other venues hosting the festival. The selection criteria emphasised a high standard of professionalism in work demonstrating a strong conceptual character and depth of visual expression. Even artists who are not chosen benefit from a critical review of their work. Following the first *Nitaq* the organising

galleries were flooded with new applicants seeking to participate in future festivals.

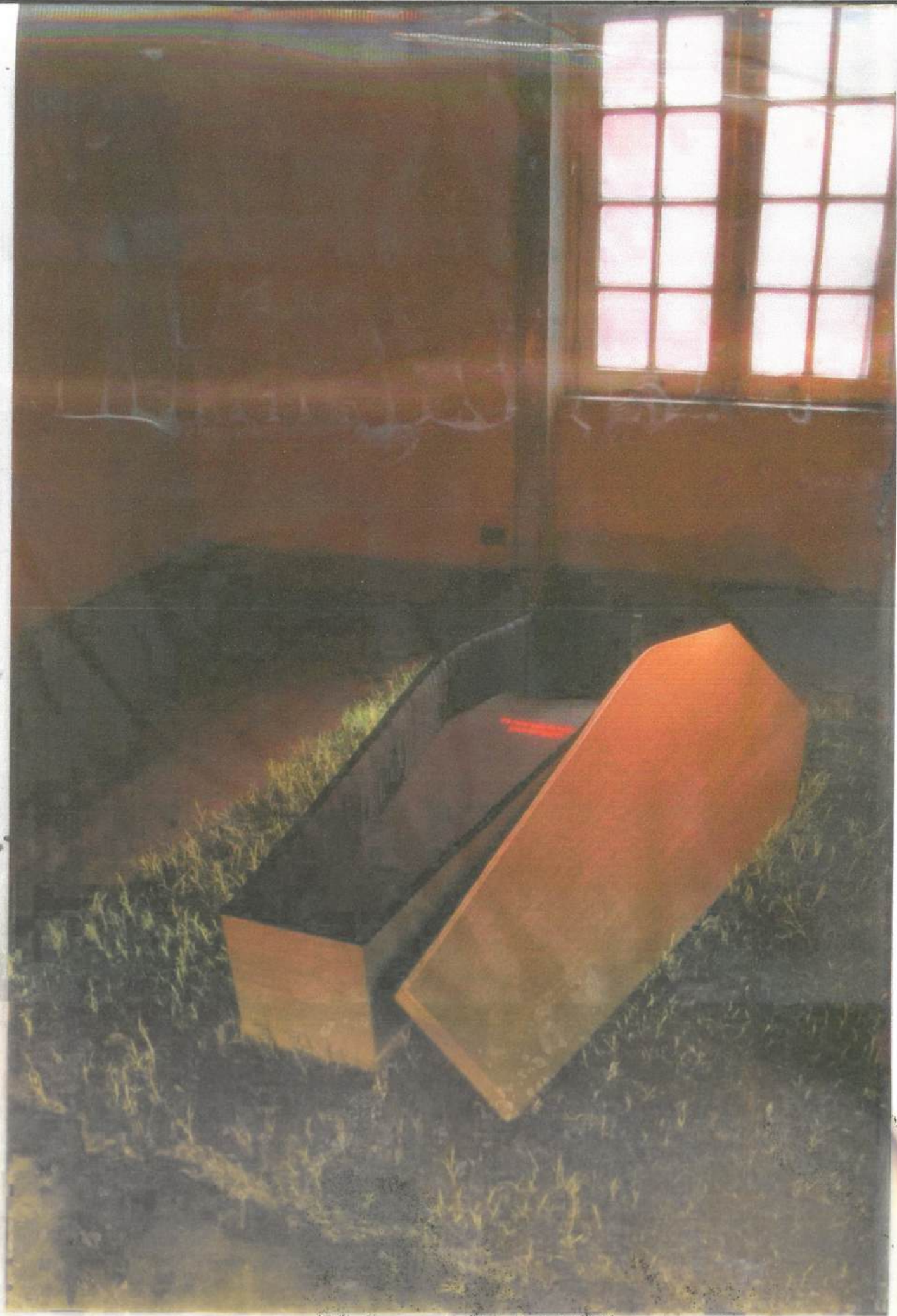
Egypt's first independent arts festival was a commercial success with attendance running into the thousands over the nine-day time period. Downtown sponsors were extremely enthusiastic about festival-related sales in their venues, encouraging new sponsors to join the event. But aside from reviving interest in Cairo's beautiful neo-classical downtown (itself a work of art) and exposing a new clientele to the area's offerings, *Al-Nitaq*'s greatest achievement was that of catalysing and cross-fertilising the local arts scene.

Young talent was discovered that previously had no public outlet. Artists, musicians, writers, poets and theatre people met and interacted for the first time, exchanging ideas and making plans for collaboration. Repercussions were heard in the press. "How," journalists asked, "can a festival with virtually no funding or government assistance succeed where heavily subsidised events fall short?... Why did these marginal venues attract crowds that our costly, institutionalised ones fail to produce?"



The answer of course, is that funding alone cannot generate talent or attract the interest of an apathetic public. *Al-Nitaq* showed Cairo another half-forgotten face of art, art produced by creative individuals whose vitality and yearning is not intimidated by censorship or defeated by lack of finance. That the government-run press should pose pointed questions related to the prevailing system was, itself, a triumph.

REYAD ELSADER



Mohamed Mandour:

A Potter from Fustat **ELIZABETH RODENBECK**



YELLOW BOWL

ACCORDING to Ancient Egyptian tradition, Man himself was formed of Nile clay on a potter's wheel by the ram-headed creator god Khnum, Lord of Elephantine Island and the cataracts. The god is depicted several times in reliefs, seated at his kick-wheel. Numerous reliefs from the Old Kingdom onwards show an enormous variety of pottery jars, jugs, vessels and containers of all kinds. Shelf upon shelf of them are ranged along the walls of the make-believe storerooms of the dead, where they were



CERAMIC BOWL

hypothetically filled with the wine, the wheat, the honey, oil, dates and other foodstuffs needed for life in the afterworld. Every archaeologist makes a careful study of the number and type of potsherds found on a particular site. Flinders Petrie revolutionized archaeological methods and techniques by his systematic analysis of pottery and his use of sequence dating.

Since its foundation immediately after the Arab conquest in AD642, Fustat (the original Arab settlement, later to evolve into Cairo in the 10th century) was known for its pottery. Pottery and other craftsmen would have been native Egyptians or Copts, already masters of age-old skills during the earliest civilization of the Nile valley thousands of years before.

Inheritors of tradition, and known throughout Islam, the Fustat potters were highly skilled at procuring, storing, mixing and manipulating Nile clays into varieties of traditional vessels which were then fired in kilns and marketed. Millions of redware vessels were turned out for popular everyday use, as well as glazed ware for the more affluent and for export. With succeeding generations and regimes, styles and glazes changed, but utilitarian wares remained basically the same.

Under the Fatimid dynasty (AD969-1171) glazing became extremely sophisticated. Nassir-i Khusraw, a Persian who visited the city in the middle of the 11th century, mentions local products: "All types of porcelain are made at Fustat. It is so fine and transparent that a hand held outside a vase can be seen through it. Bowls, cups, dishes, and other utensils are made here. They are decorated with colours whose shades change with the position of the object." No doubt he was referring to the lustreware which was so highly prized in Fatimid times. An abrupt change came about in the Mamluk era (1268-1516) and vessels became more robust and rugged, glazes cruder. And then, with the long decline of arts and crafts under the Turkish occupation, wares reverted to the simple everyday needs of the lower classes.

Anyone who goes to Fustat today will see quantities of flower pots, water pots and storage jars stacked around the smoking kilns. Some potters have recently been moved out into the eastern desert in an effort to reduce the acrid black smoke which pours out of the kilns and pollutes the city, but the effort has not been wholly successful and the potters bitterly resent their summary exile.

BORN IN 1950 IN OLD CAIRO, the oldest of seven children, Mohamed Mandour never went to school. When he was seven years old he was apprenticed to a Fustat potter. His parents

thought he would be better off under the watchful eye of a master, than running around the streets and alleys of Fustat, picking up bits of pottery and other debris.

Fustat, the old city, is a maze of narrow, winding streets and alleys, a labyrinth of mud-brick buildings, some of which are still standing, others in ruins. The city is a living museum of the old, with its many traditional crafts and trades.

Mohamed Mandour, now 40, is a potter by profession. He has been working in his father's workshop for many years, learning the art of pottery from his father and other masters.



CERAMIC JAR

pots, traditional storage jars – forms which had remained the same since time immemorial. He received his share of whacks and curses, but says laughingly that it was just part of everyday life and all the boys expected a bit of rough treatment. It was not unkindly meant, the commonly held view being, "If I don't beat this boy he won't be any good." Pollution at that time was not as bad as it has become recently – the fuel for the kilns was vegetable matter, cornstalks and sugar cane, rather than the plastic and rubber which is burned today.

The small boy gradually learned to throw pots on the wheel. He was taken on as an apprentice by another master who recognised his talent and advanced him to making five different models of the *qillet al sebuah*, the pottery candlesticks used on the seventh day after the birth of a child. Each little piece had to be made separately and then the whole welded together with clay.

He changed masters again and between the ages of 12 and 16 he worked with Imam Hafez, a kind master who appreciated his unusual ability. More sophisticated artist potters were migrating to Fustat.

In 1960 Sayed al Sadr, Egypt's foremost modern potter and a teacher at the School of Fine Arts, who had worked with Bernard Leach in England, established an atelier among the traditional pottery workshops.

In the winter of 1967 Mandour attracted the attention of a well-known sculptor, Mohamed Hussein Hagra, who invited the young man to study sculpture with him in the atelier he and Safeyya Helmy had set up in Helwan, 20 miles south of Cairo. Hagra encouraged Mandour to make sketches and explore free-form sculpture, but though he profited immensely from this experience which developed his aesthetic sense, Mandour eventually realized that his talent and inclination lay elsewhere, and he went back to Fustat to make pots on the foot-powered wheel which he prefers to this day.

In 1970 he went into the army. Fortunately his superiors recognized his outstanding abilities and he was put in charge of an experimental laboratory at the Ministry of the Interior.

On discharge after the 1973 war, Mandour took a job with UNESCO for six years as a teacher at a school for the mentally handicapped in Matareya. He was able to pursue his own work as an artist-potter and his reputation grew. Since then he has held over two dozen local and international solo exhibitions. Time after time he has carried off first prize in national group exhibitions.

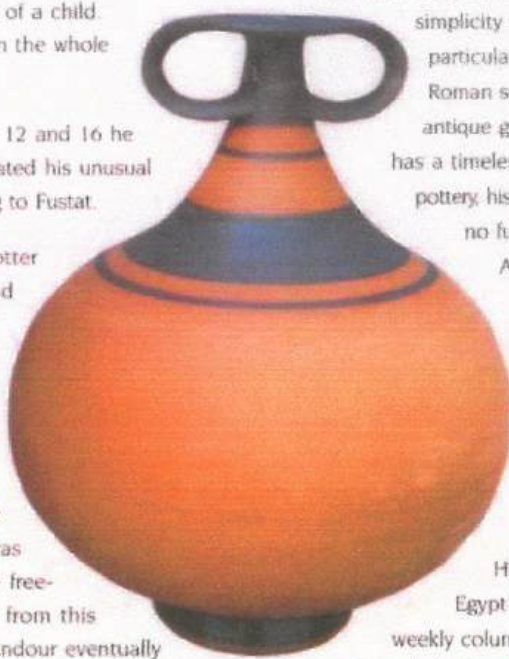
Mandour built his own atelier on the side of the hill in Fustat twenty years ago, near that of Sayed el Sadr, his distinguished old mentor. He produces most of his work in this simple two-storey stone house. He also teaches in an atelier in the suburb of Atada.

Red rock from Arwan is his primary material. It is brought to Fustat in lumps, where it is crushed to powder and mixed with water. "This clay is finer, easier to handle, holds its shape and is altogether more pliable and plastic than ordinary clay," Mandour maintains.

His pots are fired in an electric kiln these days, to a temperature in the region of 900 degrees centigrade. His glazes are locally made mineral oxides which produce a matte surface: dark green, black, a cobalt colour, white. Only occasionally does he indulge in decorative designs, usually echoing back to the heyday of Islamic ceramics: stylized birds and fish on a black or white background. To his credit he is not tempted to play around with expensive lustre or other shiny glazes.

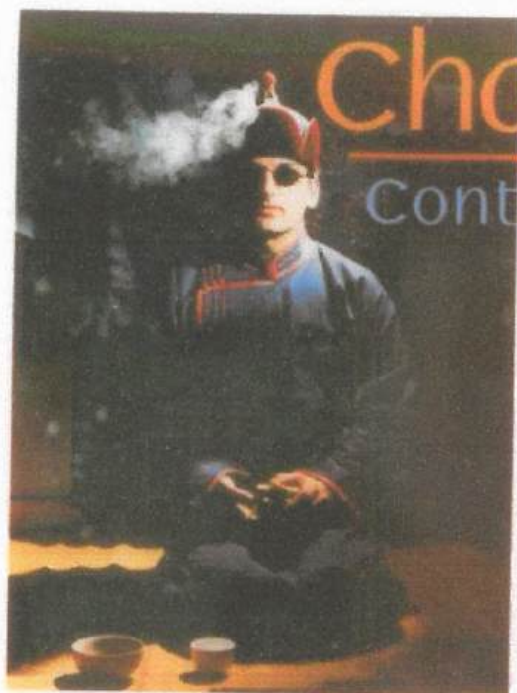
The outstanding feature of Mandour's work is its utter simplicity and purity of line. Whether a particular pot is portly and rotund as a Roman senator or slim and tall as an antique goddess, convex or concave, it has a timeless quality. Unlike traditional pottery, his pots are not utilitarian, having no function except to be beautiful. An endless variety of forms calls up echoes from the depths of the pharaonic, the Coptic and the Islamic past. They crowd side by side in his studio, each one more noble, more elegant, more ethereal than its neighbour.

Hussein Bikar, the dean of Egypt's painters and critics, in his weekly column in *Al Akhbar* waxed poetic over the work of this extraordinary artist, "Every curve is a sweet bedouin song rising in the heart of the desert. The fine handles and the elegant lines of the mouth do not conform to the traditional proportions dictated by practical use. The pot has transcended the utilitarian stage of carrying liquids, to become an end in itself as an exquisite piece of art fashioned by the hands of a talented self-taught artist from the pottery yards in Fustat. His talent has raised him far above the stature of academically disciplined and titled artists."



Above: CERAMIC NARROW-NECKED VASE
Below: THE ARTIST IN HIS STUDIO, 1998.





Chant Avedissian

Contemporary Iconographer

The Context

CHANT AVEDISSIAN IS A UNIQUE CASE in modern Egyptian art. His work and indeed his character exemplify the concept of multiculturalism. His Armenian origin and Western education make him an outsider, always seen in comparison with, or in contradiction to, other more mainstream artists. His work makes him even more of an outsider. Unlike the artists of his generation, and indeed most of the preceding generations, he has always looked for and found 'Egyptian' sources of inspiration, in method as in madness. Modern Egyptian art originated as an offshoot of Western painting and sculpture, and most of its developments have trailed Western, particularly European, art movements. Why was Chant Avedissian more able to excavate the roots of Egyptian culture? The answer could very well be the fact that his being part of this culture was always threatened.

But we might be able to take this point a little further. Chant was for many years associated with the late Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who developed a theory of indigenous architecture based on two major concepts: architecture for the poor and architecture without architects. For more than eight years, Chant neglected his individual talent and worked on photography and documentation for the great architect. This devotion was an expression of an inherent political and social commitment that was not allowed, due to rigid societal frameworks, to be expressed more explicitly. This same sense of political and social awareness and commitment found its natural route some years later when Chant started to paint again and to include in his work subjects such as the Gulf War, dual cultural identity, gender and the effect of commercialism on daily life.

One of Chant's major achievements is that he devoted the years 1977-1980 to paint and document an iconography of the Egyptian cinema in the 1940s and 1950s. Portraits of famous film stars, singers and dancers, scenes from the famous graffiti of the period flowed into his work, depicting a vibrant, joyful and humorous celebration of Egyptian culture. No other artist has ever been capable of expressing such attachment to and love for an Egyptian culture of film.

The Technique

AVEDISSIAN WORKS from photographs – magazine images published three or four decades ago. These images are blown up, partitioned into blocks of plain colour. The stencil is made and then the colour – pigment mixed with gum arabic – applied onto sheets of wrapping paper, butchers' paper, sometimes corrugated cardboard. "The paper is not acid-free. I am not interested in permanence. At some point these images will simply self-destruct."

The works that result are images of images, with the propagandist element to the photographs played up mercilessly. The captions are kept, the stylised Arabic script becoming one more decorative element. These images of images explore the way symbols shift, the way meanings change when they are put into different contexts. Over the years the stencils have become increasingly flexible, and now can comprise up to twenty separate sheets. These are carefully numbered, and then stored. There are hundreds, and each one is infinitely reproducible.

Nigel Ryan

(courtesy of Al Akhram Weekly)

The Work

AVEDISSIAN'S MONOTYPES are the result of twenty years of peripatetic research, during which he has absorbed the principal achievements of modern art through his formal studies in Paris and Canada. With this he has integrated the iconographic heritage of unknown Prehistoric artists, the geometric and abstract concepts of his Arab surroundings, and the baroque and flowery motifs of Ottoman design. In the 1970s and 1980s he was influenced by the graphic language of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, with whom he worked for some ten years. Avedissian's fondness for popular art, Sufi poetry, Chinese and Japanese Zen concepts and aesthetics have resulted in his own version of a Wabi Sabi lifestyle.



AMINA SHOUKRY – gouache on recycled paper, 50 x 70 cm

The first Om Kalsoum stencil led to others. The first Om Kalsoum stencil led to others. Every single image is created through several layers of stencils, each of different colour and form. Starting in 1991, and still going to this date, they represent thousands of hours of work. Selecting images from magazines. Enlarging them to the desired scale. Outlining and simplifying the forms. Tracing each form onto different sheets of transparent plastic. Cutting out each form. Preparing the colours with gum Arabica, testing and finalising it on recycled paper. Writing the caption under each. Numbering them. signing, washing the brushes and continuing with the next. This represents almost ten years of my life, all the jasmine tea I drank, all the 'Cleopatra Box' cigarettes I smoked, and all the solitude in my room, working by night, sleeping in the mornings.

Every single image represents a bit of propaganda, seen through the magazines, films, books etc of what was the Nasser era, the 1950's and 60's, which coincided with my youth in Egypt and my own family dramas, coloured by an upbringing within the Armenian diaspora: in spite of being born in Egypt, and having only an Egyptian passport, each time I talked to an "Egyptian" he or she would ask about my nationality, enquire about the origin of my name, or comment on my accent. Equally, each time I met an "Armenian" he or she would wonder why my work is like that of Ottomans, and not Armenians. Still, all this faded magnificently in the face of China, Korea and Japan. I discovered peace and harmony in being "Oriental". I do not look Chinese, Korean or Japanese, and I never could be. At least visually. What relief.

Looking at the images in past newspapers, it seems that all human dramas were transformed by the media into some sort of a caricature of reality. All past presidents, princes, kings, emperors and revolutionaries, speaking in the name of the masses, left images. War heroes, soldiers, women fighters and martyrs left images. Sportsmen, sportswomen, nurses, dancers, singers and movie stars left images. Searchers of money, fame, power, social change and social justice left images. Criminals, playboys, maids, writers and philosophers left images. Even dogs, parrots and donkeys left images. All these images, manipulated then and with new versions operating now across the world, were extremely distorted, filtered, retouched and censored, in order to empower the product that the system wished to impose. In the case of socialist Egypt, this was Arab nationalism. By making these stencilled images I wanted them to be a reflection of the fabric of some megalomaniac designer or politician. Approximately that and not much more. Do people ever leave images, or is it that they do not need to leave any?

Artists of Lebanon, Contemporary Art Centre, Capotaormina

While studying in the West, the artist soon realised that the Western modern traditions arose from cultures and societies in which he would probably be a provincial outsider if he stayed and lived outside of its centre. Yet, all the same, Avedissian made the decision to come back to his birthplace in Cairo; there he fused the techniques he had acquired in the West with the heritage of his complex Armenian-Egyptian background. Egypt – his family's adopted homeland after their flight from the massacres in Armenia – became essential to his art.

Avedissian is not in awe of the West. Equally he never resorts to self-protective inwardness, nor to proclaiming a culturally exclusive 'Egyptianness'. On the contrary, he has a fascination for cultural differences and similarities, as well as an ability to make new Pharaonic, Armenian, Nubian, Arab, Eastern or Western sources. He does this in brave and unconventional ways.

Bygone eras, death (he lost his parents when still a teenager) and beloved heroes (most of the stencilled stars, divas and leaders are figures of his childhood) are the main themes of his monotypes. Om Kalsoum, the diva who more than twenty years after her death is still number one in the charts, the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the father of Arab nationalism, King Farouq, the last king of Egypt, the Druze princess and singer Asmahan, killed in tragic circumstances, are some of the most well-known figures of Egyptian history and icons of the Arab world.

Treating subjects that are already dead is not an innocent choice. Avedissian commemorates characters who have been ignored by the Egyptian state since their death; monuments under environmental threat (Luxor, the Valley of the Kings, famous streets in old Cairo); everyday objects

(cooking materials, fly repellents, musical instruments), beloved animals (parrots, donkeys, stray dogs); landscapes and people, which he mixes with amusing words in Latin or Arabic. No amount of his personal angst seems to reduce the humour of these paintings.

The paintings depict an era. The Egypt of the 50s, when the country was at the height of its cosmopolitanism. Spies and tradesmen, Greeks, Italians, Muslims, Copts, Jews, Armenians, Palestinian refugees, Europeans and a great number of Middle Eastern intellectuals, all mingled. This era also represents the height of Egyptian popular culture, with Egyptian cinema dominating most of the Arab world. Booming publishing houses and writers from neighbouring countries made Cairo a meeting-place to discuss anti-colonial ideas. The Suez Crisis was looming. The Soviets were about to build the Aswan Dam. The reflected nostalgia in Avedissian's work is overpowering.

Overlapping motifs intertwined with historical characters and names, landscapes, objects and symbols, stencilled in random directions, painted with local pigments, bordered by hand-coloured textiles, become the vehicle of Avedissian's memories. Simple recycled packing cardboards and corrugated paper are the media for his ideas. This is his way of paying homage to his host country of Egypt, and to other Eastern cultures and aesthetics, in which he finds many affinities and similarities.

Rose Issa

The Artist – in his own words

ON 13 JANUARY 1991 I went for a long stay to Luxor in Upper Egypt, at a time when the Gulf War was imminent. Luxor looked like the setting for the movie *The Shining*. Five star hotels, red carpets, glittering decorations, elegant hotel personnel, luxurious boats on the Nile and spectacular Pharaonic monuments. As in *The Shining*, this highly touristic town was totally empty, except for its sparse inhabitants. Everything looked strange, the usual reality was shifted to a totally different value system. The real owners of the temples and tombs had them back to themselves. Egyptian schoolboys and girls became the sole visitors to the temples. Extremely alive with their musical instruments and songs, their wonderful homage to the ancient ruins was quite in contrast with the generally silent tourists burdened with heavy guidebooks.

I stayed for three months in a small room, in a small hotel in front of the Karnak Temple, during which this super-mediated war took place. My visits to the temples in this atmosphere made the sense of time vanish despite the mega-media war. It was there in Luxor that a lady asked me to paint of her idol Om Kalsoum. Not having painted for some ten years, I decided to make a stencilled painting of the diva.

There were many reasons for deciding on the stencil image. Having filed for some years Hassan Fathy's architectural drawings, I discovered that, at the age of 85, Fathy still had all his faculties. Stencilling also gave me the possibility of variation. Once the drawing was cut out one could concentrate on colour, or different backgrounds. I had to go hieroglyphic, i.e., simplifying to the extent of the essential.

EVE VOTES – gouache on recycled paper, 50 x 70 cm



The lure of the East

CHANT AVEDISSIAN has been conducting an affair with the Far East. He has travelled in China and Mongolia. He knows the back streets of Ulan-bataar and the price of Genghis Khan vodka. His exercises in Chinese calligraphy fill several books. In 1995 he was the only Egyptian artist to take part in the Korean Biennale. "We must go East," he announces, "Why visit Paris, London, New York, when the West is here, in Cairo. Cairo can be more West than the West; it can be a parody of New York, more exaggeratedly French than the French. The Middle East, Europe, they are reflections of each other. But in China they do not care what lies to the West. Mention Egypt and they might have heard about the Pyramids, but nothing else. This gives space. In Egypt I am Armenian, in Europe I am Egyptian, but in China these definitions mean nothing."

Yet if the Middle East is merely an extension of Europe, or *vice-versa*, Egypt retains a firm hold on his affections. It is just that there are difficulties. In one published interview he tells his interviewer, quite baldly, that his work is too Egyptian to be noticed here. In many ways his work has been an experiment in pairing down, an exercise in reduction. Some of Avedissian's most recent work is on scrolls, rolled away, neatly filed. The stencils themselves have become increasingly Far Eastern in feel. They too can be mounted, in series, and folded away.

Nigel Ryan

(courtesy of Al Ahram Weekly)

...and Armenia

HOWEVER TANTALISING and fulfilling the East proved to be to Avedissian, in more recent months he has turned his attention to Armenia. He has been doing so strictly as an artist, interested only in beauty, and refusing to allow any engagement of his own Armenian heritage. He has been at equal pains to avoid the sort of artists' world that might in usual circumstances provide a convenient *entrée*: "If art is only in relation to race and nationalism then I am proud to be definitely out of it ... I am out of my own image, projected or

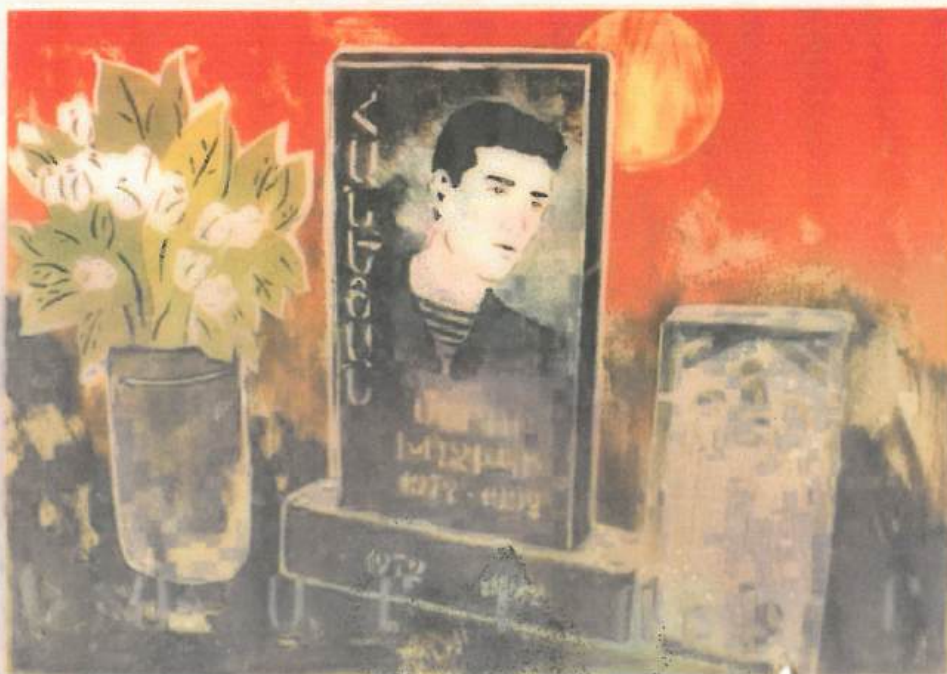
imposed, and shall also stay out of the Yerevan art scene. I am avoiding artists and the Armenian cultural scene like the Pest."

Even so, the dramatic landscapes of Armenia and strange, rather ethereal, quality of its people have clearly struck a chord. When in Cairo, Avedissian had already been working on themes and images gathered from previous visits to Yerevan and the surrounding countryside, with dramatic results. He has found particular inspiration among the local graveyards and their serried ranks of headstones, each carrying a photo-engraved image of the deceased in their prime. At once macabre, compelling and oddly reassuring, these exquisite gravestone images have provided Avedissian with new sustenance. Pure and clean, they have an uncluttered appeal to an artist who, rather ironically given the symbolism of the images to the relatives and friends left behind, has little time for the paraphernalia of roots, ties and roles.

James Parry



ALEXEI ROMANOV - tempera on recycled paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2000



YERABLOOR - tempera on recycled paper, 50 x 70 cm, 2000

Yerabloor is the name of the cemetery in Yerevan in which he is buried and where the Hagop-Karabekian is buried.

OTTOMAN JERUSALEM

THE LIVING CITY 1517-1917

Edited by
SYLVIA AULD and ROBERT HILLENBRAND

Architectural survey by YUSUF NATSHEH

The Ottoman empire dominated the Mediterranean and the Middle East from the 16th to the 18th centuries until the Europeans began to assert power in the region. However, the Ottomans continued to control much of the region until after their defeat in the First World War.

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Khairiah Kasmieh
Klaus Kreiser
Martin Strohmeier
Ernst Axel Knauf
Angelika Newirth
Michele Bernardini
Khadr Salameh

Mohammad 'Ali 'Alami
Mahmud Atallah
Lawrence I Conrad
Paolo Cuneo
Rashid I Khalidi
George Hinitian
Ruth Victor Hummel
Kamal J al-'Asali

Nancy Micklewright
Claudia Ott
Vera Tamari
Sylvia Auld
Susan Roaf
Beatrice St Laurent
John Carswell
Finbarr B Flood

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Yusuf Natsheh

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Themes and trends in contemporary Egyptian theatre

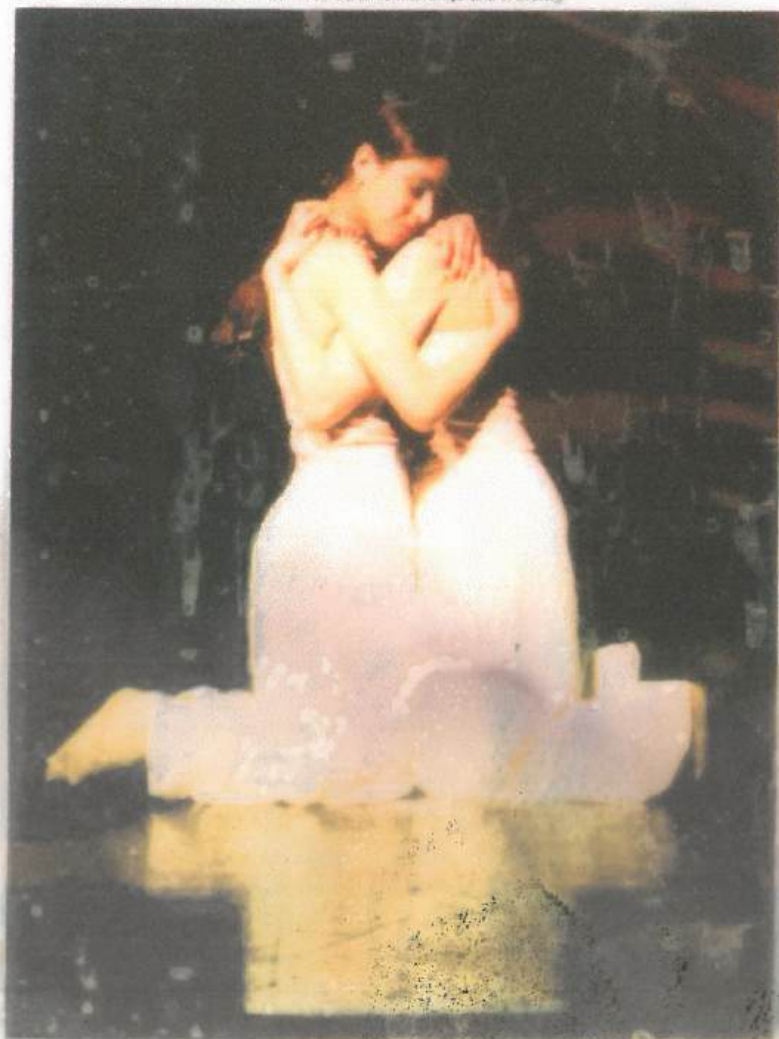
SARAH ENANY

IN 1996, 97 AND 98 George Bartenieff, Karen Malpede and Roberto Ciulli singled out independent, experimental theatre shows as the best that Egyptian has to offer, presented by so-called 'free theatre companies'. 'Free of what?' I find myself continually being asked. To answer this leads you to another question that baffles foreigners and even some Egyptians: What is this tendency on the part of critics and audience to insist on dividing plays into either 'private-sector' or 'public-sector'?

To answer this, we must remember that Egypt retains an antiquated form of state control of the arts, embodied in the state theatre organisation. This admittedly rickety old organisation owes its existence to the military *coup d'état* of 1952 and the subsequent adoption by the military junta of the Soviet socialist model of state ownership and patronage of everything, including the arts. This was either a disaster or a giant step forward, depending on how you

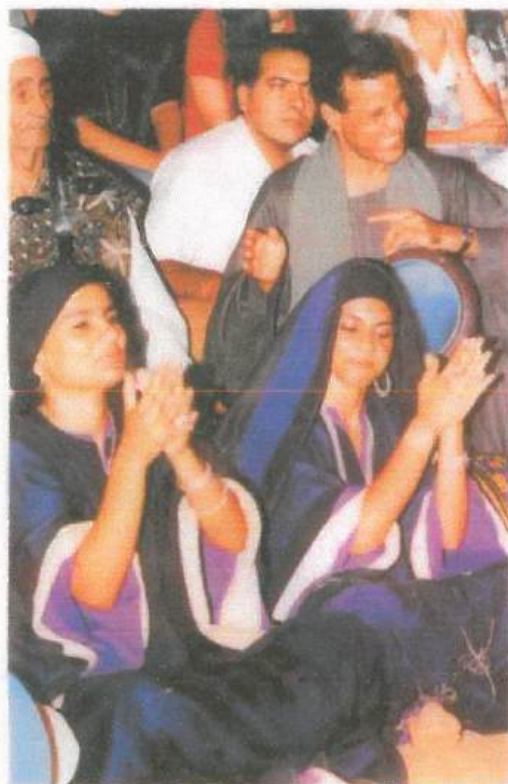
look at it. On the one hand, many of the old independent troupes such as the Ramsis and Nagib el-Rihani companies, who had helped popularise theatre on the Western model in Egypt (after its beginnings in the mid-19th century), closed down, theatre became state-controlled, and practically all artists became employed by the government; on the other, it witnessed the so-called Golden Age of modern Egyptian drama, namely, a kind of word-centred, politically oriented theatre with the main theme being the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, with the most seminal influences in performance being Bertolt Brecht and similar Western socialist artists.

Some independent Egyptian theatre companies now feel confident enough to tackle controversial issues such as non-traditional relationships and sexuality.



That all ended with the collapse of Nasser's socialist dream in 1967 after Egypt's defeat in the Arab-Israeli war. With the advent of the open-door policy under Sadat, the state lost interest in theatre as a political forum for disseminating the old ideology. The state theatre became, in effect, a headless body, and survives today as a bloated bureaucracy, its funds soaked up by its numerous employees. Today, a visit to the National Theatre or indeed any of the state-run theatres, will reveal sparsely populated musical 'adaptations' of old plays, foreign texts, film material, and more or less any old thing, most of its companies offering no more than two poorly attended middle-brow productions a year that never cover their costs, let alone make a profit. In a desperate attempt to fill up houses, the state companies have resorted to spectacular musicals complete with box-office stars, in the face of a repertoire that has dated so badly as to be unperformable.

Today's private companies conformed on to this formula long ago, the 'recipe for success' as described by highly successful director Galal el-Sharawy: 'A pinch of comedy and a pinch of pretty girls, spiced with some political criticism.' Their appearance dates back to the Sadat era, when the consumer society coupled with the end of the socialist fundamentalism imposed by Sadat to combat the UDD put a new emphasis on theatre. Private companies were set up and each in on the stage, using all the paid forces in the name of



entertainment. The question is: why should they feel an obligation to present political criticism?

The answer lies partly in the legacy of the Nasser era, when theatre was an area consecrated, supported and funded by the government as a political safety-valve. Political comment became synonymous with serious theatre. This survives today, secure in its power, the government has a long-established policy of allowing a measure of political dissidence to let off steam.

The other, more serious, reason is that Egyptians talk about politics the way the English talk about the weather: it is a safe topic and respectable to talk about, and allows us to skirt real, more dangerous issues, such as human rights, the abuse of women, the rules that govern marriage and relationships, sexual orientation, freedom of faith, criteria of success and failure in life, etc. A very rigid value system governs our most intimate relations, the way we relate to the world, to ourselves and to other people. On stage and in the media, characters are stereotypes, pawns in the game of social relationships. Time after time we see *The Good Woman*, the *Whore*, the *Brother*, the *Sister*, the *Mother*: none of these characters displays anything different from what is expected of them, and if they do, it is regarded as an aberration. In this context, it is easier to rebel against the government than against your father, and the ugly face of familial relationships is swept under the carpet, any mention of it denounced as detrimental to the reputation of Egypt – a convenient excuse trotted out by censor and audiences alike to condemn anything that shows an aspect of society they would rather not see. Foreign journalists often mistake the comic criticism of government policies in private-sector plays for an unprecedented degree of freedom, not realising that this is bought at a greater price of silence over other issues.

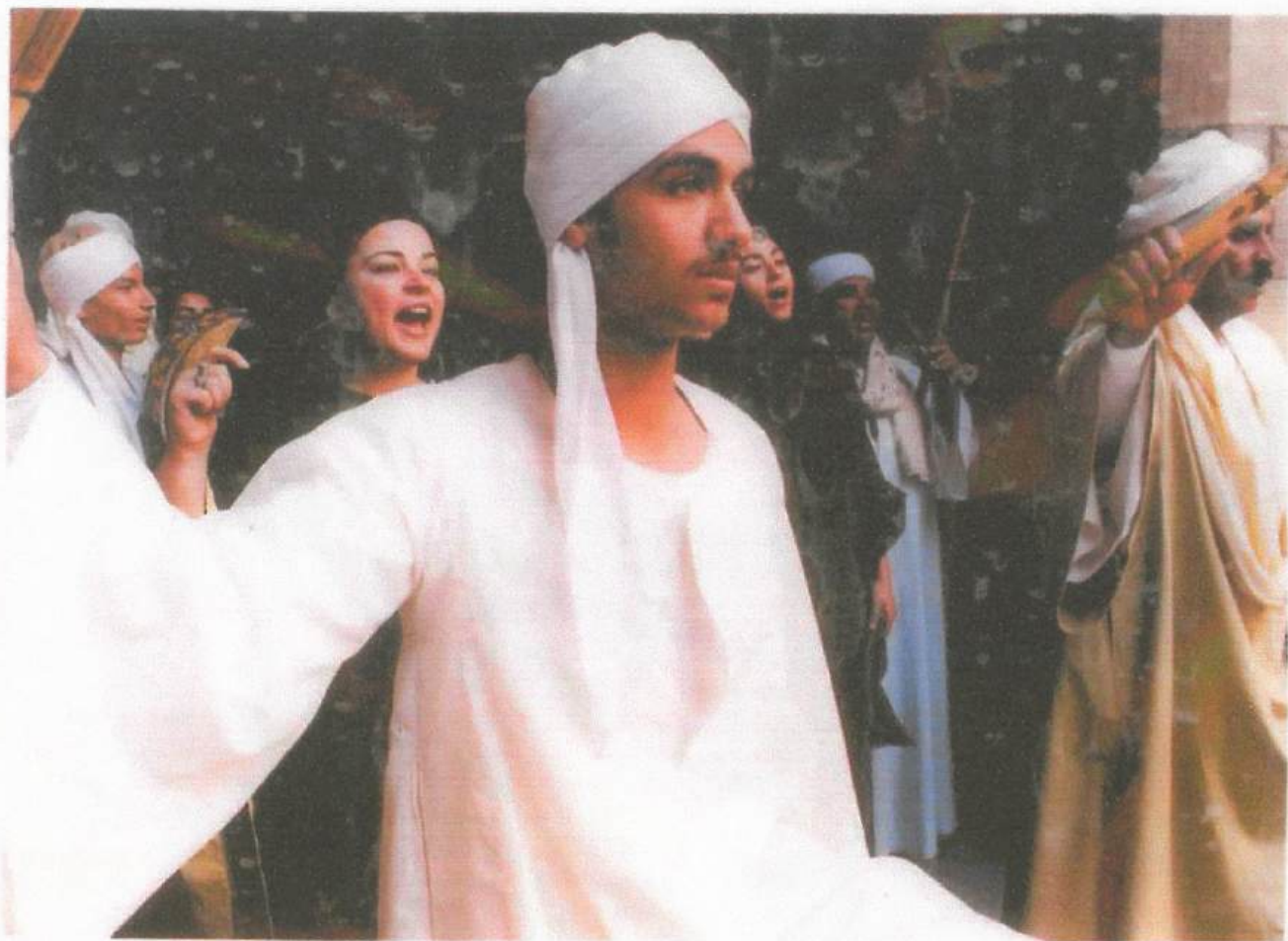
But there are people who dare to discuss these issues. They form part of an alternative trend which began to appear towards the middle of the 1980s, at the height of the tide of fundamentalism, the appearance of a predominantly young independent theatre group, dubbed the 'alternative' Egyptian theatre. It seems logical that today, after

after so many years of state control, to the old formula of private companies. However, the similarity is deceptive. Whereas the old ones had the legal and financial infrastructure of a professional company, with the resources to rent theatres, mount big productions and enjoy the patronage of the aristocracy and the rich, they were bourgeois in outlook, and publicly espoused the concept of theatre as education. The new ones stand in marked contrast, tiny non-profit cottage industries struggling for survival in a financial void with an almost total lack of recognition or any legal status, a dearth of performance spaces, and emergency laws still in force that forbid "unauthorised public congregations" of more than five people.

These groups, in fact, constitute what in the West would be called a fringe. Their venues are art galleries, cultural centres and the homes of friends; their sources of inspiration are the cinema, poetry, plastic arts and foreign, experimental texts. In these groups, most texts are workshopped and the director is usually the scriptwriter. And, like fringe theatres world-wide, they have the courage to tackle the issues that have long been out of bounds to any other channel. To name just a few examples, in La Musica Company's *The Braid* and *The Temple's Life is Beautiful*, Nora Amin and Ahmad el Attar respectively challenge the traditional sweetness-and-light view of family relationships, revealing an arid wasteland where affection is dead and frustration, violence and oppression rule the day:

The nature of the relationship of individuals to each other – and to the greater mass of humanity – continues to occupy centre stage in today's 'alternative' Egyptian theatre





Above & opposite, top: Scenes from El-Warsha's acclaimed production. **SPINNING LIVES**

Mohamed Aboul-Soud's Shrapnel Company takes an iconoclastic look at how people delude themselves with religion and use it to destroy the different; Effat Yehia's Caravan Company adapted Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* into *Desertscape*, a feminist examination of the roles of women; Maher Sabry was the first director to portray gay and lesbian love in a lyrical and sympathetic manner on stage, in fact in the Egyptian media as a whole, in his *Maraia* Company's *The Harem*. Hany Ghanem's *Rebellion Troupe* uses multimedia performance to explode traditional myth, presenting a sordid view of life. Karim Tonsy's dance theatre company portrays youthful angst. In addition, some are awakening to Egypt's rich heritage of indigenous popular performance modes dating back hundreds of years, including puppet-shows, folk dance, comic interludes, shadow-plays, etc., and using these to enrich their work; an Egyptian version of Yusuf Idris's *Cull* perhaps? In this vein, Hassan el-Gereltly's *El-Warsha* explores traditional sagas and epics from a dialectical and controversial point of view.

Thanks, too, to their experimentation with form, they have revolutionised the long-established, largely logocentric concept of what constitutes theatre. In this respect the relatively new institution of the Experimental Theatre, started in 1988, has been invaluable in giving them inspiration and a forum. Some independent groups and the new trend they represent have also emerged in Cairo; you find them in Alexandria. Upper Egypt has a few of them, too. Unfortunately, the centralisation of all theatre activity in Cairo has caused us to lose sight of anything that happens outside the capital. It is a pity that the

provincial theatre. Practically its only outlet is the down-at-heel Cultural Palaces (formerly Mass Culture) Organisation. Rarely covered by the media or brought to the attention of visitors to Egypt, it offers such diverse fare as original texts by regional playwrights, translations of Western dramas, famous plays from the Sixties repertoire, and experiments with popular folklore theatrical forms. Nevertheless, it suffers chronically from bureaucracy, censorship and lack of funds. The longest run for even the most successful play does not exceed three weeks.

In the face of the current recession and the decline of petrodollar tourism, even the commercial theatre is going through financial difficulties. Only the independent young companies are fully unaffected by this since they never had any money to begin with, and are – for now – content with their small but fiercely loyal audiences, and a few sympathetic critics, both in Egypt and abroad. What the future holds for these groups remains to be seen.

Margo VEILLON

JOHN RODENBECK

COLLECTORS AROUND THE WORLD have been aware for decades that the most vitally interesting artist at work in Egypt is a native Cairene of Swiss nationality and feminine gender. Now 94 years old, Margo Veillon was born in Abbassiyah in 1907 and has lived in the suburb of Maadi since 1922, where her house on Road 19 has become a landmark.

Since 1997 Margo's house has legally belonged to the American University in Cairo, with the proviso that after her death it will continue to be maintained as a museum of her life and work. Apart from her own collections, which are designated to remain in the museum permanently, it will also serve as a repository of paintings for rotating exhibitions.

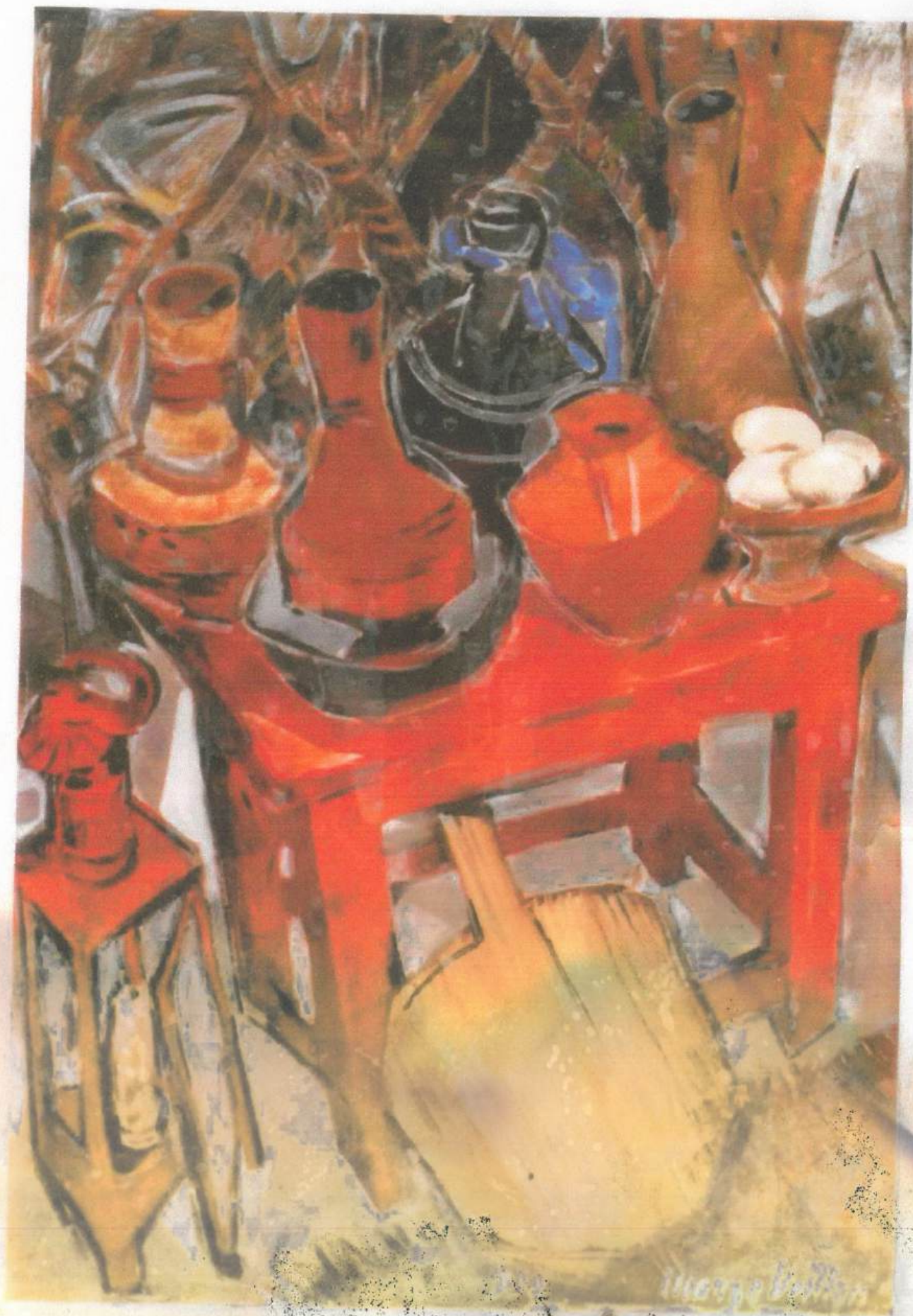
Set among a small forest of tropical shrubs and trees, the house was built to her specifications in 1952. Margo has worked for nearly fifty years in its two ateliers, a superbly lit studio dedicated solely to painting and a workshop housing tools and materials for print-making and ceramics. Everything is to hand and impeccably in order. Showing an equal dedication to artistic discipline, Margo's private living quarters demonstrate in detail the elegant simplicity of her lifestyle. The rest of the house is crowded with delightful surprises. Paintings, drawings, prints, and sketches overflow from every corner. On display are sculptures, mosaics, seed-pods, gourds, boxes of coloured sand, and stones collected during desert camping trips. In her orange-curtained sitting room the furniture is plain, substantial, and comfortable:

cushioned Morris chairs, a round table under an adjustable hanging lamp, a blue-painted stool, a red-painted metal chest, two hefty Sudanese beds. There are bright fabrics, wooden and pottery bowls. Bookcases contain reference books and monographs on her favourite painters – Cranach, Breughel, Picasso, Van Gogh, Braque. The room is bright during the day with blobs of sunshine. There is always music and usually a mass of cut flowers – roses, marigolds, iris, nasturtiums, sunflowers, according to season – brought by visitors and plopped wonderfully into jars, where Margo lets them do their thing. From time to time the phone rings and conversations are conducted briskly in any of four languages. At night, after hours of concentrated labour, when she likes to entertain friends, this room is apt to be aglow with conviviality.



Central to Margo's life since childhood has been her work. With it she has successfully channelled her energy, her enormous technical skill, her talent, and her own restless spirit into an abounding harvest of artistic production. Throughout eight decades her genius has thus ranged with

Top: Margo Veillon, 1950s. Bottom: Margo Veillon, 1950s. Opposite: Margo Veillon, 1950s.





Watercolour

undiminished urgency, authority, and brilliance from painting to photography, drawing, prints and graphics, ceramics and even sculpture. Formal training she left behind very early, but has devoted a lifetime since both to learning and teaching art. From 1928 to 1931 she studied techniques of drawing and painting in Paris, where she was closely associated with Alfred Pellin and Sanya Rabinovitch. Shorter working sojourns later took her to Spain and Italy, swinging London had her loyalty during the 1960s; and for the past several decades she has spent most of every summer in Zurich.

But the country of her birth remains her real home. Margo long ago weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of living as an artist in Egypt rather than Europe and is fully aware of both the sacrifices she has made and the riches she has been able to keep to herself: the Egyptian sky at midday, sunrise, or sunset; the desert with its spectrum of colour in rock and sand; the many moods of the river; and the Delta, above all, with its lush variety of vegetable growth and the rhythms of its agricultural life. Here, especially, she was able to delight in and record the spectacle offered by ordinary Egyptian people doing ordinary things.

Unlike most artists trained in Egypt, Margo has complete mastery of the human body as physical form, how it works and how to draw it. A multitude of people, exuberantly earthy, vociferous, happy and sad, are thus poised in parade, or gesticate the unholy day with their arms and legs. They are not, as in the work of many of her contemporaries, but rather, they are the

draped or flapping galibiyas, their backs, elbows, feet, and faces labouring at the physical tasks of a culture where until quite recently everything was done by human effort. And here are her women, in black or gaudy cotton worn to the bends of knees, elbows, buttocks, and breasts, burdened with cabbages, babies, alfalfa, jerrycans, mobbed by knee-high children, goats, water buffaloes, and split-stick crates, out of which tumble cocks and hens, rabbits, pigeons, chicks, and ducklings.

Margo's touch is witty and loving, often ribald or grotesque, but never trite, sentimental, condescending, or merely folkloric. Indifferent to politics, cultural allusiveness, and social comment, she heeds only the shapes, the movement, the patterns, and the

colours of her subject, the visual reality that has touched her heart. In Egypt during the 1960s and 1970s – hard times for artists – both residence and travel were radically restricted. Banned from more than 95% of the country, foreigners were limited to Cairo, Alexandria, and a handful of sites in Upper Egypt and were forbidden to use major roads. Such confinement was not Margo's style and she hated being cut off from her subject. The bureaucracy that has attempted to control Egyptian artistic life for the past four decades offered no help, however, and continues officially to ignore her. Although Egyptian and foreign artists recognise her importance, she thus remains almost unrepresented in the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, where she should have a permanent exhibition to herself.

For the past few years, with an increasing sense that time is getting short, Margo has put special effort into creating a published record of her work. Major publications thus far are:

- *Divertimenti*. Cairo: privately published, n.d., Stations, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1976
- *Harvest*. With a foreword and captions by John Rodenbeck. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985.
- *Margo Veillon: Une vie, une œuvre, une passion*. Textes de René Dailly, Doris Wild, Annie Gismann, Blas G. Ribelles, Vera Bajochi, Catherine Veillon. Beirut: Privately published, 1987
- *Naha*. *Sketches, Prints and Photographs*. London: Scorpion, 1994.
- *Margo Veillon: Le mouvement égyptien: Travaux 1925-1996*. Ed. Charlotte Hug, textes de Jean-Christophe Aeschmann, Léon Verne et des écrits inédits de l'artiste. Paris: Actes, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1996.
- *Egyptian Harvest/Margos Egyptianer*. Edited and with an introduction by Charlotte Hug, with an essay by Benedek Benkert. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000.

Margo Veillon is still active as an artist, with recent exhibitions at both the American University in Cairo and the Margo Veillon Gallery.

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THE ISLAMIC WORLD

In print since 1983, Arts and The Islamic World (AIW) is now coming out twice a year in a hardbound format, and is being published in association with the East-West University Press, Chicago.

The journal is produced by a networking team of art scholars and specialists based in the Islamic world as well as in other Eastern and Western countries. Over the years it has steadily shaped as the leading international publication providing in-depth coverage of Islamic arts history and heritage as well as the contemporary arts scene in the Islamic world, with lavish monochrome and full colour illustrations.

Alongside general readership, its clientele includes key arts personnel: artists and art critics, art collectors and connoisseurs, heads of art and cultural institutions, libraries and research organisations, and museum directors and curators with special interest in the arts of the Arab and Islamic countries and communities.

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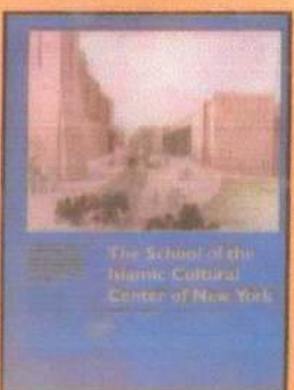
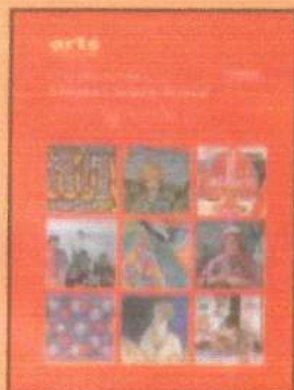
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1983: Arts Education in the Islamic World

1984: Cultural Policy in the Islamic World

1984: Islamic Arts Research in the U.A.E.

The journal has co-sponsored a number of exhibitions, including the 1986 Exhibition "Young Artists from the Islamic World", and the 1989 Exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London, "Contemporary Art from the Islamic World".





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Continuing the current series of theme volumes, this issue of Arts & The Islamic World looks at the arts scene in Egypt, a country which continues to occupy centre stage in the artistic life of the Middle East and Arab world generally.

The advent of a vibrant private sector for the arts, free from the shackles of the traditional systems of patronage and of government control, is an encouraging development and one that will hopefully prove both sustainable and a model for others to follow.

We are specially pleased that it has proved possible to present features in this volume on so many different aspects of the arts, and particularly on the more contemporary media such as cinema, experimental theatre and modern dance. This approach should serve the journal well in the future, as we prepare similar monographs on the arts in other countries in the Islamic world.

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Arts & The Islamic World
PO Box 9000 Crescent
London SW1X 7EP
Tel: +44 (0) 207 245 0404
Fax: +44 (0) 207 245 9898
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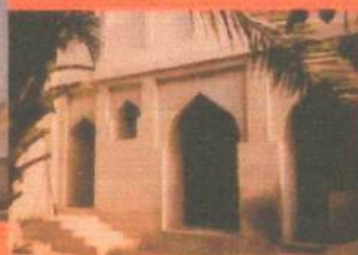
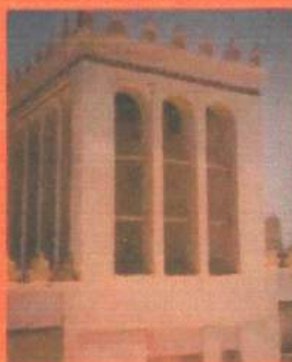
Al Muharraaq

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Al Muharraaq

ARCHITECTURE OF A
TRADITIONAL ARABIAN TOWN
IN BAHRAIN

SPECIAL VOLUME

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Al Muharraq SPECIAL VOLUME

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Email arts@iibi.demon.co.uk

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Director, East-West University Press

816 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605 (USA)

Tel 312 939 0111 Fax 312 939 0083

Email zafar@eastwest.edu

Representative Office in South Asia:

c/o World Network, Plot #72 C

2nd Zamzama Commercial Lane, DHA Phase 3,

Karachi (Pakistan)

Tel +9221 587 7336 Fax +9221 587 7393

Email info@hotmail.com

Representative Office in North America:

c/o The Sachems, 18 Northolt Crescent

Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 4P5

Tel/Fax (905) 948 9761

Email jatala@home.com

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Acknowledgements

Al Muharraaq, in Bahrain, is one of the finest remaining historic towns in the Arabian Gulf, and *Arts & the Islamic World* is happy to highlight this pioneering work aimed at documenting and critically evaluating its layout and building design. This first in-depth study is based on several years of painstaking research carried out in the mid-1980's by a British architect, Dr John Yarwood, initially in Bahrain, and later in the UK, for his highly commended doctoral thesis at Sheffield University. The author's permission for *Arts & the Islamic World* to introduce this to a wider international readership is deeply appreciated.

As Dr Yarwood has emphasized, this fascinating city is considered to be of compelling interest for a number of reasons. It occupies a crucial position in patterns of technochronology (and general cultural diffusion) spanning vast distances and periods of time. Predecessor states – as far back as Dilmun – were the main staging posts between the Indus valley and Mesopotamia. The region also received Persian influence (and beyond that, from Sassanian and Saljuk design) and transmitted onward influence to eastern regions of Africa via the Omani Empire. The city has not been studied in detail before, and Dr Yarwood was greatly assisted in his work by the Bahrain Ministry of Housing and a number of scholars and specialists.

It took considerable time and effort to produce this volume, which includes a large number of drawings, photographs and color images, and we apologize to our subscribers for the delay in its appearance. Its publication has been made possible by sponsorship contributions from the Islamic Investment Company of the Gulf (Bahrain) and Faisal Finance (Switzerland) which we are very happy to acknowledge. We also wish to place on record the continuing personal interest – and institutional support – extended by the Chief Executive Officer of the Dar Al Maal Al Islami in Geneva, Mr Khalid Abdulla Janahi, as work progressed in putting this volume together.

Foreword

This study describes the layout and building design of the town of Al Muharraq in the State of Bahrain. It is based on survey work and research conducted in the mid 1980s. This is written up in the author's doctoral thesis. Limits on space here have obliged omission of much – particularly work concerning cultural, social, economic and political history; building industry organisation and building construction; public health; climate and climate control, and other such topics. A good part of the description of architecture is, however, retained.

Al Muharraq is of compelling interest for a number of reasons. It is the only remaining traditional city on the south side of the Arabian gulf – if we discount "museum buildings" and small quarters constructed in the twentieth century. Moreover, it occupies a crucial position in patterns of techno-chronology (and general cultural diffusion) spanning vast distances and periods of time. Techniques changed very slowly indeed over the centuries, and so nineteenth or early twentieth century work gives valuable clues, (even to the archaeologist!) Predecessor states – as far back as Dilmun – were the main staging posts between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia. Also, Bahrain received Persian influence (and beyond that, from Sassanian and Saljuk design) and transmitted onward influence to east Africa via the Omani Empire.

The city had not been studied in detail before this work. However, neglect, fragile construction, a fierce climate, cultural prejudices and genuine administrative obstacles have conspired to hasten its destruction. Once the physical remains are lost, records may be found valuable by future generations.

There is also the modern cultural identity of the Gulf region to be considered. Many Bahrainis and other Gulf citizens would probably accept that they have been a little too mesmerised by western urbanism and architecture in the recent past, and this is hardly an adequate basis for authentic, contextual planning and design in the future. Bahrain has done well to preserve a number of "museum buildings", but beyond that the challenge is to find new functions for old buildings, so that urban forms are conserved, even though building fabric may be modified to

accommodate the ineluctable demands of a contemporary community.

The second challenge is to establish cultural continuities between past and future. This cannot be done by mere reproduction or historical revivalism. There are, in my opinion, at least three topics which stand out. First, institutional arrangements and building forms should reflect the need for new types of communal living, (which the modern western city heartlessly denies.) Second, the role of the artist and craftsman in building should be strengthened, and building technology should be steered away from impersonal mass-production. Thirdly, the motor-car should be disciplined, and the role of infrastructure in form-creation should be subjugated, so that layout geometry is made by organic social processes and not only by technology (or, indeed by elitist aesthetics.) Lastly, one might question the role of private capital in creating the modern city, which seems just as philistine and merciless in the east as it does in the west.

Everyone will have their own opinion on these matters, of course. But lest it be thought that we are trying to set the western tradition against the Islamic one, kindly allow me to end by quoting two passages from the great British philosopher and architectural critic, John Ruskin, who was advising his audience how to build.

"Every great architecture has been the result and exponent of a great religion. You can't have bits of it here, bits there – you must have it everywhere or nowhere. It is the manly language of a people inspired by resolve and common purpose, and rendering resolute and common fidelity to the legible laws of an undoubted God."

"If you can fix some conception of a true human state of life to be striven for – life good for all men, as for yourselves; if you can determine some honest and simple order of existence... then and so sanctifying wealth into commonwealth, all your art, your literature, your daily labours, your domestic affection, and citizen's duty will join and increase into one magnificent harmony. You will know then how to build, well enough."

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CHAPTER ONE

The Urban Pattern

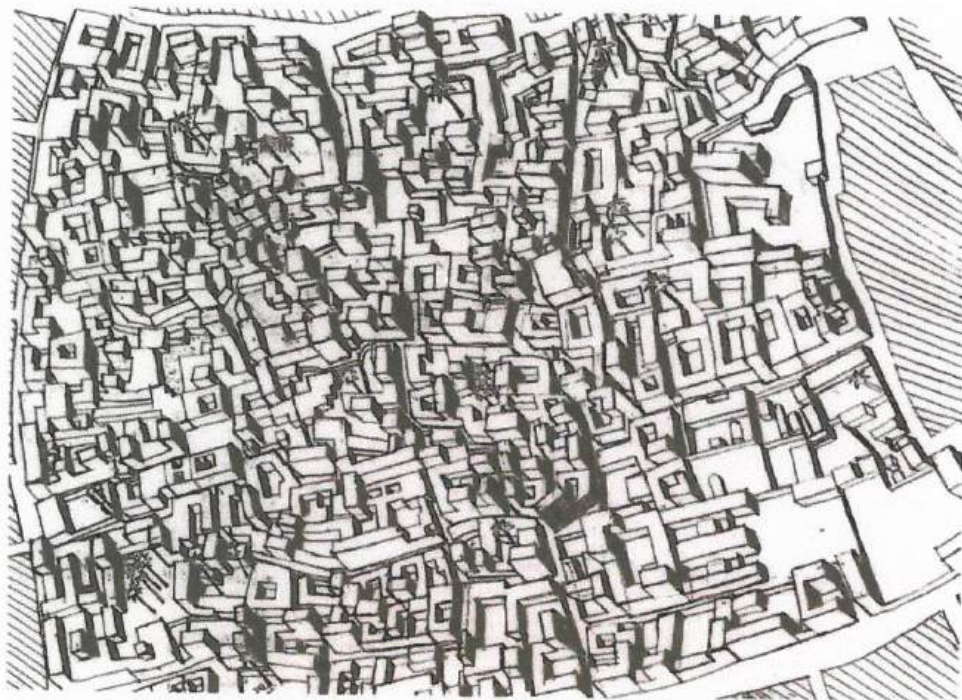


Fig 1.1 Birds-eye view of bin Khatir quarter

The Islamic City

As de Montéquin points out, the archetypal Islamic city is a private religious city, in contrast to the public secular city of our western classical tradition (polis and civitas). The great importance which Islam attaches to privacy, home life and 'the internal side' conditions the form and appearance of the city. A particular passage from the Qur'an is often quoted:

'The interior of your house is a sanctuary; those who violate it by calling you while you are still there do not keep the respect they owe to the interpreter of heaven' (sura 49).

The house became sealed from the public realm, and the courtyard form used by the Hittites, for example, was appropriated and adapted to give privacy. A strong desire to avoid ostentation is also evident, not only in buildings. In *Sacred Art: East and West*, Titus Burckhardt suggests that Islamic male dress is a generalized priestly costume, which emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the human body. One factor restricting ostentation is the equality of all Muslims before God; Islam is a highly egalitarian religion, and it stresses the fragility of worldly position and wealth. This motivated the modesty of the outward facades of buildings; there is enrichment inside, and on facades facing internal courtyards, but street facades are hardly designed at all. These give anonymous exteriors. This modesty perhaps also leads to the camouflage of the separate dwelling in the collective form. It is generally impossible to identify the

boundaries of a single dwelling, whether from the street or from aerial photographs. The city form is collective (see Figure 1.1, which is a bird's-eye-view of the bin Khatir area). In this the city parallels the collective social consciousness: the individual is secure in his tribal identity and, beyond that, in his membership of the umma itself, the ultimate socio-religious collective of Islam.

This collective form also arises from the subdivision of property as generations pass, due, in its turn, to the refined divisibility of property rights in the Islamic city. This has caused a gradual intensification of land utilization by the extension of buildings and the infilling of open land. Freehold is the dominant form of ownership in the modern European city, and the indivisible nature of most ownerships is reflected in the separate identity or even formal separation of modern building structures. However, the Islamic tradition has allowed the separation of title (or ownership) from usufruct (right of use). Subdivision arises when children inherit after a death, and a whole series of subdivisions ultimately results. This creates complex rights of access and leads to intensification of land use. If subdivision is not pushed, then joint ownership arises; many refined joint owners of a house are often found. The individuals may live scattered over a wide area and rarely communicate, let alone agree on a course of action with regard to their property, and this makes urban renewal very difficult.



Plate 1.1 Part of aerial photograph of Al Muharrag flown in 1951.

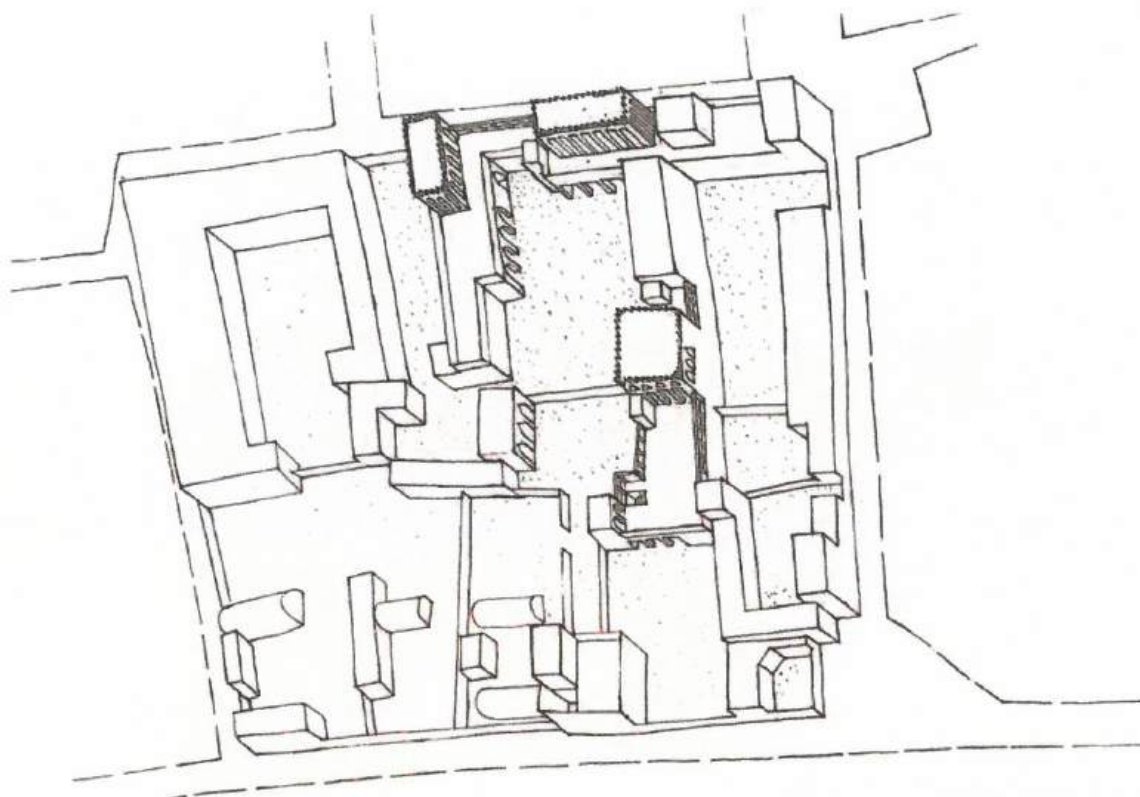


Fig 1.2 Sheikh Hamad house aerial view

The Pre-Capitalist City

Al Muharraq was, and to some extent still is, pre-capitalist in that property was not fully abstract and exchangeable. A house is still felt to be part of one's family, and hence of one's personal identity. To sell it would be like cutting off a limb. This is the 'unchanging land' to which the mediaevalist Troeltsch refers:

[Capitalism] tends to a restless and changing social differentiation which is not based on unchanging land but upon accidental accumulations of money which can change anything into anything else. The personal relations which depend on nature and on social groups are dissolved. The individual gains an abstract freedom and independence... He makes up for the loss of concrete individuality ... by abstract individualism.

Gellner and other writers have argued that the traditional Islamic collective, (the Ummah,) prevented the emergence of civil society and "modular man" in the Middle East. There has also been a similar academic debate on whether Islam or certain aspects of Islamic society tended to block the development of capitalism. Robinson stresses the Prophet's positive encouragement of trade, the condemnation of practices disturbing the free play of supply and demand contained in *fiqh*, and the importance attached by the *Qur'an* to rationality. Robinson nevertheless suggests that the bourgeoisie failed to achieve political power as a class. The merchant class was unable or unwilling to dislodge the

power of the dominant military bureaucratic class, and thus could never inaugurate a capitalist revolution.

Shari'a law prevented the growth of powerful autonomous organizations such as the European city guilds. Shari'a implies that each individual is answerable only to God for his actions, and militates against the public recognition of group interests other than kinship groups. Sharia law contains no concept of a 'legal personality' such as that found in Roman law. A 'legal personality' may be the public interest or a company, corporation or other group. Such interests cannot receive independent recognition and expression through the legal process. The legal stress is always upon individuals and kinship groups. According to the jurist and historian Schacht, Islamic law did not recognise cities as such, nor did it admit corporate bodies. The city remained a collection of villages in which family interests predominated over others. This tradition can be traced clearly in the form of a city like Al Muharraq.

Public Spaces: the Street and the Square

The street and square in western cities have long been designed to facilitate the efficient circulation of traffic; to provide a setting for the appreciation of architectural detail; and to provide adequate space for social intercourse and communal spectacle. The Muslim city has not, in general, had streets or squares in this sense. Wheeled traffic was very rare until the motor car was

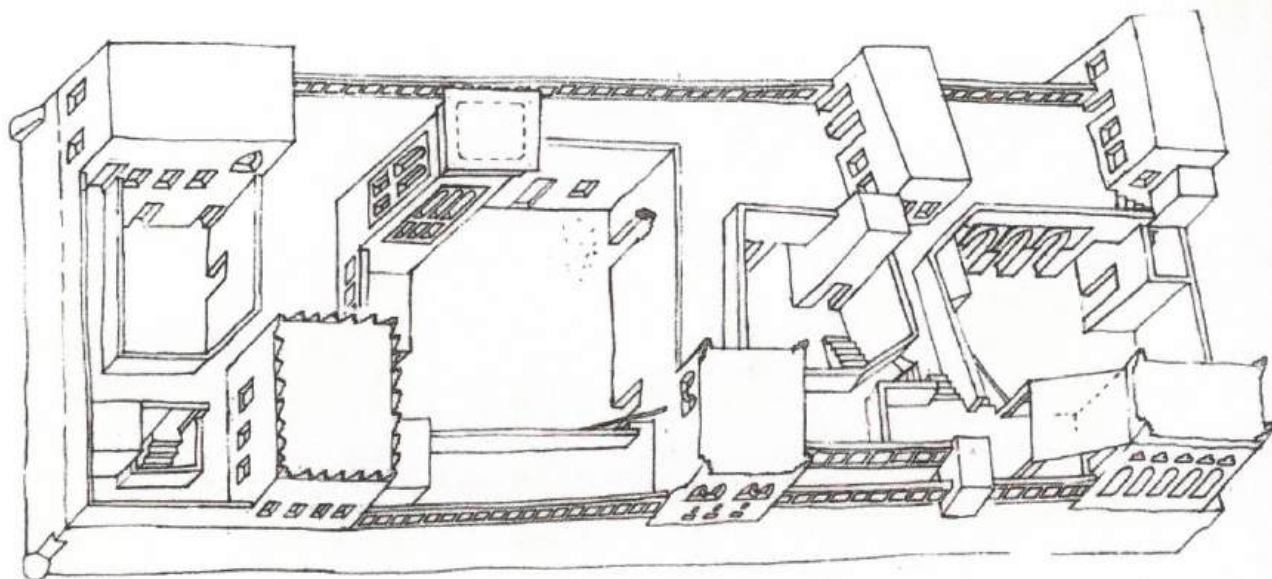


Fig 1.3 Sheikh Isa house aerial view.

introduced, so that a thoroughfare need only be wide enough for donkeys.

The form of the houses has always dominated the form of the street, whereas the reverse is the case in the western city, where the modern street is laid out for maximum efficiency as a piece of engineering, and the house forms accept this discipline. In more sophisticated western environments, aesthetic considerations may also be at work, producing formal or informal squares, with sequences of spaces and views designed to provide artistic enjoyment. The houses must then conform to such a design. However, in the Islamic city such external concepts are entirely absent, so that the design process goes from inside to outside. The public realm is the accidental by-product of countless individual, private house-building decisions, and this leads to the characteristic tortuous, narrow form of thoroughfares. There are sudden shifts of alignment for no apparent reason, and the whole effect is without obvious pattern or hierarchy. As one looks over the city, the flux of the form appears to be uninterrupted by the thoroughfares, which have no form-generating role.

Another factor is the absence from Shari'a law of the concept of a 'legal personality' which would recognize the public interest in carrying out and maintaining public works. Religious endowments could hardly create and maintain networks of streets, as streets are essentially public, not personal, enterprises. Thus one finds that even where a wide street or public place exists, it is soon invaded by adjacent owners, who seize the land for their own uses, leaving only the minimum width necessary for movement. And why not? After all,

it could be said, nobody owns it. The legal restraint on such behaviour, as Janet Abu Lughod makes clear in her essay 'Contemporary Relevance of Islamic Urban Principles', was acceptance or opposition by proximate neighbours – those whose personal interests would be directly and drastically altered. Wider public interest had no channel for articulation.

Chaos theory is the most pertinent analytical tool here. The form of the historic Islamic city is not accidental in the true sense, but results from countless private actions governed by rules of neighbourly behaviour, from the local building tradition, and from the inherent physical limits of each situation as it confronted each individual involved. The limitations on such action, while universal in principle, are localized in application. Each increment of growth obeys rules in responding to the situation existing at that precise time. Each increment alters the constraints on the next increment, such as adjacent structures, ownership boundaries, rights of way and support. In the modern city, the constraint by contrast is the preordained town plan. An increment such as a house does not accommodate itself to the pattern of adjacent houses already there, but rather to the overall plan.

Historic Description of Al Muharraq

There seem to be very few architectural descriptions of Al Muharraq from past decades or centuries; those that are available come largely from travellers. For example, Nabholz visited it during the 1920s and makes some comments. Also Rihani's book, *Around the Coast of Arabia* (1930), is worth reading to get a little of the atmosphere that existed in the 1920s. Other writers give

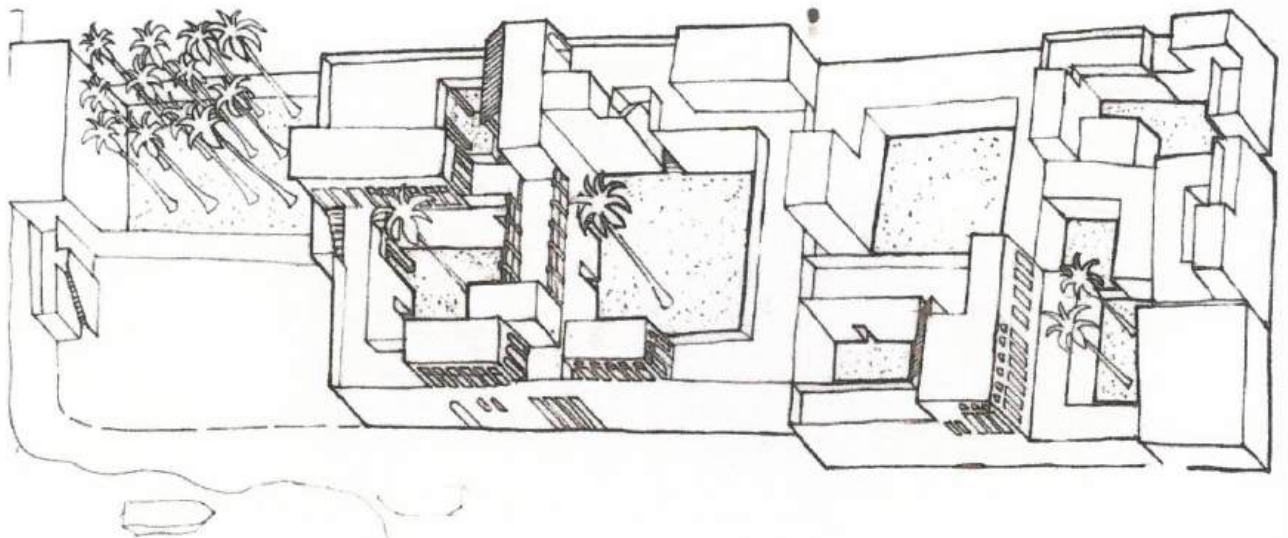


Fig 1.4 Fakhroo house aerial view

descriptions of nearby towns – Barclay Raunkiaer (1969) on Kuwait and De Rivoyre (1883) on Bandar Abbas, for example. They give some interesting insights.

The one traveller who provides a few good visual descriptions of Al Muharraq is Palgrave, writing in 1865 (He is approaching the town by boat from Manama).

The town of Moharrek, situated on the southern side of the islet to which it gives its name, lies like a long white strip on the shore of the channel which separates it from Menamah, whose buildings occupy a corresponding position on the margin of the larger island. Moharrek is far the prettier of the two to the eye; its white houses set off by darker palm huts (for the extreme mildness of the climate renders this mode of habitation very common and almost desirable), the large low palaces of the Khaleefah family much resembling the better sort of bungalows at Malabar Point or Beach-Candy, two or three imposing forts close to the sea shore, a long coast battery good for show at a certain distance; all these form an ensemble worthy of a sketch, if not a picture. I much regretted that evening my want of drawing implements.

And well might we echo his regrets 140 years later. He continues:

As a whole Moharrek is curious and worth seeing... from its Perso-Arabic appearance, its small square houses, its paved market place, and its high raised benches everywhere along the walls, announcing an out-of-doors life. Besides it, owns a degree of close-packing and disorganization different from the straggling style of most Arab cities.

The 'high raised benches' are gone, and I am not sure where the market place was. The 'coast battery' is interesting; it is not shown on historic maps, but fortifications to the north are shown on the Brucks and Rogers map of 1825.

Historic Growth Process

Al Muharraq has expanded northwards on land and by reclamation from the sea to the south, west and east. Its present size and shape are very different from the historic situation.

With the aid of the map collections of the Ministry of Housing in Bahrain, the India Office Records and Library, and the Ministry of Defence, Hydrographic Section, Taunton, I was able to collect copies of several interesting maps which throw some light upon the historic growth process. Incidentally there are earlier Portuguese and Arab maps, but they present imaginative concepts rather than accurate information.

From these maps it is possible to construct the approximate boundaries of the town at various periods in the past. Looking at the historic maps, one is struck by the fluidity of the coastline. Large areas of reef were exposed at high tide, which may have sometimes made the line of the coast uncertain. These shallows provided the basis for the gradual process of land reclamation which allowed the town to grow. One is struck by the tendency of certain street-lines to reflect the growth process: Wali-al-Ahd Road, Al Khalifa Road, and Road No. 3, the main *sag* routes, are all cases in point. These streets represent the boundaries of the town at different times; the roads probably represented routes along shorelines or fortifications taken to bypass the dense,

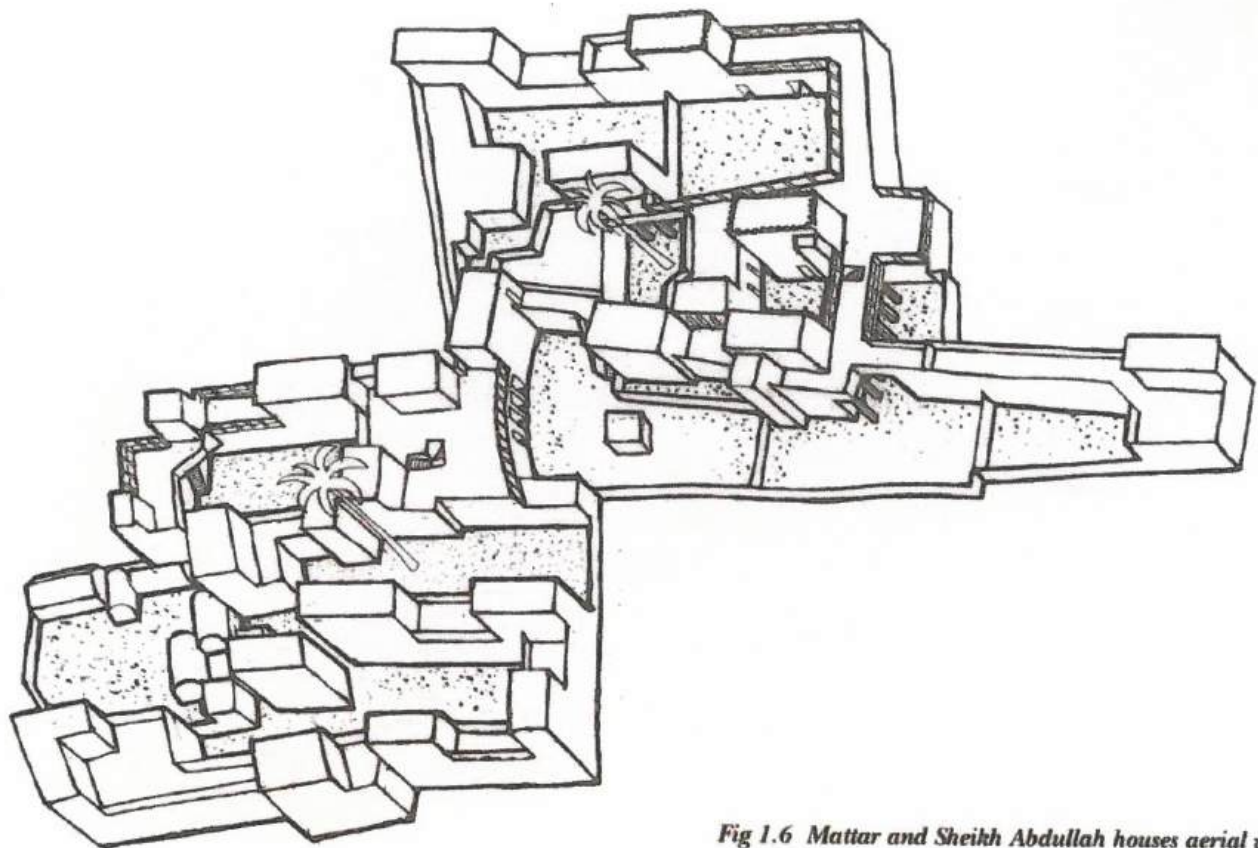


Fig 1.6 Mattar and Sheikh Abdullah houses aerial view.

fort and access to it, particularly from the Al Khalifa *firaj*, must have been very important, as was access to the spring.

In identifying the most important routes some caution is needed. The modern pattern is deceptive because several new links have been added in the last thirty or forty years which obscure the significance of the historic layout. Sheikh Hamad Road was widened around 1930, as the Government Report for that period indicates. It then terminated at the northern courtyard of Sheikh Hamad House. This was partly demolished around 1960, and the road was extended to meet Sheikh Isa Road. The original layout gave importance to Sheikh Muhammed Road as a north-south link, but after this road extension scheme, Sheikh Isa Road became more important as a north-south link. Sheikh Isa Road and Sheikh Muhammed Road were crucial links between the villages to the north (which contained the summer palaces of the nobility), the palaces of the Al Khalifa family in the core, and Abu Maher Fort to the south. Sheikh Hamad Road and Sheikh Abdullah Road linked the central palaces to the coast, and hence to the ferries to Manama. There is also a ring road, mainly along former beaches (Al Khalifa Road, Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Road, Abu Maher Road, Road 1123) and along Wali-al-Ahd Road. This was a route from Dair and Samahij villages to the spring and the Manama ferry. It passes along the northern limit of the built-up area as it was in the 1920s.

The Airport Road (Sheikh Salman Road) was built in the 1930s to facilitate the link between the airfield and the Manama causeway. Streets built in the period from 1950 to 1975 are noteworthy for their naive orthogonal grid and small block size. From 1925 to 1950, north of Wali-al-Ahd Road, streets were built wider and straighter than previously.

The Muharraq Municipality was established in 1927. It achieved little with regard to town planning although its role in street-widening was significant, and its various public health functions were very useful. Concern about town planning surfaced after the Second World War. The Political Agent foresaw that a sudden building boom was likely to occur after the war, and believed the government was unprepared. He called for regulations to be made and these were modelled on the Quetta Municipal Regulations; the idea was to use a good example already worked out in India as a basis. It is interesting to see from India Office files how the concern with town planning was at the forefront of people's minds in the mid-1940s, and how the Political Agent seized the initiative. The post-war areas reflect these early attempts at planned layout.

The Social Pattern

The land disposal process is a key to the social pattern and deserves comment. Janet Abu Lughod makes an important practical point about the Islamic city:

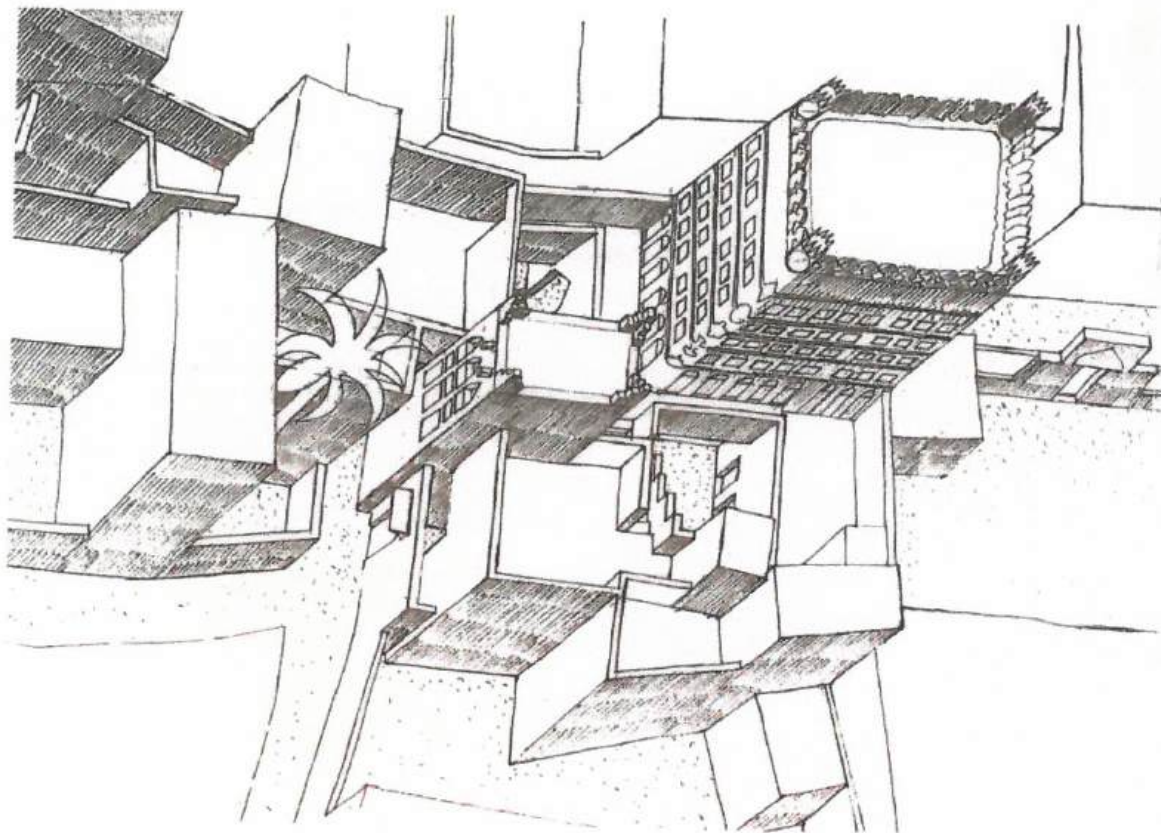


Fig 1.7 Seyadi House aerial view.

Planning and ownership began with the ceding of urban space to supra-individual entities... These supra-individual groups may have been related by kinship, descent, common origin or function, but in any event they were assigned space within the evolving urban pattern on which to set out their own 'communal settlement': the details of the arrangement were left to them.

In many Islamic towns this characteristic was lost long ago, but in Al Muharraq it persisted until recent times and is still, to a limited extent, found today. This procedure inculcates a social basis to urban structure.

It is generally accepted that Al Muharraq is divided into nineteen zones, each named after a major tribal grouping. There are two exceptions to this pattern: Al Kazim, a loan word based on casino, a public garden, and Steeshan, also a loan word, the arabized form of station – that is, the northern bus station built before the Airport Road and causeway allowed public transport to pass round the town. A tribal area is only very loosely defined on the ground. There was a degree of evolution in the historic boundaries before 1950; tribes would divide into groups descended from notable men and would be renamed accordingly. While related families or client families would arrive from other villages and towns, setting up a small area of their own, so that terminology evolved over time.

A leading tribe would have lesser client families

occupying space around it so as to form a cluster. The leading tribes still remembered and recognized are listed here.

a. Original Core

Al Jalahma
Al Qasasib
Al Mu'awdah and Al Bana'in
Al Bin Ali As Saghah
Al Bukhamis
Al bin Shiddah and Al Mahmid
Al Hayayik
Al Kharu
Al bin Khatir
Al Sheikh Abdullah (al Khalifa)
Al Sheikh Hamad (al Khalifa)

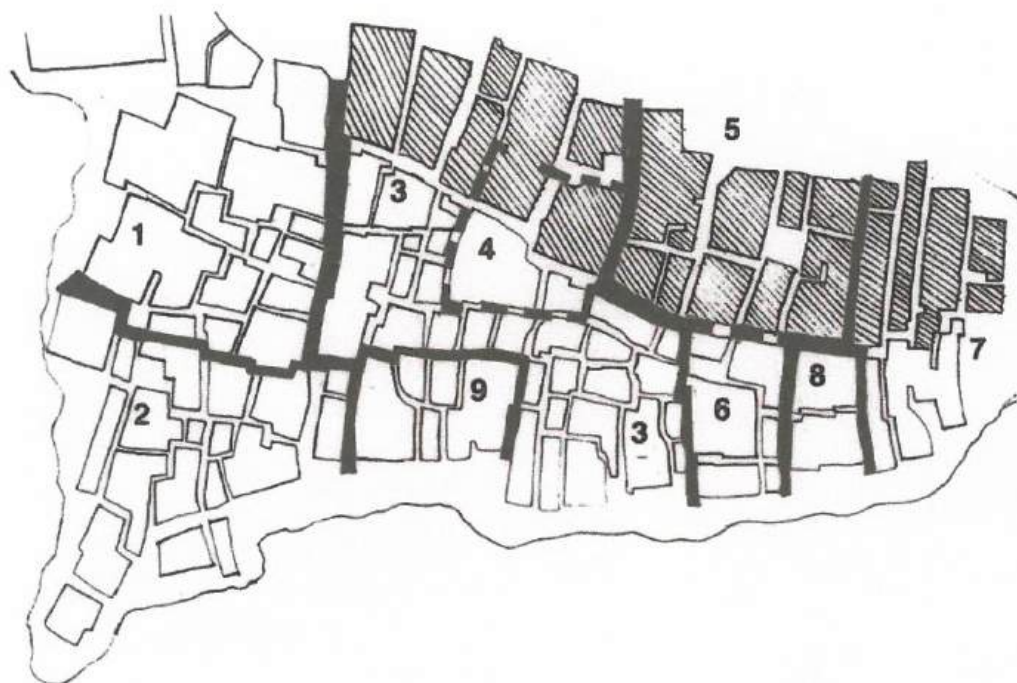
b. Halat Abu Maher

Al Jalahmah
Bin Mughala also known as Al Bugiwarah

c. Extension Areas

Bin Blindi also known as Al Manamah
Al Mirri
Al Amamah
Al Ghanah
Al Zayaynah

Note that the extension areas also include extensions of



Family Areas:

1. Al Jalahma
2. Al Musallam
3. Al Bu Kuwara
4. Al Alyham
5. Al Mihayza
6. Al Bin Halul
7. Al Bin Aqah
8. Al Jalalif
9. Al Atawi

N.B. Shaded areas are extensions.

Fig 1.8 Tribal areas on Abu Maher Island.

the original areas of Al Bukhamis, Al bin Ali and Al Mu'awdah.

As a case study I tried to establish in greater depth the pattern of family areas on Halat Abu Maher before 1930. There were nine families, listed below:

- a. Jalahma: ship owners who also lent money to pearl divers. Earlier they had been pirates. They had about forty houses. They originally came from Dammam.
- b. Musallam: ship owners and pearl traders. They had about thirty houses and came originally from Iran. One branch of the family is in Al Hidd.
- c. Buquwara (or al Mughla): ship owners and pearl traders, originally from Ruwais in Qatar.
- d. Alyham: another branch of the Buquwara. They had about sixty houses.
- e. Al Atawi: fishermen and water carriers (from the three springs on Bu Maher to houses), originally Bahraini.
- f. Al bin Halul: divers and fishermen, originally from Bahrain.
- g. Al Mihayza: a branch of the same family as the bin Halul.
- h. Al bin Aqah: divers and fishermen, originally from Bahrain.

The two main upper-class families were the Jalahma and the Buquwara, who associated with the Ruler, and intermarried with the Khalifa. The Musallam were also an upper-class family who intermarried with the Jalahma and accepted their leadership and judgment. Alyham and Buquwara were the same family as were Al

Mihayza and Al bin Halul. The five lower-class families were tributary to the Buquwara, who represented their interests to the Ruler.

The area boundaries and the original shoreline are shown in Figure 1.8. The spatial pattern paralleled the social pattern in the sense that socially related families clustered together. The Jalahma group was located west of Quarantine Road (also known as Bu Maher Road), and the Buquwara group east of it. The leading families were on the western half of the island. About fifty houses were stone-built and the remainder were barastis. The stone houses were in the Jalahma/Musallam/Buquwara area, and this situation lasted until the mid-1930s, when the impact of the oil industry helped many families to improve their houses.

Form Follows Family

One could speculate that tribal areas were originally bounded by major roads. This would seem logical. However, it is possible that certain streets already existed as well-worn routes when such land grants were made. In that case two blocks of land would be defined on either side of the road: as the town grew, tribes would expand across the new roads which ran along the earlier coastline. (In this way, Al Bukhamis crosses Al Khalifa Road.) Finally, as the years went by, property changed hands at the margin of the areas, and certain streets were widened for traffic, thus obscuring the earlier pattern. Of course, it would be very difficult to prove this hypothesis; however, in my discussions of the position of boundaries with local people, it was often said that the boundary ran along a particular major street.

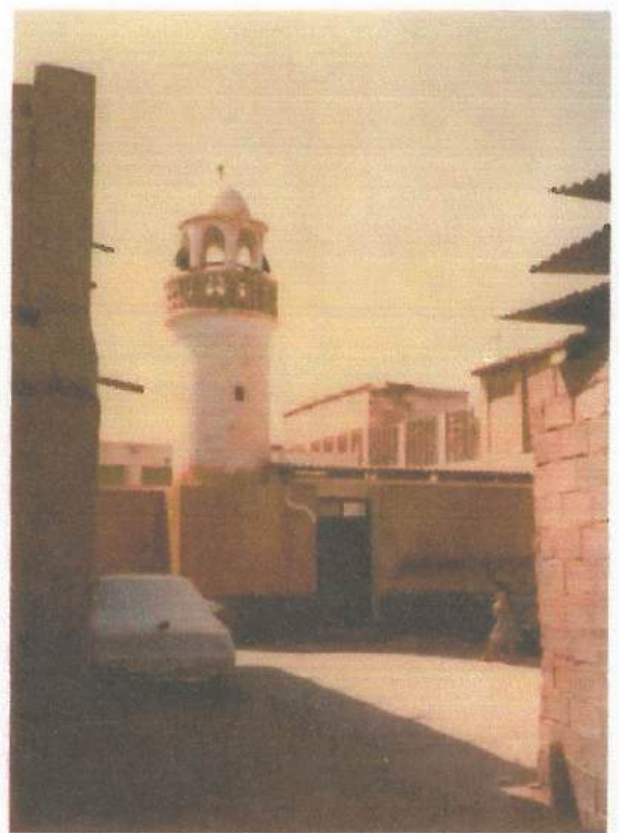
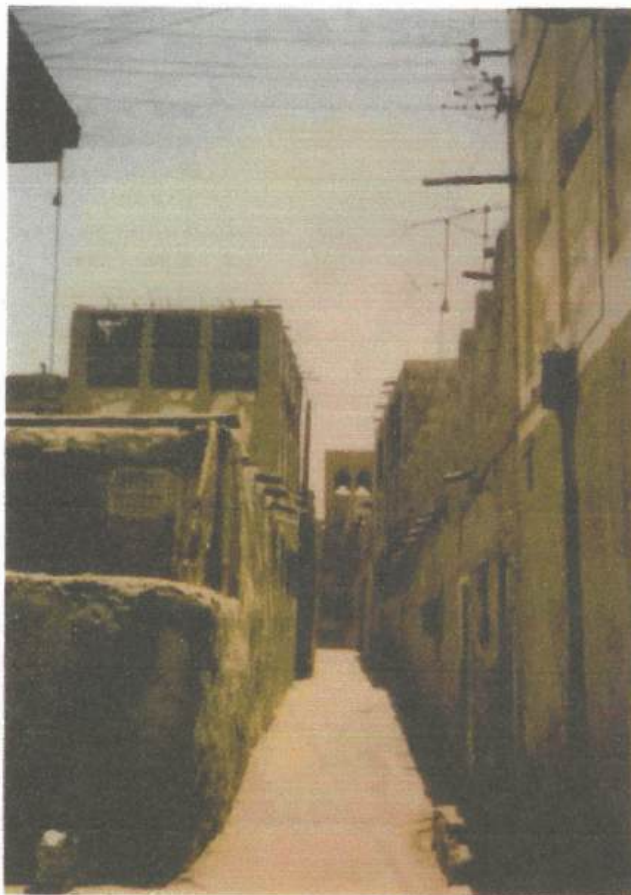


Plate 1.2 Typical streetscape.

Within each tribal area the tribe itself created plots for its constituent families, and secondary roads would immediately arise to give access to these. Over the generations, however, each plot would be subdivided many times according to Shari'a law. Until the last forty years, such subdivisions were actually occupied, with each division having an independent access added. During most of the twentieth century a committee from the Municipality would visit a property to agree changes in layout and create any new lanes needed for access to the subdivisions. It is usually obvious on the ground when a lane has arisen in this way. They are mostly cul-de-sac, but sometimes a through lane was more convenient.

The cul-de-sac is celebrated by some authors as a particularly valuable and interesting innovation of the Islamic city known as *al Darb*. It is, a semi-private street which allows movement between relatives' houses without emergence into a wholly public realm (see, for example, Hakim 1986 and de Montequin 1983). As barastis at low densities were gradually converted to stone structures at high densities, the diagonal paths became inconvenient. Orthogonal building layouts were better linked by zigzag paths about a diagonal line than by a central diagonal path; land could be exchanged by informal agreement to achieve this.

It would appear that road types mirror the process of tribal land allocation and division; in other words, the pattern of roads defines human territory. The territory relates to tribal, sub-tribal, family and

household origin, and so the road pattern models the identity of the individual. At first glance there seems to be no road pattern or hierarchy – as is indeed the case, if one looks only for an engineering pattern, a physical or material hierarchy. The pattern is social in nature, and so it is harder to analyse by simple inspection, particularly when the social pattern has more or less passed away.

The usual mental models used by western designers are apparently useless here, and that is doubtless why such layouts as this one seem to us incomprehensible. Townscape aesthetics are not applicable, nor is any engineering thinking useful. Beyond a few basic 'desire-lines' linking important destinations, there are no aesthetic, perceptual or technological patterns. Form follows family.

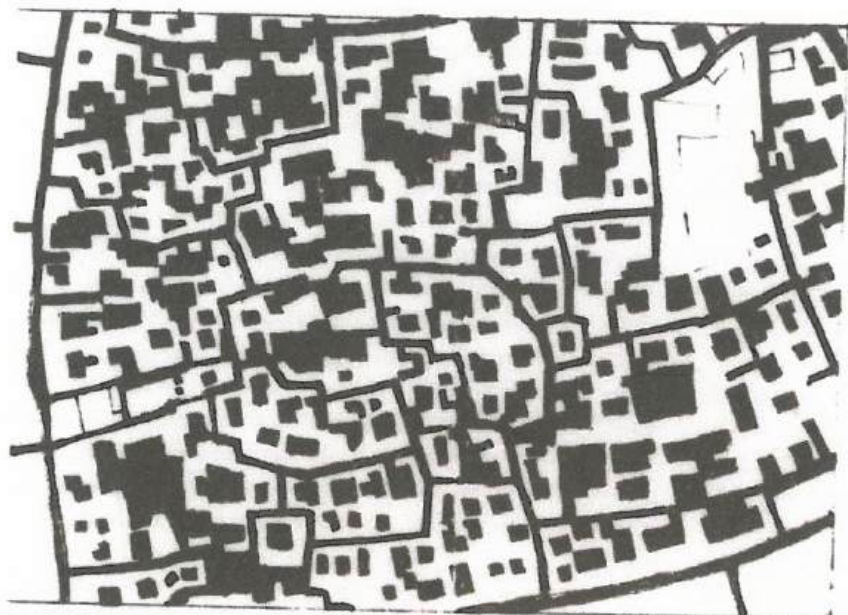


Fig 1.9 Pattern of courtyards and thoroughfares.

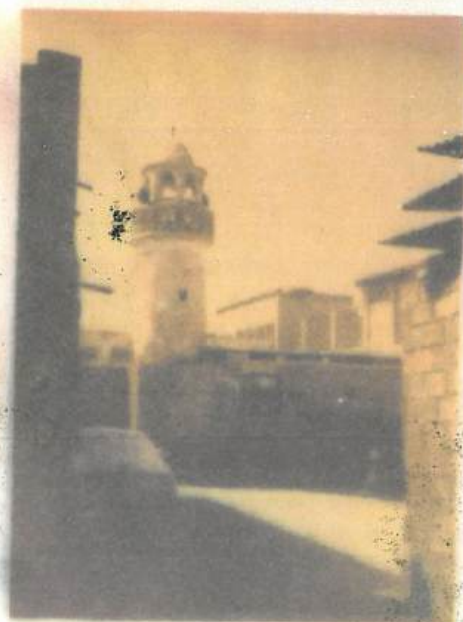
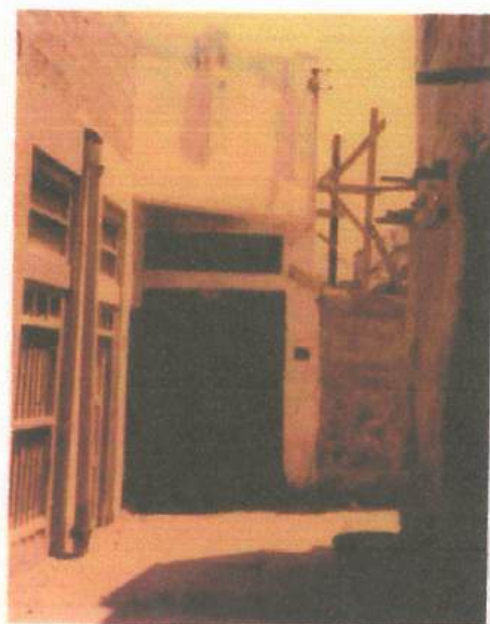


Plate 1.3 Typical streetscape.



House Form

Broadly speaking, the form of houses comprises four crucial elements.

1. Courtyards.
2. Ranges of buildings planned around the courts.
3. Roof terraces reached by staircase from the courtyard.
4. Single-room or double apartments on the first floor, approached along the roof terraces.

The general qualities of building form are shown by the bird's-eye views of houses (Figures 1.2 to 1.4 and 1.6 to 1.7). An informal impression is uppermost in all the earlier houses, although there is an overall unity. This sense of unity is due to three factors: first, piers are equidistant and windows (or infill panels) are usually the same width; secondly, the courtyard form focuses and unites the structures around it; and thirdly, the roof terrace system (with its associated parapets) establishes a constant horizontal line around each courtyard. A terrace system may be very extensive, connecting many houses together over large areas. This is truly a collective form.

The world seems a different place when viewed from the terrace. The courtyard encloses but the terrace releases. One is exposed to sun, moon, stars, wind. On the terrace one is very aware of the sky, but hardly aware of the courtyard; one sees only apartments dotted here and there, and space flows freely between them. It looks more like a 'family village' than a 'family house' in the western sense. The courtyard focuses and condenses the identity of the household and provides a setting for its daily round. Several writers have suggested that the courtyard – the heart of family life, open to the heavens but isolated from the mundanity of public life is a metaphorical link to God. The house opens to the sky; the heavens penetrate to the heart of the house. The court is the 'hidden treasure' of the house, just as the body of man hides the soul. This may not have been a conscious idea in Al Muharrag, but it was perhaps an archetypal vision towards which designers in many lands turned. In Al Muharrag there is a dual polarity – that is, inside/outside and up/down. The sense of being within or without, above or below, is intense. There is no blurring of these zones; their identity is crisp and consistently maintained.

Apart from the kitchen, stores and animal stalls, all rooms are multi-functional. Thus a room may be used for sleeping, eating, socializing, and so forth. Their utilization depends on climatic conditions: ground-floor rooms are used in cold weather, and in summer many people sleep on the terraces. The upper rooms become very warm on a still summer day, but, having a high thermal capacity, cool quickly at night. Therefore these rooms are used at night as they are cooler than ground-floor rooms. The ground-floor rooms lose heat

through the night, and could be occupied on a still, hot day. However, a wind would cool the upper room more effectively than the lower room.

Another basic planning consideration was privacy and territoriality – in other words, the assignation of certain zones to certain groups of people within the extended household. In so far as wealth permitted it, male visitors were segregated from the family; young men from young women; servants and slaves from others; and the headman's family from other residents. When a son married, he might take an apartment in the house for a time, and a separate territory would be established. However, slaves would be companions of their masters or mistresses, children would visit their uncles' and aunts' rooms in a carefree way (as part of their play), and so on, so that territoriality was treated flexibly.

A particular courtyard may be the focus of a specific territory. For example, the headman may have had a separate court for his immediate family. Other courts may have been assigned to visitors and single men, servants, single women, and so on, or various combinations of these. There is no simple fixed pattern, and some later houses have only a single courtyard, although they are quite large. The Shirawi House is a good example of this. A territory may have a staircase leading up to a roof terrace and its associated apartment, which need not always be directly above the corresponding ground-level accommodation.

The separation of these territories is largely achieved by the careful positioning of windowless walls. This is, of course, most obvious in the separation of the whole house from the street. These walls often seem like membranes holding apart distinct realms. This means that the street doorway – and sometimes the door between courtyards – has great significance: the door pierces the membrane, and suddenly tension is released. This calls forth an opposite reaction: the visual reinforcement, celebration, strengthening of the place of piercing, the transition between realms. The doorway is therefore decorated in a rich and majestic way. In some cases there is more than one street door, so that the family does not have to pass through the visitors' territory, or young women through men's territory, and so forth; the social function of male hospitality is so important that the majlis access route is always to some extent separate from family territory.

Construction & Decorative Design

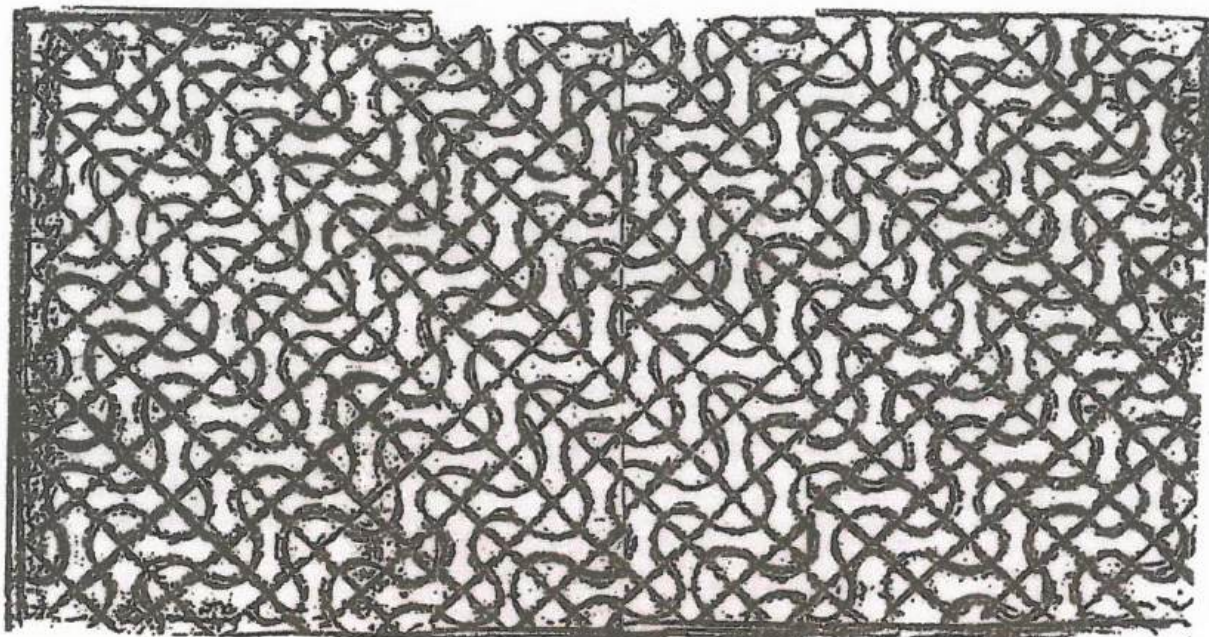


Fig 2.1 Carved plaster decoration

Construction

A complete discussion of the building industry, building construction and climate control will be found in Yarwood (1988) and only the briefest picture is given here. See also Yarwood J.R. "Building Construction in a Historic Arabian Town". Construction History. Volume 15 1999.

Calcareous stone from a quarry on Jiddah island was used for foundations walls and columns were built from coral stone (*hadjar al bahr*) excavated from intertidal flats, using a random-rubble technique, and jointed by mud (usually excavated at Rifa'a). Quartered palm trunks (*yadhaw*) were laid horizontally within solid walls in order to strengthen them. Columns were tied horizontally by beams of mangrove, known as *Zanzibar poles*, (*denchel* or *chendel*). Rendering consisted of three layers: the first layer (*al tchres*) was mud; the second layer (*al misailh*) was mud and gypsum; and the third layer (*al tabidh*) was lime and gypsum. Layers were cut back to form decorative patterns. Frames were filled by non-loadbearing elements, including stratified coral stone laminae (*farsh*), about 7cm thick, which occurs naturally on the coasts. Windows had their frames, often with vertical iron bars after 1900, these were imported from ironworks such as Kufi and Jambudpur. Stained glass may have come from Danzig.

Roof construction comprised mangrove poles, with a diagonal grid of split bamboo above. Upon this rested palm-frond woven mats (*basin nagh*) and then a layer of rubble stone set in mud, rendered also with mud - the

best was imported from Lingeh on the Persian coast. Roofs were drained by timber gargoyles (*marzam*).

Climate control was sophisticated - and heavily influenced by Persian methods. This advanced during the Middle Period, when the Persian Revolution caused a flood of refugees to cross the Gulf. Wind-towers caught breezes and brought them down to head level, as well as acting as hot-air flues at night: (see Roaf 1983 and A Coles and P Jackson 1975.) A device known as *al badgir* comprised two *farsh* panels displaced horizontally so as to create a 5cm gap which speeded air movement. These were built into parapets and walls at low level so as to cool sitting or sleeping people.

Low thermal capacity was achieved by slender structural frames and infill panels of *farsh*, which enabled first floor apartments to lose heat quickly at night, (although the diurnal range of temperature is small in Bahrain). Tall but narrow apartments facilitated cross-ventilation. Narrowness also prevented excessive sagging of the *Zanzibar poles* and so prevented ponding of rain-water and leakage. Facilitation to catch prevailing wind and minimise solar radiation is important: this topic is discussed in detail in Yarwood (1988).

MERLONS														
BRACKETS														
ARCH FORMS														
VOIDS														
RECESSED PANELS														
INCISED PANELS														

Fig 2.4 Catalogue of designs for merlons, brackets, arches and panels

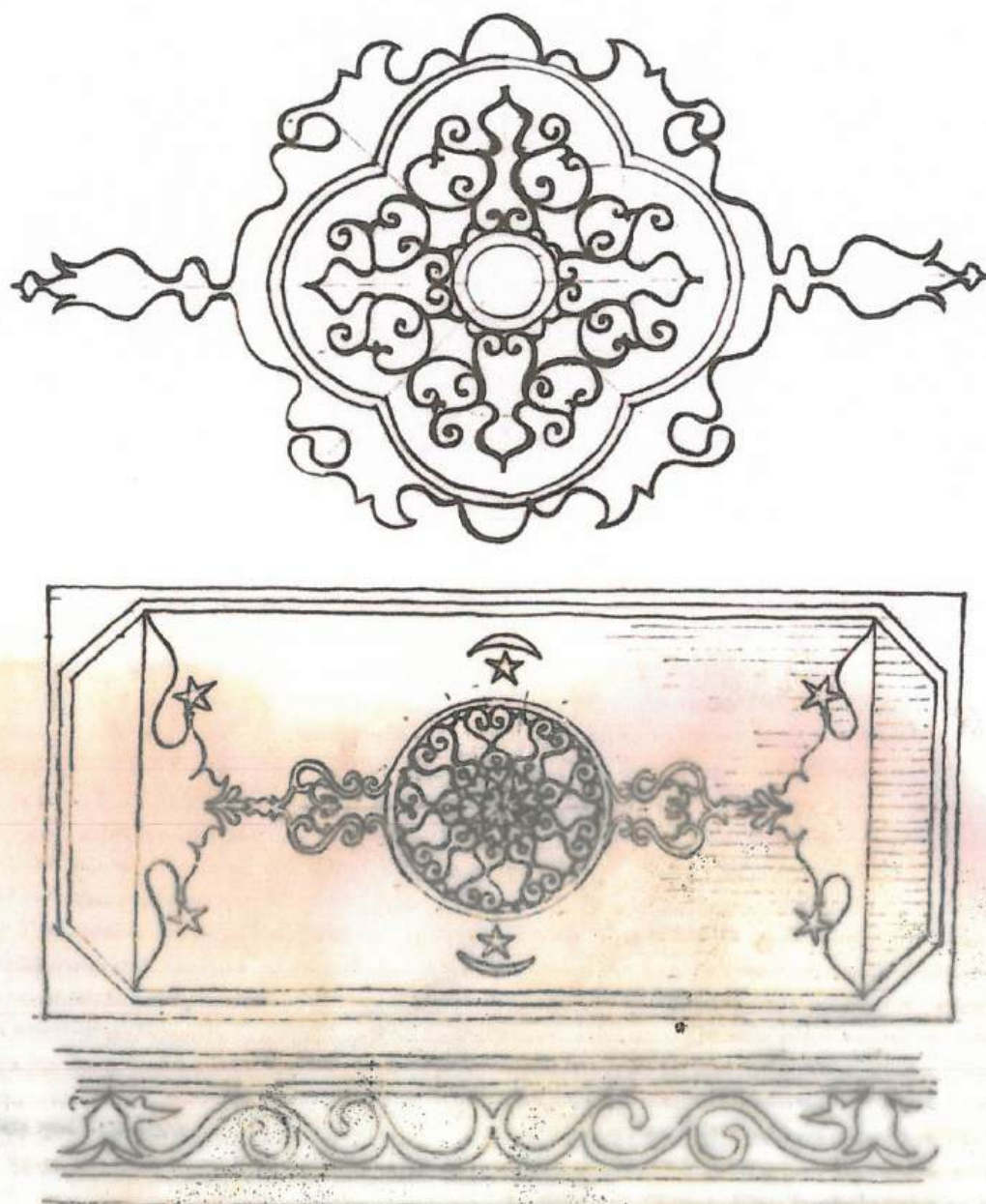


Fig 2.5 Fretted timber ceiling decorations at Maffur houses

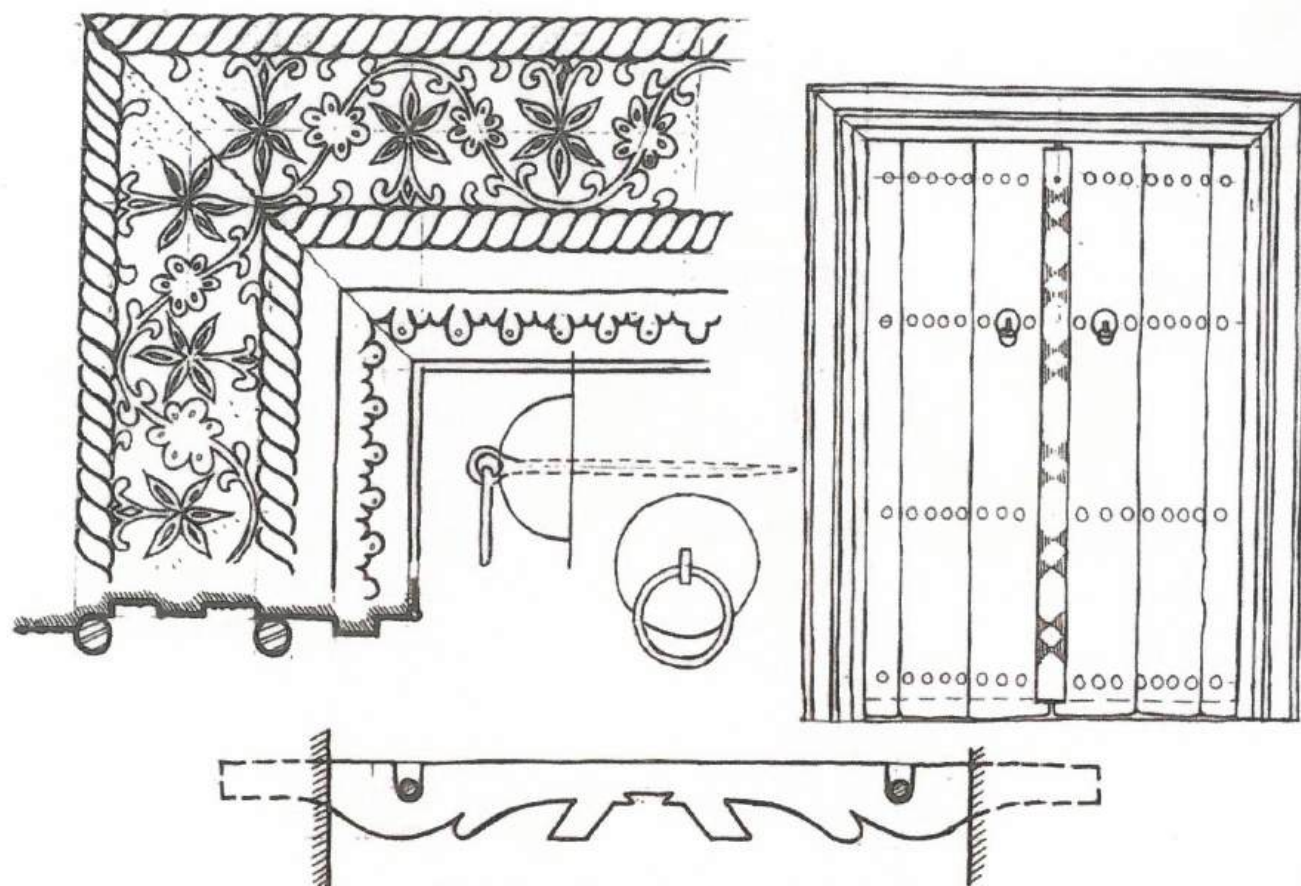


Fig 2.6 Sheikh Isa house doorway, architrave detail, iron knocker and upper door rail.

ubiquitous feature, justly well known and much loved locally.

The finest work at the Seyadi house was executed by Persian carpenters and is nearly unique in Al Muharraq. It is possible that this was made in Persia and shipped to Bahrain. The only tacked-lath decoration and the only glass marquetry in Al Muharraq are found in this house too: see Figure 2.7. The timber fretwork and carving on certain doors was a unique prototype which spawned copies in the following decades.

Wrought Iron

Wrought-iron grilles set in timber frames (covering windows externally) are found in Sheikh Abdullah majlis, Sheikh Hamad House, Al Jahana House and a house in Lane 1140. These were the only examples I found, but probably others still exist: see Figure 2.8. Clearly they follow a particular design idiom, having parallel vertical bars usually running from top to bottom. There are curlicues back-to-back on these bars, and they form horizontal rows, and there may be petals formed by bars enclosing the curlicues. The Sheikh Abdullah design has beautiful double flowers.

Wooden Carving and Fretwork

Door-post carving is generally in three styles:

- Lozenge style: the cross section of the door stop is rectangular with a 'necklace' of lozenges and

rhomboids. The lozenge sides are often carved in steps, which gives a very distinctive (almost crystalline) appearance.

- Fluid style: the rectangular cross-section is carved into a 'necklace' of fluid shapes, mainly circles, quatrefoils, and ovals.
- 'Lily' style: the cross-section is semicircular. There is a stylized lily at the top. The most characteristic decoration is vertical fluting, which becomes spiral in form and again vertical. It would appear that the lily style was initiated by the Seyadi House, and is thus an import from Persia from around 1920. It is not uncommon in a debased form in the Al Awadiyyah district of Manama.

I next discuss window grilles: see figure 2.9. Most window grilles were made from short pieces of wood (about 1.5 cm square in section) jointed by mortice and tenon. However, the grille frame was often subdivided by timber members having a similar section but spanning from side to side. These grilles are very strong. This is surprising in view of the small component sizes. Such grilles may be found at Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed House, Sheikh Salman House (majlis) and Mattar House. The Seyadi majlis grilles are more complex, with outer panels framing a centre panel of a different design. The use of short elements was no doubt economic in areas where high quality timber in large sections was not readily available.