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# TENDENCIES IN MODERN EGYPTIAN PAINTING

أتجات فى فنون الرسم المصرية المعاصرة



Salah Enani: *Artists and Authors from the Years of Enlightenment*, 1990



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## 0. PREFACE

This text is a translation of the thesis '*Tendenser i Moderne Egyptisk Maleri*' written in Norwegian, which I presented for the Cand.Philol. degree at the University of Bergen in May 1994.

As a result of my research I realised that the literature on this topic in European languages is very limited. I have therefore made this translation to be able to present the results of my research to a broader public than the Norwegian one. It is my hope that both researchers and students on Middle-Eastern studies will find it interesting to also study *modern art* from Arab societies. I am indebted to amongst others the artists, gallery-owners and researchers who generously spent their time helping me while I was in Egypt, their help encouraged me to make this translation.

This thesis must be regarded as a first attempt in achieving a broader understanding of modern Egyptian art. Whilst working on this translation I have seen several topics that could have been rewritten or made further research into. I have not, at the present time had the opportunity of doing this, therefore there have not been made any major alterations from the original in this translation. Some minor faults have been corrected.

It is impossible to name all the persons that have helped me during my research. In addition to all the Egyptian artists and gallery-owners I would like to mention Prof. Dr.philos. Gunnar Danbolt at the University of Bergen and Dr.philos. Saphinaz Amal Naguib and Dr.philos. Gunvor Mejdell, both at the University of Oslo, and at last Anne Sunderland who has helped with proof-reading the English text.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Approaches and methods

#### 1.1.1. Approach

I have been interested for a long time in how the encounters of different cultures are taking place. Islam is at the present time the second largest religion in Europe. This is causing new encounters in Europe, at the same time as the western culture is influencing the non-European societies. Against this background it is important to know and understand cultural expressions from different Islamic societies to understand the processes going on in the western multicultural society.

Egypt has always been an important meeting point between east and west. Since the invasion by Napoleon in 1798 Egypt has been the most important gateway for western scholars to understand Islamic cultures. In Egypt they have found a key to understand Islamic and oriental cultures, at the same time as Egypt itself has an exceptional national history. Through oriental studies, one has studied the Egyptian culture and society from the 19th century until today. Most of the humanistic sciences as archaeology, anthropology, religious history, literary history and art history have studied different aspects with Islamic and Egyptian culture.

Egypt has been under strong western influence since Napoleon, but it also belongs to an Islamic cultural and religious sphere. This entails that the western ideas and phenomena that occur are getting an other shape than in the West. One example is the *religious* ban on pictorial art, enforced in the mosques and the Qur'an. This is giving the pictorial art different terms and history than in the West. The modern Egyptian pictorial art is a phenomena of this century. It has been created in the encounter with Europe and European culture. It is consequently many different, and partly antagonistic tendencies that form the basis of modern pictorial art in Egypt as well in other Islamic societies.

To choose to examine modern pictorial art in *Egypt* falls in line with a long European tradition of research. The results of research in Egypt can to a certain extent be transferred to other Islamic societies and provide basis for further research.

The object of this thesis is to provide a concise survey of the topic, *Modern Egyptian Painting*. The topic is being examined according to ancient and modern Egyptian history, and according to tendencies in modern western pictorial art. It is an object to elucidate why and how Egyptian painting has developed as it is today. This topic has been of minor interest from scholars and the public outside Egypt. I hope therefore that this thesis can be part of providing a contribution to enhance the understanding of non-European cultures here in Europe.

First I will elucidate on some questions connected to how and why a national pictorial art was founded, in the encounter with the West, in Egypt after 1900. Later on, I shall, to a certain extent, examine if there are a distinctive common Arabic / Islamic pictorial aesthetics, that the Egyptian art can or should be examined according to, and that is different from the prevailing western directions.

The most important object of the thesis is to elucidate, describe and partly analyse as to how modern Egyptian pictorial art looks today. I wish to examine what is specifically Egyptian, and what is part of international movements.

### 1.1.2. Limitations

My approach of examining encounters between western pictorial art and Egyptian art, from as many angles of incidence as possible gave a frame of reference for the thesis. Because of my approach it occurs quite naturally that I, in this thesis will focus on different tendencies within modern Egyptian painting. It would not have been fitting to write a single monograph, or to examine only *one* single aspect of Egyptian pictorial art from a chronological and representative examination. Nor am I making a strictly chronological examination of the different stages in Egyptian pictorial art. The different pieces of art are being dealt with, where they most naturally fall in to context.

The thesis consists of two main parts. The first part, chapter 4, is dealing with the pioneer-generation, that established the development of a modern pictorial art in the period 1930-1980. The second part, chapter 5, concentrates on the younger generation, and will consequently deal with contemporary art from the period 1980 to 1993. Some older artists, that were established before 1980, but who are still active, will in this connection be dealt with in chapter 5.

Questions always arise about the selection of artists and works of art for such a thesis. Omissions must take place in descriptions dealing with a *selection* of works of art, either from a period or a group. The artists and works of art are



selected to be *representative*, and exhibit to a greater degree the different tendencies in modern Egyptian painting. I have chosen to include a limited number of works of art from many artists. In this way I aim to elucidate the different *tendencies* from as many angles of incidence as possible. This approach also gives a concentrated section of the topic.

My research is focused on painting, but if necessarily, or useful for the understanding of the topic, I will also include artists working in different techniques.

My seven months research in Egypt in 1993 was supplemented by several shorter trips. During my various periods in Egypt I have had profound interviews with approximately 25 painters, among them the half are teaching at the various colleges of art in Cairo and Alexandria. I have also visited the *Faculty of Fine Arts, Academy of Fine Arts, Faculty of Applied Arts and Faculty of Art Education*, all in Cairo. I have also had interviews with gallery-owners and the director of *Museum of modern Egyptian Art* in Cairo. In addition I have thoroughly examined all the works of art in the Cairo museum and seen numerous paintings in artists studios. There are a great variety of exhibitions in Cairo, with 7-8 new exhibitions each month. I certainly visited all the exhibitions held in Cairo during my stay. At the same time it is obvious that far from all of the exhibitions were of any particular interest, seen from an art historical point of view.

### 1.1.3. Methodical problems

A very important question is which methods can be used to discuss and analyse Egyptian art. Originally I had been thinking about dividing the material by conceptions like for instance: impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, abstract expressionism etc. These conceptions are being used in Egyptian art-literature, I consequently assumed that it would be convenient to use them. Further examination shows however that these conceptions, in an Egyptian context, cover something other than western art history associates with them. Further more, Egyptian artists seem not to fit into *one* single conception. The relation to Egyptian culture showed to be a superior aspect for the most of the artists. Consequently, after working for a long time with the material, I realised that a *thematic* division of pictorial art, within different aspects of Egyptian reality, clarifies things for a further understanding of the topic.

One needs to ask if it is right or possible to evaluate modern Egyptian pictorial art on basis of western terms and ideas. By using western conceptions, it is easy to see only the parts that resemble the western, whilst the others are overlooked.

This is not satisfactory, because it doesn't catch the distinctive qualities of the art, which would inhibit me from describing the *encounters* between two cultures.

The pictures often deal with something else, even if the forms resemble the western models. One example can be seen in surrealism, in the West it deals with dreams and the subconscious. In Egyptian art surrealism is used more as a style, a description of the outward form. The demand of thematic content is not the same. Egyptian surrealism satisfies the formal *outward* resemblance of some parts of surrealism. This tendency to use the *styles* only as concrete expressions of form, and not as general cultural and ideological conceptions tells a lot about the distinctive qualities in Egyptian pictorial art.

These differences towards the concept of style make it clear that it is impossible to use it as an important criteria for analysis. When I use the western styles it is only as a descriptive term on stylistic characteristics.

An other important point is that Egyptian national feelings, are a far more important point of reference for Egyptian artists in comparison to western art at the present moment. Since Egypt plays such an important part as a theme in their art, I have found it necessary to place their art into a broader historical and political context, in an attempt to find out why. See chapter 2.

I have not had the opportunity to present a similar examination of all of the other topics dealt with in this thesis, for instance Egyptology, Islam, Arabic literature and others. It would also go far beyond the objective of this thesis. Since these topics are not in direct line with this presentation, I am possibly guilty of some inaccuracy in referring to them, however I don't believe this weakens my thesis, since my topic is *modern pictorial art*.

In my material there has arisen many questions related to the cultural heritage, universal vs. specific conceptions, the importance of religion on the art, and many similar questions. There are many pitfalls a western spectator can fall into when studying non-European cultures. Edward Said<sup>(1)</sup> discusses these and similar questions, and also looks at the West's comprehension of the Orient throughout the times in his book *Orientalism*. An important tendency in most of 'Western Orientalism' literature is a smaller or greater degree of ethnocentrism or cultural superiority towards the topic being studied. Said quotes for instance H.A.R. Gibb: *'It is true that there have been great philosophers among the*

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1 Edward W. Said: ORIENTALISM, Western Conceptions of the Orient.

*Muslim peoples and that some of them were Arabs, but they were rare exceptions. The Arab mind, whether in relation to the outer world or in relation to the process of thought, cannot throw off its intense feeling for the separateness and individuality of the concrete events. This is, I believe, one of the main factors lying behind that 'lack of sense of law' which Professor Macdonald regarded as the characteristic difference in the Oriental<sup>(2)</sup>. Said further points out that many orientalists researching on Islamic questions alienate themselves to the culture they have studied: 'Rather, their estrangement from Islam simply intensified their feelings of superiority about European culture, even as their antipathy spread to include the entire Orient, of which Islam was considered a degraded (and usually, a virulent dangerous) representative.<sup>(3)</sup> These attitudes not only belong to the previous generations of scholars, but also characterise, according to Said, many of the present scholars: 'Even the ones whose speciality is the modern Islamic world anachronistically use texts like the Koran to read into every facet of contemporary Egyptian or Algerian society. Islam, or a seventh-century ideal of it constituted by the Orientalists, is assumed to possess the unity that eludes the more recent and important influences of colonialism, imperialism and even ordinary politics<sup>(4)</sup>.*

I do hope that I have learned something from Said, and that I, because of this analyse the Egyptian pictorial art without prejudice, but with a necessary distance.

#### 1.1.4. Literature

There have been published a remarkably small number of books on modern art and artists in Egypt, also in Arabic, this in spite of the great number of educational institutions within the field. There have been published five general survey works in French or English about the pioneer generation, where the book of Azar<sup>(5)</sup> is the most thorough and analytic. Since there has been little research on the topic outside Egypt the amount of available literature in European languages is limited. However there have been published small monographs on some of the important artists of the pioneer generation, most of these are available in one European language in addition to Arabic.

As I have mentioned before the Arabic literature is not extensive either, but concentrated to some smaller books and theses in the different art colleges. The unpublished theses at the different art colleges have not been available to me

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2 *Ibid:* p. 105-106.

3 *Ibid:* p. 260.

4 *Ibid:* p. 301.

5 Aimé Azar: *La Peinture Moderne en Egypte*

because of the language barrier. This doesn't cause too many problems since the important points of view are also reflected in the European literature. Some of the Arabic literature I have had translated. I have also made good use of art-critics and articles in newspapers and magazines. I have made an extensive search for literature at the American University in Cairo, and approached international databases from the University Library in Oslo. I can consequently, with a great degree of security ascertain that I have got hold on what is available of relevant literature. As can be seen from the literature list, my literary sources have enabled me to work with my material to both constitute a picture of the situation and also to draw my conclusions.

Since I am, at this time is concentrating on how the encounter between western culture and Egyptian pictorial art are taking place, all of the literature is not relevant. My concern was in finding relevant literature which helped me to put the pictures into a specific context.

It is not possible for me to point out significant differences, related to use of method or thematic preferences, in the literature written by Egyptians, and in the one written by Europeans. What signifies the available literature is that it is to a great extent descriptive, and to a lesser extent analytic. It is also emphasised by an imprecise use of terms and conceptions of style.

Other sources I have used are mainly smaller exhibitions catalogues, and interviews with artists and gallery owners. When I, in the text, refer to statements from an artist, without referring to any source, it is statements emerged from my interviews with the person concerned.



## 2. GENERAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Historical and Political

As seen in chapters 4 and 5, modern Egyptian art is closely bound to Egyptian culture and history. The art is to a lesser degree international, compared to the West. To be able to study and understand the art it is hence important and necessary with a brief introduction to Egyptian history.

I will emphasise recent history, after Napoleon's invasion in 1798. This event indicated an important turning point for Egypt. After this, Egypt has to a greater extent, more or less voluntarily, been drawn into western sphere of interest. From Napoleon to present times, there has been a conflict with western ideas on one side, and Egypt or the Islamic on the other. It is in this context that *modern* Egyptian culture has emerged and is developing. This introduction can not be called adequate for the period. It gives small glimpses into history, to provide a background to study and understand present Egyptian society and contemporary art.

An important and remarkable feature with Egypt's history, is that Egypt has been governed by foreign rulers as far back as the Persian invasion 525 BC until the revolution in 1952. Between 1517 and 1914 Egypt was a part of the Ottoman empire. Egypt was also drawn into the fights between England and France about the African and Asian colonies. Napoleon's army occupied important parts of Egypt between 1798 and 1801. By the occupation of Egypt Napoleon wanted to achieve two things, one was to enhance his empire; *'By taking Egypt, then, a modern power would naturally demonstrate its strength and justify history; Egypt's own destiny was to be annexed, to Europe preferably'*<sup>(6)</sup> The second thing he wanted to achieve was to bring European civilization to Egypt; *'Napoleon wanted to offer a useful European example to the Orient, and finally also make the inhabitants' lives more pleasant, as well as to procure for them all the advantages of a perfected civilization'*<sup>(7)</sup>. The Egyptian rulers did not want Napoleon's form of civilization for Egypt. Napoleon and the French forces were thrown out by British and Ottoman forces. Mohammed Ali was Ottoman commander against the French forces. He was appointed pasha in 1805, a vassal of the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul, but he ruled Egypt as his own realm. One of his ambitions was to transform Egypt to a modern state, partly after European model, but on its own terms. His successors followed up the plans, but without sufficient financial funding. From 1841 Egypt was an autonomous province

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6 Edward W. Said: *Op. cit.*: p.85.

7 *Ibid.*: p. 85, from Fourier: *Preface historique*, vol.1 of *Description de l'Egypte*, p. xcii.

within the Ottoman empire. The plans of modernisation and the financial problems resulted in tensions within Egypt, both in relation to the Ottoman empire, and to Europe, specifically England and France. First of all it was the expenses related to construction of the Suez canal and khedive Ismail's overwhelming need of luxury that broke down the Egyptian economy. These things led the Ottoman sultan in 1879 to depose khedive Ismail and to install his son Tawfiq as khedive. There were big riots in Egypt in 1881 because of the political situation in the country and the economic conditions for the people. All leading national forces filled the ranks behind what has later been called the Urabi-revolt, headed by colonel Ahmad Urabi. Their demands were a constitution and legislation after European standard, democratic representative bodies and government. The new constitution was proclaimed in November 1881 and Egypt's first elected assembly with legislative authority was opened by khedive Tawfiq. These new nationalistic movements caused great agitation in France and England who wanted to protect their interests in the Suez canal. Uninhibited passage through Suez was of vital importance to keep their colonies. Egypt had accumulated a great foreign debt and finances were intractable. English and French shareholders in the Suez canal and other important projects, maintained a constantly increasing influence on Egyptian administration and finances. A situation which was in their interests because of economic, political and military reasons. During the summer of 1882 there was a great military tension in the Mediterranean. Since the British government did not receive guarantees for their interests, British forces occupied the canal zone and Cairo at 13th of September 1882. The Ottoman sultan in Istanbul had no power to withstand the British forces. After this Egypt came in reality under British administration with Lord Cromer as Consul General, he held this office for 24 years from 1882. Khedive Tawfiq was still in power and appointed a pro-British government, ruling on Lord Cromer's approval. It is worth registering that Egypt never became a British colony, even if the difference was symbolic. In 1916 the British government declared Egypt as a protectorate, to secure their own interests in, amongst others, the canal zone, after the Ottoman empire had entered the war on German side. There had for a few decades already been strong nationalistic forces in Egypt. These were further strengthened by the British exiling of the leader *Sa'ad Zaghloul* to Malta in 1918. This happened after the Wafd-movement had raised demands for autonomy for Egypt. The deportation led to riots throughout the country.

### 2.1.1. Independence

Not before 1922 did the British accept the demand of autonomy, and an independent kingdom was proclaimed. Khedive Fouad took the title of king. The British maintained still substantial influence over the administration in Egypt and in particular the Suez canal. There were big political conflicts between the Wafd-party on one side, and king Fouad and Farouk and the British on the other side. The outbreak of the Second world war delayed the independence process. In 1952 there were held elections where the Wafd-party won a triumphant victory. They formed a government, but after a disagreement between prime minister Nahhas and king Farouk about the British withdrawal from Suez, king Farouk dissolved the government. This led to common riots and anti-British demonstrations, the army was called out to put down the riots. An association called 'Free Officers', that had been organised as a secret opposition movement, had for a long time awaited the opportunity to take power through a coup. They had planned to do this in 1954, but because of the riots that broke out in 1952 they then grasped the opportunity<sup>(8)</sup>. There were no other political alternative at that time, that seemed to have any ability to govern Egypt better. 23rd of July 1952 they carried out their coup d'état, and declared Egypt to be an independent republic 27th of July, king Farouk was then exiled.

Until 1954 general Naguib was formally head of state, but general Gamel Abdel Nasser took over in 1954 and was appointed president in 1956. Even though the transition of power in 1952 actually appeared to be a coup, it should be regarded as a revolution, because of the tremendous support the new government had in the population, and because of the big reforms that were carried out. Egypt has had different alliances after the revolution, first they tried a close liaison with the US, but when this proved to be fruitless Nasser gradually moved Egypt to be a leading power among the non-allied states and within the Arab League. At the same time Egypt entered into weapon-supplies treaties, co-operation and friendship with the Soviet Union, but without going into all the political desires from the Soviet Union. The Nasser-period was dominated by domestic redistribution politics, with great land reforms, development of education and health services, and other parts of public sectors. One result of this policy was that all university graduates were granted employment in the public sector.

Political balance between the two superpowers was also of vital importance. The constitution of 1956 was clearly inspired by the socialist countries, and the

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8 Arthur Goldschmidt jr.: *MODERN EGYPT, The Formation of a Nation-State*, p. 89.

government started an extensive central planning, private sector should still play an important part, even if this was rapidly diminishing. The movement towards a socialistic system continued throughout the Nasser-period. An enormous problem for Egypt and the other Arab states in this period, has been and to a certain extent still are, the relations to Israel and the Palestinians. When Anwar Sadat succeeded Nasser after his death in 1970, he continued in the beginning Nasser's policies. After a short while he oriented Egypt more towards the West and towards a private-capitalistic economy. The peace agreement between Egypt and Israel led to a grave weakening in relations between Egypt and the other Arab states, but it led to massive aid from the US in the following years.

Sadat's liberalisation of the economy only led to an improvement in the standards of living for a small percentage of the population. The greater masses did not improve their situation. This was one of the many reasons by which the *'Muslim Brotherhood'* and other more radical groups gained public support. Sadat was met with political confrontations also amongst the more influential in society. One of these Islamistic organisations *al-Jihad*<sup>(9)</sup> was responsible for the assassination of Sadat 6th October 1981, carried out by a high-ranking officer. Lots of other persons with associations to Muslim Brotherhood, were also arrested, jailed and executed in connection with the murder, at the same time as also other sanctions were applied. Hosni Mubarak succeeded Sadat as president after the murder, he is still in office. Even if Mubarak is continuing along many of the same political lines as Sadat, he is wider respected amongst the people, but he is also facing great domestic problems. He has managed to achieve better relations with the other Arab states, which were rather low after Sadat's peace agreement with Israel. Islam has a more visible position in society, in addition Muslim Brotherhood has been legalised, whilst other Islamistic or terroristic groups are being mercilessly beaten down. Mubarak tries through his government to balance between Islamic and Arabic ideas on one side, and a greater rapprochement to the West on the other side. Egypt is again a full member of the Arab League, and works as a mediator and link between different groups in the Middle East that are not on speaking terms. Egypt is playing a vigorous part in the difficult negotiations between the Palestinians, Israel, and the other Arab neighbours.



Mubarak is continuing the process of privatisation of public sector, and liberalisation of the economy in general, and adjusting to the demands of the World Bank related to cutting in subsidies and similar. Egypt is still fighting against an enormous foreign debt, even if some of the debts to the US were released after the Gulf-war. The new financial policy has led to a rapidly increasing inflation, this entails that the differences between the rich and the large growing numbers of poor increases. This situation has given room for many conflicts which are being used by different Islamistic groups. These groups seek to destabilize the government through terrorist actions against police stations, military camps, the tourist industry, as well as ordinary civilians. Their aim is amongst others to establish an Islamic state, with *Shari'ah* as fundamental basis for the legislation and order of society. They will further make the country independent of western economic influence, and establish a just policy of distribution.

The Copts have always, until now, played an important part in Egyptian society, even if they are a declining minority. The Copts often consider themselves as the 'true' Egyptians, since Egypt was Christian before Islam became the dominant religion. The religious distribution in Egypt today is about 93% Sunni-Muslims, 1% Shia-Muslims and 6% Christians, mainly Copts.

Present Egyptian society is characterised by many contrasts: between urban and rural areas, between national and international movements, between the rich minority and the large majority of poor, between the intellectual middle class and the nouveaux riches merchants, between Christians and Muslims, and between the fundamentalists, or *Islamists* (Vogt<sup>(10)</sup>), and the rest of the society. Such contrasts also influence art and the artists, even if they are not a direct art subject.

### 3. ART-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### 3.1. Historical

Egyptian painting, in *modern* terms, is a rather new phenomenon, compared with Europe. It is on the other hand, possible to see some parallels between Egypt and other countries with a relatively short history as independent states, as e.g. Norway. Painters, as well as other intellectuals, sought out Egypt's roots to find inspiration and motifs for their art. It was important to create or revitalise the nation's culture to give legitimacy to the independence and nationalist movement.

Egyptian artists have an enormous cultural heritage to draw upon when they are seeking the nation's roots. Egypt has 6000 years of civilization in the Nile-valley with superb paintings, sculptures, relief and architecture from all the pharaonic period. Because of Islam's ban on depicting living creatures, there evolved an important break in the use of pictures when Islam became the official religion in Egypt. On the other hand a rich calligraphic tradition developed, enabling the artists to evade the ban on images by '*drawing*' with the script (Ill. 1). It is important to remember that the ban on images was enforced varying according to time and place. Depicting of figures occurred to a certain extent in crafts such as ceramics and metalwork, and in illuminated manuscripts.

An important difference in connection with the Coptic and pre-Islamic period, was that pictures were never allowed in mosques or other religious buildings. In previous times there were just temples, churches, tombs and palaces that were embellished with pictures. There were lesser opportunities to carry out pictorial art when religious buildings could not be embellished anymore. The focus shifted to a rich variation in architecture and ornamental decoration.

Within the Coptic church pictorial art continued in icons and other religious pictures. Coptic painting is part of an unbroken tradition from the classic pharaonic, via Roman until Byzantine painting. It is consequently possible to regard Coptic painting as a branch of Byzantine painting.

One must even so conclude that there has not been any particular *Egyptian pictorial art* in the Islamic period, until the start of this century.

### 3.1.1. The 'modern' Egypt

The first schooling in fine arts in Egypt in modern times started in 1908, with prince Yusuf Kamal's foundation of '*Cairo School of Fine Arts*', which is also known as '*cole Egyptienne des Beaux-Arts*', modelled on western academies of fine arts. Previously there had only been simple drawing-schools and crafts-schools. It is safe to say that there did not exist any pictorial art made by and for Egyptians before this school. What had been done before must be considered amateur painting. The school could be established because the mufti of Egypt, the liberal theologian Mohammed Abduh, had stated that pictorial art was not contradictory to Islam as long as it should not be used to defeat the purpose of Islam<sup>(11)</sup>. Mohammed Abduh was the Egyptian mufti between 1889 and 1905. He was devoted to reformation and modernising the judicial system and schooling in Egypt. Abduh tried to find a middle line between the conservatives at Al-Azhar and the European secular movements. He wanted amongst others to modernise *Shari'a* by reintroducing *ijtihad*, the right to interpret the law.<sup>(12)</sup>

Prince Yusuf Kamal was himself responsible for financing of the academy for more than 25 years. The teaching staff were mainly from France and Italy. It was at this academy that the first Egyptian modern artists were trained. This new effort was generated by a genuine interest of creating something new, but there did not exist any important mediums such as big art collections and museums that could present a great selection of art. There still exists only *one* permanent collection of European art in Egypt, this is at *Mahmoud Khalil Museum* in Cairo, where there are mainly impressionistic painting and Chinese antiques. Because of this lack of available collections artists and other interested people have no opportunity to become oriented about European art history. The academy, then as now, emphasises classical skills, and does not encourage independent experiments.

There were many foreigners living in Egypt, particularly in Cairo and Alexandria. In addition to the innumerable British and French, who for more than 150 years had been jockeying for the most influential position, there were many from other Mediterranean countries e.g. Italy, Spain and Greece. Further more there were quite a big group of Armenians. There was also a substantial Jewish colony, in addition to people from other Arab countries. Under British rule there had not been fostered a sufficient national middle class that could increase Egyptian economy. Egypt was in need of liquid capital and expertise

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11 Liliane Karnouk: *Modern Egyptian Art*, p. 4-5.

12 P.J. Vatikiotos: *The History of Modern Egypt*, p. 194-198.

within most fields. At this time this cosmopolitan character with European dominance was important for the development of both art and society. The strong foreign influence lasted until 1952, when foreign property was nationalised or confiscated. After 1956 great restrictions were exercised on private Egyptian business. The revolution led to remarkable cultural changes. Almost all the foreigners left Egypt, in this flood went also a great deal of the art interested public and the foreign artists that had worked in Egypt. Simultaneously a new national '*revival*' started in all parts of society. Within pictorial art this happened from new models, political, inspired by realistic and social-realistic movements.

The years between independence in 1922 and the 52-revolution were an important time of change in Egyptian society and culture. They were thirty years dominated by great changes and expectations. The expectations from 1922 about a new and better society were not fulfilled, and this created, partially the basis for the 52-revolution. Egypt was a young state struggling to create a new national identity and self-image. There were great needs of creating national institutions in all fields, also within arts. The art-scene, in Egypt at this time, were very hustling, with widespread contact between different art-directions, and many foreign artists settled for some time. Foreign artists were employed in important positions as teachers and professors at art colleges. In this entire century Egyptian artists have gone back to their cultural roots. This has led to a mixture of Egyptian impressionism, social-realism and national-romanticism. The result had to be different, and specifically Egyptian.

Egyptian modern artists have mainly been trained in a conservative classical academy-tradition, which the public also have appreciated. Experimental art has had poorer conditions in Egypt than in Europe. Only a small fraction of Egyptian artists has had the opportunity to study in the West, or take long journeys to Europe or the US, where art-movements are much more complex and full of nuances than the academy tradition. There are many reasons for the differences between Egyptian and European art, mostly are of political, economical and social character. The European public have been accustomed to pictorial art for centuries. The progressive and liberal parts of the European middle classes were enthusiastic for the new aesthetics in art from for instance Bauhaus and the expressionists. This aesthetics was a sign of the modern generation's prosperity and success, but part of this success was due to effective plundering of the colonies like for instance Egypt.



The art-public in Egypt, has in this century consisted of three elements; a small upper class, a new and nouveau rich middle class, with at least in part European education and ideals, and foreign residents in Egypt. Neither the upper nor middle class showed any particular interest for, nor had the opportunity to become familiar with, the newest trends in Europe. The foreign residents and some Egyptians who had lived for a long time in Europe, thought and acted as Europeans, as e.g. Ramsees Younan. This European influence can also be seen in architecture. Numerous buildings were build in Cairo, in the inter-war period, in outstanding Art Deco or Functionalism.

During the twenties and thirties the art market was dominated by Europeans living in Egypt and westernised Egyptians. It is understandable that foreign customers wanted art expressing '*the genuine Egyptian character*', at the same time this art was acceptable from the formal '*conservative*' demands. This is also conjunctive to the strong nationalistic movements amongst Egyptians at that time. As Vogt<sup>(13)</sup> points out, Egyptians were at this time mainly positive towards the '*western*'. Their taste were formed by the Europeans' taste. This can partly explain why the public were so conventional. At the same time there was much radical opposition to this form of society. The opposition in, amongst others '*Les Inquiets*', we shall see later, were oriented towards Marxist movements. That artists were directed towards surrealism when they were looking for alternatives, show that they went to well-known sources, Paris. Many foreigners were also loosely affiliated to the left-movement in these years. They contributed in creating a market for alternative art.

Egyptian authorities have, since the 52- revolution, paid great attention to art and culture. There has been established an Art-directorate under the Department of Culture, which is responsible for the governmental involvement in art and culture. There have been established colleges of fine arts, colleges of applied arts, colleges of art education, in addition to colleges for music, theatre, ballet, opera and films, in Cairo as well as in important province towns as Alexandria, Assiout and Mansoura. One has to regard this strong emphasis put on art as a necessary part in the modernisation, and thereby the westernization of society, which the government has given priority until present time.

The art-training, in Egypt as in other countries, has been criticised in different ways. It has been claimed that the training on one hand is too conservative, and on the other hand is too casual and not consistent. An important difference from

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13 Kari Vogt: *Op.cit.*, p. 202.

European art-training is that there is a total ban on using nude models in all high-schools and colleges. From an European point of view this is inhibiting to the learning of correct figure-drawing.

There has been established a museum of contemporary art, *The Museum of modern Egyptian Art*, in Cairo. There are also arranged many ambulatory exhibitions in the country. There are different scholarships for artists. There are also several judged exhibitions for established artists as well as for young unestablished ones. There are also efforts made to get foreign exhibitions to Egypt, and Egyptian artists abroad. There are also arranged international biennials and triennials in Cairo and Alexandria, with participants from all parts of the world.

An important difference compared to Europe, is that the art-scene is totally dominated by public institutions, there are very few serious private galleries running. There are 10 public galleries in Cairo, where of 3 belong to art colleges. Further more there are only 5-6 private galleries, in addition there are also 5 European cultural centres running exhibitions.

This strong public effort expended on art, in a country as poor as Egypt, is remarkable. This must be due to Egypt's recent political history. There has been a need to express many aspects of the national culture. It was important to show that the new government after 1952 represented something new and revolutionary, compared with previous governments that had served as marionettes for different foreign interests. Under both Nasser and Sadat there were ordered heroic artistic depictions of different events in recent Egyptian history. These were paralleled in the former socialistic and non-allied states which Egypt at that time had close relations to. The negative aspects of this public involvement are that in the Nasser-period there was a great degree of censorship in all cultural activities, specifically within literature, newspapers and drama, as well as in painting. This led to, that some adaptable artists achieved a greater recognition and more commissions than others. The censorship in the society has gradually been lifted since Sadat, but still exists to a more restricted extent. This continuing strong governmental engagement with culture has of course also negative effects. Some artists complain that they are not allowed to exhibit in the public galleries, but are abandoned to private galleries or to exhibit abroad. This does not only affect amateurs without other possibilities, but amongst others well established artists such as Siwi and Abal. Even if there are several judged exhibitions, this is not a guarantee against nepotism within cultural-life. In spite of strong public efforts on the part of art,

there are only a small minority that can live as artists, most of artists are also working as art-teachers, professors, or in the bureaucracy.

### 3.1.2. Centre vs. periphery

Generally speaking one can say that Egyptian artists, until present time, have not belonged to the avant-gardist circles in Europe, even if they have studied or worked there. They have apparently been working in more '*conservative*' figurative styles. When we consider the situation in the inter-war period there are two exceptions. Art Deco inspired neo-classicism and neo-realism found their way to Egypt. These were art-forms that according to the conditions were not disruptive to Egyptian taste. The second exception was the circle around *Les Inquiets* (see chap. 4), we can here find experiments with surrealistic and abstract art.

To continue, there were many artists who undoubtedly were inspired by French expressionism and impressionism in the twenties and thirties. The conservative style is not only due to the public's taste, but is also a question related to centre vs. periphery. Important innovations take place in the centre not in the periphery. On the other hand, there may under certain circumstances also occur revolutionary innovations in the periphery. One such example is young Soviet art in the first decade after the revolution. Neither Moscow nor Leningrad were central in Europe, and the new-born Soviet Union was penniless. Important reasons for this enormous creativity can be explained by the enthusiasm that artists felt towards the revolution, at the same time as having close ties to art-centres in Germany and France.

It is remarkable that there have not been any important contacts between Egypt and the German art scene. This follows a historical tradition partly related to Egypt's independent position towards the Ottoman empire. The upper-classes from the other countries of the empire went to Istanbul to study, where they also met German culture. Germany had close connections to the Ottoman empire in the 19th century. Egyptians going abroad for studies went mainly to Paris. During the Second world war there were some pro-German movements in Egypt, but the most important reason for this was to be anti-British. Most of the politicians regarded a possible Italian-German occupation of Egypt to be as bad as the British one.<sup>(14)</sup> The Egyptians were following a general pattern in Europe,

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14 Arthur Goldschmidt jr.: *Op. Cit.*, p. 72-74.

Paris was the most important place to visit for art-studies. It must be regarded as an exception when artists went to Berlin for studies. The centre of western art has changed many times in this century. First there were France and Germany at the same time in the inter-war period. After Hitler's assumption of power in 1933 Germany lost its position, and France, specifically Paris was the important centre for some years until the war reached France. After the Second world war New York has been the most important centre, with Paris as the second important. In the last decade Berlin has again played an important part, but it is not possible to talk about *one* important centre, but about different independent centres such as New York, Berlin and London. German expressionism early in this century had a great importance for most of what happened later in European art. This tendency is totally absent in Egypt.

There are several dominating cultural impulses, these have for many years played important roles in Egypt. In addition to the western impulses, there are the Mediterranean and Islamic cultural impulses. The Roman '*Mare Nostrum*' is still a reality when it comes to identity, there are numerous arrangements of cultural, politics, sports and economic character between the countries around the Mediterranean.

The most prolific inspiration derives from Paris, rather than from Mediterranean sources. Surrealism, or surrealist inspiration and influence, is besides Art Deco's classicism the only '*modern*' art-movements that have occurred in Egypt whilst they were still active in Europe. This may be explained by the fact that they are French and Mediterranean art-expressions. Art Deco was both modern and conformal at same time. Conformal is on the other hand not the expression to describe the surrealist tendency.

It is important to remember that many modern artists as e.g., Picasso, Léger and Modigliani also had neo-classicistic periods in their careers, and that they did not express themselves within just one style. They used *different* stylistic expressions when needed. This is something we can find also among many Egyptian artists.

### 3.2. Popular art and applied art

Since an important part of what is being called *Islamic Art*, is related to applied art, I find it important to make some comments on the present situation.

Egypt has a vital tradition in popular applied art using many materials such as, wood, metals, ceramics, glass and textiles. There have been produced everyday articles in the same styles for centuries. Old models and types are used, even if modern materials as plastic are being used in intarsia-works. There is a very small degree of artistic renewal within these traditional crafts. The schools of applied arts try to raise the artistic level of these crafts, but without particular success. The contrast to the splendid works executed under the height of Ottoman empire are enormous, but these works are still the ideal.

There are some experiments and innovations carried out in glass and ceramics at the moment. It is unfortunately impossible to go further into that subject in this thesis. What is most interesting in connection with painting is the development of tapestry. In the forties the architect and philanthropist *Ramsees Wissa Wassef* started a weaving-school for children in Harraniya outside Cairo<sup>(15)</sup>. Tapestries with pictorial designs had not previously had any position within Egyptian applied arts. At the school the children learned only the technique from Wissa Wassef, they were to create their own designs related to their cultural background from the villages. His slogan was that everyone is born as an artist, but that creativity is being destroyed by the authoritarian school-system. It was important for him that the children created their designs from their own imagination, without any interference or guidance. The results are quite interesting naive tapestries, even if they are of varying quality both in expression and craftsmanship.

With his ideas about children's creativity Wissa Wassef places himself in the mainstream of art-pedagogy for children. *'Giving the child opportunities to create constantly with the knowledge he currently has is the best preparation for future creative action.'*<sup>(16)</sup> The public school-system also provides art-education in all schools, but this is run on more conservative educational principles.

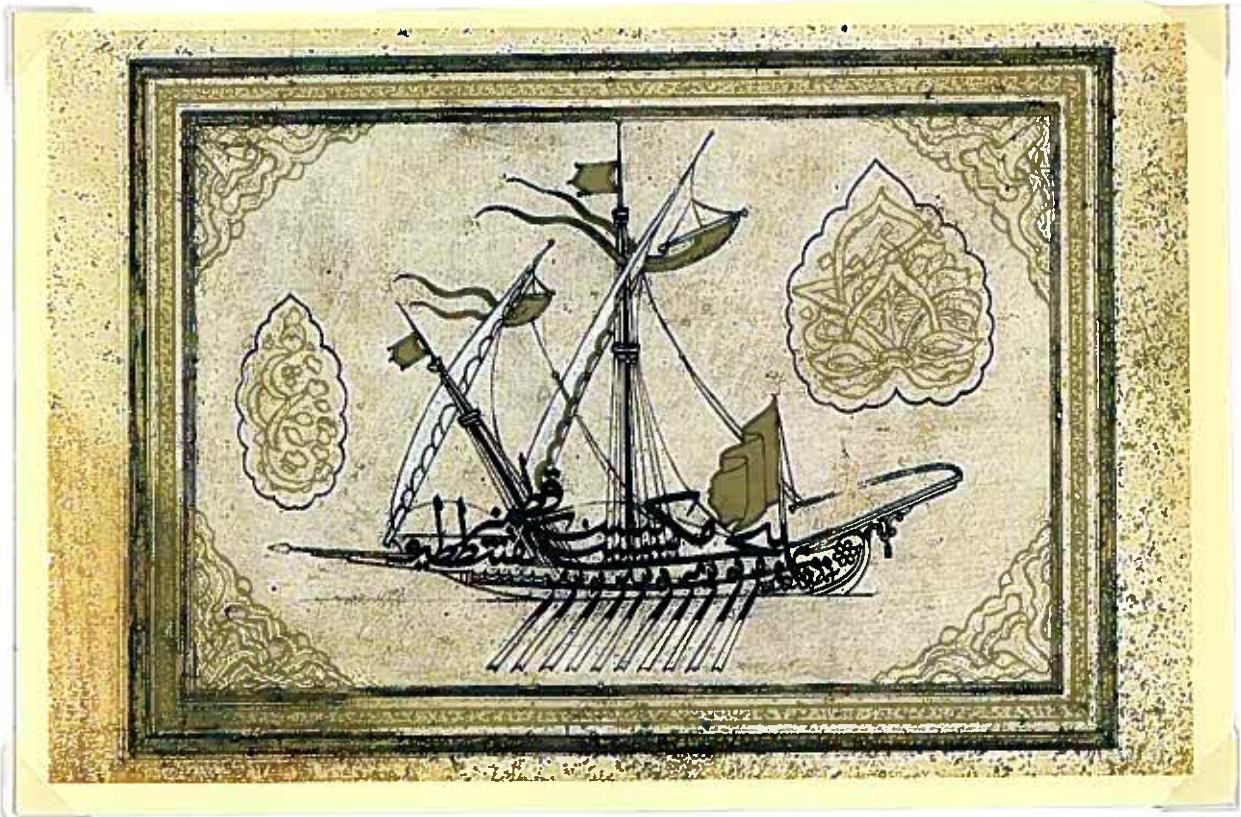
Participation in the Wissa Wassef workshop is not only limited to children, they are allowed to continue there as adults. Adults often accompany their children to the centre so that they also can be trained. Wissa Wassef tapestries have been exhibited abroad many times and received great acknowledgement. Recently the centre has also started work with ceramics and batiks after the same free educational principles.

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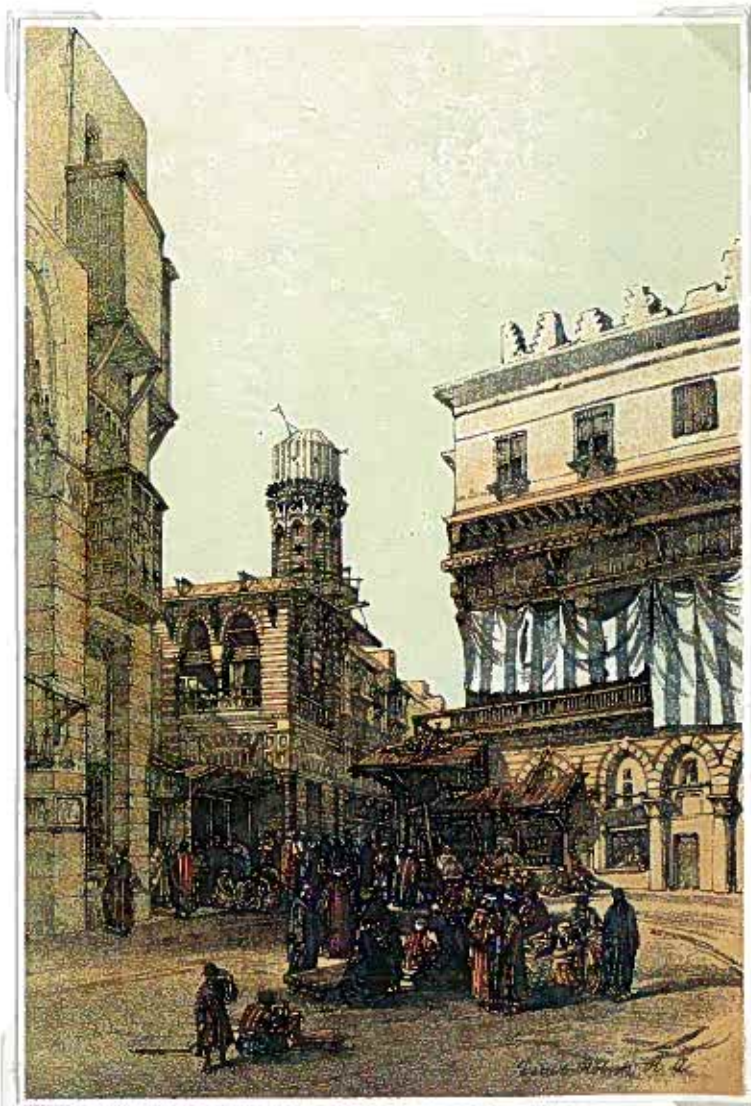
15 Denise Ammoun: *Crafts of Egypt*, Cairo 1991, p. 33.

16 Lowenfeld & Brittain: *Creative and Mental Growth*, p. 4.





1. Anonymus:  
*Arabic Calligraphy*,  
ca 1540.



2. David Roberts:  
*Bazaar of the  
Coppersmiths, Cairo*,  
1856.

Some particularly competent artists have withdrawn from the Wissa Wassef centre and tried to establish themselves as independent artists, with some success. Further more the naive expressions have been established as a style aspired to by some. There are also artists working both with batiks and painting, as e.g. Ali Dessouki, others like e.g. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen and Taha Hussein have weavers using their paintings as motif. In other words, there are many points of contact between popular art and modern painting in present Egypt.

### 3.3. Foreign artists in Egypt

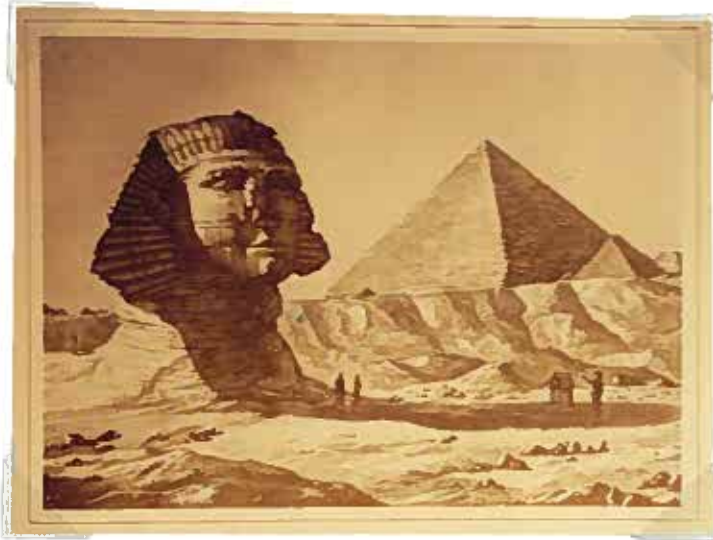
Before starting to study the Egyptian artists in this century I think it is important also to look at the foreign artist in this and the previous century. Even if they are few, they had a certain influence, they acted partly as teachers, and partly as sources of inspiration for Egyptian artists. They saw Egypt through the eyes of European orientalism and influenced the Egyptian to do the same. The Egyptian upper class had from the times of Mohammed Ali and Ismail admired European, and specifically French culture. Primarily this was a result of well-defined independence from the Ottoman empire. This Francophile tendency would later also balance the British influence on society, economy and administration. The upper-class adopted the French upper-class' ideals. It was a conservative, well established and well known style with romanticism becoming the ideal. The modern tendencies in the second part of the 19th century, such as impressionism, outdoor painting and realism did not arouse the same interest. The foreign artists, mostly French, did not represent the prevailing modern contemporary trends in Europe, but a conservative and conformal view on art. This tendency continued into this century.

There was also an orientalist tendency<sup>(17)</sup> in Europe. This takes its inspiration mainly from the romanticism that dominated European painting in the first part of the 19th century, and from the colonialism's desire of, and need for detailed documentation about the conditions in distant countries and areas. For Egypt this work of documentation started with the occupation by Napoleon in 1798. He brought with him a big scientific delegation to Egypt, included were also draftsmen and painters. They were to map every aspect of Egyptian society, both antique monuments, and elements of everyday life; trades, administration, architecture, culture, popular life, dress etc. This work resulted in the publishing of *Description de l'Egypte*<sup>(18)</sup> (Ill. 3,4,5). The completion of this work took more than 30 years, but the result were 26 volumes text and 11 big volumes with

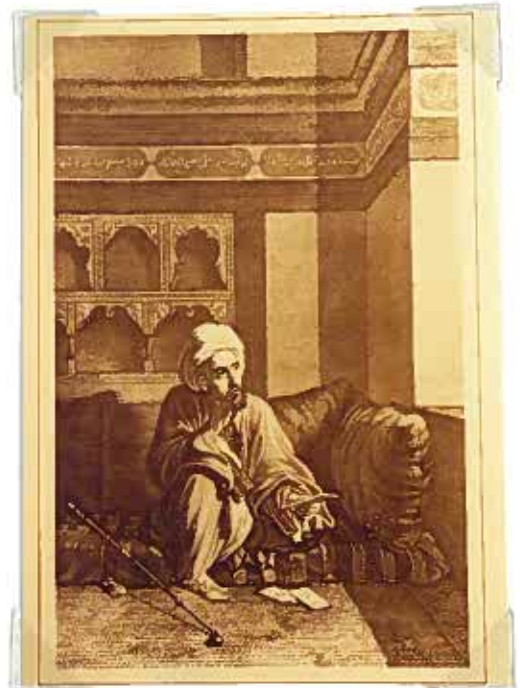
17 See e.g.: Mary Anne Stevens: *The Orientalists*.

18 See e.g.: Robert Anderson & Ibrahim Fawzy: *EGYPT REVEALED, Scenes from Napoleon's Description de l'Egypte*.

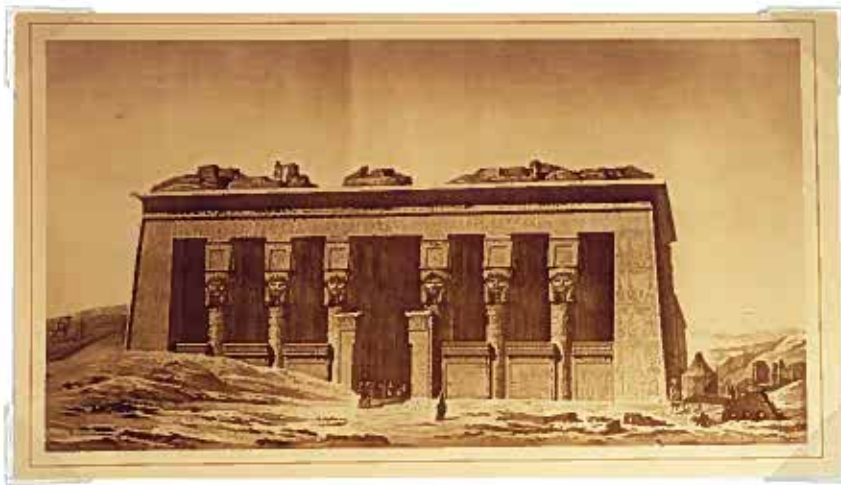




3. Description de l'Egypte:  
*The Sphinx and the Great Pyramid*, ca. 1805.



4. Description de l'Egypte: *A poet*, ca. 1805.



5. Description de l'Egypte: *The Temple of Hathor, Dendera*, ca. 1805.

illustrations. This is the most thorough outstanding European scientific description of the country. It was of great importance for France's and Europe's comprehension of Egypt. Said<sup>(19)</sup> describes the importance in this way; *'Egypt was the focal point of the relationship between Africa and Asia, between Europe and the East, between memory and actuality.'*

*Jean-Léon Gérôme* (1824-1904) is the most well-known French artist that has stayed in Egypt. Between 1856 and 1875 he had 8-10 journeys to Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. His motifs vary, they show spectacular parts of common life, not only antique monuments. He has e.g. executed many battle-scenes, portraits of Ottoman generals, interiors from mosques during the Friday-prayer, carpet-dealers in the bazaars, and dancing dervishes, just to mention some scenes. One may expect that he was knowledgeable about the *'Description de l'Égypte'* before he went abroad. Also artists from other European countries visited Egypt last century, most of them on shorter trips, but some have left their distinct mark on the art-history. Amongst British artists, *John Frederic Lewis* (1805-1875) and *David Roberts* (1796-1864) hold a unique position. Lewis lived in Egypt for 10 years between 1841 and 1851. Lewis was trained as an engraver and transferred his sense of details to his numerous aquarelles and pen-and-ink drawings from everyday life in Cairo and the rest of Egypt. Roberts did only stay for eleven months in 1838-39, he travelled extensively in Egypt as well as the Middle East. He made numerous sketches and aquarelles, which he later published as lithographs in six volumes after his return to London (Ill. 2). The foreign artists description of *'the life in the orient'* has undoubtedly been of major importance for the Europeans' attitudes towards the Orient. The task of procuring, describing, systematisation, is also a way of possessing, it is a part of colonialism and orientalism. It is part of the construction of the West's comprehension of it self as superior, and thereby with legitimate rights to conquer and govern the Orient. This is a part of the direct and indirect communication between the West and the Orient. It is difficult to determine which importance these visiting artists have had on the development of Egyptian art. It is undoubtedly that they were regarded with curiosity and genuine interest, since they were western and the West was a cultural ideal. Their influence can most clearly be seen in what I call orientalistic and folkloristic aspects.

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19 Edward W. Said: *Op.cit.*, p. 84.

#### 4. IMPORTANT PIONEER-ARTISTS, 1920-1980

To use proper frame of reference on contemporary art it is important and necessary to dedicate some attention to the most important and influential artists earlier in this century. It is my intention to give a survey of the most important tendencies in this period, because the artists in this period have had great influence on the later development of Egyptian painting. The time prior to the 52-revolution was an important time of upheaval in the Egyptian society and culture, with fights for independence and later independent kingdom. The time after the revolution is not last important, where the attempt is to create a new state independent of the old aristocracy. These different phases have made different demands on the artists and creates diversified art.

Egyptian artists and intellectuals were in the inter-war period more or less organised into different groups that asserted different views in ideology, philosophy and art. In this active, optimistic and dynamic mood that was prevailing in Egypt, it was also important to get intellectual and professional inspiration. This was also a way of participating in the debates in society, and at the same time being able to influence the development of Egypt. It was also a way of communicating with the art-public. Such groups are also well-known from different European countries. After the 52-revolution the government played a more active and important part as commissioner and benefactor of the arts. It then became important to go with and not against, to get any commissions after the private art-market had stagnated. This led naturally to a decrease in the diversity of art for some years.

In his description of this period Aimé Azar<sup>(20)</sup> is using following different groups of artists: 1) *Les Aînés*, this group was also from 1927 called *La Chimère*, 2) *Les Inquiets*, with this group as basis there where founded different international oriented groups like *Art et Liberté*<sup>(21)</sup>, in protest against the fascists and nazis condemnation of modern art as 'Entartet', 3) *L'Eveil de la Conscience Picturale* or *Le Group de l'Art Contemporain*, divided into following sub-groups: A) *Intellectualité et Poésie*, B) *Peintres Tragiques*, C) *Permanence de l' me Orientale*, 4) *Le Groupe de l'Art Moderne*, 5) *Les Independants*. The last group, the independents, consist mainly of younger artists from the former generation, amongst whom some are still active. There were also other more short-lived groups connected to specific galleries or exhibitions.

20 Aimé Azar: *La Peinture Moderne en Egypt*, 1961.

21 Lilliane Karnouk: *Op.cit.*, p. 30.



Recently there have not been established new groups with clearly expressed political or ideological program, except for some very short-lived groups without the same influence as earlier. It would also have been difficult in the post-revolutionary Egypt to establish groups in open ideological opposition to the government. On the other hand there have recently been established more union-like organisations.

#### 4.1. Portal-figures

There are two artist with whom it seems obvious to start this survey. The sculptor *Mahmoud Moukhtar* and the painter *Mohammed Nagi*. They were both trained before the First world war, and they have both had dominant positions in the art-life in Egypt between the two world wars. Their art later being a guide for generations of Egyptian artists.

It is commonly understood that *Mahmoud Moukhtar* (1891-1934) was the father of modern Egyptian art. He has been singled out by all scholars dealing with this subject as an epoch-making pioneer. He was working in a relative classic, naturalistic pictorial language, one can see distinct influences from different sources, both French and Egyptian. He lived his adult life in Paris, and from French sources, influences from Auguste Rodin and Aristide Maillol are evident, but the most outstanding influence came from Art Deco artists as Jeannot and mile-Antoine Bourdelle . He is also influenced by, and emphasised the Egyptian tradition, specifically evident is the influence from the sculptures of Ramsees II's period. He was 20 years when he entered the cole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1911 as the first Egyptian student. He rapidly adapted to the bohemian artist-life in Paris, very far from his humble background in the countryside (22).

The influence from Rodin specifically evident in the bronze-sculpture *'The Blind'* (Ill. 8) from 1929. He shows three blind beggars holding in each other, so as not to get lost. The modelling is more compact and with lesser movements than it can be seen in similar works of Rodin as e.g. *'Burghers of Calais'*. The sculpture-group shows three relatively young men dressed in long Egyptian gallabeias. This gives a rather compact impression, since the group is standing still. The first is holding a big walking-stick in his right hand, whilst he has placed his left hand behind his ear to list to the surroundings. It is obvious that the two others are totally dependent on him as a guide. The man in the middle holds his hand on the first's shoulder, whilst he turns back and bends down to the third one. The third one seems to be the youngest, a youth, he has his right arm under the second's left arm, and he is leaning towards the second in a confident manner.



6. Mahmoud Mukhtar:  
*Egyptian Awakening*, 1919-28

7. Mahmoud Mukhtar:  
*Khamsin wind*, ca. 1927

8. Mahmoud Mukhtar:  
*The Blind*, 1929



Moukhtar lived for most of his life in Paris, but exhibited and had important commissions in Egypt. He joined, and exhibited together with the rest of La Chimère-group on several occasions. His ability to combine present modern tendencies in French sculpture with the strong and dominating Egyptian-pharaonic tradition of sculpture has given him an important position in modern Egyptian art history. Inspiration from Aristide Maillol's heavy classicistic forms with distinct sensuality, can be seen combined with the pharaonic traditions. He has in many connections been pointed out as the pioneer amongst the Egyptian artists because of his ability to combine his Egyptian-pharaonic cultural heritage with western contemporary art. From antiquity it is specifically Ramses II's (1279-1212 BC) sculptures that have been of greatest importance. This is due to the fact that he is the one pharaoh whose many sculptures erected in his reign have been preserved for coming generations. The temples in Abu Simbel, many sculptures in e.g. Luxor, and two colossal-statues in Cairo are only a few examples of all the sculptures executed under his reign. In this way the monumental-sculptures from his epoch have become normative for the future's evaluation of pharaonic sculpture.

A synthesis between Egyptian cultural heritage and modern society was achieved by most of the artists at that time, at the same time as both the art market and the government wanted a national art. A very good example of this pharaonic inspired art is the granite-sculpture *'Egyptian Awakening'* (1919-1928) (Ill. 6) in front of *Cairo University* in Giza. The sculpture shows a sphinx waking up from the lethargy in stone. The lion-body stretches its forefeet and claws, as cats do when they wake up. The head of the sphinx, which looks like a pharaoh, but that also symbolises modern Egyptian, has a sharp, straight gaze. A smart, straight woman stands by the side of the sphinx, she is lifting her veil to enter modern times. On the formal level there are immediately several things to look at. The first is the evident pharaonic inspiration. The sculpture is mainly frontal, but can also be seen from the other sides, we can not find any elements of the Greek contraposto-ideal that gives life and movements to classical and naturalistic sculpture. The next is how also neo-classicism in the twenties and thirties, through a certain degree of abstraction, withdraws from the idea of interior movement in the sculptures. The result is a forceful, but massive pictorial expression which is also associated with militarism, because this was the dominant pictorial expression in Germany and Italy during the fascist-epoch and in the Soviet Union during Stalin. In this regard it is interesting to see how different artists, with different foundations can approach each other stylistic in this way. The specific content of this sculpture is the symbolic character, it is a





9.(a&b) Mahmoud Moukhtar: *Sa'ad Zaghloul*, 1933-34

10. Mahmoud Moukhtar: *Freedom and Agriculture*, 1934



national symbol, not a portrait of a sovereign. None of the two faces can be identified as any influential persons in Egypt. The symbolic aspect is repeated in many of Moukhtar's works. He describes peasant women collecting water, carrying water and other items on their heads, and similar scenes that can depict the Egyptian national-character. A good example can be seen in *'Khamsin wind'* (Ill. 7). The khamsin is a period of 50 days with rough weather, with heavy sandstorms, the sand penetrates into and through everything. We are seeing a woman trying to walk towards the wind, the wind is taking her long dress and cloak and twisting the clothes around her. It is difficult to distinguish any other human forms through the flapping fabric than the arms holding the cloak together under the chin. The face is the only part that is not covered, but it is bending down to avoid the wind. It is remarkable how he creates illusion of movements, even if there are no classic drapes in the flapping clothes, there are on the other hand gentle, but forceful movements.

He has also made several more traditional portrait-sculptures. Amongst the most important ones are the statues of *'Sa'ad Zaghloul'* (Ill. 9) in both Cairo and Alexandria. The statue in Cairo, from 1933-34, shows Zaghloul in western suit, but with fez as a token of high rank. He is standing with an outstretched arm as caught in the middle of speech about Egypt's future. The 4-5 meter high base is formed as it should consist of four columns made of papyrus-bundles as they are found in the temples in upper Egypt. On the plinth below the base there are reliefs with title *'Freedom and Agriculture'* (Ill. 10) that shows different scenes from the countryside and from the modernisation of Egypt. He has also executed many other portrait-sculptures and busts of important persons from Egyptian community.

The fact that many European artists also tried to combine oriental and western inspiration in their art does not by any means weaken Moukhtar's importance, rather contrary, this places him in a greater perspective. Since he lived in Paris most of his adult life, but even though he exhibited regularly in Egypt, and even stayed there for longer periods, he was firmly rooted in both traditions. His importance for Egyptian art has lasted long after his death, which is quite natural considering his pioneering efforts and the popularity he achieved in his own times.





11. Mohammed Nagi: *Paysage à Giverny*, 1918



12. Mohammed Nagi: *La maison de faune à Poméi*, 1912

13. Mohammed Nagi: *La cueillette des dattes*, 1912



*Mohammed Nagi* (1888-1956) was a lawyer and came from a wealthy Alexandrine-family. In addition to being painter, he was during his entire life also very active in other parts of cultural life, and held important offices within the Egyptian cultural administration. He took initiatives to improve the situation for Egyptian artists. He served in the foreign service for a few years, between 1924 and 1928. He left this because of disagreements about Egyptian art- and cultural-politics. In 1935 he founded '*Atelier d'Alexandrie*' and in 1952 '*Atelier du Caire*', these are artist-organisations and artist-governed galleries. To some it is possible to point out differences between the contemporary Egyptian galleries, these are not the most avant-gardistic, but they have always played an important role as a meeting place for younger Egyptian painters, poets and musicians. Nagi was the first Egyptian director of '*cole des Beaux-Arts*' in Cairo between 1937 and 1939. Later on he was director of '*Musée d'Art moderne du Caire*' between 1939 and 1947. In 1947 he became director of the Egyptian Academy in Rome and cultural attaché at the Egyptian Embassy there, he stayed in Rome until 1950.

Azar has also placed him in the group amongst '*Les Aînés*'. he is working in two strictly different styles. In his pictures dominated by the moment or sentiments, the preferred style is based on combination of impressionism and realism. In the more epic historical works he is using a style that is inspired by neo-classicism as well as pharaonic painting.

Throughout his career he was closely bound to Italy, both professionally and artistically. Even if he stayed for long periods in Italy he was not influenced by the futurism there, nor considerably the modern French trends such as expressionism or cubism, which he must have been familiar with during his studies and work in France. This has to do with the Egyptian spirit of time. The Egyptian understanding of pictures was, as I have mentioned, rather conservative. There were a widespread need and wish for creating an art that could express national emotions and sentiments. In such conditions it was impossible to work within modern avant-gardistic movements as futurism was, they are too international and consequently not of any interest. The different modern art-movements would be alienating in the context where Nagi worked, the time had not yet come. Nagi had for a while studied at André Lhote's academy in Paris, they became good friends visiting each other frequently, but as Etienne Meriel<sup>(23)</sup> points out Nagi was not considerably affected by Lhote's principals of composition, but was to a certain degree affected of use of colours. Nagi was a great admirer of Claude Monet and visited him in Giverny in 1918,

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23 Etienne Meriel: *La peinture de Naghi*, in *Mohamed Naghi Un impressionniste égyptien*, p. 24.





14. Mohammed Nagi: *Femmes cuisant le pain*, 1934



15. Mohammed Nagi: *L'Eglogue*, 1932

16. Mohammed Nagi: *L'École d'Alexandrie*, 1939-52



he rented a house and worked there during the summer. One example of these works is *'Paysage à Giverny'* (Ill. 11) from 1918. This is a classical pastoral-motif with grazing cattle and shepherds. The foreground is relatively soluble, painted in broad strokes, it is competed with a centrally placed brown cow. The middle distance is dominated by a compound where the cattle are grazing, this is closed to the right of a great grove, in the background some low hills are raising. The motif is calm and balanced, but it is marked by a soluble composition, one doesn't grasp immediately what he seeks to describe. The colours are held in a cool bluish nuance, the motif is clearly caught in early morning light. Both use of colours and brush strokes testifies great respect for the master.

From his studies in Italy he has painted several agreeable, but relative neutral lyrical pictures from different places in the country, as *'La maison de faune à Pompéi'* (Ill. 12) in 1912. The motif shows an open square, or a big atrium, with a loggia in the background and elements of an other building to the right. In the middle of the square there is a fountain with a small sculpture of a faun. The picture has a classical triangular-composition, which is partly shifted to the left. It is probably painted early in the spring or in the late winter, the colour and light have a cool blue-violet shade, it is partly hazy and hence without distinct shadows.

Already during his studies Nagi painted popular motifs from Egypt, in these he could sometimes be rather expressive, as in *'La cueillette des dattes'* (Ill. 13) from 1912. The picture is peculiar because it is oval, as if it should be mounted in a ceiling-decoration or a wall-panel. He has from a frog perspective seen the peasants climbing the palms and carrying away heavy cases of fruit, the picture is executed with broad strokes, and sharp, bright colours. The perspective is exaggerated with heavily falling lines towards the centre, it seems that he has been experimenting with strong lenses to create this effect of distortion. The oval form can also point to such experimentation with lenses. Nagi had as most of his contemporaries a romantic perception of Egypt. The life in the countryside was an important theme for him, he travelled extensively across Egypt and painted monuments, villages and peoples in different situations. Many of these paintings as for instance *'Femmes cuisant le pain'* (Ill. 14) from 1934 show a vivid figural composition and a warm rendering of the motif.

In 1932 he travelled for one year to Ethiopia. In addition to his portraits of the imperial-family he travelled across the country and painted several pictures of the fertile nature. *'L'Eglogue'* (Ill. 15) from 1932 is one of the pictures from this journey. We can see a valley with fertile vegetation and in the background two





17. Mohammed Nagi:  
*Piazza della Signorina*,  
Firenze, 1930



18. Mohammed Nagi:  
*Les larmes d'Isis*,  
1937



ridges on either side, in the foreground a small party of tourists are taking a rest. A couple dressed in European fashion in dark suit and white summer-dress are sitting leaning back on the left. They are obviously listening to what their guide is saying, he is sitting in the centre of the picture dressed in a traditional gallabeia. Behind them to the left the mules are waiting. In this picture, as in many others from the thirties, he uses broader strokes and sharper colours, they are more expressive. *'Le dimanche des palmes'* also from 1932 is an example of the many pictures he made of the imperial-family during his stay in Ethiopia. This picture is fast and sketchily executed and is probably meant to be a draft for one of the more detailed versions of this motif.

He undertook many journeys to Italy, and often painted pictures from these trips, as *'Piazza della Signorina, Firenze'* (Ill. 17) from 1930. Here he is showing a rather audacious cutting of the motif, he is standing inside Loggia della Signorina looking towards the square, between two columns. The use of brush is vivid, and the colours are limited to white, yellow and blue. The main-motif is the Perseus-sculpture, by Benvenuto Cellini, standing inside the loggia. It is not the square that is the motif, nor is it a traditional depiction of a sculpture. He has depicted Perseus as a recollection, he is seen sideways from the rear, one gets the impression of a stronger movement than in the sculpture itself. Perseus is standing triumphant with the head of Medusa in one hand and a sword in the other.

Christine Roussillon<sup>(24)</sup> points out that he is simultaneously working with several themes throughout his career, amongst these the epic is an important theme. Here he consciously uses a neo-classical style. During his studies he copied renaissance-masters in the galleries in Italy, and he expressed later on his great admiration for these. In 1922, inspired by Egypt's independence, he executed the big *'La renaissance de l'Egypte'* commissioned by the National Assembly in Cairo. In 1935 he painted a group of pictures describing the history of medicine from the antiquity to present times. For the Egyptian pavilion at *'L'Exposition Internationale de Paris'* in 1937 he showed 7 pictures with the theme *'Les larmes d'Isis'* (Ill. 18). The Isis legend has always occupied an important place in Egyptian consciousness. In this group the pharaonic inspiration is distinct also in the technique. He is using a flat two-dimensional composition without modelling of volumes or using of light and shadow. *'L'cole d'Alexandrie'* (Ill. 16), executed between 1939 and 1952 is also falls to the

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24 Christine Roussillon: *Naghi: un parcours estétique*, op.cit., p. 29.

category of epic pictures. He uses here a neo-classical expression as in most of his epic pictures. It is not only an allegoric representation of the academy in classical Alexandria, but also at the same time a description of modern Egypt, depicting representatives from the sciences, politics and other parts of society. The motif is a view with the bay of Alexandria in the background. The middle distance is dominated by a Roman forum with a palace, temple and library. The intermediacy between the middle distance and the foreground is dominated by a triumphant equestrian statue. In the foreground three groups of men are gathered on a Roman mosaic-floor. The group to the left consists of modern politicians and scientists, the middle group represents religion and philosophy, there are both Muslim, Christian and Jewish clergymen. The third group consists of ordinary citizens and artists. This picture is a good example of how Egyptians in that time sought to knit the present society to the former cultural heritage, at the same time as they paid attention to the diversity of the society both in historical and present times.

When looking at the art of the portal-figures Moukhtar and Nagi, one particularly notices the strong emphasis they both place on the classical pharaonic past. Moukhtar stands out amongst Egyptian artists, because of his consequent choice of both motif and style. Egypt distinguishes itself from its Arab neighbours because of its history of a long uninterrupted civilization. In Egyptian connection the Islamic period represents only a rather short chapter of history. It is also remarkable that they, in their art, do not deal with Islam or other current religious, political or cultural topics. Later on Islam is going to play a more important role as inspiration for artists.

Through Nagi's art it is made clear that Egyptian artists are not overly influenced by style-conceptions, but rather on the contrary dominate them. They use different stylistic forms to express different events. The *style* is hereby reduced to a *form*, and loses lots of its original ideological content. This entails that the usual conceptions of style are not specifically suitable concepts for classification of modern Egyptian art.

## 4.2. The relation to Surrealism

In this chapter I will deal with three painters Ramsees Younan, Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar and Mahmoud Saïd, who each in their own way have a relationship with surrealism. The differences between them are big, but they all deal with amongst others metaphysical themes in their pictures. Saïd and Younan exhibited together at the surrealist exhibitions in Cairo, whilst the younger Gazzar did not participate in these, even if many of his motifs can be characterised as surrealist. Despite their differences, these three are always included in discussions about the concept of surrealism in Egypt. As we could see with the portal-figures there is a move towards liberation from the usual concept of style, this tendency will be further reinforced as we proceed towards the contemporary.

It is essential to discuss the concept of surrealism within Egyptian modern art thoroughly before using it. Surrealism is a concept used rather loosely by Egyptian art-literature, Gharieb<sup>(25)</sup> reduces it to cover art shown at the five group-exhibitions arranged by 'Art et Liberté'. Georges Henein who was the initiator of 'Art et Liberté' in 1939, had already a long-lasting relationship with surrealism. Henein had 5 years previous met André Breton in Paris, whilst he studied at the Sorbonne. Surrealism as ideology had already then begun to lose some of its revolutionary momentum, compared to the situation in the first part of the twenties. There was dissension within the international surrealist movement, between those who emphasised the political and ideological aspects of surrealism, and those who regarded surrealism more as a style and a way of life, such as Salvador Dali. This led to the exclusion of Dali from the surrealist movement in 1936<sup>(26)</sup> because of his strong self-assertion and political ignorance. Breton represented the ideological movement that was active in Europe in the thirties, it was, as we shall see, this fraction that branched into Egypt. André Breton in 'Manifeste du Surréalisme' from 1924 defines the surrealism as<sup>(27)</sup>: *"Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, whether verbally or in writing, or in any other way, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, free from any control by the reason, independent of any aesthetic or moral preoccupation."* Related to the contemporary Egyptian art these were very radical ideas about art and the function of art. It seems that surrealism as an ideological and artistic foundation was a suitable frame of reference for radical artists in Egypt at that time. The surrealism attained after a while distinct anti-fascist and communist profiles. Breton expressed it in the following way in a

25 Samir Gharieb: *Le Surréalisme en Egypte et les Arts Plastiques*, p. 6.

26 Dawn Ades: *Dada and Surrealism*, p. 132, in Nikos Stangos: *Concepts of Modern Art*.

27 Herbert Read: *A concise history of Modern Painting*, p. 132.

lecture in Brussels in 1934: *'The other problem which presents itself to us is that of the social action to be adopted — action which, according to us, has its proper method in dialectical materialism, action which we cannot forego in as much as we hold that the liberation of mankind is the first condition for the liberation of the spirit, and that this liberation of mankind can only be expected from the proletarian revolution.'*(28) In Egypt anti-fascism was the only common denominator, surrealism functioned more as an art-political and aesthetic movement. Surrealism was in Egypt more fluctuating in the ideological discussion between socialists, communists and anarchists.

Irrespective of this it delineates a distinct rebellion and break of norms within society. Egyptian surrealism was not particularly concerned with Breton's surrealistic manifests from the twenties. The automatism was rejected by the majority, even if Fouad Kameel and Younan periodically used the technique. The fact that surrealism was preoccupied with dreams, the unconscious and subconscious, opens a new connection to the old popular story-telling tradition. In Egypt there are a living popular story-telling tradition that adopts elements from pharaonic mythology, legends from the Prophet's life and tales from *'Thousand and one nights'*. Even today TV-serials are made in this tradition. With such a tradition of mixing fiction and reality surrealism should have the best opportunities for developing. The first exhibition of *'Art et Liberté'* took place in February 1940, called *'Expositions de l'Art indépendant'* after an article by Breton and Trotsky called *'Vers un art libre et indépendant'*(29). As one can see the group paid great attention to its international character and connection with the international surrealistic movement. The exhibition appeared rather alien to the Egyptian public, who were not used to seeing different examples of avant-gardistic art. It therefore got a rather reserved reception. The art-critic Badr Eddin Abou Ghazi(30) opens his review of the exhibition like this: *'Le salon était une révolution contre l'ordre, la beauté et la logique.(...) Les béliers se transformaient, chez Ramsès Younan, en formes de sables provenant d'un monde étrange, où les femmes figuraient comme des arbres vides.'* The exhibition got, even so great attention from the public. This was due to the tremendous preliminary work that had been done, and the fact that it seemed to be so alien. The reception inspired the participating artists, most of them younger than 25 years, to carry on with the next exhibition that was held one year later. The last exhibition was arranged in May-June 1945 after which the group was disbanded. According to Samir Gharieb *'Art et Liberté'* has played an important role in the

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28 *Ibid.* p. 134.

29 Samir Gharieb: *Op.cit.*, p. 11.

30 *Ibid.* p. 12.



development of modern Egyptian art in several areas<sup>(31)</sup>. It has paved the path of *modern* abstract art in Egypt. Because of the group's active participation in the cultural- and society-debate it has laid the foundations for several other groups. The group has had great influence on younger generations of artists, that have learned from their experiences and consequently developed to be amongst the best Egyptian and Arab artists. As in Europe surrealism constitutes a great challenge for classicism and academism. In my opinion Samir Gharieb attaches too great and all-embracing importance to '*Art et Liberté's*' influence to the development of later Egyptian art. He does not pay the same attention to the '*Groupe de l'Art contemporain*' from 1946, where we find amongst others Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar and Hameed Nada. This group emphasised in addition to the social-critical perspective the importance of developing of a national symbolistic and expressionistic art. They often worked in a naive style adapted to the popular myths and tales that often were the source of inspiration to their art. As an artistic and ideological movement surrealism is founded on several radical European ideas early in this century. These existentialist, atheistic, psychoanalytic and Marxist ideas had to be perceived as antagonistic to an Islamic human spirit. The idea of totally advocating the surrealism testifies to a detachment from important elements of Egyptian and Islamic culture. Very few did it, they only used elements of the surrealism.

*Ramsees Younan* (1913-1966) ought to be studied as a good representative for the few artists who were totally involved with the international oriented surrealistic movement. Azar naturally places him amongst *Les Inquiets*. He started together with the author Georges Henein, the painter Kamal al-Talmisani and other friends several different artist-groups with an outspoken international and surrealistic ideology. He was one of the founders of the group '*Art et Liberté*' the 9th January 1939. The group was founded after a request from André Breton and Diego Rivera, to become part of an international action to repress the nazis hostile and reactionary attitudes towards modern art<sup>(32)</sup>. The following views of art's importance in society were expressed in the foundation-manifest:<sup>(33)</sup> '*We believe that any attempt to confine modern art, as certain people wish, to being an instrument at the service of a religion, a race or a nation is utterly absurd or is no more than a bad joke. As for us these reactionary myths can only be regarded as imprisoning the thought. As a generalized exchange system of thoughts and emotions which are shared by the whole humanity, art cannot but*

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31 *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

32 Badr Eddin Abou Ghazi: *Ramses Younan*, 1978, p. 4.

33 Alain Roussillon: *Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar*, Cairo 1990, p. 67.

*reject those artificial restrictions.*' Younan was an internationally oriented intellectual and as such he also worked as translator from French to Arabic, and translated amongst others *Caligula* by Albert Camus. Surrealism and psychology were for him closely connected with international ideas of socialism and Trotskyism. He was consequently very involved with the ideological basis for the artistic views of the French and Spanish surrealists, at the same time as he studied the political and philosophical ideas of Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky and Sigmund Freud. According to Younan surrealism is a medium to liberate art and break inherited concept concerning form and content. He expresses his views like this:<sup>(34)</sup> *'We owe to the surrealist movement, the first serious attempt to create a new myth, as well as a junction where reality and phantasm, appearances and essence, reason and madness, summits and depths meet. Nowadays, the lucid artist can neither imagine his house in the midst of a nature which has lost its transparency, nor content himself with living in the factic [sic] framework of ordered geometrical figures or borrowed metaphors. This is why we find him deliberately forcing those images to emerge, hoping to discover, under the ruins, the raw material of existence and its hidden features.'*

Younan started with realistic, folkloristic expressions, but developed rapidly towards surrealism, the first examples can be seen already at the academy. He worked for a while as an art-teacher in Port Said in the thirties, but participated at the same time in the art-life of Cairo, both in literature and in exhibitions. One example of his surrealist style can be seen in *'La Nature appelle le vide'* (Ill. 19) from 1945. Even if he, like Dali, worked with figures becoming deformed and dissolved he had a coarser treatment of details in the motif. The motif is rather macabre, we can see fragments of a human body, a skull looking like a mask on the top of a spine where there are only a few ribs left, the arms have vanished, traces of flesh can still be seen on the pelvis. One of the legs looks like a long stick pointing up to the right and dividing the picture in two halves, the other legs ends with a unnaturally big, but partly rotten foot. The different parts of the skeleton are connected with thin threads, trying to keep it assembled as long as possible. The figure is placed in a desert-like landscape with a few rocks in the foreground, in the background a human figure is vanishing from the sight. It is obvious that Younan tries to express the desperation, feeling of barrenness and emptiness mankind had after the end of Second world war. He had difficulties in believing that there were any hopes for reconstruction after the enormous material and emotional destruction the war had led to. He had visited

Paris soon after the end of the war, and was overwhelmed by how Europe had been devastated.

The forties were naturally rather tense also in Egypt, both as a result of the world war, but also because of national political problems. There were strong nationalistic, anti-British and anti-royalist forces amongst the people, there were several big strikes amongst workers and students. One of the reasons was the important position the British had regained during and after the war. This ended with the appointment of a new prime minister, Ismail Sidqi. He started a wave of arrests of communists and other leftists. This led to different appeals and proclamations from intellectuals. As a result of the persecutions of leftists Younan felt forced to leave Egypt in 1947. He moved to Paris and stayed there for nine years, until 1956. During his time in Paris he worked for the Arab department of the French broadcasting, but artistic he felt into lethargy, he held only one exhibition in France. He left both his job and France when his employer demanded that he should broadcast anti-Egyptian bulletins on the radio, during the Suez-crisis. After his return from Paris in 1956 he wrote an essay about the importance of national art to relating to the international cultural-heritage<sup>(35)</sup>: *'Although it was essentially a Surrealistic movement, "Art and Freedom" welcomed different other artistic trends. It also helped relate the Egyptian artist to the contemporary world, and relate the concept of art to the concept of freedom. Thanks to the Surrealistic movement, more attention was given to our folklore heritage which, as a result, became inspiration of some Egyptian artist long before Tawfiq al-Hakim wrote his play "The Tree Climber" (...) It is often said that modern art became international as a result of colonialism, which culturally as well as militarily invades the colonized countries, thus destroying their traditions and their art. However, we should realize that modern European art had been influenced by Eastern and African arts before any Eastern or African artist was influenced by European art. Therefore, cultural invasion is not the issue, it is rather cultural response, expressed in breaking out of the boundaries of national tradition into international heritage. True Egyptian art will not exist unless our past heritage is allowed to react with the international heritage: only that will lead us to establish the foundations of our modern art. Therefore, we should not fear any innovation, no matter how extreme it may be, for those who fight innovation under the pretext of protecting our national identity reveal the weakness of their faith in its potential growth.'* The political climate had radically changed whilst he had been in Paris. The importance of creating a new national identity was emphasised, and was performed more or

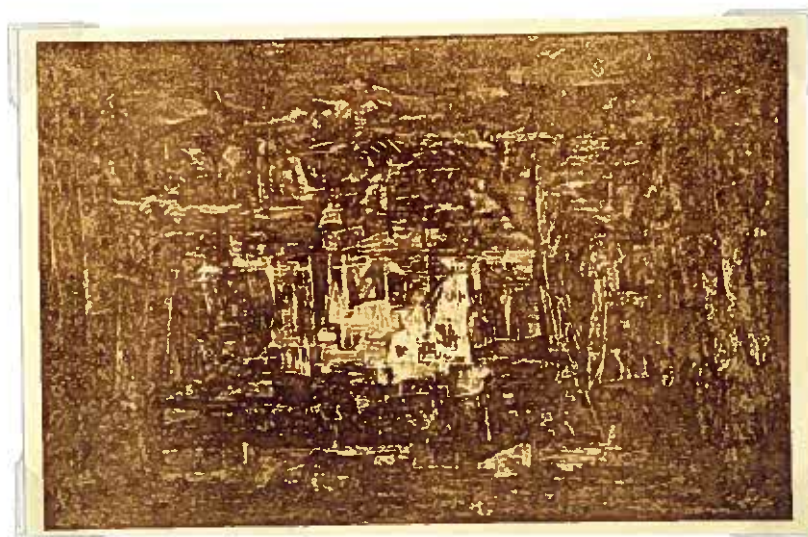




19. Ramses Younan:  
*La Nature appelle le vide*, 1945



20. Ramses Younan:  
*La Conscience de la terre*, 1958



21. Ramses Younan: *Ville Magique*, 1960

22. Ramses Younan: *Composition*, 1963





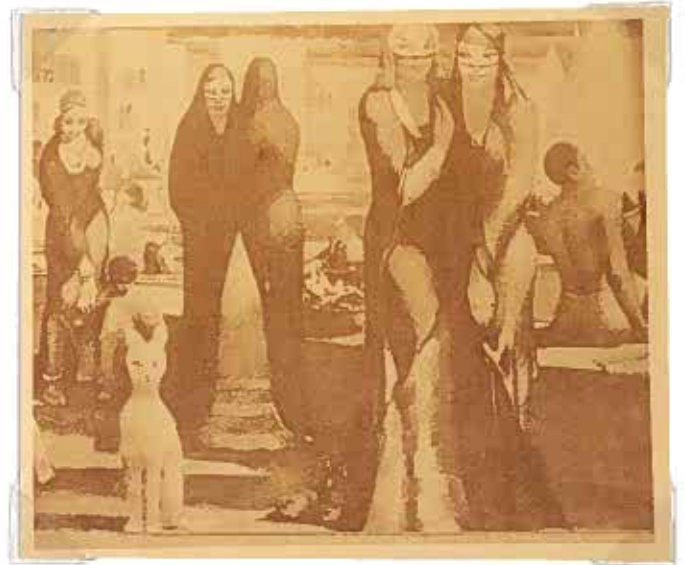
less after a socialistic pattern. In this connection it was important for Younan to explain that different artistic impulses could and should be used in the new society, to create a vivid pictorial art.

Whilst he was in Paris he barely started with abstractions, which later on in the fifties and sixties became a dominating factor. In the fifties he most frequently painted organic forms inspired by e.g. Henry Moore. His worries about the future are expressed in *'La Conscience de la terre'* (Ill. 20) from 1958. Two dragon-like forms are twisted together, one ends like a strange tree, the other ends as the head of a giant prehistoric monster devouring the first. The theme is obviously the struggle between good and evil forces, and the result is not settled. Azar<sup>(36)</sup> wonders about what had happened to Younan after his return to Egypt in 1956. Azar missed the rebellious and unconstrained style he had used earlier. Azar concludes that Younan was not able to readjust to society after the war and revolution. Azar emphasises that he still has a masterly composition in his pictures, but as I shall return to later, this disappears gradually. During the sixties the organic aspect disappears, after a while he concentrates on abstract compositions, held in gloomy melancholic and depressive shades of colours in grey and brown, in dark and light shades. There are many small colour-areas combined without any apparent strong composition. Examples of these abstractions can be seen in *'Composition'* (Ill. 22) from 1963, in spite of the title, the composition is rather weak. The picture has a clearly defined focus, a lighter area to the left of the centre. In *'Ville Magique'* (Ill. 21) from 1960 it is easier to see the transition from surrealist to abstract style. A town can be glimpsed in the centre, this picture has the same composition with small contrasting colour-areas, but the composition is clearer. In other works inspiration from landscape formations as mountains, rocks and valleys can be seen, but the impression is more fragmented. The compositions are not strong enough to tie them together as purely non-figurative paintings. It seems that inspiration vanished with the years, but he still had a need to express himself.

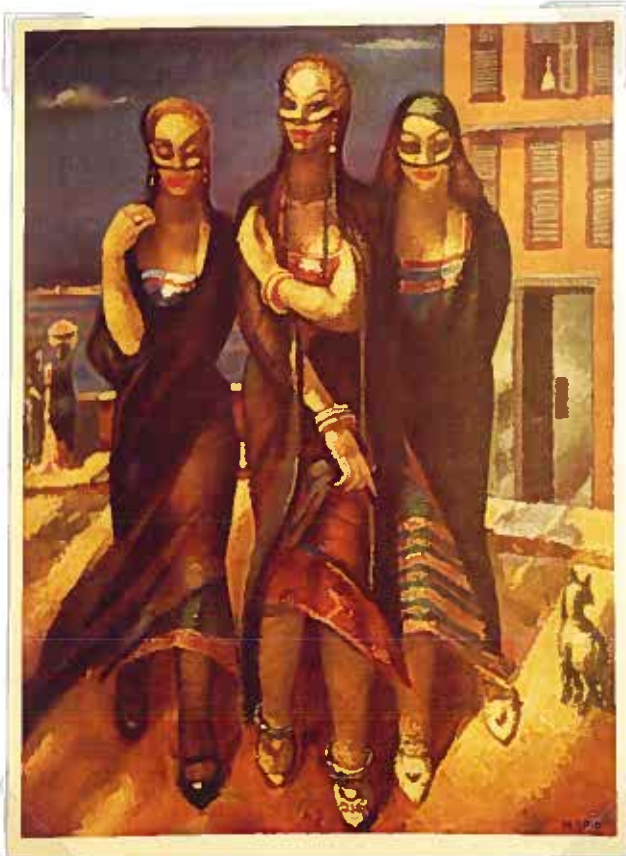
It is obvious to see that Younan can be described as a *French* artist, living in Egypt. There is nothing specifically *Egyptian* in his pictures. This in spite of his efforts to place *'Art et Liberté'* in a broader Egyptian context.



23. Mahmoud Saïd:  
*Invitation to a Journey*, 1932



24. Mahmoud Saïd:  
*The White Cat*, 1937



25. Mahmoud Saïd:  
*Banat Bahari*, 1937

When looking at *Mahmoud Saïd* (1897-1964), it is obvious that he is much more influenced by the Pharaonic art than the other artists in the surrealist movement. He was more or less autodidactic as painter, he had stayed in Paris for three years from 1919 to 1922. In spite of, or perhaps because of, his lack of Egyptian art-training, he holds a central position amongst the Egyptian pioneer artists. He managed to combine modern elements with classical and oriental ones in a convincing manner. In addition to being an artist he was also practising as lawyer until his retirement at the age of 50. He continued painting after his retirement, but it is obvious that his best pictures were done when he was young. The fashion went gradually out of his style, he had found his expression in the thirties and continued with this. Azar places him naturally amongst Les Aînés.

His motifs are not drawn from the Egyptian antiquity, but neither from contemporary life. His style is difficult to classify. Classical and realistic elements are clearly visible, but there are also elements of Art Deco, even some cubistic influence is apparent. He has also an obvious inspiration from western orientalist art. He treats both figures and architecture in an artificial way, there is a certain influence from surrealists such as e.g. Giorgio de Chirico. In some of his works one can recognise the same dryness as seen from Chirico. He doesn't dare to stretch the artificial aspect as long as the surrealists, but he exhibited at some of the surrealist exhibitions in Cairo in the forties.

His art describes the Egyptian relations to modern European trends. The artists tried them, and used them as long as they were satisfying for the object. This is a tendency continuing into contemporary art. Inspiration from Art Deco painters in Paris as e.g. Jean Dupas, Tamara de Lempika are also visible in his art, as is inspiration from the early cubists. He avoids unnecessary details, but concentrates on the main form. He doesn't go as far in deconstruction of the forms as e.g. Braque, Picasso and Léger did rather early, and with whom he must have been familiar with during his three years in Paris. In the twenties there were many different styles side by side in Paris, it is often difficult to draw sharp lines between them, because there are gradual transitions in the expressions and because artists used different expression for different purpose. Conclusively, Saïd's motifs are most often both realistic and sensual surrealist at the same time. He consequently uses figurative pictorial expressions. His motifs are also without exception taken from Egyptian reality, even if in an exaggerated manner. He is undoubtedly a national painter. This separates him thoroughly from the 'pure' surrealists.





26. Mahmoud Saïd: *Prayer*, 1941

27. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *La folle*, 1948





He often depicts female figures, in a way that could be described as '*oriental beauties*', with wide open look, sensual and flirtatious, but they are veiled in a way that enhances rather than conceals the female forms and the underlying tensions. '*Invitation to a Journey*,' (Ill. 23) from 1932 is a very clearly example of this flirtatious style. Two young pretty women are standing talking to each other in intense tête à tête, simultaneously they communicate with the spectators and invite them as well. The same theme can be seen in several of his big pictures from the street-life of Alexandria. An other example is '*The White Cat*,' (Ill. 24) from 1937. The motif is two female couples strolling along the seaside promenade of Alexandria, they are veiled, but with rather transparent veils. Behind this decent dressmode it is quite obvious that they are flirting with the spectators, veils being no obstacle. This is also the theme in '*Banat Bahari*' (Ill. 25) from 1937. There are three young and challenging sisters walking up from the harbour. They are wearing low-necked richly coloured short dresses. Around the bodies and in front of the face they have a faint black transparent veil. These pictures show that he is also a part of the Ottoman tradition. In Ottoman miniatures from 18th century, by amongst others Ahmet III's court-painter Levni, there are also promenading ladies showing a coquettish and flirtatious behaviour through their transparent veils<sup>(37)</sup>. Saïd's style can be seen as a modern version of, and a synthesis between Victorian orientalist illustrations and the Ottoman miniature-painting.

The fact that veils were no obstacle for indecent behaviour was used by Kemal Atatürk in his efforts to modernise Turkey after the revolution in 1923. He accomplished a radical westernization of all aspects of Turkish society, after the fall of the Ottoman empire. It was *banned* for anyone else other than prostitutes to wear the veil. This led to the total disappearance of the veil in Turkey.

He is working in a totally opposite direction in '*Prayer*' (Ill. 26) from 1941, he is concerned about volumes and forms in a great mosque, he treats these forms from a clearly cubistic model. We can see three parallel barrel-vaults and three rows of backs as the men prostrate themselves in prayer. The motif grows together organically in a way approaching abstraction. His themes are often on the edge of surrealism, even if his style is more realistic-romantic. In some of his works, as e.g. '*The White Cat*' and '*Banat Bahari*' there is apparently an inspiration from the particular style of Akhenaton, with elongated and slender faces, necks and bodies. Akhenaton is often considered an exceptional Egyptian

ruler because of his attempts to introduce monotheism in Egypt. During his reign (1350-1334 BC) there developed a particular art-style with slender limbs and faces, but squat body. This style contrasted sharply to the *classical* Egyptian ideal. The classical style was, with minor modifications, prevalent both in previous and later periods of pharaonic art. This peculiarity from Akhenaton has inspired many modern Egyptian artists.

In a very personal style, a combination between classicism, realism, naivism, cubism, expressionism and surrealism we find the art of *Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar* (1925-1966). He displayed specially artistic talents already as a secondary school student and won prizes for young students. He grew up in lower middle class surroundings in Sayyida Zeynab in Cairo. From this neighbourhood he has acquired a lot of inspiration for his later art. He very soon became a central person in Cairo's artistic-life. In his motifs he is concerned about metaphysical and folkloristic themes. He is considerably younger than the surrealists from the thirties and forties, it is therefore natural that his style diverged. Azar places him in the group among '*Les Tragiques*', together with Hameed Nada amongst others. Gazzar joined '*Le Groupe de l'Art Contemporain*' when this was founded in 1946. Hameed Saïd<sup>(38)</sup> that was close to this group says the following about the specificity of Egyptian art: '*Any attempt to understand Egyptian art without understanding Egyptian religiousness is bound to fail as is any attempt to understand it without taking into account Egyptian agriculture.*' In other words, he is saying that even if Egyptian artists are studying abroad and have foreign ideals, their art is genuinely Egyptian. The western elements and the Egyptian background coexists to form a whole that needs to be studied to understand Egyptian art.

Gazzar mainly uses few, bright colours in green, red, brown, white and black, he is seldom uses shadows or nuances. His figures are often ample and coarse, without specifically three-dimensional modelling. He has a burlesque fantasy, bordering on madness. Humans, in particular women, in many different situations are his most frequent motif in his early stages. His pictures are often loaded with ubiquitous Egyptian or Islamic symbols such as, Fathima's hand, '*the blue eye*', crescents, small framed quotations from the Qur'an praising Allah and the prophet Mohammed. Further on popular superstition and spiritism are often part of the motifs. '*La folle*' (Ill. 27) from 1948 is an example of this more or less surrealistic popular mysticism that often occur in his pictures. The picture is so saturated with symbols that it makes a uniform interpretation difficult. We

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38 Alain Roussillon: *Op.cit.*, p. 70-71.

can look into a narrow alley bending to left. In the foreground to the left there is a man's naked upper part of the body coming out of a hole in the wall, he is lying partly in the house and partly in the street. Over his head there is a man-sized key hanging on a hook. Further into the picture a fur with the sign of a horse-shoe on the back is spread on the street, along the right wall there is a strange construction with a clearly supernatural radiation. It is hung with masks, teeth, Fathima's hand and ceramics with religious inscriptions, on a beam across the alley a raven is perched. The mad woman stands in the middle of the picture. She is clad in a long dress with her hair hanging loose down to the ankles, her hands are stretched over her head. The hands look like claws trying to grasp something. The movement is frozen in time, giving the impression that she is crying in anxiety or mental pain, whilst she is trying to force away demons and invoke spiritual assistance. The metaphysical plays an important part of popular everyday life in Egypt. Wahid al-Naqqash<sup>(39)</sup> says that Gazzar has given: *'the most accurate metaphysical analysis of the popular classes ever issued by Egyptian intellectuals.'* Gazzar grasps in other words the genuine Egyptian character by the root and he is able to express this to his public in a convincing manner.

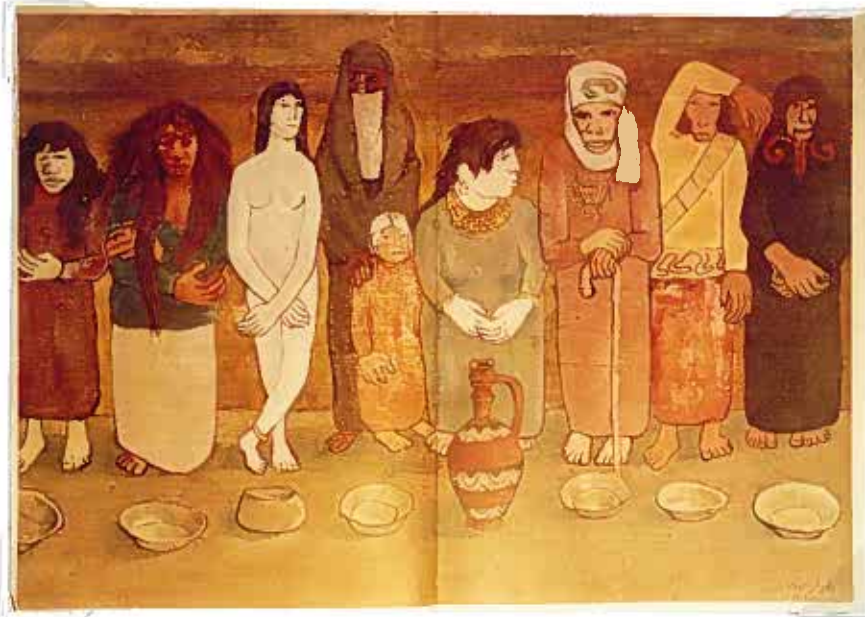
He is concerned about depicting many parts of Egyptian society, with its different religions, peoples and traditions. He often displayed a strong criticism of society, but he had no need to use a social-realistic expression, his surrealist naivism was forceful enough. He was in 1949 arrested with his art-professor Hussayn Yusuf Amin for the picture *'Le théâtre de la vie'* (Ill. 28) from 1948. He has lined up eight women and a child along a wall, with a beggar's bowl in front of each. From their dress it can be seen that the women come from different social strata and several areas in Egypt, one of them is even naked and white as a sheet. He is, in a very brutal manner, exposing the weaknesses in Egyptian society before the 52-revolution. This picture and the history connected to it shows that Egyptian society had developed a long way from the fights for independence early in this century. The demands were now social justice and an other distribution of the wealth of society. Ezz El-Din Naguib emphasises that Gazzar was one of the first leading young artists supporting the 52-revolution.<sup>(40)</sup> *'After the 1952 revolution El Gazzar was the head of other artists in praising the achievements of the revolution, such as: the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the Charter, the High Dam, and the call for Islam, and in searching for a mature formula that enabled the artists to interact with society.'*

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39 *Ibid:* p. 74.

40 Ezz El-Din Naguib: *The Dawn of Egyptian Modern Painting*, p. 126.





28. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *Le théâtre de la vie*, 1948



29. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *Le carnaval des amants*, 1948

30. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *Un djinn amoureux*, 1953



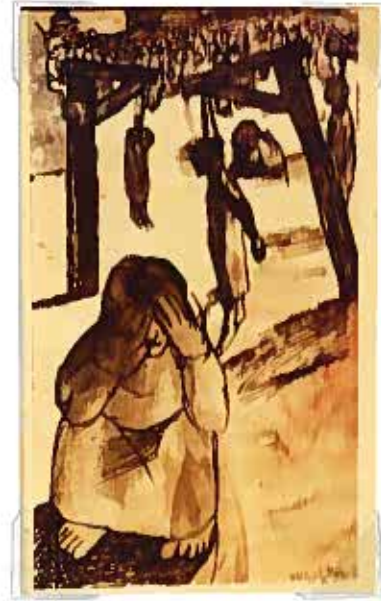


Gazzar has references to classical Egyptian culture in some of his paintings. In *'Un djinn amoureux'* (Ill. 30) from 1953 he is combining the references to the pharaonic cultural heritage, represented by the popular sky-goddess Nut, with his more common metaphysical figures. The picture is loaded with metaphysical and sexual symbols. The main figure is crouching on hands and feet, she is a woman, but at the same time also an animal. The body has nine pairs of teats and a long tail, the hands are reptilian, the hair is made of gold decorated with religious inscriptions. A voluptuous naked woman lies on her back with her legs sprawled apart, she is being controlled by a awe-inspiring creature, half man and half reptile hovering over the scene. To the left of the main-figure another woman-like figure with cat head is sitting in lotus posture with her hands raised over her head and an owl on her arm. Here are many different elements acting at the same time: fear, control, sexuality, passion and religious submission. This depiction of an unnatural elongated woman, crouching on hands and feet can be found at innumerable places in pharaonic art, it is a depiction of the sky-goddess Nut. The stars are part of her body, and she swallowed the sun, in the guise of Ra, every evening and gave rebirth to the sun every morning. She was in many aspects the most important divinity for life, love and rebirth. Further, she was mother to the five most important gods in the Heliopolis Ennead<sup>(41)</sup>, Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephthys and Horus the elder. Also in this antique performance it is easy to recognise the same pairs of contradictions as in Gazzar's picture. The Nut-myth gives a lyrical explanation of the sun's journey through the night, at the same time as it was used to place women in submissive position where their sexuality could be controlled.

It is obvious that Gazzar felt bound and restricted by parts of the Egyptian Islamic culture where men and women were, and partly still are, kept segregated in most connections, and where all kinds of intimate relations between the two genders are banned outside marriage. The desire, lust, fight and attraction between the sexes are often important motifs in his pictures. One of the most striking examples of this is in *'Le carnaval des amants'* (Ill. 29) from 1948. It is very far from the cheer atmosphere, one would expect at a carnival, it is more a narration of the unattainable. The composition is quite bizarre, the foreground is a platform, a scene? On a chair to the left sits a naked, pale and exhausted middle-aged man, he is looking up at a younger, naked woman hovering in the air above the rest. She is obvious elevated to an ideal-woman, in her outstretched hands she is holding a nest with two eggs, her facial expression is ethereal.

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41 Robert Armour: *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, p.18 & p. 38.



31.(a&b) Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *Dinshaway-massakren*, 1953

32. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *The Charter*, 1962



Below to the right a woman, also naked of the same age, sits on the floor, with a cat on her lap. She stretches her right arm towards the hovering woman, trying to grasp her, or at least get some of her eternal power. Between these two on the platform, a big turtle is placed apparently for no reason. Underneath on the ground are about ten naked women and a water-buffalo. Three of the women are leaning towards the edge of the platform, one of the figures is bending over a small child the hands hiding its face, perhaps to protect it? The entire composition is remarkably static, there is very little movement and communication between the persons, the picture has a restrained.

He had also earlier in the forties painted many pictures of naked woman and a few men. This is often called his shell-period, because the figures are lying, standing or sitting immovable in enormous shells. Thematic one can get associations to *'The Birth of Venus'* by Botticelli, because of shells and bodies. This is the only similarity, the rest is rather different, but even in Botticelli's picture there is very little interaction between the figures.

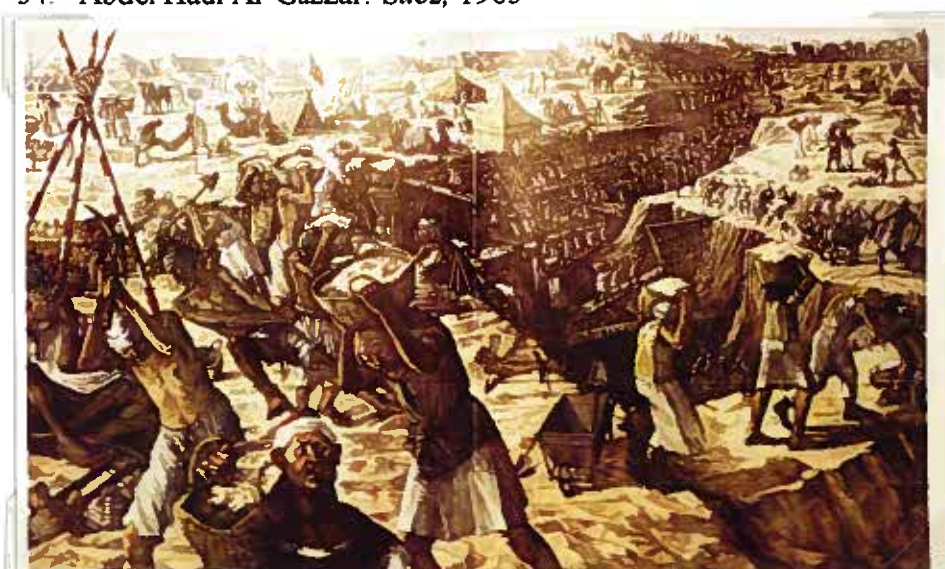
Another subject in his art is the suppression the Egyptian people were exposed to during British rule, between 1953 and 1955 he made a series of pen-and-ink drawings related to what happened during the *Dinshaway-massacre* (Ill. 31). Some British officers had gone to Dinshaway in the Delta, the summer of 1906, to shoot pigeons. Whilst they were there a fire broke out in the village, and the villagers claimed that it was the British' shooting that had caused the fire. They attacked the officers with sticks to chase them, in the turmoil one villager was killed and several wounded. During the retreat one of the officers died of sunstroke. This incident led the British to set up a provisional court that sentenced three of the villagers to death and several others to public flogging, for manslaughter and violence against British authorities. At this time there were strong nationalistic movements amongst the Egyptians. This was probably a contributing cause to the British overreaction. This incident is remembered as one of the worst injustice against innocent civilians.<sup>(42)</sup> The pictures show how the Egyptian victims are being tortured and finally hanged. He is using simple and coarse agents, it is obvious that this is an incident the public know well, it is therefore no reason to work specifically on the details.





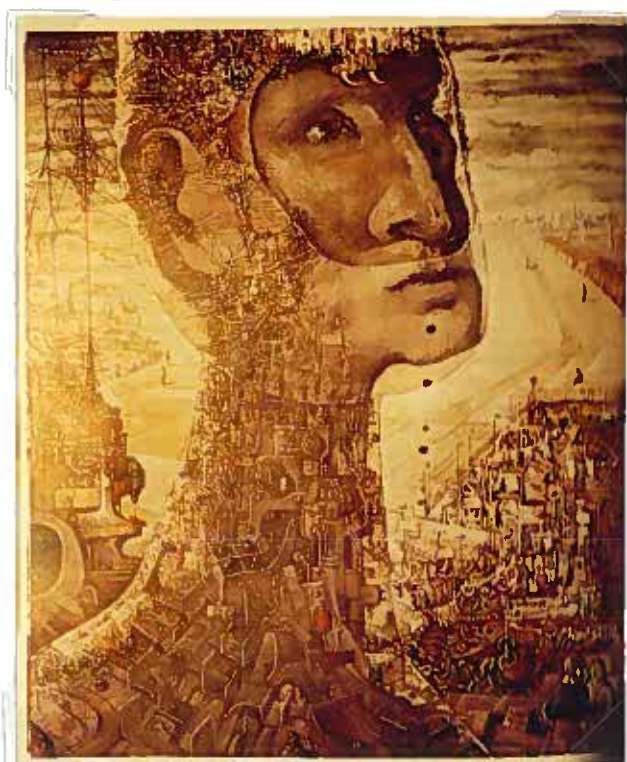
33. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *Peace*, 1965

34. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar: *Suez*, 1965



35. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar:  
*High Dam*, 1964

36. Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar:  
*Mouled*, 1955





In another direction, but along the same line, he is painting several pictures with heroic nationalistic message. *'The Charter'* (Ill. 32) from 1962 displays unity between all the different groups in Egypt, and between ancient and present time. Mother Egypt, a frightening green creature without eyes and clad in a black cloak, is standing between a worker with a machine and a peasant with an Ibis-bird, in the background a Coptic priest and a Muslim shayk are embracing each other. It is further filled with countless signs of prosperity and wealth, a strong military defence, harbours, oil-pipes, factories and towns. In 1965 he is painting a huge, surrealistic composition, *'Peace'* (Ill. 33). A winged palace is covering the entire background, on the stairs down from the palace a white and black figure is dancing. In front of the staircase are the participants of an imaginary peace conference. At a table covered with a green cloth sit the most important actors, it is difficult to identify others than Nasser. Two lines of various Arab and Soviet flags run from the palace. Below the flags hundreds of people from different professions are gathered, from impoverished fishermen and peasants, to intellectuals and artists, there is even an astronaut present to emphasise modern times. In the midst of the people another surrealistic element appears, a great shell with a rising young woman, this time she is beautifully dressed as a bride, this is a close allegory to the pure and immaculate Venus from Botticelli's picture. It is difficult to interpret this picture in any other way than as an expression of a desire for pan-Arabic union, where Nasser would be the leading figure and the Soviet Union could play the role as guarantor. Nasser participated at the Bandung conference in 1955, and later played an important role in the organisation of non-allied states that were founded in 1961. It is important to remember that this picture was painted in an optimistic period of the Arab League's history, two years before the debasing Six-days war against Israel.

Gazzar has obviously very divided opinions concerning modernisation and progress, he supports the ideas, but is afraid of the consequences. This is clearly seen in his pictures from Aswan and Suez. In 1965 Gazzar painted a clearly social-realistic picture from the construction of the Suez-canal (Ill. 34) in the 19th century. There are thousands of labourers doing all of the work manually. This can be seen as a depiction of how great Egyptian efforts can be when necessary, it is also clearly supporting to the nationalisation of the canal. To paint such a picture in 1965 draws parallels to the Aswan-dam which was under construction. He has also painted this motif directly in his *'High Dam'* (Ill. 35) in 1964. A comparison between these two pictures shows that he is worried about developments in modern Egypt. His *'High Dam'* does not in any particular manner depict the construction of the Aswan-dam. Some constructions are barely seen in the background to the right, to the left it seems that a village is



37. Hameed Nada:  
*The lamp of Gloom*, 1948

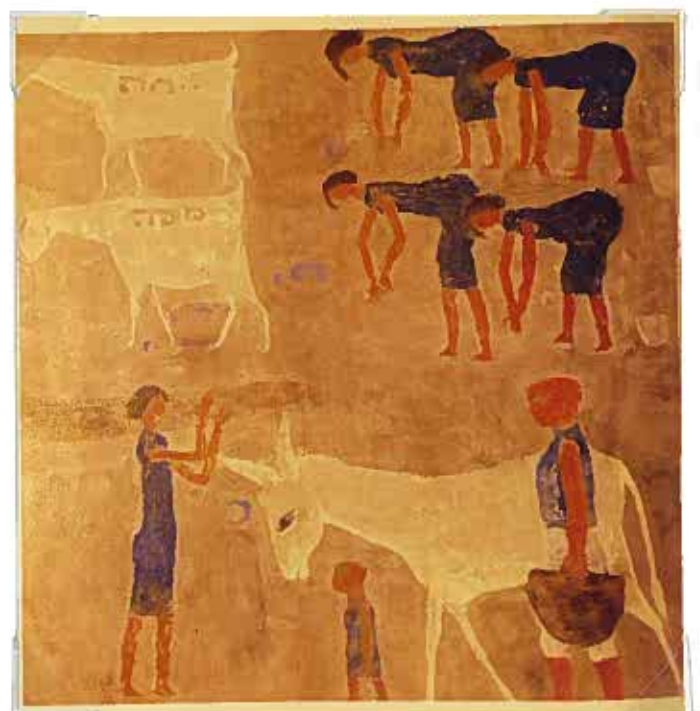


38. Hameed Nada:  
*Unison*, 1948

39. Hameed Nada:  
*The beginning of the game*, 1978



40. Hameed Nada:  
*Work in the fields*, 1962



disappearing. Thousands had to move from villages that were dammed under. The central motif in the foreground is an enormous head on a long neck dominating the picture. The connection to the gigantesque style under Ramses II is clearly visible. The neck and the head constitutes of a cobweb of mechanical constructions, power cables and cranes. It is clearly expressed that the alienation and the technical progress have gone too far. The alienation is an often reoccurring theme in the sixties. Most of his pictures from this period show how his fear for the modern society develops. The anxiety obviously comes gradually, it was hardly visible in his works from the forties and fifties. *'Mouled'* (Ill. 36) from 1955 shows this tension very clearly. The motif is drawn from Gazzar's native area in Sayyida Zeynab in Cairo, named after the prophet Ali's daughter, who also has a mosque dedicated to her in this area. She was one of the few important women in Islam and has been very popular, and the religious feasts in this part of town have always been full of life. A mouled is a religious feast in honour of a saint, the most important is the feast on Mohammed's birthday. People are at this time participating in the celebrations with enthusiasm and gaiety, it is a kind of a counterpart to the catholic carnival. This picture covers in one way the ranks of surrealistic and naivistic popular depictions, but it shows also another aspect, the depressive. There is traceable anxiety to be seen in the faces, the joy of participating in the feast has vanished, people move more or less trance like and they have devastated facial expressions.

Since the end of the fifties he has also made some dark, gloomy abstractions, with some spherical objects drawing the spectator into the picture's own world. This is a tendency developing in the sixties, this has obvious been a difficult period for Gazzar. The anxiety is present in picture with generals sitting in their laboratories planning, wars, machines taking man's place and function, UFOs, satellites and surveillance from many directions, and similar topics.

Gazzar's art is as we have seen very complex. On one hand he tries to liberate himself and his art from the Egyptian and Islamic background, but on the other hand he avoids this and uses his own background. This clear dualism is a very important characteristic for modern Egyptian art.

The expansiveness of Egyptian surrealism is demonstrated by the fact that a painter like Saïd could exhibit in the surrealist-exhibitions with Younan, Talmisani, Efflatoun and other quite radical artists. This points out that such European terms are nearly unusable in this connection. This is also why I have called this chapter *The relation to Surrealism*.





41. Hameed Nada:  
*Africa*, 1963



42. Hameed Nada:  
*Hassan and Naeema*,  
1969



43. Hameed Nada:  
*A morning rhyme*, 1956



### 4.3. The relation to Expressionism

After having studied how Egyptian art relates to surrealism, it naturally follows to study the relation to expressionism. This relation has an important role in Egyptian pictorial art throughout this century. In this period expressionism was an important trend in European painting. In this connection I will elucidate the relation to expressionism with one painter, *Hameed Nada*. Also Injy Efflatoun who will be dealt with in the chapter on Female pioneers (Chap. 4.4) could have been taken into account. Both by Nada and other artists there is obvious inspiration from western expressionism, but also from other movements in contemporary and classic European and Egyptian painting.

It seems to be a natural transition from the fellow student Gazzar's pictures, to *Hameed Nada* (1924-1990). He is a contemporary of Gazzar and in the forties he worked in a closely related style. At that time his style was dominated by a naivistic realism. He was also concerned about metaphysical and religious themes build on Egyptian tales, at the same time as he was describing peoples' suffering and distress, he took into account the more burlesque parts of fantasy. He said that after having read psychology he became interested in the conflict between the inner and outer life of humans<sup>(43)</sup>. In "*Lamp of Gloom*" (Ill. 37) from 1948 there is a strange composition with a kerosene lamp dominating the right half of the picture. Three people, an old, a young woman and a little child, are standing attentive in front of the lamp. In the background there are some naivistic drawings on the wall, with a naked woman kneeling in front of them. Azar<sup>(44)</sup> claims that this can be a symbol of humanity's world, the people are standing as uncomprehending witnesses to the actions of the world. The three persons represent three different stages of life. He further claims that the picture could have been called '*Prison de l'homme*'. This is a defeatist interpretation that is not in relation to the political activity in the society and amongst the artists of that time. Even if he describe sufferings in a metaphysical more than social-realistic manner, there is a message in this pictures about the people's need of changes in their living conditions. They may not be able, themselves to concieve the solution and as a result feel trapped.

Nada's people have big and coarse limbs with few details. The proportions both between humans, and between humans and things are not realistic, he consciously uses distortions and misrepresentations. '*Unison*' (Ill. 38) from 1948 is also drawn in the same partially naivistic style. There are six naked persons in a room, they are distributed in three pairs. In the background to the left there is a wall with simple drawings of birds, a snake and Fathima's hand. In front of the

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43 Liliane Kamouk: *Op.cit.*, p. 67.

44 Aimé Azar: *Op.cit.* p. 118.

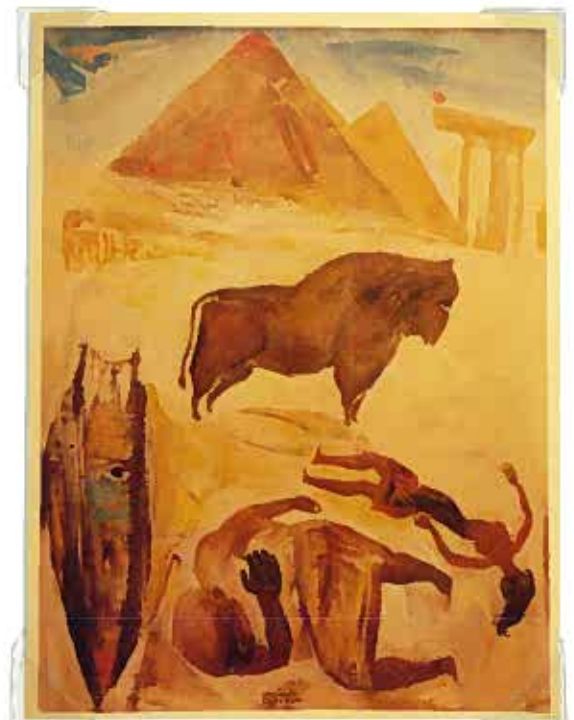


44. Hameed Nada: *Motherhood*, 1975

45. Hameed Nada:  
*The woman and the cat*, 1979



46. Hameed Nada:  
*Cairo*, 1983



wall, but with their backs turned towards the spectators, are a man and a woman standing with their arms stretched up against the wall, there is apparently no communication between these two. In the foreground to the left stand a pair of over-seized clogs, a symbol for how heavy and difficult poverty is to cope with? In the middle of the picture two sturdy women are sitting talking together. To the right, the main-group sits, a man and woman in close embrace, they are apparently rather content with the situation and each other, even if the surroundings are rather poor.

It is remarkable that Nada's style changes dramatically in the fifties. Whilst the pictures from the forties mainly deal with sufferings and escape from brutal reality, the pictures from the fifties show exuberance and an appetite of life. He has started using more colours and the style becomes more expressive. This can be caused by several things, firstly there had been important political changes and secondly he had achieved greater maturity as an artist. There are several important factors in this change. The compositions are executed more freely, with fewer components. He was also substantially inspired by the pharaonic principles of composition, in depicting different bodily parts from their most characteristic angle, but without being limited by the rigid system of composition in pharaonic art. He was also inspired by cubism, and from Ragheb Ayad's pictures from the Egyptian countryside. Ayad was particularly active in the twenties and thirties.

Nada uses sharp bright colours, with white. Lightness and clarity distinguish his pictures from this period. His motifs are often derived from lower middle class environment in Cairo, which was his childhood environment. His main-motif is primarily women, but they are often followed by cats and hens. '*A morning rhyme*' from 1956 (Ill. 43) shows a woman wakening. She is lying with crossed arms and her legs bent. She is clad in a simple blue skirt and white blouse. To the right struts a yellow hen around with two eggs on the ground below her, to the left a small child is standing holding a white chicken. Fertility motifs like these are common in many of his pictures in this period. In some works he has been inspired by the countryside as in '*Work in the fields*' (Ill. 40) from 1962. The picture is kept in a tight range of colours, with grey and white against blue and terra-cotta. The composition is dominated by strong vertical and horizontal crossing axes. On the top to the left stand two skinny goats, their backs are quite straight. To the right are four women with bowed backs in two rows under each other. The arms and legs are parallel and strongly dominate this part of the picture. The lower part of the picture is dominated by a walking donkey, together with three upright persons, a woman, a man and a child. In this picture he has been able to combine his interest in composition, at the same time as he could





47. Inji Efflatoun: *The girl and the beast*, 1941

48. Inji Efflatoun:  
*The family of the Fisherman*, 1953

49. Inji Efflatoun:  
*Eyes of despair*, 1960





depict of the women's hard labour in the fields, again a fertility motif. In this picture the inspiration from Ragheb Ayad is particularly evident. Further out in the sixties he was more engaged by African art. He wished amongst others to be part of a process where the art of the third world could be liberated from the western art<sup>(45)</sup>. Nada wanted to participate in the reversal the westernization of African primitive art, which many artists as e.g. Picasso had been part of. He wanted to take the African spirit back to Africa. This led to his use of inspiration from African masks and wood-sculptures in many of his works. In *'Africa'* (Ill. 41) from 1963 this tendency is particularly evident. In the middle of the picture two ebony-black figures are standing, against a background that could be a mask, or a beetle, in other words a free rendering of a scarab. The figures are almost weightless, they are not standing on firm ground, but on something that can be interpreted as a boat-form with geometrical ornamental patterns.

In the sixties he is again changing both colour and way of painting, he is using more colours, he is modelling volumes and avoids monochrome areas. There even appear some surrealistic elements that were more obvious in the forties, as small decorative minor characters, geometric patterns etc. In *'Hassan and Naeema'* (Ill. 42) from 1969 this change is apparent. This is an old Egyptian tale of two lovers. Naeema is a red-haired tall slender woman, she is sitting to the left of the picture wearing a patterned cotton dress. Hassan is a small, coarse dark man, his physiognomy is similar to some of Nada's works from the forties, or to some African masks. The cloths are decorated with big geometric patterns. The desire and lust are forcefully apparent in this picture, but so are also the problems. Hassan's body is partly soluble, he has hardly any arms and only short strange legs, Naeema seems unavailable too him. As Karnouk<sup>(46)</sup> points out he changes artistic expression again from the mid-seventies, he acquires a more fluent expressive style. It is difficult to agree with Karnouk that this should reflect a *further* inspiration from African primitive art, this inspiration is visible from the sixties. It is possible to find similar tendencies in Western art at the same time. In addition to an eloquent expression he is also working with a certain decomposition in some pictures, as in *'Motherhood'* (Ill. 44) from 1975. The motif is two female figures, two different stages in a woman's life, again a fertility motif. In the background she is standing as a naked, young and slender dancer, she seems to be totally engulfed by the rhythm of the dance. In the foreground to the left sits a heavily pregnant woman. The belly is at the same time a face, it can be the child's father, or a dream about what the child will look like. To the right there is a bird-like creature, apparently interested in the pregnant woman.

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45 Liliane Karnouk: *Op.cit.*, p. 70.

46 *Ibid.*: p. 71.

There is a clear dynamic movement between these three figures. The background is fair with fragments of geometric decoration. Nada is more direct challenging in *'The beginning of the game'* (Ill. 39) from 1978. This motif is strongly sexual, a half-naked inviting woman is lying or hovering over a black and blue sofa. She is wearing only black silk stockings, and lies with cocktail-glass in the left hand whilst the right is stretched over her head. The figure is tense, it is tranquil, but it seems to be just before an explosion. The party has obviously gone on for the entire night, the sharp morning light flows through the open door to the right, on the doorstep a small cat stands watching the world. Nada has many sensual ladies with cats as *'The woman and the cat'* (Ill. 45) from 1979. We can see a half-naked woman almost hovering diagonally in the picture, in the background a cityscape can scarcely be seen. From the right a big black cat is coming towards her, she is making an inviting gesture with her gloved hand. Below to the left another cat is disappearing, over her head a cock crows loudly. In the background an entrance to an apartment building is visible. It is obvious that Nada expects the women to satisfy him on his terms. His picture *'Cairo'* (Ill. 46) from 1983 is in another genre. There are some pyramids and temple ruins in the background. In the middle of the picture the sexual symbol has been changed to a big, virile ox. Below the ox lies a thin and exhausted woman, below her again, in the foreground a coarse-limbed man is also lying. They lay away from each other without any form of communication, they are finished with each other. Nada is clearly trying to describe the important place which sexuality holds in human relationships, and that it has had this position for ages.

Nada is often characterised as being surrealist, this is in my point of view a very inaccurate description. It is more appropriate to say that he is working in an expressionistic influenced style, also with strong folkloristic elements. The fact that he is using metaphysical motifs is not sufficient to describe him as surrealist. It is interesting to see that Nada throughout his career has consequently depicted people's lives, lusts, vices, emotions and sufferings without employing any political message in his pictures. He emphasises the emotional and psychological aspects. The *lack* of political and ideological message distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries.

#### 4.4. Female Pioneers

There are very few trend-setting female artists in this period. The most important one is *Injy Efflatoun* whom I shall pay attention to below, to continue it is worth mentioning *Marguerite Nakhla* and *Effat Nagi*, Mohammed Nagi's sister.

Marguerite Nakhla lived most of her life in France, but stayed for some time in Egypt. Her style was influenced by French impressionistic tradition, but has at the same time some of the unceremonious gaiety from the caricatures. Her figures are often slim and ungainly, with their clothes more hanging than fitting well. She has amongst others painted some animated portraits with good empathy. She has also painted some church-interiors during Coptic masses. Satiric and critical pictures towards the present society's political and economical dominates her production. One example of this can be seen in '*La Bourse de Paris*' where she in a striking way depicts the inter-war period's chase for profit on the stock market.

Effat Nagi stayed mainly in Egypt, but followed her brother on his journeys around Egypt and in Italy. She started in a style clearly influenced by her brother's romantic expressionism, but changed gradually to a more abstract expressionistic style influenced by '*L'cole de Paris*', with solid broad strokes, she had a limited palette, and used contrast-rich colours as black, grey, blue and white.

A certain social-realistic tendency, but with strong elements of expressionism are found in the works of *Injy Efflatoun* (1924-1989). She came from a wealthy family, but soon became politically active towards the left and started to study painting. She participated on some of the surrealist exhibitions arranged by 'Art et Liberté' in the forties. With her first appearance '*The girl and the beast*' (Ill. 47) from 1941 she takes her place amongst the Egyptian surrealists. She is clearly influenced by her teacher Kamal al-Talmisani in use of colours, but she has not the same strong expressions. The motif is a scared little girl on the top of a rock whilst trees and plants are stretching their branches like tentacles after her. An ominous bird a cross between an eagle and a griffin, flies in from the left to capture her. The picture attracted attention when it was exhibited in 1941. She soon changed from the surrealist inspired style to an expressionistic inspired style. This provided her with better means of expressing people's daily life, without being forced into social-realism. Throughout her entire life she was an active feminist and socialist. She was one of the leading figures in the women's movement in Egypt, both before and after the 52-revolution. Because she would not submit herself and her political activity to the Nasserist policy she





50. Inji Efflatoun:  
*The ward*, 1960

51. Inji Efflatoun:  
*Dreams of the interned woman*, 1962

52. Inji Efflatoun:  
*Night behind bars*, 1963



was jailed for four years (1959-1963). She has later described this as a very important period in her life: *'Imprisoning women for their political ideas was an irrefutable admission of their political power, and a public proof of their equality with men.'*<sup>(47)</sup> In this period hundreds of intellectuals that were active in the communist party or elsewhere on the left were interned if they did not support Nasser's policies.

In spite of her strong political engagement, it is impossible to say that her pictures had *clearly* political motifs in the fifties before the detention. Her motifs were then, peasant women, fishermen, construction workers etc., painted in a manner giving associations to social-realism. This can also place her in the romantic-folkloristic tradition that has been prevalent in Egyptian painting in this century, but it doesn't fit exactly. By depicting typical Egyptian motifs she was recognised by the public's national feelings. The elements that separate Efflatoun's and Gazzar's pictures from predecessors, such as Nagi or Moukhtar who emphasised national beauty, are that it is possible to see suffering and depression in the figures' faces. Efflatoun wants to express something other than national emotions, from this perspective she has converted to realism. This difference between realism and folkloristic romanticism are not paid sufficient attention to by Naeem Atteya<sup>(48)</sup> or the critics quoted by her. They put Efflatoun into the romantic-folkloristic tradition that dominated Egyptian art before the Second world-war. On the other hand they praise her for describing the life in Egyptian villages better than most others. In *'The family of the Fisherman'* (Ill. 48) from 1953 this realism is apparent. The motif is a young family, the fisherman, his wife and an infant. They are sitting in a ordinary room with a big window in the rear wall, through the window the swarming street-life can be seen. The picture is painted with rapid broad strokes, that gives it a certain monumentality. The figures are very thin with sharply defined features, their eyes are worried, the woman is sitting giving breast to her infant. Their worries for the future are quite clearly seen. The composition is rather specific and can be seen as an allusion to 'the holy family', this family are building up their future in the new Egypt, where nobody knows how future developments will be.

Efflatoun has always been very concerned about the situation for women. According to traditional Islamic law the husband has unrestricted command over his wife, and can easily divorce her simply by saying three times *'I want to divorce you'*. It may take some more time, but theoretically the wife can be disposed the same day. A divorce ruins most women's lives in a society where her duties are mainly domestic. The conditions and possibilities of maintaining a

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47 Yasser Amr: *Cairo's*, April 1993.

48 Naeem Atteya: *Injy Efflatoun*, Cairo 1986.





53. Inji Efflatoun:  
*The High Dam*, 1964



54. Inji Efflatoun:  
*The commandos*, 1970

55. Inji Efflatoun: *Refugees from Sinai*, 1968



decent life are strictly limited for divorced women. This was a constant reappearing theme in Efflatoun's political as well as artistic work. *'Eyes of despair'* (Ill. 49) from 1960 shows this very clearly. This is a close-up of a young woman's face where sorrow, depression and frustrations have left their distinct marks. The picture is painted very emotionally and expressively, but the result has become neither pathetic nor sentimental. The picture is very forceful, both politically and emotional. She also painted during the years of her detention, the motifs were then scenes from the prison-life such as, the yard, dining room, dormitory and others. The pictures are painted with great involvement and she reveals situations from the prison in a very convincing manner. *'The ward'* (Ill. 50) from 1960 is a picture from the dormitory, where the women are living as crowded as in a beehive, three berths in height with only a narrow passage between. Some of the women had to take their children to the prison, a little girl is standing on her mother's bunk glancing out into the room. It is striking how strong, warm feelings this picture expresses, this is a close and careful women's community. There are at least two women on each bunk, most of them are talking to each other, one is reading a book and some are playing with the little child. They can relax after a hard day's work. It is obvious that they are proud women who are not going to be broken down by the humiliating conditions of their life. Pride can also be seen in *'Dreams of the interned woman'* (Ill. 51) from 1962. Here the motif is a proud and determined woman, herself, sitting in the window frame of the cell looking out at the world beyond the walls. The figure has relatively soft and gentle movements, but the face has a stern and disapproving look. The almond shaped eyes and sharp nose are accentuated by the hair being drawn into a bun. A more romantic picture is *'Night behind bars'* (Ill. 52) from 1963. This a view towards the yard through the bars of the window. There is yellow, but cold, moonlight over the yard. There are big trees in the background and the low-hanging moon is coming in from the right. The picture is saturated with longings and dreams for release, and for coming out and living the life on the other side of the bars. There is an apparent optimism in this picture, the end of Efflatoun's detention period is approaching.

Louis Awad<sup>(49)</sup> points out that Efflatoun is entering a new period after the detention, a lighter period where the hopeful white is permitted to dominate more strongly. She also changes technique, she uses more rapid and expressive strokes, nearly a personal form of pointillism. This special technique has aroused

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49 *Ibid.*, p. 14.





56. Inji Efflatoun: *Collecting maize*, 1972

57. Inji Efflatoun: *The stockade*, 1980



interest amongst the critics, as Safwat Osman<sup>(50)</sup> says: *'The eye can neither settle on a single detail isolated from the whole painting, nor on the painting as a whole isolated from its details'*. Her technique is specifically hers and separates her from contemporary colleagues both in Egypt and in the West.

She often uses quite big colour-spots placed beside each other to build up the picture. *'The High Dam'* (Ill. 53) from 1964 offers quite a good example of this change in style. The picture is painted from the top of a big crane, in the foreground we can see some tackles and winches, in the depths below there are numerous machines and people working on the foundations for the Aswan-dam. Her colours are different in stead of earth-colours she now uses bright red, blue, yellow and white. Through her staccato brush-strokes she transmits the speed and intensity of the work.

In *'Refugees from Sinai'* (Ill. 55) from 1968 she returns to her main theme, the description of common people's lives and sufferings. The Six-day war in June 1967 dispatched tens of thousands in flight from both Palestine and Sinai. In this picture we can see a group of nomads, four women, two men and two children, forced to flee their homes and lands because of the war. The main-motif of this picture is the four women, there is one old, two middle-aged and one young woman. The dress of the nomads is traditionally the most veiled one in Egypt. This picture shows that it is not only religious submission which lie behind the use of the veil. In their own peculiar way these women show a strength and dignity, of which an infringement is not to be accepted. She returned to the conflict with Israel many times in the following years. *"The commandos"* (Ill. 54) from 1970 is a honour to the Palestinian freedom fighters trying to liberate their country. The past has shown us that this fight would be very long and painful. We can see a group of soldiers clad in camouflage-uniforms with automatic guns in their hands and the kaffeya around their head showing only the eyes and nose. Behind the group of soldiers are their homes, an enormous refugee tent-camp.

In many of her pictures she depicts people's work and drudgery, as in *'Collecting maize'* (Ill. 56) from 1972. A group of peasants are sitting in a field sorting maize before it is carried to the barn. The motif is the entire harvest, the single acts of the individuals are of minor importance, hence there are not many distinct details, but there are several groups sitting behind each other doing different parts of the process. The colours are bright, light and warm, the brush-strokes are rapid, broad and strong. Henceforth she continues with this simplification in

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50 *Ibid.*, p. 25.





58. Taha Hussein: *Osiris*, 1985

59. Taha Hussein: *Water*, 1988





the treatment of her painting, the backgrounds are subordinate and are often left untouched. The surface of the figures are not being treated as earlier, the figures are built up with parallel lines underlining the figures' forms. This is clearly seen in "*The stockade*" (Ill. 57) from 1980. The motif is a yard where vines make a shady roof and reeds make the walls. In the yard there are a few cows in the foreground and countless children and adults around, everyone busy with their own duties. The yard seems to be a peaceful place where one can relax in the shadow. The colours are as usual in this period, white as a dominating background otherwise bright yellow, red, green and brown.

A recapitulation of Efflatoun's works shows that the *Egyptian spirit* is a running theme in her production. It is for example not women's situation in general she treats, but specifically the Egyptian women's situation. It is also interesting to notice that she is not pacifist, but gives warm support to Palestinian feddayins defending Arab land.

#### 4.5. Conclusions of the Pioneers

The first impressions of modern Egyptian art show that there are abundant artistic expressions existing side by side. I shall hereby try to clarify this impression of multitude.

The social and political conditions have been turned upside down several times in this period, this affects artists, intellectuals, politicians and the public. The most important events were independence in 1922 and the revolution in 1952, these events were both important incitements for Egyptian artists.

A recapitulation of Egyptian art in this period shows that it has gone through different phases. Artists have had different points of reference in several ideological and artistic movements. In the entire period there has been an interaction between European impulses and Egyptian reality where the artists have operated. The *Egyptian character* is through the entire period a common denominator. Figurative painting has clearly been dominant in this period, this is probably the form of expression that best communicates to the public during such changeable conditions, at the same time it represents a kind of artistic continuity. Abstract painting is almost a parenthesis in this period, a form of expression that a few have used for a limited period. Egyptian art continuously seeks inspiration from European art, both from earlier art, but contemporary art and intellectuals are also important. The national aspect is very important for all artists irrespective of artistic expressions or ideological ideas. This led to artists seeking inspiration from pharaonic art, the Egyptian tradition of popular tales

within Islamic and folkloristic traditions. This strong emphasis put on the nationalistic aspect is a tendency which continues until present times.

A particular development of Egyptian art can be seen during this period. It starts in a distinctive folkloristic-romantic direction, represented differently by Moukhtar, Nagi and Saïd. Their main task was to express the classical 'beauty' and genuinely Egyptian. They had no political objectives, beyond the national, with their art. Younan figures as the most prominent representative for internationally oriented and politically engaged art, through his involvement with the surrealist movement. From the thirties until after the 1952-revolution a kind of realism became more and more important. The art had a political purpose, a critical art began to take shape, inspired partly by social-realism. This is represented by Gazzar and Efflatoun, at the same time as they are deeply rooted in Egyptian popular traditions. A greater diversity emerged gradually. This can be seen by Nada, who uses elements from popular romanticism combined with elements from political art. He gradually liberates himself from the programmatic and schematic models, and creates his own style. The message becomes less prominent and obvious. This creates a basis for rich diversity. This tendency towards diversity and eclecticism reach into present contemporary art. A common feature for all the artists of this period is the impossibility of placing any of the artists of this period into *one* single style, as has developed in Europe.

When studying modern Arabic literature, one can find great divergence, but also some parallels to development within pictorial art. Arabic literature receives important parts of its inspiration from classical, traditional Arabic texts. Modern literature has therefore distinctly different sources than pictorial art. In the discussion about the relations to the western, Jabra<sup>(51)</sup> points to Taha Hussain, who in the twenties emphasised that Arabic literature should be a combination the classical tradition and the modern western, humanistic and analytic approach. After the Second world war this attitude amongst Arab authors changed, the disappointment in the West, specifically after the creation of Israel was strong. The authors wanted to go their own, new ways. As Jabra points out that important parts of the inspiration received by Arab authors had been 30-40 years delayed related to the main tendencies in European literature. In the fifties Arabic literature went through, within few years, all the different phases European literature had gone through in many decades. At the same time there was a change in influence from French to Anglo-Saxon literature where T.S. Elliot was to play an important role. Jabra emphasises that Arab authors did not

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51 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra: "Modern Arabic Literature and the West" p. 7-22, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*.

feel inferior towards the western trends, neither did they copy them. Their forms were dynamic, they collected inspiration from all available sources, western and domestic, Marxist and metaphysical, even older mythological sources became of great importance. There were a need for a new literature that could express actual Arab problems, such as the question of Palestine and colonialism. An identity associated with the 'third world' did also appear.

It is interesting to see the actual parallels in the traits of development between literature and pictorial art in this period. The same untroubled attitude towards the *form*, as Jabra emphasises, within literature are noticeable among different pictorial artist in this period.

Looking at pictorial art with Jabra's analysis of the literature in mind, one can get the association that art has gone through a phase resembling the *postmodernism*, despite the lack of former modernism. It is therefore impossible to use the term postmodernism, but the same eclectic attitude towards styles and trends can be seen, and it has consequently some validity. The postmodernism as a concept for analysis and description of art had not been used in western art at this time, hence it is unfeasible to use it on Egyptian art.



## 5. TENDENCIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

### 5.1. Introduction

As mentioned earlier, pictorial art is a relatively new phenomena in modern Egypt. It has developed in the interaction between the West end Egyptian national traditions and ideas. All 'western' institutions as academies, galleries and museums are present.

There are nevertheless two partly contradicting tendencies in opinions of society and art. The first one is very western and accepts and welcomes everything from the West. The other one rejects western tendencies from political, national or religious points of views. This entails two different art opinions. The first one, the internationally oriented opinion claims that art is living on its own aesthetic terms beyond all national, political and religious opinions. The second one, the national oriented opinion claims that art has an important national, political and partly religious function. Most of the artists can be placed on a sliding scale between these two extremes. The common denominator for most of them is that they have a clearly Egyptian basis for all their works.

An important point when studying modern Egyptian art is to observe that pure non-figurative or abstract art is remarkably seldom seen. At first this seemed rather astonishing, I assumed that Egyptian artists with their Islamic background would more easily than their European colleagues use the non-figurative expressions, but to the contrary the opposite is in fact the case. The vivid calligraphic tradition with abstract figural depiction in the calligraphy could have served as inspiration. This source was of lesser importance than I previously assumed. Some artists work with calligraphy as artistic expressions, beyond the decorative aspects of calligraphy of the Opening-prayer of the Qur'an and other classical texts. They can through their free an innovative calligraphy approach abstract expressionism. Other artists use a combination of calligraphy and figurative expressions. The tendency to avoid non-figurative art is pronounced also in other Islamic countries. The figurative tradition from miniatures are emphasised as an important source of inspiration<sup>(52)</sup>. Just as important is the fact that the entire art-education system is built on the foundation of western classical figurative academy traditions. In addition on is the need to legitimise art through attachment to the national, either by Islamic or pre-Islamic culture.

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52 Wijdan Ali: *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, p. xi - xii.

There are many parallels to the development in Egypt in the situations in other Islamic countries. Modern pictorial art has evolved in the conflict between different national cultures, history and religion on one hand and western aesthetic and academy-traditions on the other hand. Wijdan Ali's<sup>(53)</sup> book gives a good survey of contemporary art in the Islamic world. It is different histories related to the founding of academies and similar institutions. Here Egypt, Iran and Iraq were pioneers. It was even so, not before the fifties that art education became widespread. Several of the Gulf-states have not yet established their own academies. It is an open question if it is possible to talk about a common Islamic or Arab pictorial-aesthetic. There are great differences between artists from the Gulf-states and west oriented artists from North-Africa or Lebanon. The artists work in different styles, figurative and non-figurative, there are also great differences in artistic quality. Islam is directly or indirectly a theme for some artists, either through calligraphic or figurative works. Islam constitutes only one of many sources of inspiration for artists, but the religion seems to play a more significant role than in European art.

A remarkable detail is that the '*manner of reading*' is different in Egyptian than in western pictures. Western pictures are mainly read from left to right, whilst Egyptian pictures are read from right to left. This is naturally connected to the direction of writing, and the script in this way also affects the total visual environment of society, in advertisements, billboards and other areas.

Egyptian society has a different structure than the European, with a greater percentage of the population employed in the agriculture sector, the manufacturing industries are badly developed and were owned by foreigners until 1952. This has inevitably had consequences for the art development. In this century Egypt has in many aspects been in an inferior position towards the West, both economically and politically. It is therefore not at all difficult to understand that an aesthetic based on European surplus and superiority towards the third world has problems with being accepted in Egypt.

Egyptian artists often choose their motifs from one of three tendencies;

- 1) historic, national and romantic.
- 2) political motifs mainly related to the West's and Israel's attitudes towards and wars with different Arab states.
- 3) emotionally expressive motifs.

From the choice of theme and motif it seems understandable that Egyptian artists consciously choose a pictorial language that provides them with the opportunity to emphasise national characteristics more strongly than western artists in the same time.

In the previous chapter I showed that it involved rather great difficulties in systemising modern Egyptian art in common western terms. This is a tendency we shall see that is continuing into contemporary art, this tendency is, if possible even reinforced. In this period it could have been adequate to use the term *postmodernistic*, as a model of thinking and not as a style, on tendencies in Egyptian art. It can be claimed that many Egyptian artists have rather eclectic relations to western art, they deliberately choose very different expressions or styles in different works. This makes it difficult and unsuitable to describe them within the '*isms*' of western art. The western '*isms*' are more used as concepts of style than as ideological movements.

A division from educational institutions wouldn't either give a significant classification and hence I don't use this method. A division from ideological or philosophical movements isn't either possible to employ, because there are no distinct groups of artists or intellectuals which there was before the revolution.

I have therefore chosen a *thematic* division, where Egypt is the main theme. The different works of art, not the artists, are then classified beneath different aspects of the Egyptian culture and society. With this method the diversity of cultural inspiration is best captured. This thematic division also elucidates the differences within contemporary Egyptian art. There maybe some overlapping between the different aspects I am using, but even so I find this to be the best approach.

I have chosen to divide this chapter from the following different themes:

- 1) Pharaonic aspects, 2) Islamic aspects, 3) Cultural diversity,
- 4) Orientalistic aspects, 5) Folkloric aspects, 6) Erotic aspects,
- 7) Metaphysical aspects, 8) Political aspects, 9) Abstract orientation,
- 10) Female artists.



### 5.1.1. Surrealism

The term surrealism has different content in Egypt today, than it had in Europe and Egypt in the thirties and forties. The term is being used by the critics and artists today about the pioneer-generation that had direct contact with the European surrealists, but it is also being used about *contemporary* phenomena in Egypt. I find it difficult to use the term surrealism about modern Egyptian paintings from the last ten to twenty years. On the other hand it can be used as an indication of the possibility of classifying Egyptian art from different stylistic, but not ideological categories. The subconscious and dreamlike isn't either the theme in contemporary Egyptian art as it was in surrealism.

When I nevertheless choose to use this term on some occasions I use it to describe the disbanding of the figurative realism, in pictures depicting nature, humans or architecture. An other aspect is that the symbolic meaning of the pictures is often ambiguous or barely accessible. Lastly these works of art have some similarities in form and motif with surrealism earlier in this century. As I have already said the dividing lines are diffuse and many artists are working in several different expressions throughout their career.

### 5.1.2. Expressionism

Neither can this term easily be used on contemporary Egyptian art. It has never, as I have said earlier, been direct contact between the art movements in Egypt and Germany, where the new impetuous expressionistic painting emerged in the eighties. I will therefore use this term more descriptive of pictures where it is possible to see some inspiration from modern western movements in Italian, German, American and British painting, in addition to inspiration from preceding artists as al-Gazzar and Nada. It is not any formal 'group', but some formal common traits that make it natural to use this term.

There are also some artists working in a manner clearly inspired by abstract expressionism. When using the term '*abstract expressionism*' I use it with the same precautions as mentioned above. Many artists are working with quite different expressions at the same time. This is not common amongst European artists where these terms are defined and established. It is therefore difficult to transmit the western terms to Egyptian reality without some adjustments.



60. Taha Hussein:  
*Sakkara, 1988*



61. Abdel Wahab  
Abdel Mohsen:  
*Yellow forms, 1992*



62. Abdel Wahab  
Abdel Mohsen:  
*Pyramid-construction,*  
1991

## 5.2. Pharaonic aspects

The classical pharaonic art and architecture are visible and ubiquitous in Egypt. Great temples, sphinxes, statues and pyramids dominate their surroundings and reflect a highly developed culture, where pictorial art, sculpture and architecture played an important role. This has inspired most of the Egyptian artists, and it is being expressed in several ways. Some artists are inspired by the principles of composition in classical paintings and sculptures, others by the use of colour, some by the architecture, others by the religious, cultural and mythological contents. The Nile has always played an important role, both physical and metaphysical. The Nile is the prerequisite for permanent settling in Egypt, this has led to the connection of fertility-deities with the Nile. The Nile's important role has always been reflected in culture and religion through different deities.

### 5.2.1. The Nile and Osiris

In '*Osiris*' (Ill. 58) from 1985 *Taha Hussein* (b. 1929) goes into one of the central histories in classical Egyptian mythology, the Isis-legend. The central theme here are the fights between good and evil forces, represented by Isis' fights for Osiris and the story about Osiris' death and resurrection as the god of the underworld<sup>(54)</sup>. Isis had to search for Osiris for years after he had been killed and dismembered by his enemies. After finding all the bodily parts, Isis embalmed and mummified the corpse which was then resurrected as god of the underworld. The picture's motif is the Nile, in the upper part there is a coffin, the reflection of the coffin delimits the lower part of the picture. Above the coffin there is a row of papyrus, other water-plants and birds. Between the coffin and its reflection some animals drinking water from the Nile can be seen, and some people fishing or searching for parts of Osiris' dismembered body. This is the central story about the fights between good and evil forces in classical Egypt. The good forces gained victory with the resurrection of Osiris. The colours are limited, but well balanced, they are kept in blue and gold to achieve the proper sacred impression towards such central motif. A special technique that he often uses, inspired by calligraphy, can be seen. To substitute different shades of colour, he covers the background with small with dots, strokes or hooks. This gives an association of script, that something has been written on the background. Almost the entire surface is covered by these small signs. His style is moreover rather expressive with the use of clear, strong colours and forms.





63. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen: *Blue pyramid*, 1993

64. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Pyramids and hieroglyphs*, 1991



65. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Violet*, 1992





The Nile has always been of the greatest importance for Egypt, it is the source of life for the people. This is naturally an important theme amongst many artists. Hussein is further treating this theme in *'Water'* (Ill. 59) from 1988. We can see the whirls in the river, and in the middle of these a big fish. Around the fish there are several reflections and shadows in the water. Even in this picture the surface is covered by his small signs. The Nile gives food in the form of fish, and supplies the fields with water, the Nile is also the only source of potable water. The motif has also an ecological aspect. The Nile is on one hand important and enriching, but on the other hand this does not hinder that the Nile is also an enormous garbage receiver. The river has a great pollution problem.

### 5.2.2. The Pyramid

The Pyramid is a frequently occurring motif in Egyptian art, it is also a motif in some western *'New Age'* inspired art, but there it has a totally different connotation than in Egyptian art.

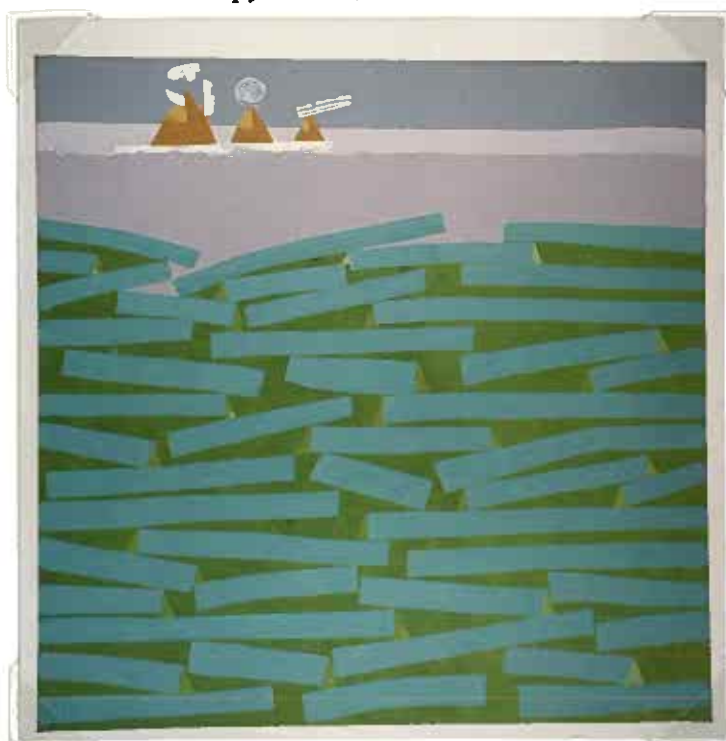
In *Taha Hussein's 'Sakkara'* (Ill. 60) from 1988 we can see inspiration from the earliest periods of pharaonic culture. Sakkara, with Zoser's step-pyramid from the 3rd Dynasty approximately 2500 BC., is situated several miles south of Cairo. This is very peculiar compared with the other known pyramids, it represents an earlier form. The surrounding landscape in Sakkara is luxuriant with fields and date palms. The lower part of the picture shows a palm forest, above this the main motif, the step pyramid is found. The pyramid is drawn in a somewhat peculiar manner. Broad stripes with small dots are falling in step pattern from the pyramid's top which nearly dissolves into the clouds. The pyramid is not drawn clearly geometrically but more as an organic form, the sky behind is ephemeral and full of clouds. The brush strokes give association to calligraphy which Hussein uses more explicitly in other works.

*Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen's* (b. 1951) *'Yellow forms'* (Ill. 61) from 1992 is a composition of different geometric forms with the pyramid as running theme. The left part is dominated by a big yellow pyramid-form with pink reflections. Inwards in the picture there are prismatic like reflections of the main form, several smaller pyramid-forms in yellow, blue and green shades. To break what could have been a monotonous repetition, there are some broad brown strokes crossing the main direction of the composition. His performance is often approaching abstract-expressionism, as in these pictures. *'Pyramid-construction'* (Ill. 62) from 1991 is another example of the emphasis he is putting on Egyptian



66. Mostafa Abdel Moity: *Pyramid and forms*, 1991

67. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Green pyramids*, 1992



68. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Ocher*, 1992



cultural roots and national identity as themes in his art. The motif is a big pyramid-form covering almost the entire surface of the picture. The predominant colour is sand-yellow as in the desert. Mohsen puts in another dimension by using several colours to emphasise shadows and reflections, blue, grey and brown on the shady side, whilst he is using white, pink and yellow to create light. The form of the pyramid is made up of big parallel colour fields that are broken by a circulatory movement around the top. The background is a repetition of the pyramid's colours, but he has used complementing colours and bigger colour fields. *'Blue pyramid'* (Ill. 63) from 1993 has the same theme, but is very differently executed. The brush strokes are coarser, with narrow and longer strokes, the colours are more transparent. The pyramid's form is not so well defined, on the right side the form is clear, but on the left side the form disintegrates because the brush strokes overrides of the limits of the form. A similar circling movement can be seen around the top of the pyramid. The use of colours is very different and unexpected, the theme considered. The background is in blue and grey pastel nuances, whilst the pyramid is painted in stronger blue and violet nuances, even here with some pink reflections.

The pyramid is also a running theme of *Mostafa Abdel Moity* (b. 1938). He works with a mainly strong geometrical, almost abstract design. He is using few, clear and sharp colours without shades or nuances, his design is clearly influenced by minimalism. He habitually works with repetitive, similar elements that he uses to create pattern like motifs. He frequently uses specific Egyptian symbols as pyramids and hieroglyphs and combines these with other geometrical forms such as cubes and spheres. He is engaged with investigating the relationship and movements between different forces, both political and metaphysical. He puts Egypt into his relations with the surrounding world. His art is clearly influenced by international contemporary art. He has lived for several years in both Spain and Italy, but he does not wish his art to lose its national character. His choice of motif secures a particular Egyptian character in all of his works. *'Pyramids and hieroglyphs'* (Ill. 64) from 1991 is in fact even more Egyptian than the title indicates. The main motif is three pyramids, when three pyramids are placed together on a row it symbolises the pyramids in Giza, the three best known pyramids, and almost a national symbol of Egypt. Three pyramids are used as decoration and as a trade mark on numerous products. The name of the leading newspaper *Al-Ahram* means pyramid, and it has the three pyramids in its heading. The picture has a broad blue frame, in the middle on the top there are three small lighter blue pyramids. Then there is a broader frame, deeper blue on the horizontal edges and burgundy on the vertical ones.



69. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Squares*, 1992



70. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Pyramids on black background*, 1992

71. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Blue pyramids I*, 1992



72. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Blue pyramids II*, 1992





Then we approach the most important part of the picture. The lower part consists of broader horizontal brown and green alternating strokes, firmly scattered with hieroglyph like signs. The upper part is black with three pyramids sketched in white and grey, between the pyramids the background is kept to different shades of green. Above the left pyramid there is a snail shell, a symbol of infinity.

The world has become more chaotic in *'Pyramids and forms'* (Ill. 66) from 1991. To the top left of the picture we can see the three pyramids, The biggest one is balancing on the top of the smallest one and the planet earth balances on the last one. They are executed in strong colours, partly in bands and partly in shades, the background is deep dark blue. Below, the picture is divided in broad horizontal bands in light grey and olive-green. To the top right the bands are broken and give association to huge rocks that are scattered in disorder. The colours are changed and ochre, blue and rust are added. The subtle balancing to the left is still in equilibrium, but small vibrations can dramatically disturb it. *'Violet'* (Ill. 65) from 1992 is more imaginative. The central part is dominated by two big violet planes, to the left a monochrome one, to the right one with stripes and shades. To the top right there are three rust brown pyramids against a grey background. Further below to the left there is a composition of different geometrical elements: three pyramids, rectangles, parts of a circle and other forms. They are all in sharp, clear colours, and the right part of the composition sets the limit between the two violet planes, at the bottom there is a black base for the composition. In *'Green pyramids'* (Ill. 67) from 1992 many elements from previous works can be recognised. The pyramids are not green themselves, but the picture is dominated by green colour. Three golden brown pyramids against a grey background are placed to the top left. On the top of the right one there is a slanting white rectangle, on the top of the middle one there is a spiral, and on the top of the left one there is a destroyed globe. Below the pyramids traces of the broad parallel bands can be seen, this time in two different green nuances. The bands are this time divided into three or four in each row resembling loosely stacked rocks, in other words a loose and defective foundation. The same elements, but in a totally different and more abstract composition is found in *'Ochre'* (Ill. 68) from 1992. The dominating background is clear ochre with narrow parallel horizontal stripes, on the top there is a grey horizon. The motif is a big cone made up of pyramids, globes, clouds, and some other geometrical elements. All the globes are disintegrating. The colours here are mainly white and turquoise.

In *'Squares'* (Ill. 69) from 1992 he is working very differently. The picture is divided into 16 squares. The division is painted to give an illusion of strong frames. All 16 squares have different motifs. On the top all four have pyramids,

destroyed globes and other geometrical elements, painted in blue and white against turquoise background. The rest of the squares are in golden brown, whilst the frames are in ochre and golden brown. In each of the remaining 12 squares, there are small traces, but not complete pictures, there are two to four short and precise brush strokes investigating the balance. *'Blue pyramids I'* (Ill. 71) from 1992 has the same elements as most of his important works, pyramids and globes, but there are also some obelisks here. The lower part of the picture has a medium blue background, against which there are three pyramids, two obelisks, two partly destroyed globes and some other objects, the colours he uses are white, grey and some green. In the upper part there is a horizon dividing the picture. First there is a narrow grey band, with a low and wide black triangle to the left, against an olive green background. In the intersection above the horizon one of the partly destroyed globes can be found. Despite a quiet composition and light colours there is an ominous impression from the destroyed globe on the horizon. *'Blue pyramids II'* (Ill. 72) from 1992 seems to be more freely composed and untroubled in the motif. The background here is darker blue, but kept in different nuances, the background is not divided, but there are shadows behind the objects. The different objects occupy two thirds of the canvas, there are obelisks, cubes, pyramids and a globe, snail shells or spiral forms can also be seen. The colours of the objects are predominantly different grey nuances, but with elements of white, red and yellow. *'Pyramids on black background'* (Ill. 70) from 1992 seems in this connection to be almost a still life with geometrical objects, but the ominous content is clear. Against a monochrome black background fragments of pillars and the profile of a pyramid can be seen, there is also a pyramid seen from the top, centrally placed in the picture rests a globe.

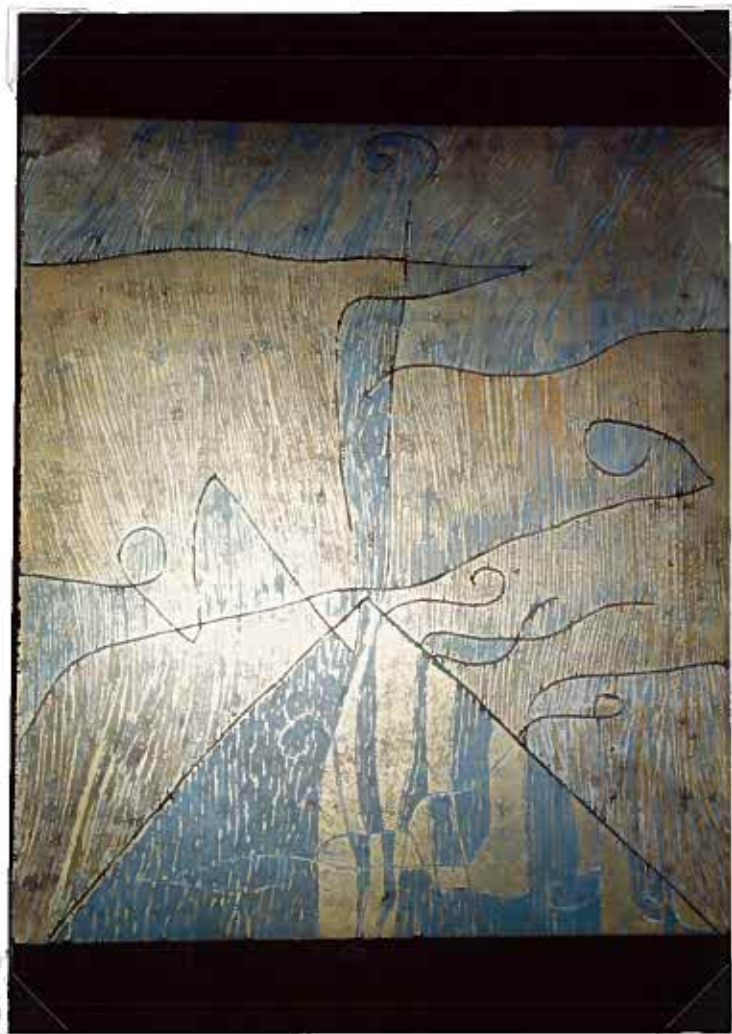
*Hussein El-Gebaly's* (b. 1934) *'Pyramid with calligraphy'* (Ill. 73) from 1990 is another example of the pyramid motif. This is one of many examples of the rich and multifarious abundance of inspiration that lay the foundations for different tendencies in Egyptian art. The upper part is dominated by a huge red pyramid against a blue background. Below the pyramid the blue colour changes to a darker nuance, representing the Nile. Over the entire surface there is an open pattern of calligraphic forms held in a bronze-coloured nuance. This pattern can also give associations to the many water plants growing along the Nile, which have always played an important part. In the bottom to the right the blue colour changes back to the lighter nuance of the background. *'Blue pyramid II'* (Ill. 75) from 1990 gives a very forceful impression because there are hardly any details that remain, he uses very few nuances of blue and bronze. The pyramid's base covers almost the entire bottom of the picture. The pyramid is kept in blue, with



73. Hussein El-Gebaly: *Pyramid with calligraphy*, 1992

74. Hussein El-Gebaly: *Brown calligraphy*, 1992





75. Hussein El-Gebaly: *Blue pyramid II*, 1990

76. Ahmed Abdel Karim: *Pyramid*, 1993





some flaming forms sloping to right converting to cloud-like forms behind and above the pyramid. There are also to other cloud-like forms to the left of the pyramid. Some of the similar ascetic expressions can be found in '*Brown calligraphy*' (Ill. 74) from 1992. The composition is very rigid. The pyramid's base covers the entire bottom of the picture and its peak ends just below the upper edge of the picture. The colours are limited and well balanced, without use of shades or nuances. Some vividness appears on the surface by the use of many narrow parallel lines, almost as if they were growth rings. Against a pale rust-brown background there is a grey sharp-pointed pyramid. Diagonally from the top right there are some solid calligraphic forms in a dark terracotta colour. The lower part of the pyramid, below the calligraphy has changed colour from grey to an indeterminable golden nuance.

El-Gebaly's design is often abstracted to two-dimensional figures, with different elements laid upon each other in layers. His design is closely connected with the fact that he mainly works with graphics, and is using the different techniques in graphic arts to communicate his message and motif without disturbing details.

In '*Pyramid*' (Ill. 76) by *Ahmed Abdel Karim* (b. 1954) we can see some of the same S-shaped figures that are frequent in his more calligraphic works. The picture is dominated by a big pyramid form with five figures based on horse-forms and bird-forms. On the top of the pyramid there is a bird. Behind the pyramid here is a big circular red form. The colours are dark and gloomy, dark grey and rust-brown with some golden traces.



77. Taha Hussein:  
*Allah*, 1985

78. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*Calligraphy*, 1975



79. Taha Hussein:  
*Black calligraphy*, 1985



### 5.3. Islamic aspects

There has been enforced a *de facto* ban of pictures<sup>(55)</sup> within Islam, no humans can compare themselves with Allah, and artists could not compete with Allah through depiction of living creatures. The ban on pictures is not explicitly stated in the Qur'an, but it is a part of *Hadith*, the tradition. Scholars disagree upon when this ban first was enforced. The ban has its rationale in the fear that pictures could be used as idols, and thereby mislead the believers from the true faith. This ban of idols is clearly mentioned several places in the Qur'an, amongst others in Surah 6-74.

The ban of pictures has not been strongly enforced in other places than the mosques. There has nevertheless developed an art-tradition which is distinctly different to the West. Depictions of humans and animals are banned in the mosques, but they can occur in secular buildings. Rice<sup>(56)</sup> points out one exception from Mosul in Iraq, where there are 11th century mihrabs with figural decorations. According to him, this is due to the strong Armenian influence in the area.

There has also been some figurative decoration, in form of mural paintings and ceiling decorations in the palaces, or in miniature paintings in manuscripts. Islamic art has two important sources of inspiration, the Byzantine and the Sassanide. Rice<sup>(57)</sup> points out the Byzantine influence in two murals from the 12th century, one from Palermo, the other from Fustat, Cairo. He continues by referring to many mosaics in for instance Syria. Depictions of humans occur, but according to Hamza,<sup>(58)</sup> isolated from their natural environment in different ways. Even in secular buildings the figurative decoration are gradually vanishing.

Because of this displeasure towards figurative art applied art and abstract geometrical decoration have dominated and been admired. Even so there has always been confined pictorial art, but of limited availability, in miniatures, manuscripts and portraits, but there has not under any circumstances appeared pictures of humans or other living creatures in the Qur'an. The miniatures in illuminated manuscript were mostly in scientific works, some poetry or heroic tales. The Iraqi and Syrian manuscripts up to the 14th century show influences from Christian manuscripts. From the 14th century the Persian illumination was revitalised, these and later Turkish ones reveal greater inspiration from Central-Asian art.

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55 Karin Ådahl: *Den islamska konsten*, in *Islam*, p. 130-142, Stockholm 1985.

56 D.T. Rice: *Islamic Art*, p. 98-99.

57 *Ibid.* p. 84-85.

58 Mohammed Hamza: *Islamic art of painting in Egypt*, Egyptian Gazette 09.04 1993.





80. Hussein El-Gebaly:  
*Calligraphy*, 1989



81. Hussein El-Gebaly:  
*Brown forms*, 1992



82. Hussein El-Gebaly:  
*Forms*, 1990



In contemporary art, inspiration from earlier epochs of Islamic art, architecture and applied art is obvious amongst many artists. It is first of all the rich calligraphic tradition that is the source of inspiration. The miniature paintings appear to a lesser degree to be an important source of inspiration, but in some works where there are combinations of calligraphy and figurative expressions the inspiration is also drawn from this source. Stylistic there are moreover great differences. Important events from the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet also give inspiration to contemporary artists. Egypt has a unique position within the Islamic world, with its prehistory from Pharaonic and Coptic zenith. The different cultures are continuously influencing contemporary artists, and many works contain evident references to this complex past in a way that makes it impossible to point out *one* single culture or religion as inspiration for the works of art. Egyptian culture *is* composed of several elements and this is necessarily reflected in the art.

Speaking of Islamic aspects of pictorial art, it is important to notice substantial differences related to religious motifs in Christian art. Since there has been a ban of pictures in religious connections, there has never been established a tradition of pictorial representations of important events in for instance the Prophet's life. Pictorial art has never been used in missionary work which were very important within Christianity. Representations of persons are seldom put into a definite textual connection, but remain isolated and symbolic. Representations of Mecca with '*Al-Ka'bah*' as the centre of the world are found from the earliest until the present time. The specific religious content is exclusively found in calligraphic works.

### 5.3.1. Calligraphy

Contemporary artists are inspired by classical calligraphy, and even more by the artistic use of calligraphy in manuscripts and other forms of applied art through the centuries.

*Abdel Wahab Morsi* (b. 1931) has worked with the significance of religion and specifically Islam in '*Calligraphy*' (Ill. 78) from 1975. Three solid vertical forms and a medallion shape with calligraphy are projected against a background of diagonal yellow stripes. The vertical forms are reddish brown and black, with simple geometric decoration. The calligraphy is kept in the same colours. The purpose of this calligraphy is not to be read, but it is a decorative component in the picture. It has even so a clearly historical, religious and cultural content.



83. Ahmed Abdel Karim: *Gold-alif*, 1993

84. Ahmed Abdel Karim:  
*Red Forms*, 1993

85. Ahmed Abdel Karim:  
*Horseheads I*, 1993



*Taha Hussein's* calligraphic works have seldom a specific significance, they are more like studies of the decorative aspects in calligraphy. In the application '*Allah*' (Ill. 77) from 1985 these decorative aspects are apparent, at the same time as this picture also has a clear message. In the top middle is, الله - God appliquéd clearly with white and green letters in a square field, with a green border. Green is the holy colour of Islam. The background of the picture is totally white overlaid with a thin diagonally net. In the lower part, the background is partly brown and black with appliquéd calligraphy in two to three rows in white and brown letters. According to Hussein, the intention is not to read what is written, there are random letters and fragments of letters, and they are partly written upon each other. This application work shows an amalgamation of inspiration from different sources. Application has long tradition in Egypt. Large canopies and tents were made to be used on occasions when larger localities were needed. The craft of tent making is also centuries old in Egypt. Traditionally coarse white canvas is used onto which geometrical borders and medallions are appliquéd. The application is made with a thinner cotton in strong colours like red, blue, green, yellow and black. Inspiration from classical calligraphy from the walls of the mosques as well as from manuscripts are also evident in Hussein's pictures. Finally it is common in all pious homes to have a picture where Allah's name is written in beautiful calligraphy. He works in a more modern, expressionistic manner in the painting '*Black Calligraphy*' (Ill. 79) from 1986. The only colours of this picture are black and white. The calligraphy follows the edges of the picture and moves in a spiral into the picture's centre that is shining brightly. On the edges the letters are large, becoming smaller towards the centre of the picture. There is no intention here either to express a written message, the picture must be perceived as an abstract composition. The letters are often written upon each other in a way that makes it impossible to see more than parts of the words.

Also *Hussein El-Gebaly* is inspired by Arab calligraphy and Islamic architecture in addition to his inspiration from Pharaonic culture. His pictures often contain several archetypal Egyptian symbols such as pyramids and hieroglyphs. His pictures do not have, as could be expected, a religious message, but rather a religious dimension. His calligraphy is not letters in traditional manner, but decorative components deeply rooted in classical Arab calligraphy, there is hence, no readable message in his calligraphy. He uses his inspiration to create pictures with a new content, they also contain lots of references to Egyptian culture and history.



86. Ahmed Abdel Karim:  
*Horseheads II*, 1993



87. Ahmed Abdel Karim:  
*Pegasus with Water jars*, 1991



88. Ahmed Abdel Karim:  
*Pegasus*, 1993



As professor of graphics El-Gebaly is one of the leading figures of modern Egyptian art. He works mainly with wood-cut and utilises the opportunities given by this technique. He often uses black or coloured paper, which combined with his use of sober golden earth colours this gives his works a very distinctive character.

In *'Calligraphy'* (Ill. 80) from 1989 it is the use of calligraphy in decoration and architecture that is the obvious source of inspiration. At the top there is a border of inscriptions, below to the right there is a pyramid form, to the right of this there is a dome. Both are richly decorated with calligraphy. Below these forms there are several rows with decorative elements brought from Islamic architecture. The entire composition is treated completely two-dimensionally. In Islamic architecture there is often found calligraphy both outside and inside mosques and other buildings. The calligraphy appears then in limited areas or friezes on the walls, but not as here on the domes. Domes are often covered with metals or glazed tiles, or sometimes with geometrical designs of lines or zigzag borders. In *'Brown forms'* (Ill. 81) from 1992 architecture is also an important inspirational source. There are three minaret like red-brown forms against a lighter background. On the top right, there is also here a border with inscriptions. The picture is further divided into smaller areas in some of which there are calligraphic decorations. The same source of inspiration can be traced in *'Forms'* (Ill. 82) from 1990. Centrally situated in this picture there is a domed building. Here both the dome and the other building-fragments are decorated with broad and free calligraphy. The background is rather uneasy and the lines in the picture are dominated by movements. He is using relatively sharp colours in red, green, blue and pink.

*Ahmed Abdel Karim* is working with motifs that clearly show that he gets inspiration from many different sources and styles. His personal style is amongst others inspired by non-figurative, surrealist and expressionistic paintings. He is not working explicitly with calligraphy, but with the letter *alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet that can be seen in many varieties in most of his pictures. Alif is also representing the divine principle by representing Allah. Mythological symbols such as horses and Pegasus also appear often. In *'Gold-alif'* (Ill. 84) from 1993 there is in the left part of the picture a big gilded letter, looking like an artistically written alif. The letter has its point of balance leaning to the left. It can also be the old Egyptian divine snake. The background is kept in grey nuances and the surface has a rich texture made up of different fibres attached to the canvas before being painted. To the right there is a small golden dot



89. Ahmed Abdel Karim: *Pegasus with Mummies*, 1992

90. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*The Mask*, 1989

91. Adel el Siwi:  
*Ali*, 1992



creating a balance in relation to the alif. An *alif* is usually written as vertical stroke with heavier pressure on the top of the stroke. Karim has written it here as if it was the start of a compressed S, a movement from right to left and back again to the middle before the vertical stroke, this form can also resemble a *miim*. This half S-shape is a form he uses on many occasions. We can see this form in different variations in '*Red Forms*' (Ill. 84) from 1993. The form has here, on several occasions, been transformed to a stylistic horse head as can be seen in chess. There are three rows of figures above each other, mostly slender and thin, but there are also small horses and two birds, all with the same S-shape in the head and neck. The figures appear alternating as light against dark background and dark against light, the colour scale range from rusty red to black, with some grey and green.

#### 5.4. Cultural diversity

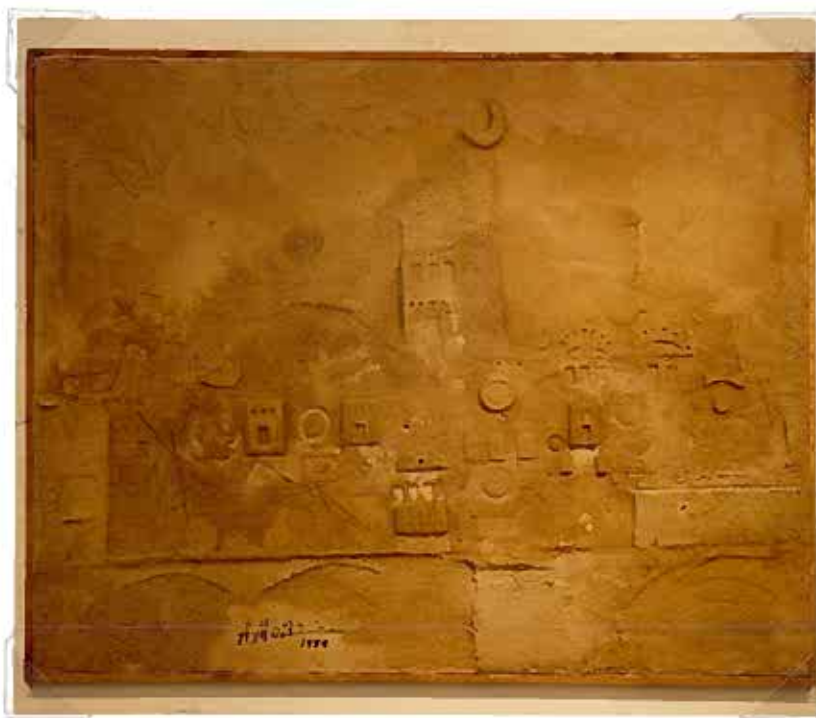
Egyptian culture is, as I have mentioned earlier, very complex and rich with recollections from different religions, dynasties and rulers. This cultural conglomerate is important to many artists whether Christian or Muslim, this gives them their characteristics towards the West and other Arab societies. Contemporary western art, is in addition to old Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic art an important source of inspiration for Egyptian artists.

Some of Ahmed Abdel Karim's works clearly show inspiration from several different sources, either stylistic or thematic. I will here deal with some pictures that are inspired by calligraphy, religious stories and other cultural sources related to Islam.

In '*Horse-heads I*' (Ill. 85) from 1993 has *Ahmed Abdel Karim* turned the canvas so that the picture gets a rhombus form. The picture is then divided to several smaller, brown squares. In each square there are between one and four grey-white horse head like figures. The background is light grey with horizontal parallel stripes. In a small area on the top there are vertical brown and golden stripes. '*Horse-heads II*' (Ill. 86) has the same theme and similar design, but the picture is not rhombic but square. Even here the picture is divided into smaller, brown squares, with grey-white figures. Most of the figures are just outlined, one of the horse heads has a long mane hanging behind it. In '*Pegasus with Water-jars*' (Ill. 87) from 1991 there is an obvious Babylonian inspiration. There is a big golden Pegasus against a strong blue background, the Pegasus has a lion's tail. In front of the creature there are six brown water jars of that kind that are found everywhere in the streets of Egypt. The ground is covered by numerous small triangular and circular sign-like figures. Karim is working in a much heavier



92. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*Eagle*, 1985



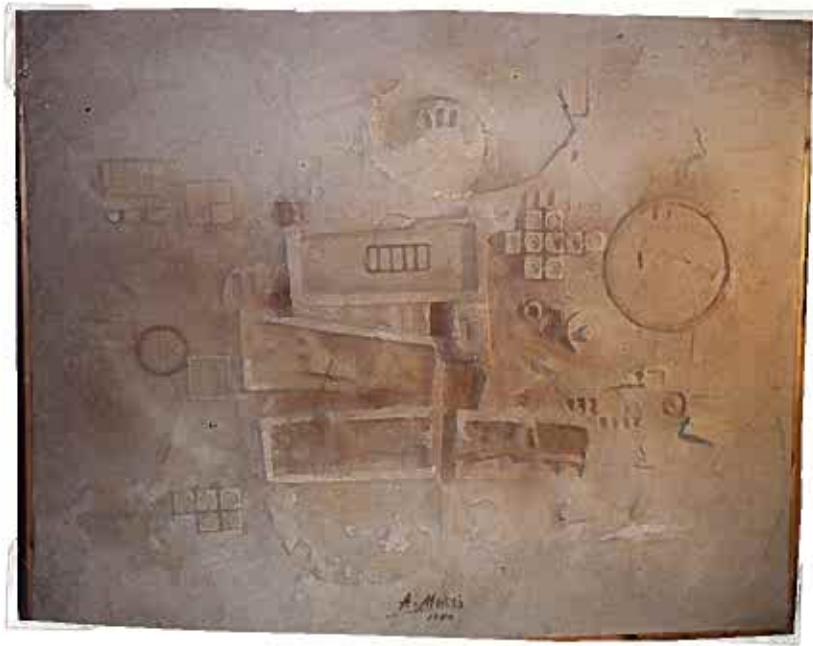
93. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*Village I*, 1989



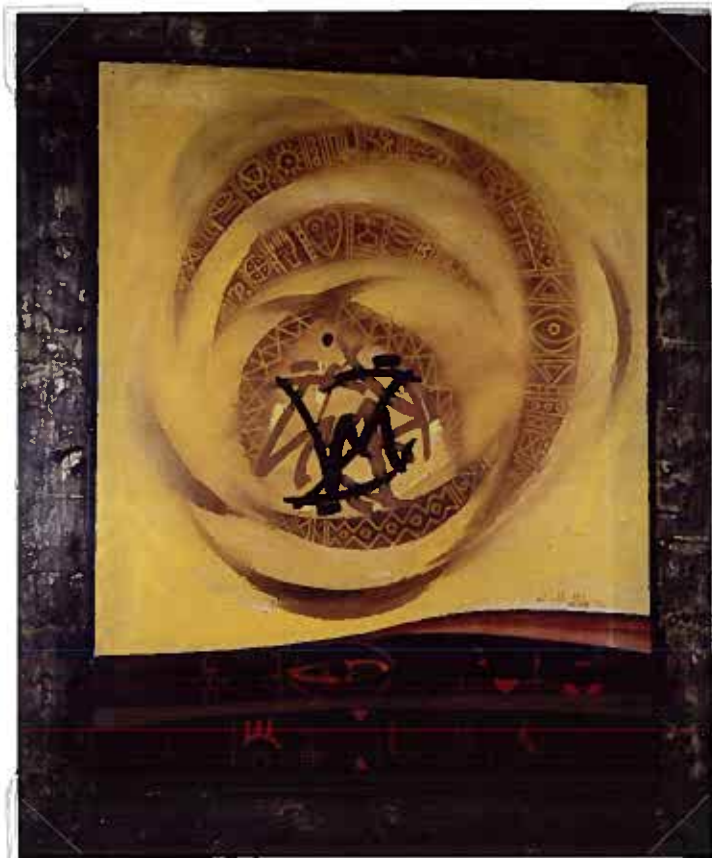
expressionistic manner in *'Pegasus'* (Ill. 88) from 1993. The background is dominated by broad and uneasy strokes in different yellow and violet nuances. From the right a big triangular form appears, made up of two flying Pegasuses, their colours are kept in blue-violet and rust-red. The Pegasuses are rendered as compact volumes without any details. Somewhat more surrealistic inspiration is evident in *'Pegasus with Mummies'* (Ill. 89) from 1992, the picture is here dominated by a big, violet Pegasus-like form standing on the ground. In front of it two mummy-like figures hover, they really resemble grave wrappings where the corps has disappeared, but the shape is kept. In the lower part of the picture there are many horse head like figures, here they are being transformed into mummies. This can be seen as a doomsday or resurrection symbol. From late antiquity the Pegasus myth has been regarded as a symbol of the soul's immortality.

In *Abdel Wahab Morsi's 'The mask'* (Ill. 90) from 1989 it is both the Coptic and Islamic cultural background that are being dealt with. Against a red background there is a almost rectangular geometrical composition, the design fills almost the entire picture. In this composition the most important part is the face of a woman. On her head she carry two fish topped by a small white crescent, on her forehead she is wearing a big piece of silver jewellery, below the face there is again another crescent, this time it is considerably greater and golden. The colouring is vivid and rich of nuances, but red and brown are predominant. The fish is a Christian-Coptic symbol with ancient tradition back to the primitive church. The crescent is one of the most widespread Islamic symbols. By having symbols from both religions in this picture he emphasises the uniqueness of the compound Egyptian culture.

In *Adel El-Siwi's* (b. 1952) *'Ali'* (Ill. 91) from 1992 Ali is seen to the left with his name written besides him. Behind him there is a djinn following or persecuting him, the djinn has a human body, but has lion's feet and an indeterminable beast's face. Ali seems to be worried, and has an introverted absentminded glance. Composition and design indicates an obvious inspiration from Francis Bacon and the 'London-School'. This Ali is the Egyptian Shater Ali, a figure in Egyptian fairy-tales. He is a poor lad that despite his problems succeeds sometimes in his adventures.



94. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*Village II*, 1989



95. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*The Cultural heritage*, 1974

One of the few artists that is working almost entirely with Islamic motifs is *Atteya Mostafa*, whom I shall return to in Chap. 5.11, Female artists. Also *Mariam Abdel Aleem* has Islamic motives in her pictures, but they are mainly together with many other symbols indicating the diversity of the Egyptian culture.

*Abdel Wahab Morsi*, who belongs to the pioneers among today's active painters, emphasises Pharaonic pictorial art, whilst he also shows clearly inspiration from culture of the present. He was for many years employed by 'Antiquities Documentation Centre'. His lifelong work there with reconstruction and restorations of Pharaonic art has left its imprint on his own art. He works in a particularly personal style which is a combination of figurative and abstract art. His work is mainly two-dimensional, this is an obvious influence from the Pharaonic art. Further he uses simple clear colours without shades or nuances, in some cases he is also using gold-leaf. His compositions are thoroughly prepared and strictly geometrical designed. The motifs are picked from both ancient Egyptian history and mythology as well as from present village life.

In some works he is using *sand* as the most important material, he is first building up a relief on the canvas before he 'paints' with a mixture of sand and glue. This is a technique that is also used by other Egyptian artists, amongst others Farghali Abdel Hafiz. Morsi's '*Eagle*' (Ill. 92) from 1985 represents a transition form between ordinary paintings and his sand-pictures. On the top of the picture there is, against a white background, a big eagle with its wings spread across the entire width of the picture. It is placed over a village on a hill or a dome of a mosque. Below the eagle there is a background of sand, but he has not drawn recognisable details of the village. On the other hand, the picture is loaded with different religious symbols from the whole of Egyptian history. '*Village I*' (Ill. 93) from 1989 is a good example of his sand-pictures. There is a relief of streets and houses, the details of the buildings are mixed up with each other. There are also some more or less occasionally placed geometric forms in the picture. The crescent is symbolically placed over the village. An other example of this style can be seen in '*Village II*' (Ill. 94) from 1989. Here there are the outlines of the village's houses that dominate the composition. The picture shows something that is difficult to identify or date. Most of all it looks like a chaotic excavation site, where there has been digged through different layers of civilization before eventually reaching the first one. It is obvious his long experience with archaeological work that has given inspiration to this picture.

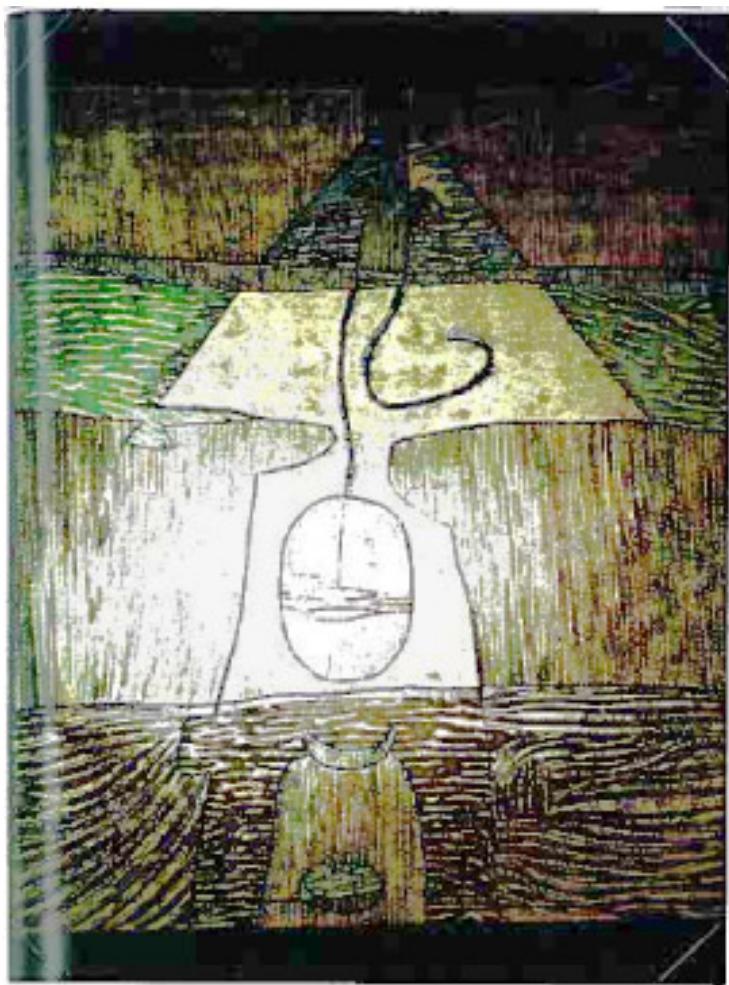


96. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*Red Composition I*, 1978



97. Abdel Wahab Morsi:  
*Red Composition II*, 1992

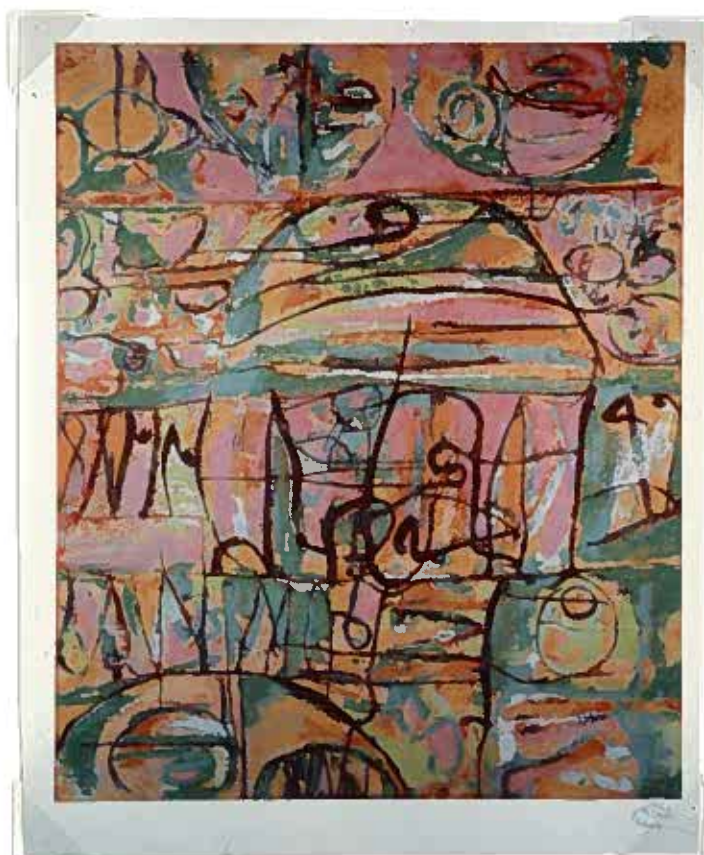




98. Hussein El-Gebaly:  
*The Cultural heritage*, 1990



99. Hussein El-Gebaly:  
*Blue pyramid I*, 1991



100. Hussein El-Gebaly:  
*Egypt*, 1993

In Morsi's *'The Cultural heritage'* (Ill. 95) from 1974 it is the heritage from the different religions and cultures of Egypt that is the theme. Over a dark area in the lower part of the picture hovers a spherical cloud-like composition against a yellow background. The dark area at the bottom is decorated in red and black with primitive geometric signs and figures. The spherical form has a nucleus with Arabic inspired calligraphy in brown and black, hurling around this nucleus are brown ribbons with geometrical decoration and Coptic, Jewish, Pharaonic and Islamic religious symbols. All of these symbols represent different important stages in Egypt and therefore in Egyptian culture.

The cultural and religious diversity in Egypt is the main subject in Morsi's entire production. Another good example can be seen in *'Red composition I'* (Ill. 96) from 1978, here he emphasises the Pharaonic influence. The picture has a strong composition, the top part has red background with black frame, whilst the lower part has brown background with red frame. In the top part there is a melancholic circular woman's face within a thin white frame. In the lower part there are many small pyramids and five mummy-shaped figures. The use of colours is limited to very few clear colours without nuances. In *'Red composition II'* (Ill. 97) from 1992 Morsi also traces the lines back to Pharaonic antiquity. The picture is divided vertically into two parts. In the left part a dark woman resides on a throne-like chair in front of a white washed building with small domes, the background is mostly red. The background of the right part is also red, and there are also white buildings with domes. To continue there are two dark figures standing in classical Egyptian poses, with naked chests and a long cloth around the waist. The buildings are in a simple primitive style that is still in use, and has been used for centuries, probably with roots back in antiquity.

In *Hussein El-Gabaly's 'The Cultural heritage'* (Ill. 98) from 1990 the motif is also the heritage from the many civilizations of Egypt. The motif can be seen as a single one, or as many smaller ones with different meanings, placed together to create a common relation. The picture is divided into horizontal and vertical areas. The four horizontal areas represent the following; the river bank, the Nile, the opposite bank and the sky. Through the entire composition there is a compound vertical movement. On first sight it resembles a tower, a minaret with a pyramid-shaped dome on the top. On the top of the picture there is a dark pyramid standing on the ground, in a golden grey colour the pyramid continues out onto the bank. The form is then hardly tightened before it widens out to half of its original width, it keeps this form until reaching the first bank, here the form changes colour to a brown nuance. If it is going to be described as a tower, it must be seen like this; in the bottom of the tower there is an arched doorway





101. Salah Enani: *Artists and Autors from the Years of Enlightenment*, 1990

102. Salah Enani: *Umm Kalthoum*, 1991

103. Salah Enani: *Derwish dance*, 1993

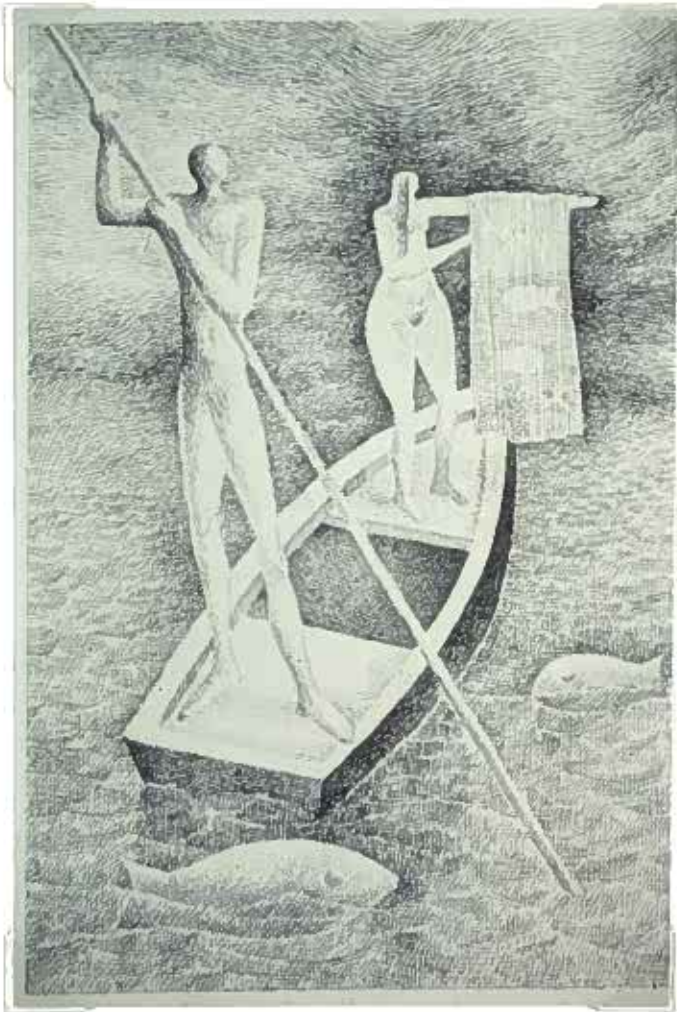




topped by a crescent. Further up there is a big oblong medallion, of the same shape as an old Egyptian seal, but with the decoration of an abstract mask. From the top of the pyramid-shaped dome there is a winding line connecting the pyramid with the medallion. I don't think it is possible to come out with a coherent analysis of this motif, the main object is a reminder of Egypt's rich and diverse cultural heritage and to emphasise that all elements are important for present Egyptian identity. Some of the same intent is evident in *'Blue pyramid I'* (Ill. 99) from 1991. The background of the picture is three rows with forms inspired by the crenellation of the old mosques. In front there is a narrow construction, with a traditional pointed arch at the bottom, above this lies an oval in form of an Egyptian seal, with indicated hieroglyphs, above this there is a pyramid. At the base the pyramid is decorated with a frieze of other pyramids. The colours of this picture are nuances of blue and golden-brown. In the lithography *'Egypt'* (Ill. 100) from 1993 El-Gebaly works more freely and expressively, with strong colours against white background. This lithography was made to be the Egyptian contribution for a series of graphic works published by UNESCO. The picture is divided into four horizontal fields, with forms inspired by calligraphy and crenellations. In the centre there is indicated a medallion form. The colours are strong and kept in different nuances of pink, orange and green, with black calligraphy and contours.

*Salah Enani* (b. 1955) is working figuratively with rather realistic expressions, but without transforming to romanticism. His style is often satiric and caricaturing, but not rude or compromising. He pinpoints the situation and pronounce the essence of the different situations. During last ten years he has concentrated on painting, whilst he earlier worked mainly as a cartoonist for different magazines. He uses the satiric and caricaturing style from his cartoonist work also within his paintings. His themes are always people in different situations. To clarify this he is limited working with recognisable figurative expressions. He has also made film posters, book illustrations and book covers, amongst others for the French editions of Naguib Mahfouz' books. He is very engaged in modern Egyptian cultural life, and has in addition to painting worked a lot with music and theatre through his position as director of the cultural centre 'El-Ghoury Palace' in Cairo. In his almost monumental panorama of Egyptian intelligentsia *'Artists and Authors from the years of Enlightenment'* (Ill. 101) from 1990 there are portraits of all of the 30 most important cultural figures in the last hundred years. There are amongst others the sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar, the painter Mahmoud Saïd, the author Naguib Mahfouz and the singer Umm Kalthoum. In the background Moukhtar sits with



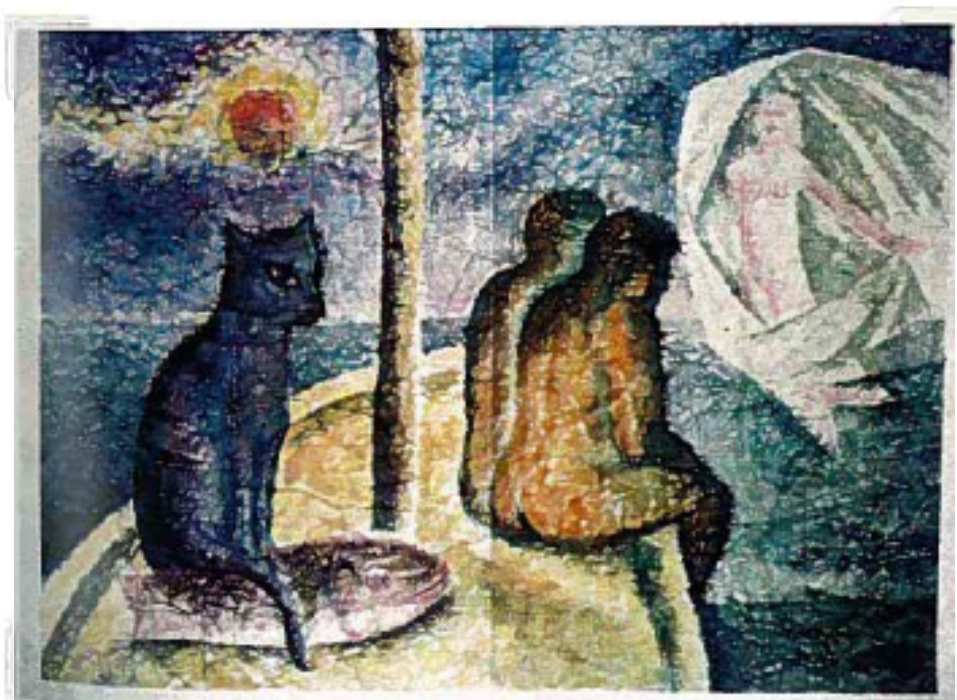


104. Gamil Shafiq:  
*Adam and Eve*, 1992



105. Gamil Shafiq:  
*Woman with fish*, 1993

106. Gamil Shafiq: *Adam and Eve with cat*, 1993



his *Egyptian Awakening*, which is a symbol for, and at the same time more or less surveys the development of this period. The sculpture is here somewhat caricatured, the sphinx has some of Enani's own traits and the woman has become older and is very interested in watching what is going on around her. In the centre of the picture, on a small platform, Umm Kalthoum is standing in her classical pose for singing. Mahfouz can be seen sitting by a café-table at the bottom to the right, and to the left Saïd is standing by his easel. All of these have in different ways played important parts in modern Egyptian cultural life. They are liberal Muslims that claim and defend their rights of artistic expressions, even if this should contradict the opinions of Islamists or conservative Muslims. Some like the author Farag Foda in 1932 were killed, other liberal intellectuals are met with different kinds of persecutions. The composition is like a stage setting in three more or less consistent groups, with a few individually placed persons. People are still entering the stage through a door in the wall in the background, the two last ones are Muslim scholars. In his homage portrait of 'Umm Kalthoum' (Ill. 102) from 1991 he reveals this legendary singer together with her orchestra. Umm Kalthoum<sup>(59)</sup> was a national and Pan-Arabian midpoint from the thirties and up to her death in 1975. Her songs have achieved an immortality that present stars can just dream about. She is envisioned as she was always seen in a full-length dress, with her hair put on top and dark spectacles whilst she is holding a small silk scarf in her hand. The musicians are just indicated, they are in this connection only subordinated accompanists. Her mouth is wide open, and one can almost hear the song and see the body's vibrations from the music. The brush strokes are expressive and indicating, more than realistic revealing. At 'El-Ghourî' Enani has brought to life again an old Sufi-tradition that was almost forgotten in Egypt, the Dervish-dance. The speciality of Dervish-dance is that the dancers rotate with an incredible speed and at length until they reach a trance-like condition. Different Sufi sects have different means to put themselves in meditative trance, the dance is only one of many varieties. Dervish-dance is mostly known from the Turkish Mevlana Sufi sect, that had its centre just outside Konya in Turkey, the sect had a *tekke* or monastery there for more than 600 years. The present Dervish-dance in Cairo is not a religious Sufi-ritual, but can more or less be regarded as a folk dance performance. Enani displays this dance in 'Dervish dance' (Ill. 103) from 1993. The entire picture has a nearly explosive force, it radiates strong concentrated energy. The dancer seems to be frozen in the movement, he stands on his toes with crossed legs, the hands stretched out and the head bent back in ecstatic

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59 Nefissa N.A. Naguib: *El-Set, Kawkab el-Sharg - Umm Kalthoum*, Midøsten Forum No. 2 - Sept. 1991, Oslo, p. 34-36.

trance. We can see the skirts of different colours stand vibrating out from the body. On the top of the shirt the dancers wear a coloured waistcoat and below a full-length skirt. When they start to dance a long range of skirts appear below the white one, each in different strong colours. Whilst dancing they twist themselves out of the skirts until they end up totally exhausted in a simple white garment. The Egyptian Dervish-dance costume differs from the Turkish one with the use of colours, the Turkish being entirely white.

*Gameel Shafik* (b. 1938) uses quite different expressions, but also motifs that reflect the cultural and religious diversity of Egypt. He works mainly with water-colours and pen-and-ink drawings. His pictures have often a simple design with only a few figures or elements centrally placed in the picture and hardly any surrounding details. The pictures are thoroughly worked over. He often uses fish, cats or horses in his pictures, in addition to humans. In some cases he also uses transition forms such as mermaid-like creatures. The fish is a particularly important symbol for Shafik. He emphasises its long tradition in Egyptian culture. From antiquity it was a dream symbol for prosperity, in addition it is an old Coptic and Christian symbol from the primitive church and the time of persecutions, and last but not least it symbolises Isis and the Nile fertilising Egypt. The struggle between good and evil is conspicuous in his pictures, the fish is always symbolising the good forces. The cat as symbol of the evil forces also has ancient traditions. Since Shafik is Copt it is also interesting to look into the Christian symbol-codex. In Christian tradition the cat has been regarded as a symbol of the devil, or his followers. During the witch-processes it was supposed that Satan could transform himself into the guise of a cat. From Egyptian mythology there is the uncontrollable lioness Sekhmet that was sent out to kill the enemies of Ra in upper Egypt. Once she first tasted blood she was impossible to stop.<sup>(60)</sup> Sekhmet can also be seen as an aspect of the goddess Hathor, who represented the worldly aspects, fertility and happiness. On the other hand Sekhmet was, in the aspect of Bastet an ordinary cat, worshipped and regarded as a protection against evil.<sup>(61)</sup> In this connection it is important to remark that different gods and goddesses in Egyptian mythology change their importance and positions many times through history. A reference to Egyptian gods and mythology can for contemporary artists therefore cover much more than one single situation.

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60 Robert Armour: *Op.cit.*, p. 112 - 114 & p. 128 - 130.

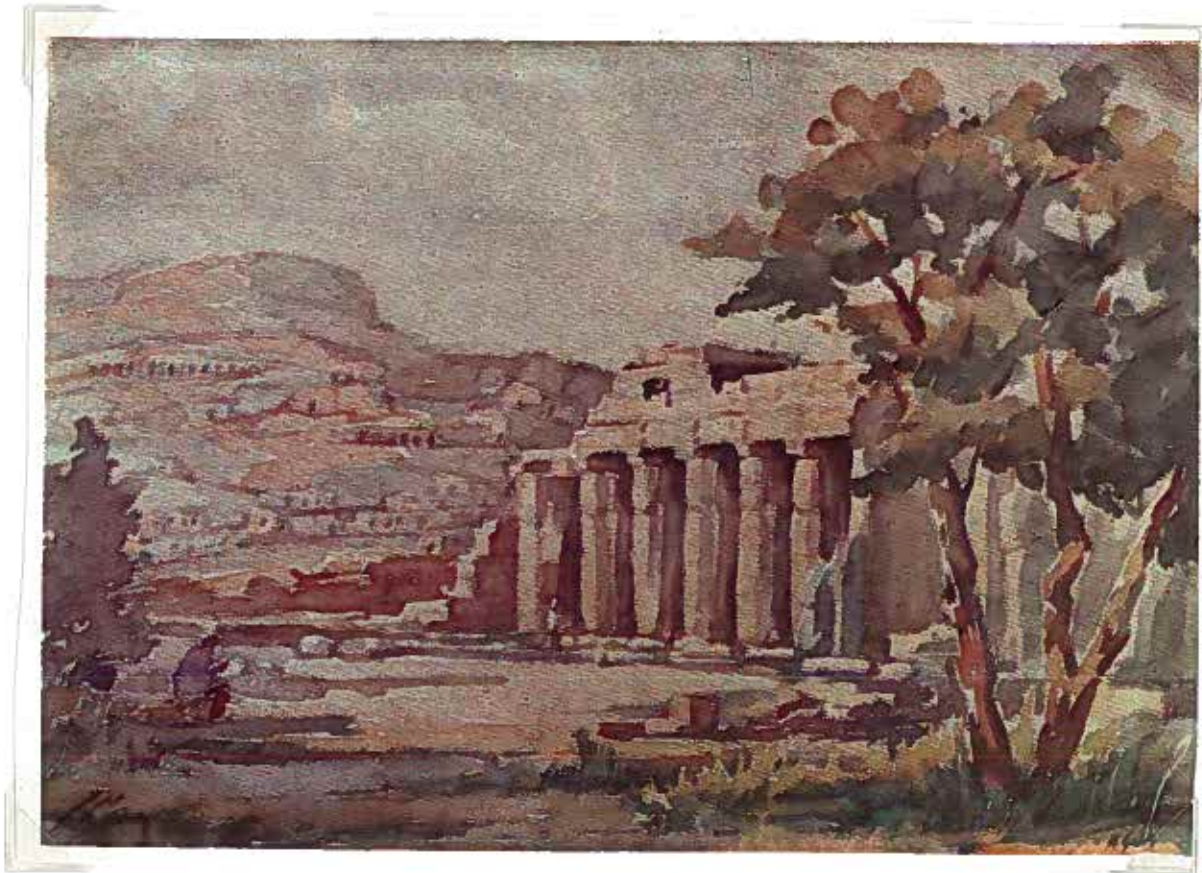
61 *Ibid.*, p. 130 & p. 191.





107. Mohammed Sabry: *The Coppersmiths*, 1948

108. Mohammed Sabry: *The Ramsees Temple in Luxor*, 1949



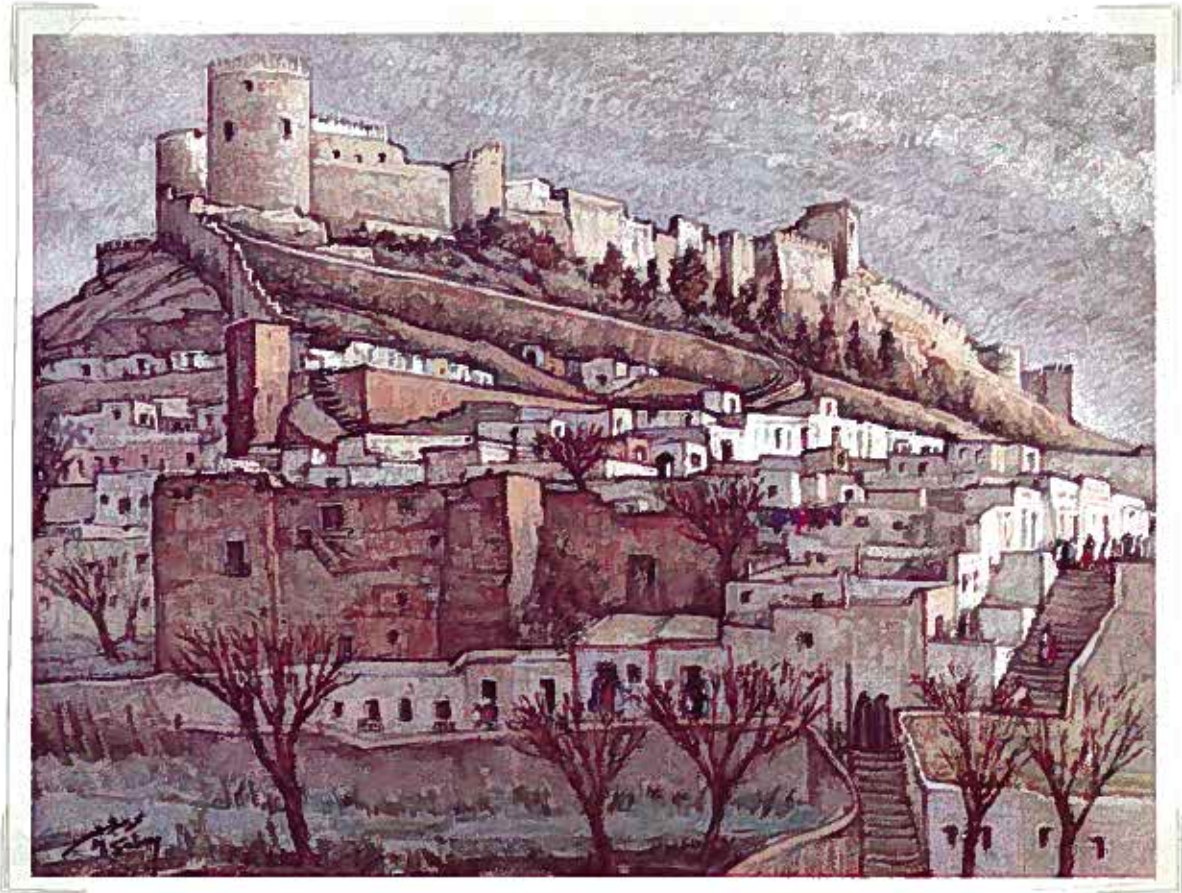
The horse is for Shafik symbolising the man, it is big, strong and sexual. There are no other evident mythological references to the horse in Shafik's pictures, but it is a generally positive and forceful symbol. Fish and lovers in the Nile refer to the old myth about Isis and Osiris.<sup>(62)</sup> Osiris' resurrection also connects him to fertility.

In the pen-and-ink drawing *'Adam and Eve'* (Ill. 104) from 1992 there is one of the many fertility motifs of Shafik. There is a naked man and woman standing in a small boat. The woman standing in the bow has just drawn a net of fish from the river, whilst there are still swimming two big fish around the boat. The man is standing aft and keeps the boat still, with a long pole. The water-colour *'Woman with fish'* (Ill. 105) from 1993 is another example of the same theme. There is a single naked woman torso holding a big fish in her arms. A homage to woman's old role as mother and life-giver. In the water-colour *'Adam and Eve with cat'* (Ill. 106) from 1993 there appears something more sinister, and there is no active movement. A naked man and woman are sitting close against each other in the bow of a boat, behind them sits a cat that has captured the fish. In front of them, out in the river a dream-like woman is approaching hovering, lightly surrounded by white drapery. This picture must be interpreted as a story about how external forces affect and paralyse a relationship. The cat represents the uncontrollable reality outside the family. The cat has captured the fish, the symbol of fertility and welfare. The only thing these people have left is the dream about a better future. Most people of today's Egypt are struggling with a difficult private economy, whilst they can be witness to a growing corruption amongst the elite in power.

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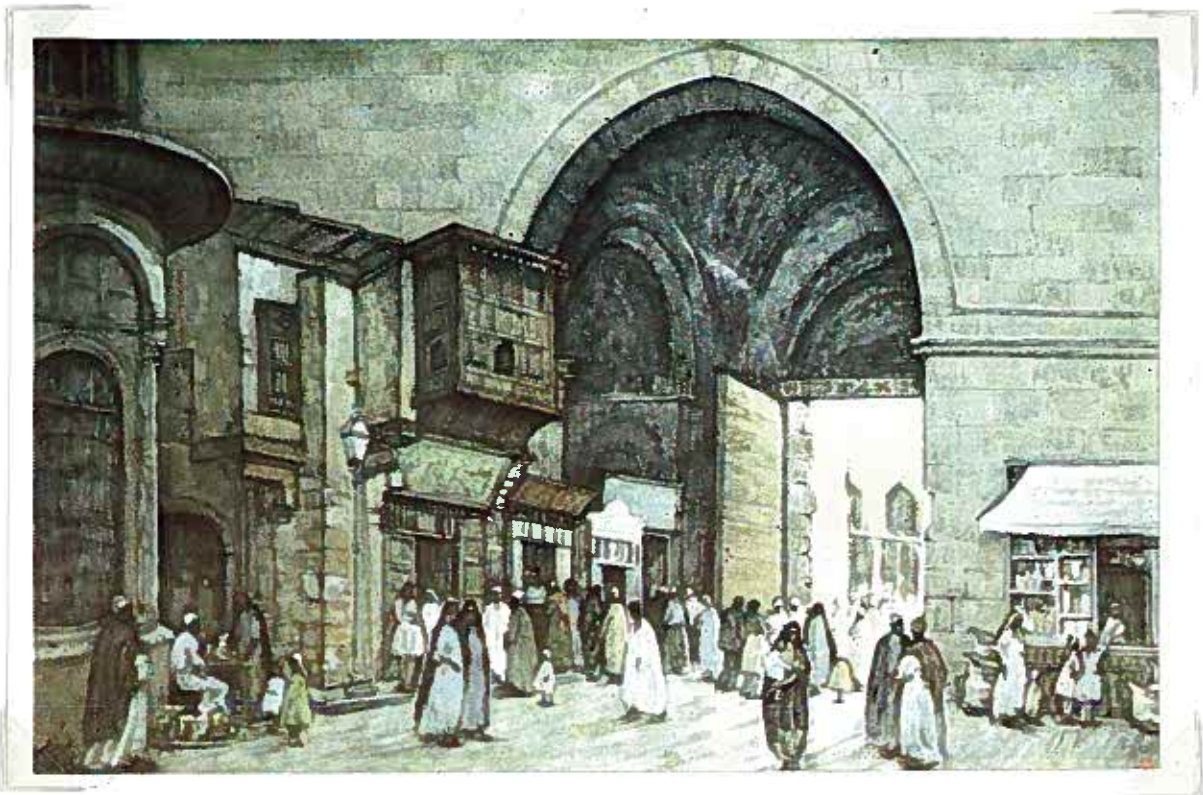
62 *Ibid.*, p. 72-88.





109. Mohammed Sabry: *La Alcazaba de Almería*, 1961

110. Mohammed Sabry: *Bab Zuweila*, 1966



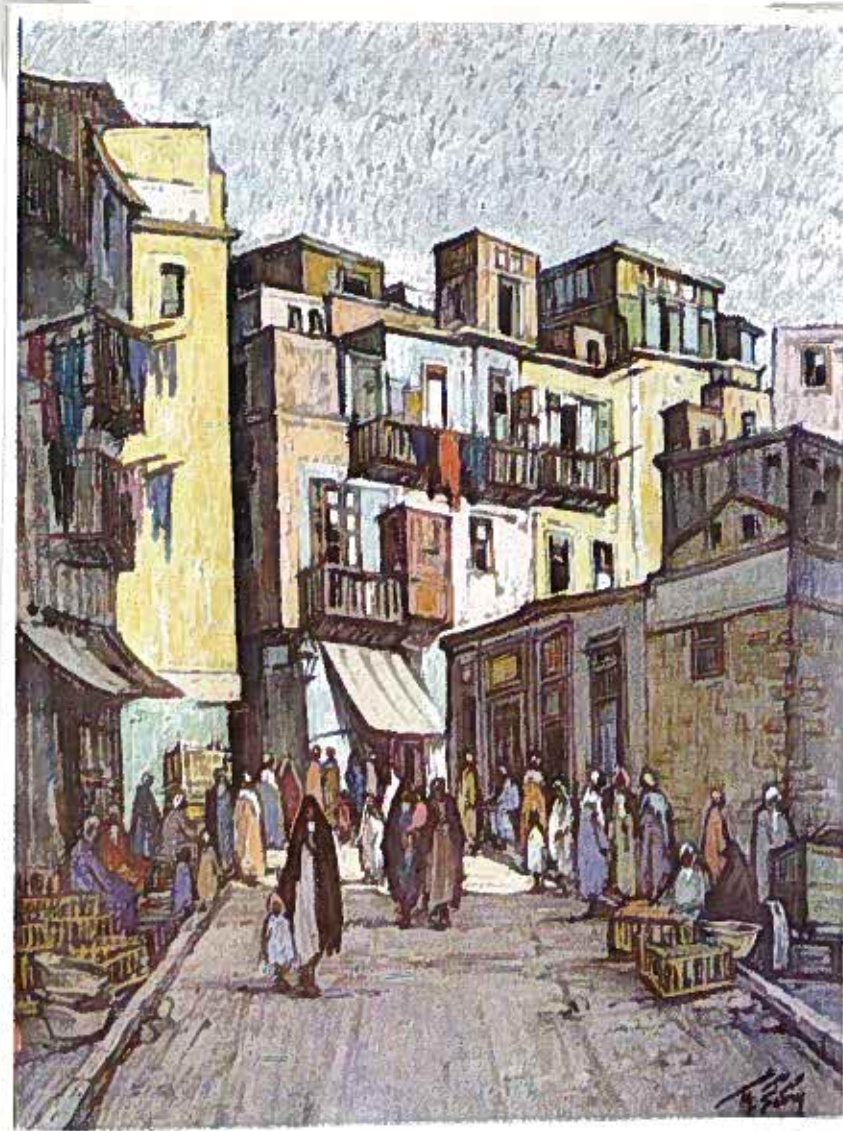


### 5.5. Orientalistic aspects

With orientalistic aspects I will underline the influence that can be seen in different works of art from the orientalistic tradition earlier in this century, or the fact that contemporary pictures fit into the same genre. These are pictures from everyday common life in Egypt, made to please European taste and comprehension of what is genuinely Egyptian common life. Delimitation towards the folkloristic aspect can in some cases seem to be vague, but amongst others I will emphasise greater exuberance combined with naivistic elements when I classify some pictures under the folkloristic aspect.

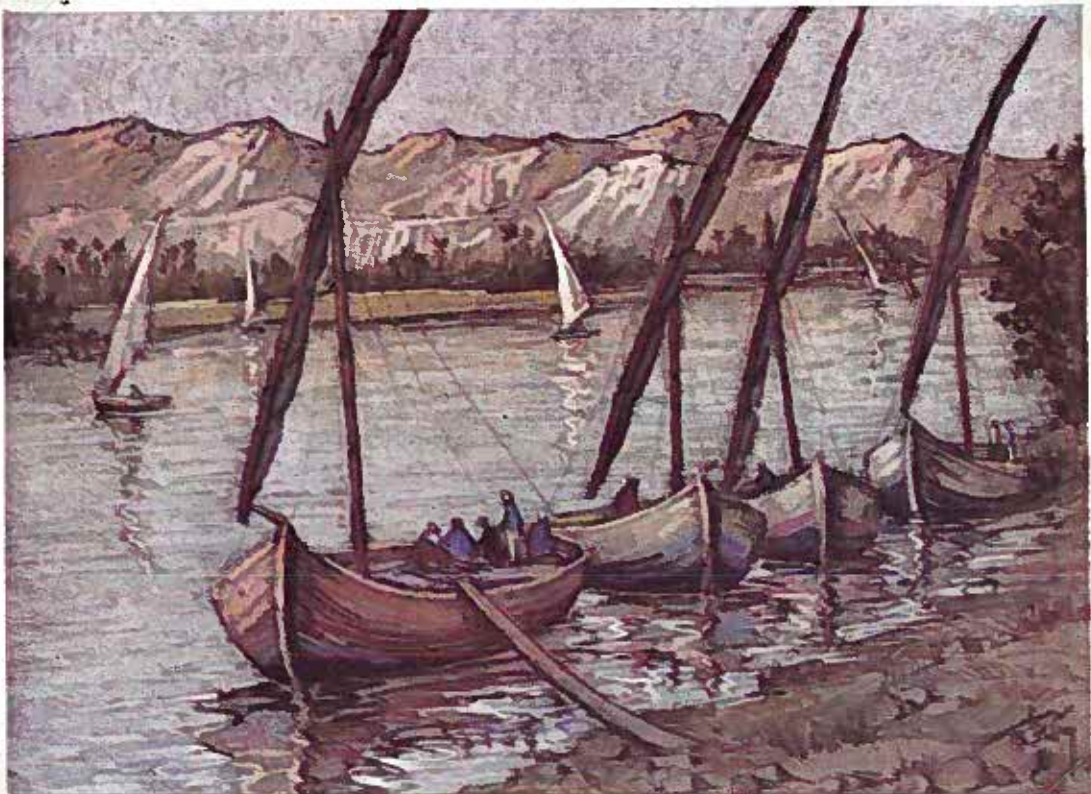
Mohammed Sabry (b. 1917) is mainly using romantic-realistic expressions in his paintings depicting scenes from street-life in Cairo. The motifs of his oil-paintings are not always historical events, but somewhat folkloristic depictions in the same manner as he does in his pastels. One example of this early period is *'The Coppersmiths'* (Ill. 107) from 1948. The motif is a copper workshop, in the background to the right the forge can be seen with a workman watching the fire and a smith forging the copper, to the left of these, two men are coming with new copper objects to the forge. In the foreground two men sit whilst they are doing the finishing work, they are beating, shaping and polishing. To the left the bazaar-street with people passing by can be seen. In the forties and fifties Sabry was also working in an impressionistic influenced manner, and was amongst others influenced by Nagi. This is clearly seen in the water-colour *'The Ramsees Temple in Luxor'* (Ill. 108) from 1949. The temple and temple court create the main motif, the motif is restricted in the foreground to the right of a big tree and to the left by a ridge with scattered houses. The temple is relatively sketchily treated. In this picture it is obvious to see the beginning of a style he has been using up to present time.

In his greater works he uses mainly oil, but it is small formats and use of pastel that has dominated his production. He has worked with pastel from the start of his career, first in portraits. He has executed portraits of many celebrities of the Arab world, in addition to queen Sophia of Spain and the Nobel-prize winner Naguib Mahfouz. Pastel gives the opportunity for a softer treatment of the surface and the colours. This softness is also a convention of pastel drawings, it gives the drawing a more romantic light which fits the message of his pictures. It is evident that he has been influenced by the contemporary and ancient tradition of Spain, where he lived for years. Sabry went to Spain to study both the Moorish and European art. The cultural richness of Spain has also appealed to many other Egyptian artists.



111. Mohammed Sabry:  
*Houses in Sharcas*, 1982

112. Mohammed Sabry:  
*Boats on the Nile*, 1981



In the last years Sabry has almost exclusively worked with pastel, and he has drawn numerous landscapes and cityscapes from both Spain and Egypt. In the tradition from portrait painting follows the importance of accentuating the flattering of the model, and glossing over unflattering and unwanted details. He applies this also for his landscapes and cityscapes, where realism is exchanged for an expression clearly influenced by romantic impressionism. He draws picturesque landscapes, with an old ruin, church, mosque or picturesque village as the central motif. There are often people in his pictures, even if they are done rather sketchily he claims that he renders the dress such that it is possible to identify their origin. It is evident that he achieves a timeless character in his pictures, he consequently avoids everything that gives a modern impression, such as cars, train or electricity.

Sabry made many of his pictures in Spain, mostly landscapes and cityscapes. One example of these is *'La Alcazaba de Almería'* (Ill. 109) from 1961. The motif is the Moorish castle on the mountain behind Almeria and the present village on the slopes below the castle's walls. The easy impressionistic style and the sketchy execution are obviously elements from the first part of this century, the choice of motif could just as well have been done by one of the many French or British artists travelling around in Egypt and the Middle East last century, drawing scenes from the popular life and genre-paintings. *'Bab Zuwayla'* (Ill. 110) from 1966 is another good example of this orientalist embellishing style. Bab Zuwayla is an old city gate in central Cairo where for centuries there has been a vivid bazaar trade in the surrounding areas. In Sabry's picture everyone is dressed in conservative traditional style, not a single western dress can be seen, despite that people use all kind of dresses from traditional ones to the latest western fashion. Neither are modern installations such as electric light or cars visible, Sabry aims at creating a timeless and partly unreal atmosphere. He also aims at a so-called beauty, henceforth there are no beggars or exhausted, loaded donkeys in his pictorial world. In *'Houses in Sharcas'* (Ill. 111) from 1982 his idyllic style is still visible, but he has employed a more sketchy design and thereby achieved more life in the surfaces. The motif is drawn from a street of a poor neighbourhood in Cairo. The poverty is no longer possible to hide, but he purifies it as far as possible. The motif is a short part of the street, with vendors sitting on the pavement with their products and customers going around shopping. In the background the picture is limited by a row of houses of different storeys and many colours. Some halfway ramshackle balconies and laundry add further atmosphere to the picture. An other example can be found in *'Boats on the Nile at Luxor'* (Ill. 112) from 1981, four felukkas with their characteristic sails furled up lie on the bank of the Nile. Four others are still sailing on the





113. Farghali Abdel Hafiz: *Girl with a Donkey cart*, 1991

114. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*Brown head with Cartouch*, 1992

115. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*Blue Hair*, 1991



river. In the background some low mountain ridges can be seen indicating that the scene is between Luxor and Aswan. The composition is traditional diagonal composition. The river enters at the middle of the right part of the picture and flows out in the lower left corner. It is a very calm and balanced composition. The motif is very decorative, but more sincere contents are barely interpretable in this picture.

In earlier mentions of Sabry's picture the critics have not been particularly concerned about the contents of his pictures, but they have been concerned about his technique. Sabry's ability to create and render the light in an eloquent manner, and his vivid strokes are emphasised by many critics as his main advantage<sup>(63)</sup>. It is obvious that most of Sabry's production is more or less kitsch, to use a modern term. In this orientalist aspect it is even so important to include him, because he represents a continuity and an important trend.

*Farghali Abdel Hafiz* (b. 1941) represents a more modern form of orientalist style. He is very concerned about the particular light of the desert and has been working with this subject for many years. His palette is dominated by pastel colours such as yellow, beige and pink, with smaller amounts of brown and blue for effects and contrasts. His design is easy and sketchy. He works mainly with acrylic, oil and sand, in some cases he also uses a relief as a background before starting painting. In later years he has concentrated his production around the use of sand and clay in combination with other materials. As Mohammed Hamza points out this is a way of accentuating the fact that he is a Third World artist, using a technique sharply in contrast with modern technology which many western artists use at present<sup>(64)</sup>. His works are dominated by more or less romantic motifs from the countryside and with a preference for young women as models.

'*Girl with a Donkey cart*' (Ill. 113) from 1991 shows a scene from a small village where a girl is driving a donkey cart through the village fields. The background and dominant colour is a warm pink nuance, whilst the details are painted in blue and white. The brush strokes are rapid and sketchy and the motif somewhat sweetish and romantic. '*Brown Head with Cartouch*' (Ill. 114) from 1992 shows an idealised woman's head in the shape of a herm. The portrait in profile shows a dark woman with an unruly hair style. She is looking out of the picture to the right, her facial appearance are clear and sharply drawn. In front of her face there is a trace of a cartouch with two or three random signs. The lower part of the herm is kept in grey-white, imitating marble. Behind the woman's

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63 Sedki El Gabajangui: *Mohamed Sabry*, p. 19.

64 Mohammed Hamza: *Egyptian Gazette* 28.05 1993.





116. Farghali Abdel Hafiz: *Girls in the desert*, 1992

117. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*The Desert road*, 1991



118. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*The Girl from the oasis*, 1993





head there is a vaguely sketched and very small man's head. This depicts perhaps the man dreaming about the woman. The background in this picture is kept in pale pink and light grey. Same theme and similar composition can be seen in *'Blue Hair'* (Ill. 115) from 1991. Again there is a dark woman portrayed in profile, her facial appearance and the dreaming eyes are rendered in detail. The rest of the body is only sketchily drawn. Her hair is pulled back, but flows freely down her neck and back. The hair and the dress have some blue spots for effect, the background is kept in different grey nuances. A thin, but hopeful palm stands in front of her. In *'Girls in the Desert'* (Ill. 116) from 1992 there are also some idealised women's figures. The composition is dominated by a sketchily executed big head on a long neck, to the right there are two smaller girls drawn with full bodies. The girls are looking towards the spectator with a flirtatious and dreaming glance. The background is sandy, but with traces of buildings. The colours are dominated by beige and light blue with pink effects. *'The Desert road'* (Ill. 117) from 1991 has somewhat the same theme, in the foreground there are three jolly girl's faces, behind them there is a donkey cart and in the background there is a palm grove. The colours here are also soft nuances in grey with few contrasts. In *'The Girl from the oasis'* (Ill. 118) from 1993 the colours have become more vivid. The motif is a young woman with long flowing hair standing out in the green fields, behind her, almost as a mirage, there are two lovers locked in an embrace. In the greens can be further seen, grazing goats and in the background the village's houses can barely be seen. In the following pictures he applies a completely different colour scale, it is strong brownish black that is predominant. In *'Wall with a face'* (Ill. 120) from 1993, Farghali has first modelled a mud-brick relief as a background for his painting. Against this dark brown background he has painted a pink girl's face, she is not facing the spectator, but looks slantingly out of the picture and away from the spectator. In the background there is a water canal bordered with palms. In *'The Wall'* (Ill. 119) from 1993 he has used the same technique and the motif is related. In the background to the right there is a palm grove. This time there is no girl standing against the wall, just the remains of some coloured spots on the wall. It is like all hopes and dreams are broken and there is left only a broken memory from a love. In *'The Dreamer'* (Ill. 121) from 1992 there is a squarely built face with sharp, but melancholic features, which is empty and introspective. The outline of the body is only vaguely drawn and there are no other particular details to focus on. At his right side there is a small and thin palm resembling the one in *'Blue Hair'*. Both persons also have the same melancholic glance. The picture is kept in brown with only a few blue and green contrasts.



119. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*The Wall*, 1993



120. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*Wall with face*, 1993

121. Farghali Abdel Hafiz:  
*The Dreamer*, 1992



122. Taha Hussein: *Leaf*, 1991





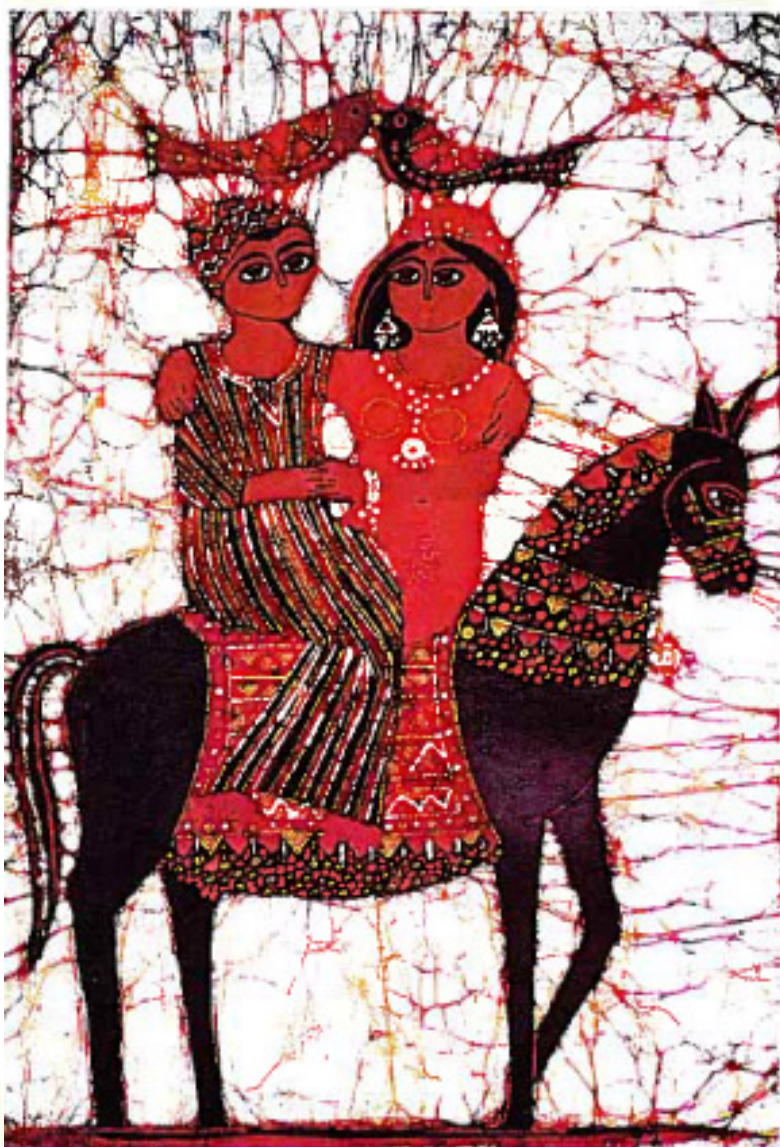


123. Ali Dessouki: *Boats on the Nile*, 1987

124. Ali Dessouki: *Baking bread*, 1982







125. Ali Dessouki:  
*Horseman and Bride*,  
1986

126. Ali Dessouki:  
*Palm trees at Sunset*,  
1989



## 5.6. Folkloristic aspects

In this chapter I will discuss some pictures that, in a more or less realistic or naivistic manner, depict everyday life in the cities or in the countryside, or have some connection to popular applied art. The motifs are usually easily recognisable events that all Egyptians can relate to. Some works deal with archetypal symbols of the Egyptian reality, deeply rooted in religion and cultural background. Others are apparently descriptive, some on the edge of being only decoration. It is however important to try to establish a division towards the orientalist aspect that treats the motifs from a more European angle about what and how one would wish to see Egypt from Europe.

In the links towards applied art it can be seen that *Taha Hussein* has also made designs for tapestries after the *Wissa Wassef* tradition. This can be seen in his *'Leaf'* (Ill. 122) from 1991. The motif is a single leaf covering the entire tapestry. The leaf has a rich variety of different green and grey nuances that renders a very vivid character. He has used the values of dark earthy colours in the background. His choice of a simplified naturalistic style for this picture is necessary to render the contents of the motif.

### 5.6.1. The countryside

The batik represents a link between popular art and traditional pictorial art. One of the pioneers of this genre is *Ali Dessouki* (b. 1937). He uses mainly motifs taken from the Egyptian crowd. In his first paintings from the sixties he worked in a loose impressionistic manner and made also some experiments with abstractions. He continued with abstractions in the seventies, when he started with batik. Batik has since then been his most important technique. He has since the early seventies mainly worked with folkloristic and naivistic decorative motifs. In the naivistic tradition he omits to use perspectives, but places the picture elements behind each other almost like on stage. The illusions of distance are realised through the mutual proportions between the figures. The motifs can be regarded as a combination of reality description and idealisation. His design is related to present tendencies in popular art as represented amongst others by the *Wissa Wassef* school. His technique is wax batik on thin cotton with a great richness of details, he dyes several times before the work is finished. He is in a way painting with the batik. He has the same expressions and richness of details in his batiks as in his few paintings. His motifs are mainly taken from the streets of Cairo's old neighbourhoods, some scenes from the countryside do also appear.





127. Ali Dessouki:  
*Ramadan Lantern*,  
1986

128. TAD: *Wedding*, 1992





*'Boats on the Nile'* (Ill. 123) from 1987 show two felukkas sailing through a small village upstream on the Nile. The felukkas are heavy loaded and float quietly onwards, the tilted sails cross each other and create thereby some dynamic in an otherwise very quiet composition. In the background there is a row of houses with doors facing the river. At the river bank women are washing cloths rinsing fish and doing other domestic duties. Behind the houses there is another typical element of the Egyptian countryside, the dovecotes. There is a long row of them, covering the upper part of the picture. The dovecotes are conical buildings of clay, they are 2-3 meters in diameter and 3-5 metres high, with numerous small holes for the pigeons. *'Baking bread'* (Ill. 124) from 1982 shows an other important element from the countryside, baking of the daily bread, *aish baladi*. This is a pita-type bread made of wholemeal flour and baked in the village's wooden fired oven. In the bigger cities the bread is baked in large subsidised bakeries.. The picture shows a small courtyard with the oven to the right, parts of the house can be seen, a child, some hens, a goat with a kid and other domestic elements are also present. In the middle of the picture a woman with her two children sits, in front of her stands a pastry board with bread ready for the oven. This is in many ways a picture of a vanishing Egypt, as a result rapidly increasing urbanisation. Another example of this nostalgic theme can be seen in *'Horseman and Bride'* (Ill. 125) from 1986. There is a richly adorned horse with a newly wed couple sitting on its back. Round the horse's neck there are coloured ribbons and amulets with Allah's name. Both bride and groom are dressed in their finest clothing after the local fashion. The groom has a long striped gallabeia and turban in same fabric on his head, the bride has a long red dress and similar veil, that for the moment is drawn away from her face. Around her neck and wrists, and in her ears she is wearing all her gold jewellery. On the head of the couple two birds are sitting as symbols of happiness.

Travelling around in the countryside brings one to places where time apparently has not moved, for at least several centuries. There are many poor villages nearly without electricity or gas. Water, fuel and everything else being used in the household has to be carried by donkeys or the women. This hard life is depicted in *'Palm trees at Sunset'* (Ill. 126) from 1989. In the foreground there is a woman with her two children and two donkeys. First comes the little daughter with a jar on her head, followed by a donkey with a boy on its back, he is holding a jar between his legs. After them follows another donkey, loaded with four jars, at the end comes the mother also carrying a jar on her head. This picture show that the divisions of labour are firmly established already for small children, girls and



129. Salah Enani:  
*Selfportrait*, 1992-93



130. Salah Enani:  
*The Barbers' shop*, 1992

131. Salah Enani: *The Cinema*, 1992



boys have different tasks and duties through their entire life. In the background of this picture there is a row of big date palms with new small ones in-between. The date palm is extraordinarily important in the countryside. The dates themselves are important, they are used specially during the Ramadan to break the fast by *Iftar*, the first meal after sunset, and at *Eid el-Fitr*, the end of the Ramadan. The domestic use is even so the most important. The palms grow rapidly and become very high, consequently there is a lot of wood in them. The bark has strong fibres, and provides material for ropes. From the veins of the leaves, that are as thick as fingers, boxes, chicken cages and even furniture is made. Lastly the roots are important to keep the soil firmly on the ground and consequently prevent desert erosion.

### 5.6.2. City-life

People have carried with them elements from their former village life to the cities. Goats and hens are going around in the streets of the old neighbourhoods, and people also have hens and pigeons on their balconies. This gives a very particular character to great cities like Cairo and Alexandria. The main streets seem to be like the ones in every other great cities, whilst the back streets seem to be taken directly from the countryside. *'Ramadan Lantern'* (Ill. 127) from 1986 shows another popular custom, widespread also in the great cities, namely the Ramadan lanterns. In all houses and streets during the Ramadan there are big lanterns with coloured glass are lit throughout the night, and all children have their own small lanterns. In villages without electricity this has another function of necessity than in a modern society, nowadays it is a pleasant old tradition. In the foreground of this picture there is a boy and a girl each with a lantern in their hands, behind them a man is sitting selling lanterns. In the background there is a house-façade with lights in the windows and some lanterns hanging down.

In a distinct figurative design, with elements of expressionism and naivism we find the works of *TAD* (b. 1946), which is a pseudonym for the illustrator in Egypt's single English daily newspaper *'The Egyptian Gazette'*. His drawings depict scenes from daily life in Cairo in a slightly romantic and carefree way, there is no political satire nor political caricatures amongst his works. His paintings deal with the same themes as his drawings, they are decorative with use of strong colours, without particular use of nuances or shades. His use of colour is dominated by a determinant use of contrast colours, without





132. Salah Enani:  
*Stroll*, 1993



133. Salah Enani:  
*Depressed*, 1992

134. Salah Enani: *At School*, 1992



unpredictable effects. His style of painting resembles in several ways advertisement design. The composition is usual rather simple, like a snapshot of a particular situation. Working as a newspaper artist entails that he daily sketches the life in the streets of Cairo. In some cases these sketches are used as design for paintings.

In his *'Wedding'* (Ill. 128) from 1992 we can see how the cars are usually adorned to carry the couple to the wedding party. The cars are adorned lavishly with ribbons, rosettes and flowers, making the most terrible wrecks look attractive. In this picture we can see an adorned, old, black car with flowers on the roof, the doors and the hood. The car is driving in a procession with the other wedding guests and other celebrants. Beside the car there are two men on a motor bike, the hindmost is singing and playing the tambourine, the two other cars are blowing their horns, waving and greeting. In the background there are three men standing on a platform whilst waving to the passing couple. TAD is using a very rich variety of colours and a dramatic background of yellow and black, emphasising this happy event.

*Salah Enani* has immortalised himself in *'Self-portrait'* (Ill. 129) from 1992-93. This is a high and narrow picture where there is no space left for anything else but himself, the picture is even so loaded with self-irony. The picture shows a rather slovenly, but formal dressed young man. Both the suit and the coat hang loosely and untitely around his slender body. This is a rather amusing contrast to his usual appearance, which is a young man dressed in immaculately pressed suit and dazzling white shirt.

Enani is mostly working with depictions of the daily, private, and intimate situations between people. He works with his typical, slightly satirical and caricaturing style. In many of his works the use of colours and brush strokes indicate some inspiration from Van Gogh. He depicts intimate scenes also taking place in public, an example of this can be seen in *'The Cinema'* (Ill. 131) from 1992. We can see into a big crowded cinema. The film on the screen is obviously a rather common love story. But the film inspires the spectators passions to more or less direct advances. The motif is a vigorous description of Egyptian popular life. The dim semi-obscure and the theme of the film provides an opportunity for the audience to show their emotions more freely than is possible on the streets or in the parks of this rather puritan society where it is nearly impossible to be alone. The public room is also the scene for *'The Barber's shop'* (Ill. 130) from 1992. This picture shows one of the many small barber's shops in Cairo, with a couple of chairs, the barber and his small apprentice. The customer





135. Salah Enani:  
*The Shayk*, 1992

136. Salah Enani:  
*Earthquake*, 1992

137. Mohammed Abla:  
*A couple*, 1983





is sitting in the chair reading whilst his hair is being cut. The apprentice is standing ready behind the chair, prepared to sweep the floor or doing other duties. Enani creates an effect of crowd by having two mirrors on the walls in this narrow rectangular room. Every important item intrinsic to a barber's shop are present in this picture. In the middle of the room there is sink on the wall and a fan is hanging down from the ceiling, in the background the street can be seen through the arched glass door. The brush strokes are, as in most of his pictures, coarse and expressive, the people are humorous and caricatured rendered, but visible resignation are evident in their faces. Emotions are further more the subject in *'Stroll'* (Ill. 132) from 1993, the motif is here a young couple in love. The man holds his arm around the young lady's shoulder while he is eating from a small pouch with nuts which she is holding in her hand. They saunter happily around totally engulfed by their love, obviously without any particular destination for their stroll. Enani depicts them so loosely sauntering that one gets the impression of their skeletons being pliable and extendible, this emphasises the softness and timidity of the motif. In *'Depressed'* (Ill. 133) from 1992 there is a couple where the happiness is not flowing freely anymore. The scene is an empty café where the only remaining guests are a man holding a crying woman on his lap. He tries to comfort her, but in vain. In the background to the left there is a window from where the light is flowing, a strong contrast to the dark and sinister interior.

Enani's *'At school'* (Ill. 134) from 1992 gives a glimpse of a crowded classroom where the teacher sits above his pupils and admonishes them. To the right in the picture there is a boy in the corner, standing with his hands above the head. In the background the headmaster is looking through the window observing the teaching. The picture gives a good impression of the strong and authoritarian school system based on swotting, revision, discipline and obedience. Obedience towards authorities either secular or clerical can also be seen in *'The Shayk'* (Ill. 135) from 1992. The motif is a shayk in the middle of a sermon or another religious lecture. He has a small group of five men sitting attentive around him listening to his message. The shayk is working himself up to ecstatic height and stands almost shouting with wide open mouth and with an admonishing index finger. The audience have obviously got what they wanted, they are sitting listening with peaceful, but content and receptive faces. The three nearest ones are looking admiringly at the shayk, whilst the two ones in the background are a bit more absent minded enjoying the atmosphere.



138. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Jugglers*, 1985

139. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Belly dancer*, 1986



Catastrophes are also part of everyday life in Egypt, the earthquake in October 1992 did hit particularly hard, it killed hundreds and destroyed the homes of ten-thousands. Cairo and the surrounding areas were shaking and trembling for minutes, houses fell apart or were so severely damaged as to make them uninhabitable. These minutes of terror Enani has depicted in *'Earthquake'* (Ill. 136) from 1992. We see a staircase with people on it in complete panic, they are running down trampling and falling over each other. At the bottom of the stairs a man lies crying in horror, further up the stairs a woman is running down in panic, carrying her daughter under one arm whilst she apparently is kicking a boy in front of her down the stairs. The staircase looks quite surrealistic, as if it was made of rubber. This was also the impact of the earthquake, the houses rocked as if they were ships on troubled waters. The stairs were death traps for many people, they were in fact trampled to death in the panic. In addition to all the material damages, the earthquake led to anxiety amongst many people which took months to recover from, there were also smaller after-quakes for months.

*Mohammed Abba* (b. 1953) works with many different expressions and techniques. He amongst others uses surrealistic and naivistic elements. He emphasises the importance of working with different expressions at the same time, to prevent being captured in one single expression or style<sup>(65)</sup>. Even so there is a distinct guiding principle in his productions, independent from the different expressions of the pictures. There are two running themes in his productions, always with new means to treat the same subject. The first subject is the colossal population density in the habitable areas of Egypt, and the crowds this leads to in the central areas of Cairo. The second subject is the immortal object for artists, different expressions for passion and love. In many of his pictures there is a man and a woman, surrounded by different kinds of fable animals, other unidentified creatures and figures of a distinct mythological origin. In some of the works love is explicitly winning, in other works the result is not so evident. He has also painted some pictures distinctively protesting against US' warfare against Iraq and Egypt's participation in the Gulf war. He is also concerned with environmental problems and pollution, and has painted pictures about how the Nile, the present life source for Egypt, is at the present being destroyed.

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65 Yasser Amr: *The Man has No Style*, CairoToday April 1993.





140. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Mouled*, 1989

141. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Man with blue Coat*, 1989







142. Ali Dessouki: *Foul cart*, 1989

143. TAD: *The Foul-vendor*, 1992

144. TAD: *Awning*, 1992



In his earlier works there is an evident inspiration from popular realism, represented amongst others by al-Gazzar. *'A couple'* (Ill. 137) from 1981 is an example of this. There is a middle-aged couple in a room, the man is sitting on a bench looking at the woman standing in front of him, she is also looking towards him. They are united through the eye contact. The woman is dressed in a half-long dress and her hair is put up. The composition is calm, traditionally balanced, a triangular composition emphasised by the flowing light spreading out in the room from the door in the background. The colours are subdued earthen colours, the motif is dark because of the strong contrary light.

In later years *Reda Abdel Salaam* (b. 1947) has worked mainly in a rather impetuous figurative expressionistic manner. Many of his pictures are distinguished by a unique Egyptian character, there are explicit references to Egyptian everyday life in his pictures. In *'Jugglers'* (Ill. 138) from 1985 there is a rather naivistic and fragmentary depiction of a circus. In the middle, against a shaded brown background, there is a platform with a yellow circle as a backdrop, from this circle there radiate many strong rays. On the platform there is a white dressed man playing flute, below him on the ground two men are dancing, the one to right is dressed in yellow and the one to the left is dressed in red. Parts of the audience, with grey faces, can be seen in the foreground to the left and at the top. There are also several multicoloured star-like objects in the picture. *'Belly dancer'* (Ill. 139) from 1986 shows a pink woman playing a drum, whilst a blue one with naked breasts is dancing sensual dances to the music. The use of colours is simple but striking, blue is used as a contrast to the pink body and vice versa, both women have glaring yellow hair. The background is kept in brown nuances. *'Mouled'* (Ill. 140) from 1989 also deals with folkloristic subjects. In the foreground there is a group of singing men sitting around a lute player. In the background there is an abundance of small figures, both humans and animals. They all seem to be in activity and enjoying the celebration. To the left there is a strange building, at the top a woman is looking sorrowfully out of a window, below sits a young man, perhaps the suitor. To his left there is an unidentified figure, beneath them there is a mythological creature, a cross between a griffin and a sphinx with a naked woman. *'Man with blue Coat'* (Ill. 141) from 1989 shows a work in a more freely and sketchily executed style than the preceding ones. The motif is a portrait of a man against an abstract background. The contours of the figure are drawn with a broad red stroke, the figure is then painted or nearly hatched in two blue nuances. Parts of the background has this same hatched surface as well, while the rest is divided into big monochrome areas in blue, rust, black and yellow.





145. TAD: *Red cock*, 1993



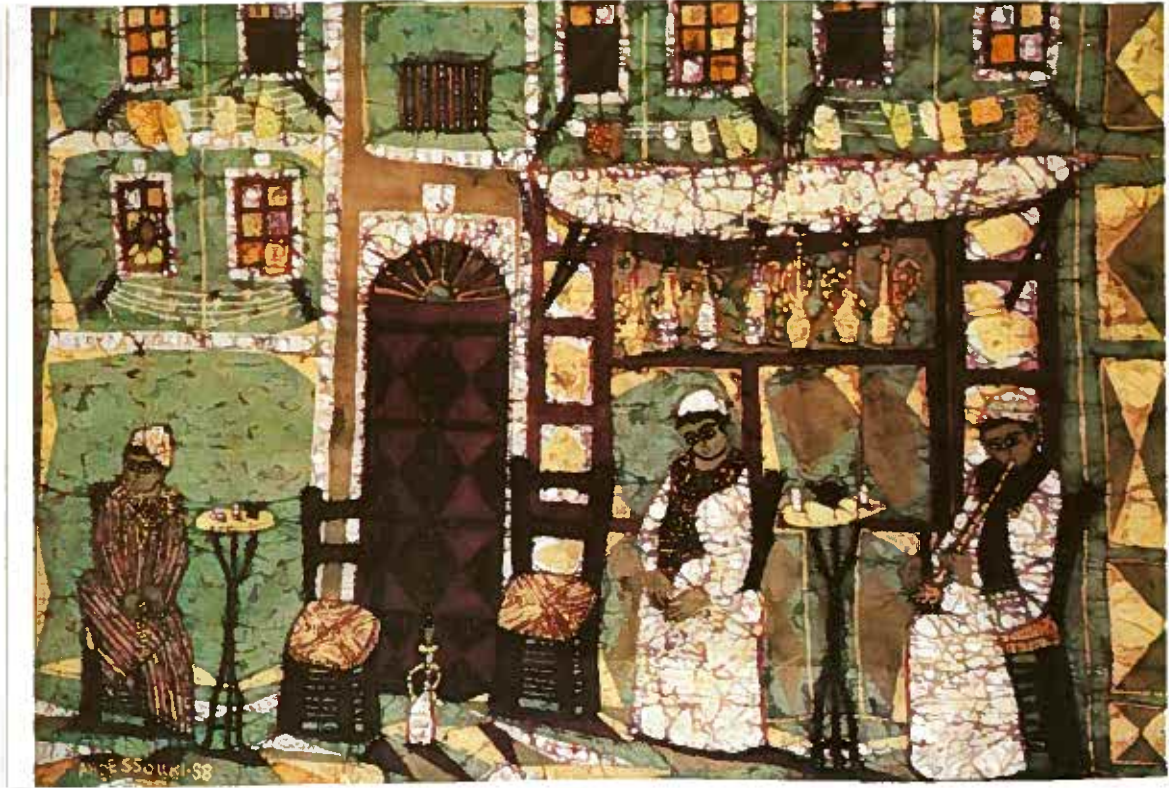
146. TAD: *The Fruit-vendor*, 1993

147. TAD: *The Vegetable, Market*, 1992

148. TAD: *The Maize-vendors*, 1993







149. Ali Dessouki: *In the Coffeeshop*, 1988

150. Ali Dessouki: *Hookah-Shishah*, 1981



### 5.6.3. Daily bread

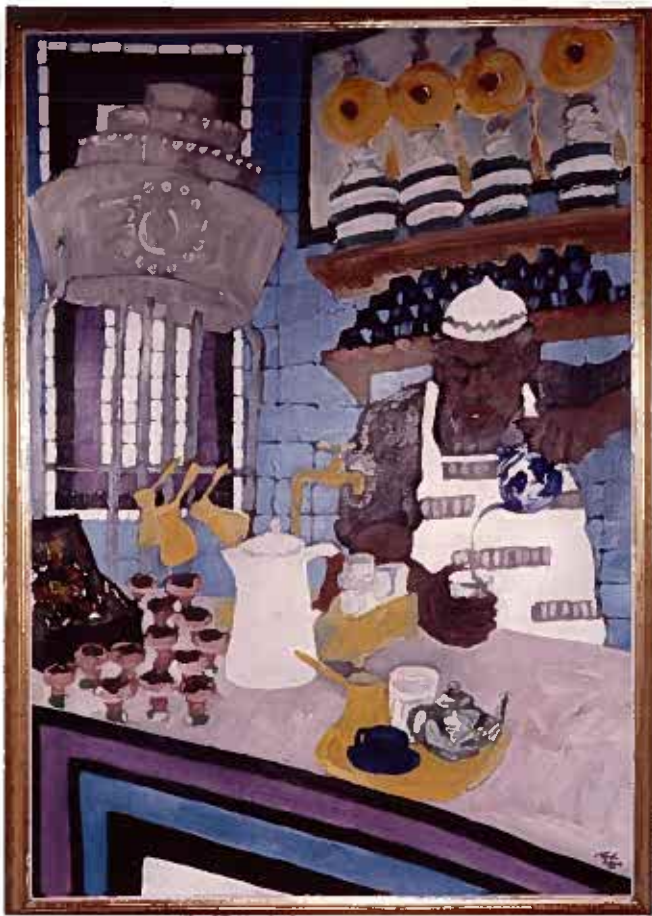
In *Ali Dessouki's 'Foul cart'* (Ill. 142) from 1989 there is another example of a popular element in the large cities, the bean-stew vendor. This is simple, cheap and nourishing food. Both for breakfast and lunch, *aish* with *foul* - bean-stew and pickles are often eaten. On every second corner in Cairo there is a man standing all morning with his bread and bean-stew cart. The carts are generally home-made and painted in sharp colours. In this picture we can see in the foreground, an old woman sitting by the wall and three children playing around. In the middle of the picture is a foul cart, with the foul vendor and his apprentice standing behind. The cart is decorated with zigzag borders and religious inscriptions, 'Allah akbar - الله اكبر - God is great' is written several places on the cart. To the left a woman is waiting to be served. Behind the woman sits another woman and a child. The background consists of a row of houses and a mosque-façade.

In *TAD's 'The Foul-vendor'* (Ill. 143) from 1992 he is also treating this common element of the streets of Cairo, the man selling bread and bean-stew. We can see a man and his cart against a neutral sand coloured background. The man stands stirring the pot of bean-stew, on his cart he has vegetables and pickles ready, and in the foreground there is a tray of bread to fill with the bean-stew. It is interesting to observe that TAD makes no treatment of the surroundings, the focus is entirely on the man. In *'Awning'* (Ill. 144) from 1992 we are looking down onto a narrow street, where all the shops have their awnings over the pavement in front of their shops. The street is so narrow that the awnings nearly meet in the middle of the street. There are both plain and striped awnings, below them one can catch a glimpse of the shops and their products on the pavement. The usual traffic-jam is also present. A big car which is unable to move in this narrow street tries to pass a man with a big cart loaded with vegetables, but the man has no place to move either for himself or the cart.

*'Red Cock'* (Ill. 145) from 1993 shows another common feature of Cairo. A man on his bicycle is driving around in the neighbourhood to sell chickens, or the cock from the cage mounted on the back of his bicycle. A proud red and brown cock towers on the top of the cage. The bicycle has seen its best days long ago. The man is dressed in a blue striped gallabeia and has a dazzling white scarf around his head. He cups his hand to his mouth whilst yelling out between houses what he has to offer.

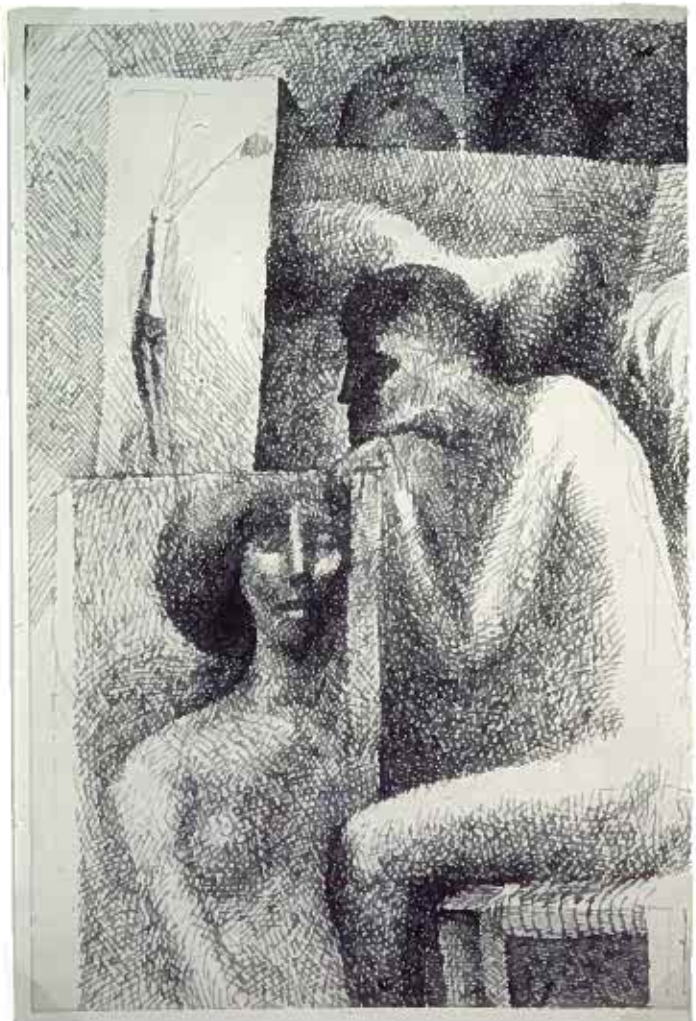
*'The Vegetable Market'* (Ill. 147) from 1992 is a motif that can be seen in every quarter of Cairo. The vegetable vendors have placed their cases and baskets under the shadow of awnings and parasols. In the middle of the picture a





151. TAD: *Café-interior*, 1993

152. Gamil Shafiq:  
*The Arist and the Model*, 1993

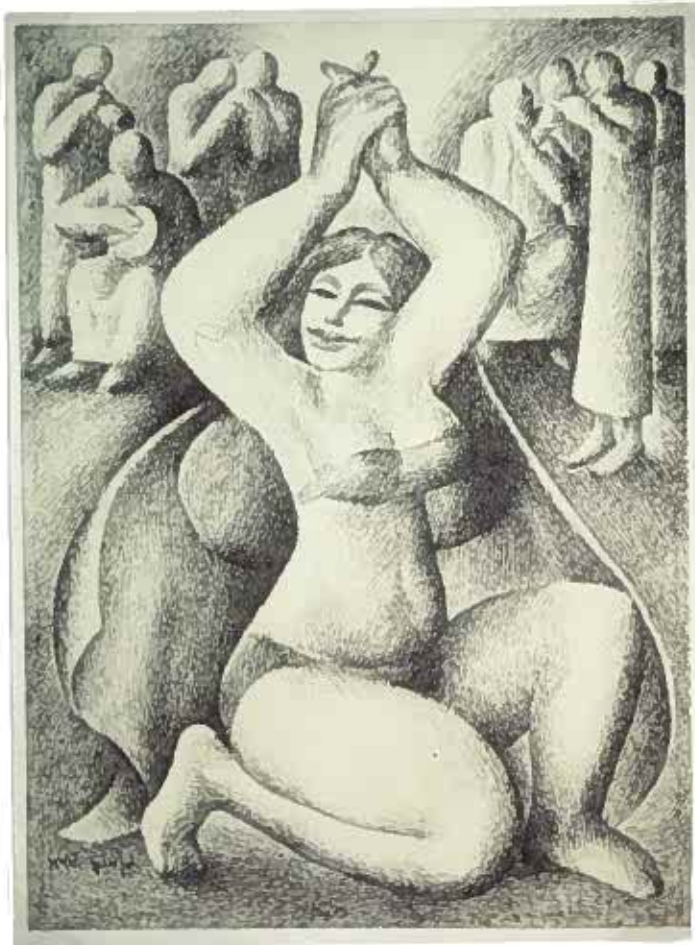


donkey-cart is approaching, loaded with colourful vegetables and a sleepy young boy. In the foreground there is a young woman with a small child on her shoulder and a vegetable basket on her arm. She is decent, but after Egyptian custom relatively challengingly dressed, with slightly low-necked dress. *'The Fruit-vendor'* (Ill. 146) from 1993 gives a glimpse into a greater market, in the background there is a plenitude of parasols. In the foreground the vendor is standing in his nearly worn out blue gallabeia sorting the fruit. In the cases behind him, there is an abundance of fruits of all colours. *'The Maize-vendors'* (Ill. 148) from 1993 shows an example of typical Egyptian snacks. Corncobs are grilled on small charcoal fires by street vendors on nearly every corner. There are two men, one in blue and the other in striped gallabeia, each one watching their fire. They have to fan all the time to keep the fire burning. Behind them grey blue sweet smoke comes up from the fires.

#### 5.6.4. Café-life

The specific man's-world is an often reappearing subject in the folkloristic depictions. The men's world is taking place in small cafés after the daily workday. They are drinking coffee or tea, smoking water-pipe, playing backgammon - *tawla*, discussing and watching TV. On such traditional cafés there are very seldom to see a woman, women just don't go to such places.

*Dessouki's 'In the Coffee-Shop'* (Ill. 149) from 1988 shows just such a café. There are three men sitting on chairs beside one of the typical Egyptian café tables, which are high and narrow with a small brass table top. The men drink tea and coffee from small glasses or cups, the man to the far right is smoking hookah, a special pipe with a long mouth piece. On the ground between the two other men there are some chairs and a table, on a shelf there are several water pipes - shishas. This is the traditional and most common way to smoke, while sitting at such a café. The background is a façade with the common drying stands hanging out from the wall below the windows. A noticeable element are the two chairs not in use, he has used different perspectives whilst drawing them. The chairs are seen from the front while the seats are seen from the top, again a typical naivistic element. He studies the act of smoking more closely in *'Hookah - Shishah'* (Ill. 150) from 1981, here there are two men sitting on a bench in a café. The first one is sitting with his legs folded while smoking his hookah, the other one is sitting by a brass table with his shishah standing on the ground. They seem to be totally absorbed by the smoking, and their gaze is absent. The tobacco is probably in this case mixed with hashish, which is not really unusually in Egypt.



153. Gamil Shafiq: *Bellydancer*, 1992

154. Gamil Shafiq: *Woman with two horses*, 1993





*TAD's 'Café-interior'* (Ill. 151) from 1993 is also showing this typical environment. We can see the marble counter and the tiled blue walls behind, the scene could be any café in Cairo. On top shelf there are four water pipes whilst, on the shelf below there is a mountain of small coffee cups. The café owner stands pouring tea from a small pot into a glass. In front of him, at the counter, there is a small brass tray with a tea pot and a Turkish coffee pot. Further there is a big water jar and several small coffee pots. In the background there is a charcoal pan with glowing charcoals and a number of small pipe heads in ceramics for the water pipes. Tobacco and charcoal are blended on the top of the pipe head before it is put on the water pipe.

### 5.7. Erotic aspects

Erotic poetry has its roots back in pre-Islamic times, and many erotic poems were written down in early Islamic times. The Qur'an do also contain texts which more or less resembles erotic poetry. Poetry is a living tradition. The expressions are renewed, at the same time as the classical tradition is kept alive. Paintings with erotic motifs therefore fit perfectly into a long artistic tradition, where passion, love and sexuality are esteemed and praised. The pictures differ in the same manner as the poetry, from the slightly suggestive to the rather unambiguous.

The art of *Gameel Shafik* is characterised by a very distinct and interesting drawing between impressionism and naivism. He has a sketchy freshness over his works, at the same time as there is an obvious strong composition in them. In Shafik's pen-and-ink drawing *'The Artist and the Model'* (Ill. 152) from 1993 the same melancholy as in *'Adam and Eve with cat'* is apparent. We can see the artist's studio with the artist sitting hunched up in a chair. He is leaning onto a picture, a portrait of a woman. The drawing lacks precise definitions of the areas, something which contributes to the condensed, nearly sculptural impression of the picture. The man more or less melts away into the background, being almost engulfed by it. His face is rather dark, which makes it difficult to trace any contours, this is also contributing to the sinister and melancholic atmosphere. In his pen-and-ink drawing *'Dancer with candelabrum'* from 1991 he depicts elements of a living popular tradition. At all Egyptian weddings, irrespective of whether they are Muslim or Coptic there is, if one can afford it, a belly-dancer. Her most important function is to stimulate the couple before their wedding night. She dances many different dances during the night, but the first one is



155. Ezz el-Din Naguib: *The Sea*, 1990

156. Mohammed Abla: *Lovers*, 1989

157. Mohammed Abla: *Woman with figures*, 1989



performed with a big candelabrum on her head to drive away evil forces, later on follow more sensual and challenging dances. In this picture the dancer can be seen in the centre, with the orchestra in the background and the couple to the side. She is depicted in one of the most hectic parts of the dance. The erotic aspect of belly dancers is very strong in Egypt, where the standards of women's dress are rather conservative. It is completely inconceivable for a stranger to look at the body of a half-naked woman. Standards are being defied on two fronts, on the one hand by the conservative or orthodox that demands that women must be veiled, on the other hand by the western style of advertisement that depicts women from European standards. In his picture *'Belly-dancer'* (Ill. 153) from 1992 the party has gone on for a while and she has come to one of the later dances. The belly-dancer fills the entire foreground and the orchestra in the background is only sketchily drawn. She has just finished one of the great dances and curtseys to receive the audience's applaud. Shafik's water colour *'Woman and two horses'* (Ill. 154) from 1992 also implicate eroticism and interpersonal relations. In the foreground a naked woman is lying at the ground, behind her two big horses are standing. The first one is bending its head down towards her and the other one is looking back and out of the picture. The horses here, represent two different aspects of the man's part in a relationship. The first one involves intimacy and sexuality, the other one involves protection.

In *'The Sea'* (Ill. 155) from 1990 *Ezz El-Din Naguib* (b. 1940) moves away from the surrealistic elements that characterise most of his productions and moves into rather banal expressions. To the left in the picture there are some coarse rugged rocks, and in the background there is a dark and stormy sky. The sea hits the shore with big choppy waves. In the middle of the breakers stands a young woman with flowing hair. She is dressed in a thin white dress that flaps out behind her like a sail. She is struggling to get ashore, she is a destitute woman that has to be rescued. The brush strokes are rough and inaccurate, Naguib does not manage to describe the situation in a convincing manner. The rocks seem to be made of brown polystyrene and the sea looks like dry blue cardboard. It is obvious that he feels it to be so daring or reckless to depict a half naked woman in a wet dress, that all principles of composition and craftsmanship can be avoided.

*Mohammed Abla's* use of colours became clearer and more vivid towards the end of the eighties, some inspiration from Hameed Nada can be traced in *'Lovers'* (Ill. 156) from 1988. The motif is a naked couple, but there are very few obvious signs of burning desire or passion in this picture, they seem to be rather reserved





158. Adly Rizkallah:  
*Les Fleurs Vivifiantes 1*, 1990



159. Adly Rizkallah:  
*Les Fleurs Vivifiantes 2*, 1990



160. Adly Rizkallah:  
*Les Fleurs Vivifiantes 4*, 1990

and anxious. The woman is probably in an early stage of her pregnancy, she is sitting to the right with her eyes cast down. The man, here also as the master of creation, doesn't seem to be quite content with the situation either. He bears a crown, but his head hangs as if he is waiting to die. Behind him there is a big strong blue shadow, it is partly faded and lacks the crown. In the background between the couple, there are several circles like a big spiral. In the middle there are traces of life, a small twig with leaves. *'Woman with figures'* (Ill. 157) from 1989 has the same theme, but in a more abstract surrealist manner. There is a naked woman sitting to the left in the picture. She looks rather contented and is looking towards a torso topped with a red spiral in place of the head. This torso must be interpreted as a symbol of man. The spiral is mirrored or casting shadows on the ground where there is a fragmented blue spiral, the same colour as the shadow of the man in *'Lovers'*. To the right there is an abstract construction of spheres and triangles bound together by thin straight lines.

*Adly Rizkallah* (b. 1939) is only working with water-colours, because he feels that this material and technique, facilitates the expression of his emotions. He is also writes poetry that he assigns to his productions, but not to single pictures. Some of his paintings can at first glance seem to be rather innocent and sweet, flower-pictures in well tuned nuances. The reality is different, throughout all of his pictures, passion and desire are running themes. When looking at pictures from several stages, it is apparent that the pictures of flowers depict sexual organs in disguise, or other symbols of physical desire. Numerous artists have depicted and described the sexual and sensual aspects of nature, but Rizkallah is the Egyptian painter that has been most consequently in researching the borders between *'innocent'* flower-pictures and erotic art. He also emphasises in the presentation of his pictures that the woman, young and innocent, or mature and experienced, is the ultimate goal for his nearly ecstatic love<sup>(66)</sup>. In this aspect he can be seen as belonging to a long Sufi poetic tradition. Some of his most recent works are almost pornographic. He takes the consequences of the fact that there is a difference between the ones that can be exhibited in Cairo or Kuwait or in Paris. Other Egyptian painters depict the whole woman as an object for their passion and lust, they don't only focus only on her organs. His design is understandable very expressive, sometimes almost abstract. His pictures are not banal in the way that they depict the erotic motifs with realistic figurative expressions. He leaves room for the spectators' own interpretations and imagination.



161. Adly Rizkallah:  
*Les Fleurs Vivifiantes 3*, 1990

162. Adly Rizkallah:  
*La Heuresse*, 1991



163. Adly Rizkallah:  
*Les Heureuses 2*, 1991



164. Adly Rizkallah:  
*Les Heureuses 3*, 1991



In 1990 he made a great series where all the works were named *'Les Fleurs vivifiantes'*. He concentrates mainly on singular plants, without any evident relation to humans. The title 'vivifiantes - life-giving' says nevertheless a lot about the relations between humans and plants, both in a symbolic and material aspect. One of the most neutral ones is *'Les Fleurs vivifiantes 1'* (Ill. 158) where we can see eight plants standing beside each other in a bed. It is impossible to identify the different plants, but they have a narrow, closed lance-like form on a rather thin stem. The bed is drawn as a rectangular area in the foreground, this is kept in different blue-violet nuances, whilst the flowers are in different nuances between red and violet, the background is in dim, pale nuances. There is more movement in *'Les Fleurs vivifiantes 2'* (Ill. 159) the plants are gathered in four groups, without being bunches. They are almost hovering objects, with thin branches in an empty spherical space. The spherical space covers almost the entire picture, but it is bordered with a broad brown outline. The two biggest plant-objects placed in the margins are the darkest ones. The spherical space becomes gradually lighter towards the middle. In the dazzling white light in the middle, there are two pure and innocent looking plants. Seen in connection to the rest of his production, this might symbolise the ecstasy. The mature woman can be seen depicted as a beautiful flower in *'Les Fleurs vivifiantes 3'* (Ill. 161). The motif is a tulip-like flower on a thin stem, the flower is passionate red in the middle and goes via violet to white on the borders. The stem goes down in a nearly cubic split form, in the middle of the split a small black circle is connected to a red dot. The background is kept in soft, pale violet nuances. The young woman is depicted as a thin and fragile plant in *'Les Fleurs vivifiantes 4'* (Ill. 160). This is also the only example depicting a human form in this series. The left part is dominated by an almost square mask depicting a man in profile, the traits are vague, but the eyes, mouth and nose are distinct. The colours are in nuances of grey and violet, whilst the mouth is painted clear red. The mask - man is looking to the right, where the plant - woman is standing, he is obvious pleased with the sight. The background of the mask is a kind of transparent shadow-picture in vertical fields, with the same colours as in the mask, but in lighter nuances, also here there are contours of the mouth and eyes. To the right, against a immaculate white background there is a fragile, thin plant, this time with two stems, thin as straws. The flower is like a wide slanted bell. Some of the petals have loosened, this together with the slanted form resemble hair and a scarf fluttering in the wind.

In another series *'Les Heureuses'* from 1991 he is more figurative. The woman is here a happy, nearly unattainable divine creature, the theme is however the woman as an object of longings and passion. The subject is treated in an almost



165. Adly Rizkallah:  
*La Fleure*, 1987



166. Adly Rizkallah:  
*La Femme 1*, 1993

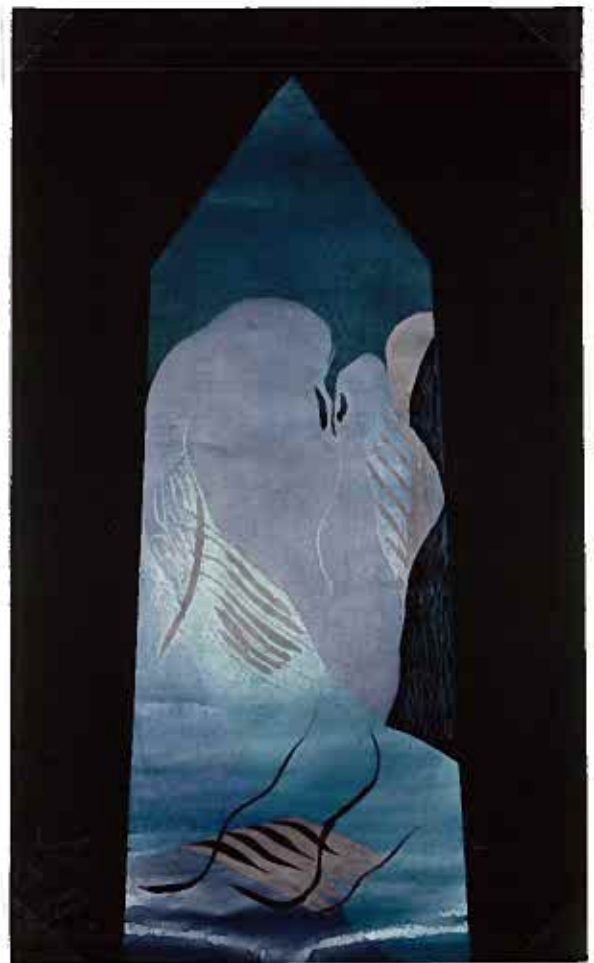


167. Adly Rizkallah:  
*La Femme 2*, 1993

naivistic and awkward manner, the intention becomes too evident, and thereby without opportunities for reflection. Even so it is interesting to see, because this series is more in concurrence with the way other Egyptian artists treat the dream of woman as a subject in their paintings. In *'La Heureuse'* (Ill. 162) there is a lonely woman surrounded by a spherical form. The woman is dressed in a long dress and has a widely open cloak around her shoulders. She is looking straight ahead of the picture with an open, but relatively empty gaze, her long hair is flowing freely down her back. In the background sways a date palm. In *'Les Heureuses 2'* (Ill. 163) there are four groups of women in a palm grove. In the foreground there is a group of four women, where two are facing the spectator whilst two are turned around. They are dressed in colourful dresses in red, green and blue, the two with their backs turned have covered their hair, whilst the two other have their hair flowing freely. The three other groups are placed gradually further into the picture. They are all dressed in black, but with uncovered hair, their hair style is firm and 'spinsterish', not soft and freely flowing. One gets the impression that it can be to much of a good thing, as in the equivocal *'Les Heureuses 3'* (Ill. 164). A solitary man is standing in front of a group of eight women. They are standing in three rows behind each other, thereby creating a pyramid-shape. The man stands in front of them, with his back to the spectator, but with his face turned away from the women who have their eyes on him. In his own belief he is also the source of happiness for these women. The scene takes place in a palm grove, the trees are used to create a dramatic effect, they turn to each side of the group of people, seemingly to avoid the tensions present.

The connections between flower-pictures and erotic picture are clearly evident when looking at for instance *'La Fleure'* (Ill. 165) from 1987. There are several white petals pointing into the picture's centre, the stamen and stigma are placed like small bulbs in an elliptic form around the centre. The allusions to the female sexual organ is strong. This is also clearly seen in *'La Femme 1'* (Ill. 166) from 1993. Here there is a white, naked and sprawling woman, with an enormous oversized sexual organ, from which there are growing big red flowers, the flowers cover nearly the entire belly and reach up to her breasts. The woman is forced into a roughly cubistic abstraction, where the other parts of her body are only rudimentarily sketched, apart from her sexual organ. He has made a series of pictures called *'La Femme'* in 1993 where all of them are variations of the same theme, an honour to the woman's flower. In *'La Femme 2'* (Ill. 167) he has given the woman's face more traits, but the composition is more or less the same. Her skin is white and shimmering like mother-of-pearl, against a background of





168. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen:  
*Obelisk with woman*, 1990

169. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen:  
*Obelisk I*, 1992

170. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen:  
*Obelisk II*, 1993





171. Reda Abdel Salaam:  
*Cityscape*, 1986



172. Reda Abdel Salaam:  
*The lovers*, 1988



173. Ali Nabil Wahba: *Blue landscape*, 1989

174. Ali Nabil Wahba: *Female landscape*, 1990





violet, and with a big red sexual flower, even if it is somewhat smaller than the first one.

*Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen* is working both with paintings and graphics; woodcut and lino-cut. He is also mixing techniques, by using monotypes as well as other graphic sheets as a basis for further paintings. He is using rather expressive designs, obviously influenced by expressionism and is often using abstract elements. In the lino-cut *'Obelisk with woman'* (Ill. 168) from 1990 he is using the obelisk which is a classical Egyptian form, but here it is also playing the part of a phallus. The obelisk is diagonally divided into two halves, in the lower part, a woman is sitting enclosed in a drop-form, against a background of a river. The upper part consist of a simple branch to the right and some streams from the drop in the lower part. Life, fertility and sexuality are central themes. The colours are different blue-green nuances and white printed on black paper. *'Obelisk I'* (Ill. 169) from 1993 is also concerned about the fertility. The motif is an indication of a woman sitting with her hair freely flowing down the back and streaming diagonally out of the picture. Also in this one the colours are blue-green nuances against black background. *'Obelisk II'* (Ill. 170) from 1993 is probably rather consciously made more equivocal. There is a pink river flowing through a pink landscape. It can also be seen as a flowing force of life, through both the movements and the colour contrasts.

In *'Cityscape'* (Ill. 171) from 1986 *Reda Abdel Salaam* is working with love as a theme for his picture. There is a melancholic heart shaped face looking through the window of a big red house. The house has several obstructions from different bars, and unusual angles. In the background above the house, in a star there is a bird sitting on a branch, whilst singing for the beloved woman, there are also different fragments of houses. In *'The lovers'* (Ill. 172) from 1988 the two lovers have eventually met each other. They are talking together, but there is also an absent minded gaze in their eyes. The lovers listen to the birds song. The bird represents the soul in Islamic iconography, and two birds unify opposing forces. The background behind the couple is a street with houses with many windows, where one can notice shadows of other people.

With *'Blue landscape'* (Ill. 173) from 1989 *Ali Nabil Wahba* (b. 1937) is working in a more lyrical manner than in many of his political works. There is an abstract landscape form, dominated by soft lines. The background is distinguished by different blue nuances contrasted in big, but restricted areas. Against this blue background there are some broad, transparent white brush strokes, which construct and emphasise the forms. To the left there are some strong vertical movements giving both balance and movement to the composition. He is using similar expressions and techniques in *'Female landscape'* (Ill. 174) from 1990.



175. Adel el Siwi  
*Praying under the palm trees*



176. Adel el Siwi:  
*The way of the poet*





177. Adel el Siwi: *The childhood of a djinn*

178. Adel el Siwi: *In the garden*







179. Adel el Siwi:  
*The stranger*



180. Adel el Siwi:  
*Blue face, 1993*

The background is white and the picture is executed in broad, strong brush strokes, in red, blue and black. It is a semi-abstract landscape with three gradually smaller ridges, seen from left to right. At the same time it is also easy to interpret this landscape as a prone woman, with knees, breasts and chin, as the three same 'ridges'.

The technique of giving a picture a double content, or to hide the contents, can be seen amongst many Egyptian artists. This isn't either an unknown phenomena in the west, but it is probably more widespread in Egypt because of generally moralistic attitudes leading to ban the depiction of nudes. Because of the taboo against naked bodies, probably most of the pictures with erotic motifs are less direct than in western art. This is also forcing the artists to find a more careful, poetic approach to the theme.

### 5.8. Metaphysical aspects

In this chapter I will discuss some pictures where the motifs have references to different metaphysical aspects from religions and popular beliefs and superstitions, together with some more or less surrealistic elements.

*Adel El-Siwi* works in a rather imaginative manner. His background as an artist is somewhat unusual. He started by attending some classes at the academy of art while he studied medicine, after finishing his medical degree he started on his career as an artist. He then lived for ten years in Italy. He is obviously influenced by his years there, and the close contact with different new European art movements and directions. He has a strong and mature design, with dark, but clear colours. In the eighties he often painted 'invisible' figures, that's to say figures which are only seen after looking at the pictures for a long time. The figures were hidden against a decomposed background. It is often difficult to separate between background and foreground, the different levels flow into each other in a transparent manner. In later years he has started to paint more distinct figures, he paints big faces or torsos looking straight at the observer through big open eyes and with well-rounded, sensual mouths. He is engaged with the room as a specific subject, not only as empty space. He is also strongly involved with, and influenced by, 'The London School' with Sutherland and Bacon. The influence from Bacon is evident in his representations of both figures and space, and also in his mode of expression in general. Siwi lays emphasis on depicting the life as it is, or as he experiences it, and he tries to avoid what he calls 'the utopian happiness' at Matisse's works<sup>(67)</sup>.





181. Adel el Siwi: *Woman*, 1993



*'Praying under the palm trees'* (Ill. 175) from 1988 is a good opportunity to study his transparent dissolved style. The centre of the picture is dominated by a big vaguely indicated palm dividing the picture into two halves vertically. From the top of the palm two branches bend down towards the ground and thereby embracing its surroundings. One can also get the impression of a mask. To the right behind the palm two persons bend their heads in devout prayer. There is a very strong light in this part of the picture and the two persons are throwing long dark shadows. To the left of the palm the picture is ambiguous and dark, but in the foreground lies an animal with its paws stretching forwards like a sphinx, but it is impossible to identify any distinct features of the animal. The emplacement of the animal creates a balancing diagonal in the picture, through the two praying persons. In Siwi's *'The way of the poet'* (Ill. 176) from 1989 there is a feature that dominates his compositions, there is only one person in the picture, but that this one person has an active communication with the observer. There is a content looking young man rapidly approaching us on a path going diagonally into the picture. The strokes are restless and the facial expressions unclear. In the background hover a blue half-naked figure. Can it be the muse Erato, the muse of lyric poetry, or is it a more earthly aspect, which has given the poet his inspiration? In the background on both sides of the figure of the figure there is some passionate red, providing good contrast to the blue muse and the dark poet. In *'The childhood of a djinn'* (Ill. 177) the motif is difficult to grasp at first sight. The impression of abstract grey fog is on the other hand very suitable for the motif, the djinn. The djinn in this picture seems to be in a metamorphosis between a cat and a human-like appearance, the head and the tail is from the cat, the body and arms are human. Above the djinn there is a big dish of fruits and sweets, that he is pointing at. In *'In the garden'* (Ill. 178) from 1991 there is also a mythological figure or djinn, this time with a more explicit human appearance. The figure of a man is resting recumbent, on his head he wears a star-shaped hat. The background is very changeable with sharp colours and forms. The foreground to the right is almost deconstructed. The figure's face is well defined with a firm chin, well-rounded lips and a big nose, the eyes on the other hand are invisible.

In some other works he deals with questions about the design and appearance of figures as the most important element. In *'The stranger'* (Ill. 179) from 1991 Siwi works with sharp and lucid colour contrasts, red – green, blue – yellow, white – black. The motif is the face of a young man with big sharp features, on his head he is wearing a grey-white hat with red spots of contrast. One half of the face is illuminated, the other half is kept in shadow, the features in this half are more



182. Mahmoud Bakshish:  
*Bottles in a white room*, 1989



184. Mahmoud Bakshish:  
*The Man in the Desert*, 1985

183. Mahmoud Bakshish:  
*The living House*, 1991

185. Mahmoud Bakshish: *Shadows*, 1991



obscure, nearly paralysed. The eyes are looking forward, but they are not focused. Below his neck the outline of his torso can hardly be seen, the rest disappears into different spots of colours. *'Woman'* (Ill. 181) from 1992 is a depiction of a mask, not a portrait. The picture has a clear vertical middle axis. The hair is equally parted, a long nose follows, accentuated by a small, but well-rounded red mouth. The hair falls loosely on both sides of the face and separates the face from the surroundings. The neck is slanted compared with the face, and the head is twisted in relation to the body. The use of colours are restrained with use of grey nuances, earthen colours, white, black, with the red mouth as the only lucid spot of colour. In *'Blue face'* (Ill. 180) from 1993 there is the same vertical composition. The face is cut off by the forehead, the nose long and coarsely painted, the verticality is broken by the big mouth in the lower part of the picture. The use of colour is also in this picture very restrained, with nuances of grey and blue. The blue colour creates shadows and obscurity in the one part of the face, the eyes are looking forward, but not focusing. In Siwi's faces with big and long noses and wide mouths the influence from both al-Gazzar and Bacon become evident.

*Mahmoud Bakshish* (b. 1938) examines metaphysical and surrealistic aspects connected to human life, and the problems people have with enduring it. He had his childhood in a small village between Alexandria and Port Said, he claims that these years by the sea have been of great importance. He has lived for many years in Kafr El-Sheikh in the delta, this was a period of melancholy and depression, since he wanted to live and work in Cairo. He now lives and works in Cairo, but detests the city, it is too big and suffocative. The melancholy and alienation are in different aspects evident in his pictures. In his pictures he is mainly concerned with colours, and lights and shadows, he is usually not concerned about a specific programmatic meaning. Bakshish' pictures are usually dark, but not necessarily sinister, the contrast between light and shadow plays an important part. The light represents and symbolises the human. There are often houses or other architectural elements playing important parts. The illumination is always specific, it seems to come from the interior, as a peculiar energy, not as ordinary electric light. Mohammed Hamza compares the light of Bakshish' pictures with cinematic art and futurism, he further points out that Bakshish from his first appearance has worked with big, heavy forms seemingly detached from gravity<sup>(68)</sup>. Literature, poetry and music are all important sources of inspiration for Bakshish. He has also often travelled to Paris to get





186. Mahmoud Bakshish: *Fata Morgana*, 1992

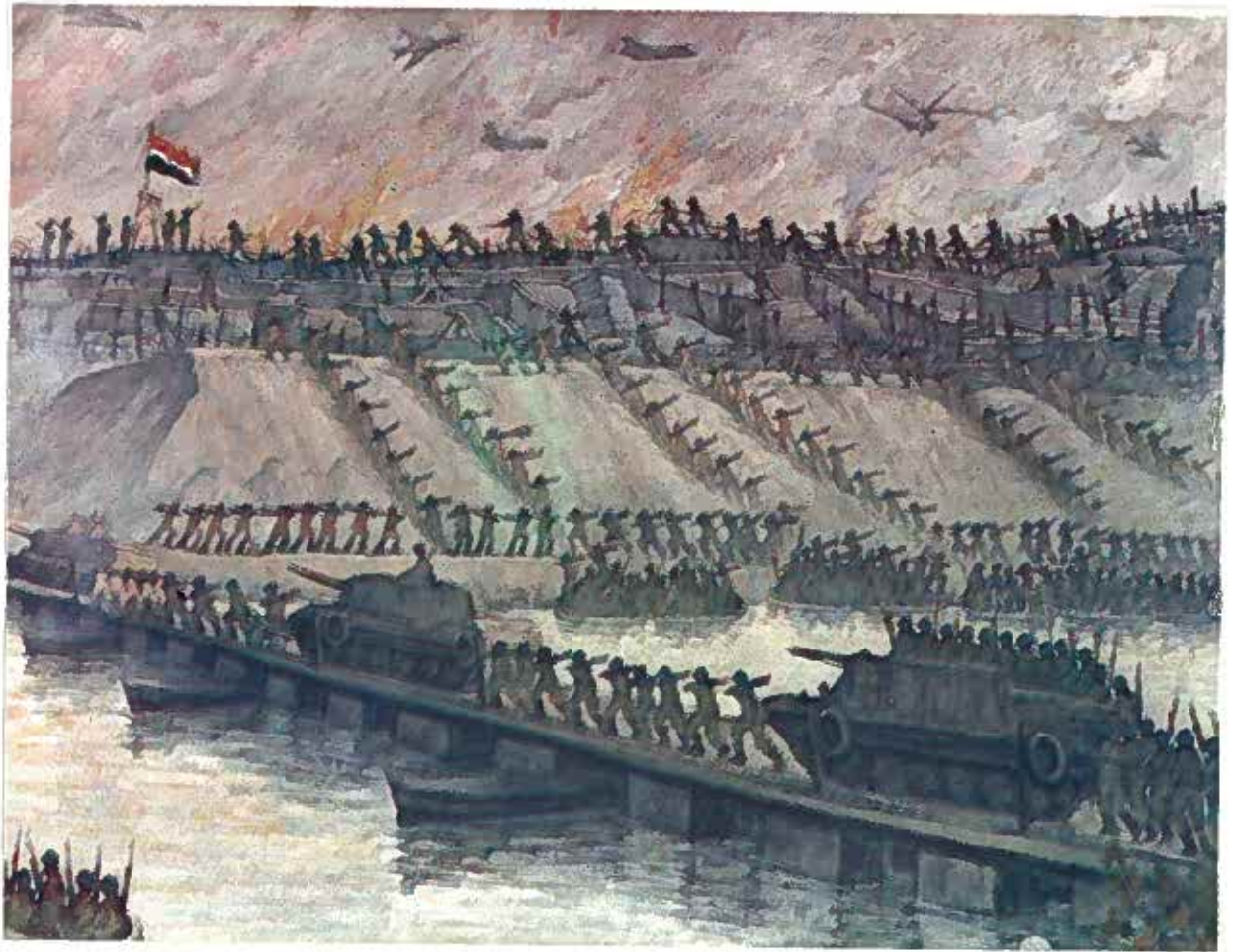
187. Mahmoud Bakshish: *Light*, 1992



inspiration from French contemporary art. Egyptian village architecture is also an important source of inspiration and cultural identity-creating element, with the contrasts between buildings and desert. His picture has often a rich and varied texture. His buildings resembles faces looking ahead and talking to the spectator. Bakshish places his art between the abstract and realism. He claims that the most important thing is to describe the struggle between good and evil forces in each individual, and that this interior struggle is reflected in his pictures. Bakshish consciously builds his picture around different antagonistic pairs, thereby creating tension and content. He works with contrasts between; light and darkness, abstraction and realism, movement and tranquillity, nature and architecture, destiny and dreams. Throughout his entire production he has always returned to these themes, but with slightly different expressions and use of colours during different periods.

*'Bottles in a white Room'* (Ill. 182) from 1989 is a kind of a still-life study. He is here working with colours and lights seen through different glass bottles. The picture has a relatively simple triangular composition, with six different bottles placed against a light grey background. The light comes at a low angle through the bottles from the rear, causing the bottles to throw long shadows in their respective colours. The only element breaking this naked monotony is a single rose in the foremost small bottle to the right. In *'The Man in the Desert'* (Ill. 184) from 1985 he depicts fear and loneliness in a very convincing manner. In the foreground of the picture there is a partly collapsed wall, parts of a fence and a small shed. This is obviously on the outskirts of the village, because the rest of the picture is filled by limitless, empty and barren desert. The picture shows an event in early afternoon, it is still quiveringly hot, but the sun throws some small shadows. The desert is empty, with one exception, more like a scarecrow than a human. There are obvious reasons to interpret this as a depiction of the fear of being overwhelmed by the enclosing, destroying and threatening desert.

From the end of the eighties his pictures have been dominated by strong effects of light and shadow and a rather expressive design have also been apparent. An example of this can be seen in *'The living House'* (Ill. 183) from 1991, this depicts amongst others the life of the night. The night in actual signification and in transferred signification as a picture of depression. A cuboid house dominates the picture, in the background some landscape forms and buildings with lights can be vaguely seen. The picture is kept in deep blue-green with very few nuances and values of colour. The house can be seen as a face or a mask, with one closed eye and the other one open and red filled with fear, the door in the middle opens like a scream. *'Shadows'* (Ill. 185) from 1991 is not as saturated with



188. Mohammed Sabry: *The Crossing of Suez*, 1983

189. Ali Nabil Wahba: *The War*, 1975





expressive contents, but the same undertone of sadness is apparent also in this picture. In the foreground to the left there are some strongly lit steps, but without any function. Firstly they are slightly deformed, secondly they are few, only three steps, thirdly they lead to nowhere, they stand alone isolated on the ground. There is a remarkable feature with the steps, the light come from two directions. The entire picture has very long shadows flowing diagonally from the top left, this implies a low light source outside the picture, the steps are also lit by a strong highly placed spotlight coming from the right. This use of light creates a static movement in the picture, at the same time as this creates some agitation. In the background to the right there is a small pyramid-like construction. Diagonally through half of the picture a big shadow, probably human falls. The shadow enters the picture, but it is impossible to predict how it will act in the picture. The agitation from the steps affects the rest of the picture as well, also in this picture anxiety and depression are evident through use of colour and composition. Still within same thematic, but with a more positive and optimistic attitude *'Fata Morgana'* (Ill. 186) from 1992 can be seen. There is a small village engulfed in darkness, but small traces of light come out from some doors and windows, making it possible to glimpse the outlines of the houses. In the background, nearly hovering above the horizon there is a strong white light, almost like mirage or Fata Morgana. It might be the lights from a neighbouring village, or it can be the dream of a new and better life another place. Even more optimistic one must consider his *'Light'* (Ill. 187) from 1992. Through a kind of a gate one can see into an ocean of light in the background. One can get the impression of standing inside a building, a temple where one can glimpse the light through the pylon. The first impression is that of a river running through a narrow gorge, and where the light is seen at the end of the gorge. In the middle of the river floats a big cube, it drifts towards the light. In my opinion there is reason to interpret this picture as the artist's voyage to better conditions. The river as a symbol of purification and transition between different stages in life has its sources from antiquity.



190. Ali Nabil Wahba:  
*American Warfare*, 1987



191. Ali Nabil Wahba:  
*Brown Composition*, 1980

192. Mostafa Abdel Moity:  
*Stelae*, 1992



### 5.9. Political and ecological aspects

The critical and political which was prominent in the West from the sixties to the middle of the eighties, played a less prominent part in Egypt in the same period. This is due to the political situation in the country, with strong centralisation, also culturally, and a rather strong political censorship. Political motifs in the pictures appear only where they are within an official nationalistic framework, or where Egypt or Egyptian interests are not indisputably put in a disadvantageous light. Other *critical* political themes have either been avoided or paraphrased in such manner that the pictures are no longer regarded under a political aspect. There is often a critical undertone in many pictures, but it is a more or less hidden message that has to be considered as so. The common themes were earlier variations on the conflict between Israel and the US on the one hand, against the Arab world on the other. From the middle of the seventies Islamic aspects have played an increasingly prominent part. In the later years a growing ecological awareness is also apparent. This has also led to artistic treatment of some environmental problems.

There is a tendency towards social realism and political motives going back to the fifties. Some of Gazzar's and Efflatoun's works can obviously be regarded from this angle, and even some of *Mohammed Sabry's* works. Sabry's *'The crossing of Suez'* (Ill. 188) from 1983 is one such example. The motif is the start of the campaign to regain Sinai, that had been occupied by Israel since the Six-days war in June 1967. There are endless rows of soldiers and tanks crossing the Suez canal on pontoon bridges, with massive support of planes and helicopters. Artistically this picture is rather stiff and almost boring, with the soldiers advancing in firm rows. The composition lacks dynamics. The design is partly somewhat abstract, but this has not been used in a creative manner, rather the contrary, the picture becomes unreal and propagandistic. The political message is very strongly focused, which is further being emphasised by the Egyptian flag, carried by the soldiers in front. Seen from a military point of view the Syrian-Egyptian attack failed. Israel rapidly defeated the attackers, but because of intervention from the US, the conflict was settled and Israel agreed upon returning Sinai to Egypt on certain conditions.

*Ali Nabil Wahba* (b. 1937) works with totally different expressions, partly influenced by contemporary expressionistic tendencies. He usually works on big canvas and paints with broad coarse strokes. Some of his pictures have a figurative appearance, but in the main are rather abstract-expressionistic. He has for instance landscape forms resembling reclining nudes. Some of his earlier





193. Mohammed Abla: *A mask*, 1990

194. Mohammed Abla: *Cairo*, 1992



works are more explicitly figurative and have partly intelligible political motifs related to the US' support to Israel in the Middle-East conflict. In his picture *'The War'* (Ill. 189) from 1975 the motif is all of the suffering the Egyptian people had to endure during the Egyptian-Israeli conflict about Sinai. The picture is dominated by a big, sad and sorrowful face. The face has a transparent appearance, behind and through the face there is a desert landscape with the three pyramids. To the left of the face there is a dark and abandoned village. To the right of the face there is a big heap of corpses from victims of the war. The background of the picture is blood red. In *'American Warfare'* (Ill. 190) from 1987, the motif is the US' role in amongst others Lebanon. In the lower part of the picture a group of people is sitting crouched in a shelter, mourning over a deceased who is stretched out in front of them, nearly like a Pieta. The upper part of the picture resembles a big American flag, where the blue part with stars is recomposed to a diffuse blue area from where there are falling bomb-like items down on the mourning group. *'Brown composition'* (Ill. 191) from 1980 goes in a quite different direction. It is a depiction of a kind of futuristic vision. The surrounding areas are dominated by big, strong steel constructions, between these there is a network of thinner constructions, cranes and machines. There is some resemblance to Gazzar's works from the sixties, but without the pessimistic undertone which we can see in Gazzar's pictures.

The perspective of the future is rather alarming in *Mostafa Abdel Moity's 'Stelae'* (Ill. 192) from 1992. There are five high stelae dominating the picture, between them there are narrow horizontal stripes in grey and orange. The background is shifting to two green nuances at the top of the stelae. On the top of each one there is a singular object, on three of them there are fragments of a globe, on the fourth one there is a pyramid in profile, and on the last one there is a pyramid seen from the top, but with its peak removed. This motif can probably be seen as a warning about how industrialised society is destroying our earth. This picture is also a doomsday prophecy for our civilization, which has its roots in ancient Egypt, but which at present is spread over the whole world. By using his nearly minimalist approach he achieves to present the motif sharp and clearly, without any disturbing or extenuating circumstances.

Traditional landscape painting is not common in contemporary Egyptian art. Nature plays even so an important role as source of inspiration and to a certain extent legitimating the motifs that in other circumstances could have been considered invidious, unpleasant or indecent. There are for instance ambiguous paintings being done with erotic suggestions, which I have shown examples of in



195. Mohammed Abla: *Midan Attaba I*, 1992

196. Mohammed Abla: *Midan Attaba II*, 1993







197. Mohammed Abla: *On the Beach*, 1993

198. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen: *Riwerweeds*



chapter 5.7, Erotic aspects. The interaction between man and nature is a reoccurring theme. The growing ecological awareness is also conspicuous and is reflected in art.

In '*A mask*' (Ill. 193) from 1990 *Mohammed Abla* is looking very closely at this motif. It is a face or mask penetrating through amounts of flowers. The colours are dark, the mask is ochre-yellow with the wreathing flowers and leaves mainly rendered blue or black and a few other colours for the effect. It seems to be a faun or another mythological nature-creature, looking towards us in our materialistic and polluted environment.

Abla has in recent years worked a lot with the city as a theme. It is not simply renderings of daily life, but more or less the city as a phenomena and a problem. The pollution, over-population and traffic are in the process of being insoluble problems. His cityscapes are apparently rather similar, and concerned with the same theme, the over-population in Cairo. In '*Cairo*' (Ill. 194) from 1992 it is difficult to distinguish forms, movements or composition, it is more or less a compact mass. He has abandoned any trace of realistic expression, he is working in an entirely abstract design. His design resembles the ones of Pollock, but it is more controlled, a kind of abstract pointillism. The humans are only rendered as small black dots, strokes or other indefinite forms. The background is sand-coloured with black and brown to represent the masses of people. In '*Midan Attaba I*' (Ill. 195) from 1992 the composition is more determined through the diagonal cross in composition. This represents two streams of people. Midan Attaba is one of the most crowded squares in the shopping area of central Cairo. There are always enormous masses of buses, cars, charts, stalls, street vendors, shops and customers. It is so densely crowded that one has to follow the stream, there is naturally a deafening noise from all the vendors and all the cars being trapped in the traffic jam. The trade is the most bustling in the afternoons and evenings. This is reflected by the use of colours in the picture. The centre is still dominated by an intense light, while the surroundings are shrouded by twilight, here the dominating colours are nuances of blue-grey. The same motif is treated in a slightly different manner in '*Midan Attaba II*' (Ill. 196) also from 1992. The composition has some common features. The density of people is less intense, but it has the same two crossing streams of people, in addition there is also a third strong vertical stream. The right third part is very different, it is covered by a blue-black shadow. In the middle of this there is a big spiral, almost a whirlpool. The picture is a depiction of the blackout one can get of being too long in this inferno of traffic, people, noise, dust and dirt.





199. Abdel Wahab  
Abdel Mohsen:  
*Green form*



200. Abdel Wahab  
Abdel Mohsen:  
*Red composition*



201. Abdel Wahab  
Abdel Mohsen:  
*Blue diptych*





202. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Bird, fish and man*, 1985

203. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Egypt*, 1986





204. Ezz el-Din Naguib: *Siwa I*, 1985



205. Ezz el-Din Naguib: *Siwa II*, 1987

206. Ezz el-Din Naguib: *The Petrified*, 1990

207. Ezz el-Din Naguib: *Living Mountains*, 1987



It is not only in Cairo there are big crowds of people. In weekends and holidays beaches and parks are filled with ten-thousands of families on excursion and picnics. He has rendered this in a very lively way in *'On the Beach'* (Ill. 197) from 1993. There is sandy bay with the clear blue sea to the right. Also here there is an incredible crowd of people rendered as small dark dots against the sand-coloured background. Two weakly drawn crossing curves represents roads or tracks where the density of people is even more so.

*Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen* is often getting inspiration from nature and is concerned about the different textual character of the materials. He is also interested in the movements and streams of water, and in the perception of forms and colours in water compared with the perceptions of air. *'Riverweeds'* (Ill. 198) from 1992 is a picture where Mohsen is working with the alterations of the elements. Water plants are gently flowing in water, but look like a shapeless sticky mass when they are taken out of the water. Stones on the contrary keep their form and their colours are often enhanced under water. In this picture there are three yellow brick like forms pointing in different directions, around these thin black riverweeds are flowing. The background is shifting from deep blue to pale yellow, according to the impression of looking down into, or up from the water. He is working on the same theme in *'Green form'* (Ill. 199). There is a slanted turquoise brick form, this is surrounded by long sea grass in different colours, blue-violet, pale green and red, against an infinite black background.

In the next pictures he is working in a completely different design, more related to abstract expressionism. In *'Red composition'* (Ill. 200) there are several more or less organic forms balanced against each other through composition, colours, forms, and treatment of the surface. The picture is dominated by a big rhombic form in the left part, this is partly decorated with red grid effects. The composition is bound together in a strong horizontal changing dark area and a thin horizontal green line on the top. The background is kept in different nuances of rust-red. *'Blue diptych'* (Ill. 201) is a vehement abstract landscape, kept in several dark blue nuances. There are big, strong and broad movements going inwards in the picture, also creating different organic forms. Innermost in the picture there is a small building with a white gable. In the top part there is lots of strong yellow light. *'Abstraction'* from 1992 also dwells around the same themes, but in more sinister colours. The picture is dominated by restless black movements against an increasingly dark grey background, changing to blue. There are only a few rays of light over the dark forms. There is also a broad brown area between the blue and grey parts of the background.





208. Sarwat El-Bahr:  
*Fragments*, 1993

209. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen:  
*Blue composition*



210. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen: *Face*



In *Reda Abdel Salaam's 'Bird, fish and man'* (Ill. 202) from 1985 there are several elements against a blue background; to the top right a fish, in the middle to the left a black and white bird and to the bottom right a man lies dressed in red. Only the outlines are drawn of the fish, it has therefore the same blue-green nuances as the background. The bird is flying into the picture between the man and the fish. The man is lying seemingly helpless on the ground with an empty gaze. The picture can be interpreted as a description of the three elements earth, air and water, the man's helpless gaze describes the helplessness humans are faced with towards the environmental problems. He is dealing with related themes in *'Egypt'* (Ill. 203) from 1986, here he also introduces the historical background of Egypt, which emphasises the responsibility of the country and the population. The composition is relatively abstract, against a dark grey background there is a slanted black ellipse, balancing above this there are two unequal sided oblong pentagons. In the left pentagon there are three overlapping triangles, a blue one, a red one and a spotted yellow one, here again the three elements. In the right pentagon there is a pharaoh seated on a throne. In these works he is using a two-dimensionally figurative technique, with elements of abstraction. The composition is strong and geometric. The use of colours is limited, with the use of few, but clear colours and only a few values.

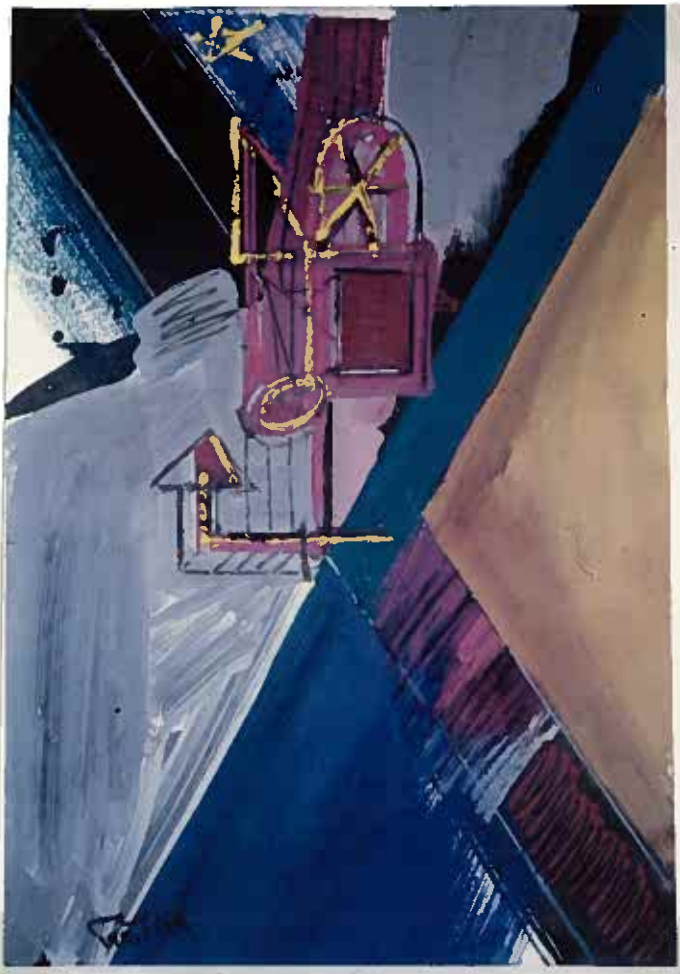
*Ezz El-Din Naguib* has for a long time been occupied by the old oases and the arid, but yet varied landscape of the desert. The strong erosion by wind, sand, sun and changes of temperatures on rocks and stones, leaves the impression that some extraterrestrial power has created the landscape from soft clay. The forms are softer and more subdued than in alpine landscapes. His *'organic'*, almost surrealist mountain-forms are therefore more realistic than first imagined. Abandoned houses in vacated villages are standing as empty stages, and gives a ghostlike appearance for the spectator with the right imagination. His expressions are clearly influenced by surrealism, but the motifs are not directly surrealist. His surrealism is limited to the organic character he is giving to the surroundings. Houses, mountains and rocks, all take more or less human forms and functions, they also partly act in interplay with humans, and partly as a substitute for humans, or as representations of spirits, djinns or other supernatural creatures. The Siwa oasis has specifically caught his interest. In antiquity there was an important oracle in Siwa, of which it is said that also Alexander the Great consulted. The oracle has entailed that Siwa from time immemorial has had an enormous important position as a destination for journeys, even if the oasis is difficult to reach in the middle of the desert near





211. Reda Abdel Salaam:  
*The window*, 1991

212. Reda Abdel Salaam:  
*Composition*, 1991



213. Reda Abdel Salaam:  
*Diagonals*, 1991



Libya. In his *'Siwa I'* (Ill. 204) from 1985 we are looking into a small street in the deserted village, a new village is built in the vicinity. Through the small windows, doors and other holes in the walls one gets the impression that the houses have something to tell, as if they are still housing oracles. The composition is built around geometric volumes with shadows falling from different angles because of the partly collapsed walls. The perspective is enhanced through rather strong diagonal shadow falling into the picture, meeting the light in the end of the street. In *'Siwa II'* (Ill. 205) from 1987 the strong geometric composition is abandoned for a more organic deconstruction of the forms. There is a small rise with ruins of many houses, in the foreground only one story is left. Farther behind, walls of several stories are still intact. In the middle of the picture there is some kind of a tower, but it has fallen apart so that it more or less resembles a creature or ghost crying out against a storm. The colours of both these pictures is naturally kept in pale earthen colours, beige, brown and grey. In *'The Petrified'* (Ill. 206) from 1990 he has moved away from Siwa to the Sinai mountains. There is a big light brown rock softly polished on all sides. Out from the stone, facing the spectator, it seems like a woman bowing with a small child in her arms. In the background there are endless mountains and a uneasy sky. The brush strokes are dominated by parallel strokes underlining the forms, but everything seems to be very dry and without any passion or conviction. He is working along the same lines in *'Living Mountains'* (Ill. 207) from 1987. Inspiration from one of the nestors of contemporary art, Hussein Bikar, is evident in this picture. There is a steep hillside with precipitous mountains on all sides. In the centre there are three huge rocks, giving the impression of being three figures with long cloaks climbing the hillside, but during their struggle to reach the top they have been petrified. The lines are quiet and subdued, but the colours are dark and ominous, in spite of the light foreground. The motif symbolises the fight for survival, and the problems connected with too high aspirations. Naguib is also an art critic and has amongst others written one of the few books translated to English about the preceding generation of painters: *'The Dawn of Egyptian Modern Painting'*<sup>(69)</sup>.

With a design influenced by abstract expressionism we find the works of *Sarwat El-Bahr* (b. 1944). There are often associations to music in his picture. The sea is also a more important source of inspiration for him than for many other Egyptian artists, which is natural since he lives in Alexandria. This again leads to the use of different colours, cooler ones, blue plays a dominant part in his production, contrary to the warmer earthen colours that otherwise are common. In *'Fragments'* (Ill. 208) from 1993 the inspiration from the sea makes an obvious theme. Against a grey-blue background in the guise of the sky and clouds there are some seagulls flying away. The picture is a collage, there are fragments of three frames and one complete frame on the canvas. In the complete one there are some feathers and a leaf. The other frames are destroyed and without any contents. This is a symbolic depiction of the artist's many unfinished pictures.

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69 Naguib, Ezz El-Din, *The Dawn of Egyptian Modern Painting*, Foreign Cultural Information Department, Cairo 1992.



214. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Forms*, 1991



215. Reda Abdel Salaam: *City*, 1991

216. Reda Abdel Salaam: *Chaos*, 1992







217. Farouk Hosni:  
*Composition*, 1992



218. Sarwat El-Bahr:  
*Lyrical atmosphere*, 1992



219. Sarwat El-Bahr:  
*Movement*, 1992



### 5.10. Abstract orientation

There are several artists working in a more or less abstract style, influenced by either Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, Constructivism, Minimal Art or New Realism. I shall here deal with some of these artists. I am using the term '*abstract*' for pictures without any clear figurative motif. A common denominator for the different works of art being dealt with in this chapter is that they have *no* obvious relations to Egypt, either in motifs, forms or colours.

*Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen* is often vague himself when it comes to describing the motifs of his pictures. The woodcut '*Blue composition*' (Ill. 209) shows several different forms placed together through different values of lines and colours. In the middle there is a big blue area, divided into several smaller areas, to the left there is a narrow area in red-violet, where the lines are softer and subtle, constantly changing directions, this gives the area a more refined character. In the surroundings there are different smaller turquoise areas, where the lines are stronger and broader, giving a harder impression. On both sides of the centre there are some yellow lines sharply in contrast with the rest of the picture. '*Face*' (Ill. 210) shows an old man, seen in profile. The picture is divided diagonally with an entirely monochrome blue-green background to the left of the face, against a darker and more varied background to the right. The face is constructed by rapid parallel lines in smaller areas describing the different parts of the face. The colours are contrasting bluish black against the paper's light grey. There is not paid any particular attentions to the details of the face. The man seems to be blinded, where one could expect eyes, there are strong dazzling pink lines, and over the forehead and nose appears to be a mask of wet, light-green grass.

In a lot of different works *Reda Abdel Salaam* is working with themes related to alienation in the cities such as; war, love, hate and emotional crises. In some of these works he is using an abstract and expressionistic style, where a distinct meaning is difficult to deduce. It would also be wrong to interpret these works as something more than reports of emotional conditions. In '*The window*' (Ill. 211) from 1991, there is in the middle an indication of a house with two blue windows. To the right there is, against a burning red background, a man in blue. The indicated cuneiform house is kept in dark brown and grey nuances, the brush strokes are vehement, but precise. The picture is dominated by intense movements and emotions. '*Composition*' (Ill. 212) from 1991 is a sinister picture dominated by grey nuances. Centrally placed there is a tank-like vehicle in yellow and grey, in a thick fog above it there are blue stars and shells.



220. Sarwat El-Bahr:  
*Rhythm*, 1992



221. Sarwat El-Bahr:  
*Dark forms*, 1992



222. Sarwat El-Bahr:  
*Blue forms*, 1992

In *'Diagonals'* (Ill. 213) from 1991 he has divided the picture with two crossing diagonals. Each triangle and the cross are kept in different contrasting nuances in black, blue, beige and pink. In the middle of the upper part there is a geometric construction in pink and yellow. *'Forms'* (Ill. 214) from 1991 has a less rigid construction. Against a background of blue-grey nuances falling into the centre of the picture comes an inferno of forms and colours, in black, green, red and yellow. In *'City'* (Ill. 215) from 1991 there is a picture within a picture. At the bottom on the left, athwart, there is a small picture of three women looking confused and anxious towards the reality of the great city that is revealed outside their picture. Behind them there is an enormous construction representing the city, there are fragments of roads, bridges, flyovers, cars and people, everything kept together within a form giving associations to a house. The picture is kept in relatively light and clear nuances of blue and red with some few strains of other colours. *'Chaos'* (Ill. 216) from 1992 is another example of the same theme, but the threatening elements are more prominent here. Against a sinister background of earthen colours a construction representing the overgrown and alienating city emerges. Also here there are constructions such as buildings, bridges and roads.

Another artist working in abstract expressionistic influenced style is Egypt's Minister of Culture, *Farouk Hosni* (b. 1942). His works are usually dominated by few, but broad and determined brush strokes giving association to both Arabic and Chinese calligraphy. He is working with a limited palette with dark colours as black and brown in contrast to lighter nuances of grey, and with limited use of red. His *'Composition'* (Ill. 217) from 1992 is a composition dominated by grey in several light nuances. Against this grey background there are some thin black lines repeating the grey forms, The background is kept in black and dark nuances of blue and red. The motif gives associations of a dream-landscape.

*Sarwat El-Bahr's 'Lyrical atmosphere'* (Ill. 218) from 1992 has also a dreamlike atmosphere. The right half is dominated by strong vertical forms in subdued blue and red, with strains of other colours to enhance the contrasts. The vertical movements are broken in the left part by a big slanted foggy blue form, which more or less hovers in the picture. The composition is tightened again by a strong vertical yellow form far left, contrasting the red parts to the right. In *'Movement'* (Ill. 219) from 1992 he is working with a darker palette. In the left part, a strong dark form in black, blue and a little red is growing, in the top part of the picture the movement changes direction and continues to the right in a wave-like form. The movement, the rhythm of the motif, is enhanced by small parallel lines of





223. Essam Marouf: *Black Amphoras*, 1992



224. Essam Marouf: *Violet*, 1992



225. Essam Marouf:  
*Jars and boxes*, 1992

different colours that are repeated. In the upper part El-Bahr has also used a hatching, nearly sgraffito in the yet wet paint. This effect further enhances the rhythm, at the same time as the movement attains a rather cautious character. In the lower right part there are several grey nuances, being broken by some few strong green strokes, which contrast the colours in the other parts of the picture. He is working with the same theme and colours in *'Rhythm'* (Ill. 220) from 1992. The motif consists of several relatively thin parallel vertical forms in different blue nuances. The forms to the left are augmenting giving a spiral-movement, one perceives the impression of increasing speed. The rhythm of this picture is created by the repetition of similar forms, and the constant changing between light and dark, with use of red to enhance the contrasts and movements. The relation to music is even stronger in *'Dark forms'* (Ill. 221) from 1992, which is another picture in the same series. In this picture there is a faint suspicion of figuration in the dark form. Even this one is dominated by relatively narrow parallel vertical forms. Here it is also possible to consider the forms as dancing figures. There are several round heads and raised arms, this fact converts the abstract forms to a group of dancing humans. In the top left there is another new element, a mask with a quite disapproving glance. To the left of the mask there is again a strong wave-form. Against the same musical background one can also interpret *'Blue forms'* (Ill. 222) from 1992. This picture separates strongly from the preceding ones in the use of colour. White is more predominant, and the blue is fresher and with several nuances. From right to left several vertical forms can be seen. The brush strokes are broad and coarse, the forms have not got clear outlines, but are more obscure and constantly in move. There are a few thin strokes breaking the main-movement in the composition, and thereby creating further movements. In the right part there is a small area with almost an explosion of small coloured dots. Also here it is obvious that dance and music has been of important inspiration for the rhythmic composition.

*Essam Marouf* (b. 1958) is presently living in Holland, but has had several exhibitions in Cairo in later years. He is working with relatively abstract expressions, but is using recognisable objects as cubes, jars, flower-like organic forms, without using them in a connection where they are expected to be used. His objects hover more or less weightless around within the space he is creating. Most of his pictures are rather spontaneous. The composition is usually tight and balanced with few, but clearly defined objects suitable placed in the picture.

In *'Black Amphoras'* (Ill. 223) from 1992 there are five pointed and quite similar dark grey jars with some nuances, against a monochrome lighter grey background. Between the jars there are about twenty smaller circles in different



226. Essam Marouf: *Floating forms*, 1992

227. Essam Marouf: *Sea-green jars*, 1992



228. Essam Marouf: *Blue forms*, 1992





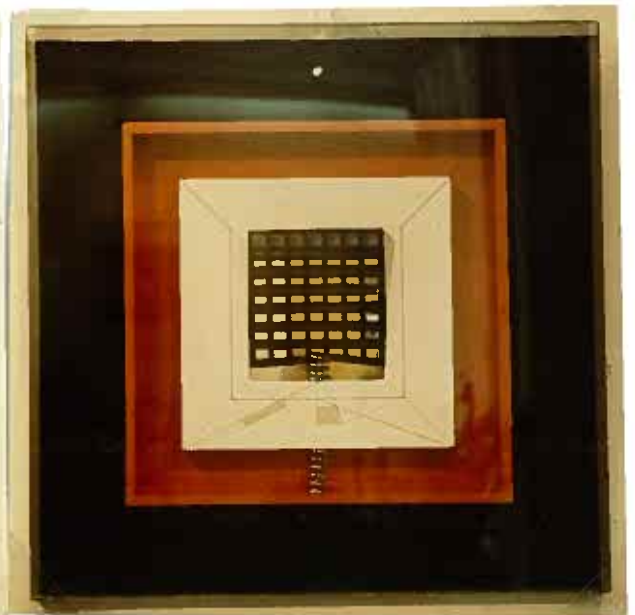


229. Essam Marouf: *Black boxes*, 1992

230. Ahmed Nawar: *Yellow grid*, 1992



231. Ahmed Nawar: *Black grid*, 1992





232. Taha Hussein: *Black composition*, 1973

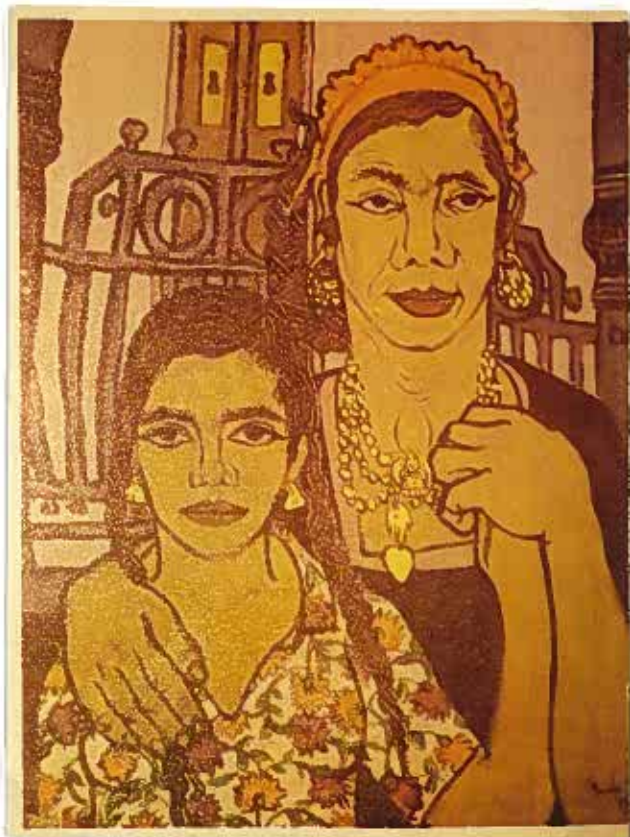
233. Taha Hussein: *Yellow composition*, 1993



nuances from the light grey of the background to black. The composition is balanced, but not rigid. In *'Violet'* (Ill. 224) from 1992, he has focused more closely onto the motif. The background is here grey-violet, to the left there is a big black jar dominating more than half of the picture. Upon the black jar there are outlines of new jar, there are white contours against the black background. Between the jars there are some black circles and white circles that have grown together to cloud-like forms. In *'Jars and boxes'* (Ill. 225) from 1991 there is an unstable grey and black background. Against this there are perspective drawings in outline of two boxes, in partly distorted perspective. To the left of the boxes one can see the white outline of a jar without handle. In *'Sea-green jars'* (Ill. 227) from 1992 the technique has changed, it has got a more dreamy feature. The background has rich nuances in blue, green and grey values, it is partly a grid pattern. Against this background the outlines of three jars can be seen, they are difficult to distinguish because they are painted with a mix of the background colours. This strict blend of close nuances gives the picture a misty and dreamy aspect. Between the jars there are also here some small green circles. In *'Floating forms'* (Ill. 226) from 1992 he is clearly influenced by the abstractions of the fifties. He uses earthen colours and slightly indefinable, organic forms moving around on the canvas. The background has different nuances of olive-green, whilst the hovering objects are painted in ochre, rust, grey and black. *'Blue forms'* (Ill. 228) from 1992 is a painting where the surface is more important than the volume. Against a grey and green background there are several monochrome blue and green objects, here their movements seem to frozen to a snapshot. *'Black boxes'* (Ill. 229) from 1992 is to a certain extent related, but since it is a perspective drawing the spectator is forced to think three-dimensionally. The background is here pale blue-grey, with some flower-like green objects, in front of these there are three black boxes of different size.

*Ahmed Nawar* (b. 1945) works in a strong geometric, abstract formalistic style. He is working with painting, graphics and collages. *'Yellow grid'* (Ill. 230) from 1992 is a collage of wood and other materials, painted in sharp clear colours. This is a square composition where one can move into constantly smaller squares. Outermost there is a broad black enclosure, within this a thin brown frame, and then again a broad black enclosure, then follows a broad blue frame with a simple raised profile. Inside the blue frame there is a mirror with a yellow grid on the top. On the upper part of the blue frame there is attached fragment of a transistor-card. At the bottom of the blue frame is painted a small slanted thin yellow grid. *'Black grid'* (Ill. 231) from 1992 has a similar composition. First a broad black enclosure, then a solid red frame, after that a white frame with a





234. Gazbia Sirry: *Umm Rateeba*, 1953



235. Gazbia Sirry:  
*A woman having  
her hair done*, 1953



236. Gazbia Sirry:  
*The palm reader*, 1956

mirror in the centre. Over the mirror there is a black grid, but it doesn't cover the entire surface, it is broken at the bottom by a small spring. The white frame is painted with thin lines of the diagonals, an inner frame and some smaller slanted grids.

*Taha Hussein* is a quite versatile artist, he is working with painting, graphics, ceramics and industrial design. The different materials demand different techniques and they therefore get different expressions. He explores constantly new opportunities within different directions. He works, as I have shown earlier, often with calligraphy as a decorative graphic expression. In later years his works have been influenced by abstract expressionism. With different effects he intends usually to achieve a specific Egyptian atmosphere in his works. *'Black composition'* (Ill. 232) from 1973 is a representative example of his earlier works. There is a surface decorated with numerous black ellipses on lighter background. The ellipses have different size, but are organised in strict rows or groups. The composition is dominated by three horizontal, but unequal rows of ellipses, here on brown background. It is clearly to trace an influence from African popular art in this picture. Hussein has lately changed to entirely abstract compositions, as can be seen in *'Yellow composition'* (Ill. 233) from 1993. The picture is kept in different yellow and golden nuances, it is possible to trace a stream towards the centre of the picture. There is a clear movement or stream of lighter nuances towards the centre, this is limited of darker grey nuances to the left. There is a picture within a picture, from the bottom there is a thin frame approximately four inches from the edges of the paper, this continues until two thirds of the height, then it is enclosed horizontally. The motif continues undisturbed by this frame. The only difference is that in the outer part there are traces of small signs used for shadows and effects, these are not present in the inner part.





237. Gazbia Sirry: *Houses, whose heads are in flames*, 1968

238. Gazbia Sirry:  
*Houses from Cairo*, 1967

239. Gazbia Sirry:  
*Formation from Egypt*, 1978





### 5.11. Female artists

I considered carefully for a long time if there was any purpose in separating female artists into a specific chapter, or if they should be treated under the other respective chapters. My conclusion is that it has a *raison d'être* to treat them specifically, to elucidate them. In this way it is also possible to examine if there are any specific features in the art of female artists. To a certain extent there are motifs that are often considered as more '*feminine*', like family-scenes, religious motifs and similar motifs. This tendency is yet not unambiguous enough to lay the foundations of a particular feminine iconography.

There is a to greater part female art-students, but the vast majority of professional artists are men. Also amongst art-professors, the majority are men. This is a situation similar to the one in Europe some years ago, and reflects probably the position of women in present Egyptian society. In the last years there has been organised several exhibitions with only female artists, to put the focus on their works, but still this has not encouraged many women to embark on a professional career as artist. In connection with this research it is particularly interesting and important to examine female artists in present Egypt, to investigate and elucidate both the similarities and dissimilarities.

*Gazbia Sirry* (b. 1925) is considered as being the pioneer amongst contemporary female artists in Egypt. She has been working as an artist from the fifties until present, thereby she provides a link between two epochs in Egyptian painting. Her vocation as artist and professor has been a source of inspiration for many younger female artists. She started with figurative, cubistic influenced expressions, where a firm composition with clear lines, pure surfaces, forms and colours were important. By the end of the fifties the composition became more loose and the use of colours more freely expressionistic. From the sixties and until the present she has worked in a quite abstract expressionistic manner. In most of the pictures there are specific national elements, in form of references to Egyptian culture and religion. With '*Umm Rateeba*' (Ill. 234) from 1953 it seems obvious that she has her basis in the realism-tradition where we also can find several works of Gazzar, Nada and Efflatoun. The motif is a mother and her daughter at the age of 11 or 12. *Umm Rateeba* is sitting with a decent low-necked black dress, with her hair on top covered by a small yellow head scarf. In her ears and around her neck she is wearing all her gold-jewellery, with Fathima's hand hanging protective at her bosom. She is sitting with her right arm around the daughter's shoulders and holding her daughter's left hand in her other hand. The outlines and features are drawn with thick dark brush strokes against the pale skin. Her face has heavy features, but the features around the mouth



240. Gazbia Sirry:  
*The pulse of the city*, 1982



241. Gazbia Sirry: *Rural houses*, 1983

242. Gazbia Sirry: *Flowers*, 1991



reveal that she is quite content with her situation. Her hands are big and coarse, bearing witness of many years of hard labour. The features of the daughter resemble the ones of the mother, but they are thinner and more youthful. She is wearing a simple dress of floral fabric with some plain gold earrings. Her hair is done in two big braids hanging down on each side of her face. Behind the mother and daughter there is a window or a balcony with a wrought iron grate. This grate is painted somewhat casually, lines and forms disintegrate slightly, the expressive element is stronger here than in the figures, which was not an unusual tendency in contemporary Egyptian painting. In the same period she was also working in a figurative cubistic manner. *'A woman having her hair done'* (Ill. 235) from 1953 is a good example of this other technique. The motif is a standing woman doing the hair of a seated woman. The scene is taking place on a balcony. The picture is dominated by a strict geometric composition. The central perspective is clear, nearly all lines lead to the head of the seated woman. The composition is done very precisely, the floor has chess pattern, the rail of the balcony consists of heavy vertical and horizontal lines. The dominating colours are white, red and black. In the foreground a young woman wearing a short-sleeved red dress is seated on a chair. Her long, curly hair is being done by another standing young woman wearing a white short-sleeved dress. All changes of colour are underlined by thin black outlines, light and shadow is differentiated with two nuances of the same colour covering quite big areas. In the background some parts of houses are visible, to the left there is a red shutter door into the adjacent room. The picture is dominated by strong vertical forms; as the shutter, the standing woman and the posts for the balcony roof. One of the first examples of a more expressionistic style can be seen in *'The palm reader'* (Ill. 236) from 1956. The motif is a seated woman in a warm yellow dress, to the left a naked white woman with black head is standing, to the left a man with crossed arms and yellow head is standing. The figures are depicted frontally but the heads are in profile, they are looking out of the picture each in its own direction. These are figures with an ambiguous symbolic power. First they represent the passions between the two genders, passions and love affairs are very common reasons for seeking a fortune teller, whether she is reading the palms or cards. Secondly they represent Isis and Osiris who are an example of the love that defies all dangers, the man stands with crossed arms which is a ruler's gesture from Pharaonic times. Lastly this reference to the past is an insurance of the fortune teller's talents and that she has inherited her knowledge from ancient sources. The brush strokes have become more vivid and expressive in this picture, the colours changes rapidly between different nuances and contrasts between white – black and yellow – blue.





243. Rawia Sadeq: *The window*, 1985

244. Rawia Sadeq: *Daily Rhythms*, 1990



In later years she has had people's houses as a theme for her pictures, the houses also represent the inhabitants. She does not treat this subject in a social-realistic manner, but houses, details of buildings and people are important elements in the pictures. She is gradually changing towards more abstract expressions with slightly rounded square or rectangular forms as basis for the construction of the picture. This new manner is clearly seen in *'Houses from Cairo'* (Ill. 238) from 1967. The right part has a strong, but irregular square pattern of doors and windows in different forms, this part is mainly kept in black and grey. The left part has an intense red background with green and yellow parts, but also three bigger grey areas where the motif is façade fragments, in the biggest one the stones of the wall, windows, shutters and balcony grates are visible. In this picture she has used different artistic expressions to approach the same theme. This creates dynamics in the motif even if the composition is relatively static. After the war of 1967 she did not paint specific protest-paintings, but painted more allegoric expressions of houses in the old Islamic Cairo<sup>(70)</sup>. This can clearly be seen in *'Houses, whose heads are in flames'* (Ill. 237) from 1968. There are three big vertical areas, as blocks of houses. The one in the middle, the yellow, has very clear details, whilst the two red ones on each side are more indistinct. In the background, all three areas get more blue-grey nuances, the three areas are surrounded by heavy blue and black outlines. In *'Formation from Egypt'* (Ill. 239) from 1978 she is drawing the ancient Egyptian past into present time. There are two great pyramids placed upon each other, they are covering the entire picture, the one on top has white background, whilst the lower one has bluish background. Within the pyramid at the top there are enormous masses of people. The lower one is decorated with slightly abstract architectural elements. Both pyramids express in different manner how densely populated Cairo is. The expressions of this picture are quite abstract, but with a strong geometric composition.

In *'The pulse of the city'* (Ill. 240) from 1982 the theme is the rush and trouble in the city, the approach is more freely and expressionistic. Against an uneasy background of blue, yellow, red and white, she has with rapid and precise brush strokes sketched details of buildings and the city's inhabitants in a constantly motion in a stressed everyday life. Houses are also focused in *'Rural houses'* (Ill. 241) from 1983, the motif is two small village houses. They have cubic forms with easy depiction of windows and doors. They are standing against a heavy green background, but in the top of the horizon the desert is visible. It is obvious that for her it is a relief to go to the countryside's green fields, far away from the sand and dust of Cairo.





245. Rawia Sadeq: *Brown Chairs*, 1992



246. Rawia Sadeq:  
*Man on the balcony*, 1990

247. Rawia Sadeq: *From the balcony*, 1990







248. Rawia Sadeq:  
*Portrait of a woman*, 1988

249. Rawia Sadeq: *Seated woman*, 1988



In later years she has in some works started to use stronger and clearer colours. People and houses are still the most important motifs, but she has also painted some abstract flower-pictures, as *'Flowers'* (Ill. 242) from 1991. The stems are painted as strong vertical lines in different green nuances against a dark background. The flowers are represented as dots of colours hovering around freely in the composition. The relationship between people, the environment and time is a superior theme in Sirry's recent works. This is also reflected in her exhibitions, the last four to five years all her exhibitions have had the same main title: *'Time and Place'*.

*Rawya Sadek* (b. 1952) is an autodidact, but she has painted for about 10 years, she has a distinct and strong drawing. She feels influenced by Coptic art, but this is not clearly visible in her works. She keeps some distance from the traditional use of colours in Coptic art, according to herself this is too grey, her colours are warmer and clearer. In her opinion it is important that the unique Egyptian influence and peculiarity are expressed in the pictures. She is not using specific *'Egyptian'* elements to achieve this, but uses the colours and motifs from daily life. Her pictures have often strong and clear colours, obviously influenced by the Egyptian light. Influence from European expressionism is also clearly evident, specifically from Henri Matisse and to a certain extent also from Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. She does not paint portraits, but human figures can play an important part in several of her works. Frequent motifs are empty interiors, more or less as a still-life, persons in the interiors have usually turned their face or body away from the spectator. Lately she has gradually moved from figurative expressionism towards abstraction. The pictures are often kept in clear colours covering big areas, without particular nuances or details.

One of her earliest and most important pictures is *'The window'* (Ill. 243) from 1985. Through an open window in a dark room one can see out to a luxuriant garden. One can see the symbolic transition from one life-stage to another, from a dark and sinister situation, to a light and inspiring one. There is a lot of motion in this motif, some of it is depicted as distortion of perspectives and lines. In the upper part the naturalistic elements disintegrate, the window has no top, the motif is limited by the trees' organic forms against a grey background. The colours are succulent and full of contrasts, with black against yellow and brown against green. A typical picture from her somewhat later production is *'Daily Rhythms'* (Ill. 244) from 1990. The entire picture is painted in warm yellow nuances that recreate the light and warmth of Cairo. The motif is a close-up of two empty wicker chairs with a small table between them, at the table there is a bottle, a



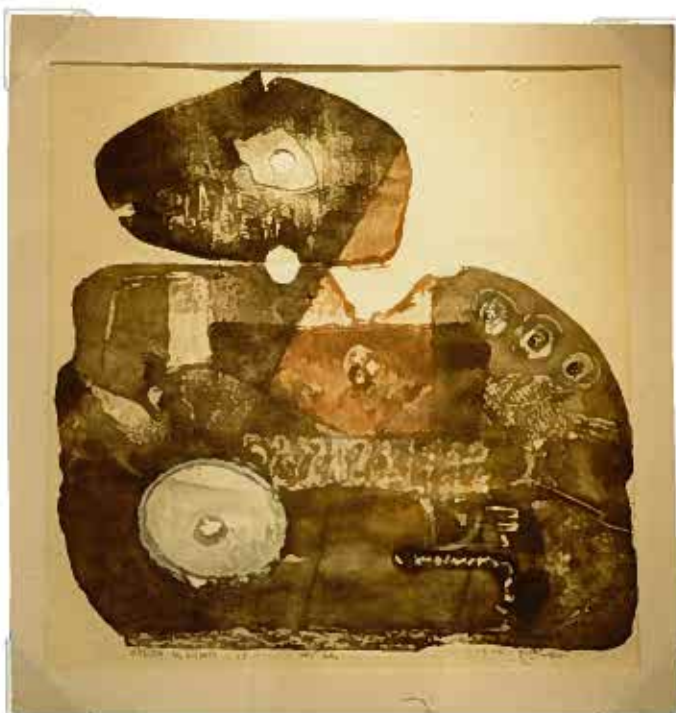


250. Miriam Abdel Alim:  
*Land of Civilization I*, 1991



251. Miriam Abdel Alim:  
*Land of Civilization II*, 1991

252. Miriam Abdel Alim:  
*Composition I*, 1988



253. Miriam Abdel Alim:  
*Assamblage*, 1990





bowl and a box. The perspective in the picture is a little distorted, each item is seen from a slightly different angle, the difference in viewpoint is so small that it creates a little disorder that gives motion to the picture, but still not greater than that the illusion of realism can be maintained. *'From the balcony'* (Ill. 245) from 1990 deals with the same theme, but here the balcony is seen from the outside, the motif is three wicker chairs a table and some potted plants. The colours move from grey-brown to golden nuances. The composition is a little naivistic, stiff without the inner movement that the distortion of perspective can provide. In the picture *'Man on the balcony'* (Ill. 246) from 1990 there is also the same stiff naivistic form. The manner of painting is quite different, she is here using rapid, broad and coarse brush strokes, with consistent use of contrast colours, white and blue-grey is dominating. The composition is staccato and restless, whilst the man in the wicker chair becomes stiff and without his own motion. *'Portrait of a woman'* (Ill. 248) from 1990, is another example of staccato brush strokes, but with brush strokes following the forms of the figure, this feature can be traced back to the influence from Kirchner. The motif is a dark woman sitting supporting her head in the hand, it is a very intense atmosphere. The picture is a close-up, dramatically cut both on the top and at the sides.

In *'Seated woman'* (Ill. 249) from 1988 we can again see that she creates the illusion of motion through distortion of lines and perspectives. This is one of the works where inspiration from Matisse is most clearly seen. The motif is a woman in a short blue dress sitting in a wicker chair with green pillows, beside her there is a table with a green table cloth, on her lap she has a white plate with some food. Her facial appearance cannot be seen, the face is completely without features. The background of the picture is completely black without any nuances, the black is also repeated in her belt. In the water-colour *'Brown chairs'* (Ill. 247) from 1992 there is also some of the same succulent use of colours. Also here she uses heavy contrasts such as yellow – blue and beige – red-brown. This motif is also from a balcony, two big armchairs of brown wood with grey pillows, they are facing each other on a blue floor, a table and a third chair can also be glimpsed. In the background to the left one can look into the flat, to the right there is a lucid yellow wall and some brown shutters. The motion in this picture is achieved through several different angles, perspectives, use of colours and the cutting of the motif.



254. Atteya Mostafa:  
*Al-Ka'bah*, 1984



255. Atteya Mostafa:  
*Composition I*, 1985



256. Atteya Mostafa:  
*Composition II*, 1987

*Mariam Abdel Aleem* (b. 1929) has for years been professor of graphics at the Academy of Fine Arts in Alexandria. She has through this position been of great importance for many contemporary young painters and graphic artists, a fact which is emphasised by amongst others Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen. She is working in a very personal abstract expressionistic manner, also with some surrealist elements. Her pictures are often full of symbols and references to Egyptian history and Islam. She is using calligraphy in some of her works, but without allowing this to be the dominant element of her pictures. Big, dark organic forms are often placed against each other and in contrast to pyramid forms and calligraphy.

Her *'Land of Civilization I'* (Ill. 250) from 1991 is an example of a motif underlining and emphasising the importance of the cultural diversity of Egypt. She is here concerned about both the Pharaonic and the Islamic culture. There are several greater, and numerous smaller pyramids all over the picture, there are also lots of more or less readable calligraphy, the name of God ﷲ, is repeated several places in the picture, most clearly in a dark cloud form to the top left. Further on there are several dark birds, both swallows and more mythological birds. The birds are here as immortality symbols for the different civilizations that have existed in Egypt. The use of colours reflect the landscape, sand coloured and some blue to represent the Nile. The technique, gouache on papyrus, is also emphasising the historical continuity. In her *'Land of Civilization II'* (Ill. 251) from 1991 there is another example of the combination of Pharaonic and Islamic culture in her depiction of Egypt. We can see the same elements; pyramids, parts of houses and black birds. The birds are ducks and ibis-birds, both with ancient tradition in Egyptian art. Birds also appear in old Coptic art. There are also strong elements of calligraphy, flowing freely at the bottom right, and very restricted – as a book page in the middle. Here she has used gold leaves as background for the red and black calligraphy. She has also used goldleaf on some of the pyramids. The colours are otherwise strong and clear; red, brown, black, yellow and turquoise for the river.

Usually she is working with graphics and she is often using a combination of different graphic techniques. *'Composition I'* (Ill. 252) from 1988 is a typical example of her recent graphic works. This is a combination of woodcut and etching, with the addition of small pieces of metals placed on the plate before printing. The motif is a combination of different organic forms, with elements of calligraphy and some birds. The colours are dark, mostly black, with smaller traces of rust-brown and green. In *'Assamblage'* (Ill. 253) from 1990 she is using the different possibilities which silk-screen provides, with both photographic and





257. Atteya Mostafa: *War*, 1992



258. Atteya Mostafa: *Yugoslavia*, 1992

259. Atteya Mostafa: *The Childrens festival*, 1992



manual treating of the screen. Centrally there is a foetus-looking figure, the head is a X-ray picture of a skull, the rest of the body is more sketchily drawn. To the top right there are parts of a big machine with gear wheels, there is a connection resembling a navel string between the figure and the machine.

Her graphic art is deeply rooted in the western art of the fifties, whilst she is getting more inspiration from the ancient and present Egyptian culture in her paintings. There are greater richness of details in the paintings than in the graphic works. She adjusts, to a certain degree, the expressions to the technique and depicts others through the graphics. The paintings can be regarded as mediators of eternal values, whilst the graphics are comments to present events.

*Atteya Mostafa* (b. 1937) has since 1977 worked a lot with calligraphy in her paintings, her art is expressed as *Islamic* art. She is not using calligraphy as a decorative element only, even if the decorative aspect is also important. Religion is very important to her, and she therefore wishes, through her art, to contribute to the spread of Islam, and to give people pictures for reflections. The Ka'bah of Mecca has for long time been a holy place, also before Islam, it has been a destination for pilgrimage for long time. According to Islamic tradition it was Abraham, the father of all Muslims, and his son Ismail, that rebuilt the Ka'bah and the Temple after the Deluge.<sup>(71)</sup> Her picture '*Al-Ka'bah*' (Ill. 254) from 1984 depicts the history about how Abraha, the infidel ruler over Al-Yaman, in his fights against Mecca had tried to destroy and remove the Ka'bah by elephants. This is a story vividly rendered in the Qur'an's Surah 105, Al-Fil<sup>(72)</sup>. Allah then became angry and sent a flock of giant birds that killed the elephants and stopped the attempt to destroy this holy place. The giant eagle is dominating the entire picture, whilst five elephants looking like mice in comparison run away deadly scared. Below the eagle there are parts of the Temple and the Ka'bah. A good example of her calligraphic style can be seen in '*Composition I*' (Ill. 255) from 1985. This is a picture of a city, totally dominated by domes of mosques and minarets. Both on and between the buildings, the 99 known names of Allah and quotations from the holy Qur'an are written in beautiful calligraphy. She is at the same time using the calligraphy to emphasise the architectural forms. The colours are in different light nuances with blue and red for effect. An other and more dramatic colouring can be seen in '*Composition II*' (Ill. 256) from 1987. This is a relatively surrealistic, quite dark interior of a mosque. The main motif is a richly adorned minbar – pulpit, with a peculiar extended calligraphy, going around it as a frieze. Below to the left there are some details of buildings, but also

71 Kari Vogt: *Islams Hus*, p. 122.

72 Holy Qur'an, *Surah 105*, p. 634 in M. Picthall's translation.

another mosque, and several lines with calligraphy. She is also commenting on contemporary political events in some of her pictures, as in *'Yugoslavia'* (Ill. 258) from 1992. The bottom of the picture is filled with black smoke from the ruins of the devastated Yugoslavia. Above this smoke there is a dirty and torn up Yugoslavian flag. To the left we can see the hope for the solution of the conflict, Islam, represented by several mosques and minarets against a light background. Above this there is a long Arabic text about the conflict, before the background again becomes entirely black. The use of colours is dramatic, with the contrast between black and the intense white and sharp contrasts between green and violet in the calligraphy. The war is also theme in *'War'* (Ill. 257) from 1992. The picture is kept in dark sinister colours, with explosions in white and red, a political message is written in the picture's centre.

Another aspect of her art has always been art for and with children. She paints pictures of children and different feasts for children, she is also making illustrations for children's books. *'The Children's Festival'* (Ill. 259) from 1992 is a good example of this aspect of her art. She is here using naivistic folkloristic expressions. The motif are two women richly adorned with all their traditional jewellery. The background has details of buildings with apparent allusions to traditional Islamic architecture. Between the two women there is a somewhat surrealistic element of three colourful fish, which are there only to complete the composition. Above the head of the woman to the right there are two small birds.

After this thoroughfare of some pictures of a selection of Egyptian female pictorial artists it is clearly seen that there is a great diversity of expressions and choice of motifs, and that they mainly are working within the same frames of references as their male counterparts. There is a considerably small degree of specific political or feminist motifs. According to Gazbia Sirry the women that really want to be artists have the same opportunities as their male colleagues.



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In this research of tendencies in modern Egyptian painting I have carefully been looking at issues related to:

- The establishing of a national pictorial art.
- The eventually existence of a specific common Arabic – Islamic pictorial aesthetic, which Egyptian pictorial art can or should be seen in relation to.
- Which topics of the pictorial art are specifically Egyptian, and which ones are part of international movements.

### Creation of Art-institutions

The condition for establishing a new, modern national pictorial art, built on the basis of *western* ideals, was to create different art-institutions. This work started early in this century. The first one to be established was '*cole Egyptienne des Beaux Arts*', later the Academy of Fine Arts, afterwards followed museums and other institutions. This was a part of the national revival or consciousness-process. The idea was and still is, that the creation of a national pictorial art is important to create and maintain a national identity. This school was naturally established after western academy patterns, there did not exist any alternative models. The school was of great importance for the development of specific Egyptian pictorial art, despite the fact that all the teachers were foreigners for the first years. In the thirties the school was reorganised several times, and achieved after a while a higher professional level, and could therefore professionally defend the designation, *Academy of Fine Arts*.

The Portal-figures Moukhtar and Nagi were also related to the school. Mahmoud Moukhtar was a student in the first class of the school. Mohammed Nagi became in 1937 the first Egyptian director of the school.

The need of higher education both in pictorial art and other fields of art, has not diminished over the years. A nation needs artists to express and develop new forms of manifestation of a national identity. In the years after the revolution the government has put relatively strong efforts behind this, paralleled with the building of other institutions for higher education.

### Arabic / Islamic pictorial aesthetics

As I have said in the introduction to chapter 5.3, I am of the opinion that one can *not* talk about a *common* Islamic or Arabic pictorial aesthetic. There are some similarities in the pictorial art in different Arabic countries, but there are also just as big dissimilarities. I find that the national heritage like Egyptian,

Babylonian, Palestinian and others plays a more important part in the development of pictorial art. Islam is however only *one* of several aspects of the society that pictorial art relates to.

On the other hand there is also an aspect that can be unifying, the fact that all Arabic countries were under European rule until this century. The systems of education are therefore built upon European models.

#### Tendencies in the Pioneer generation (1920 – 1980)

During this period Egyptian art was in a kind of '*establishing stage*'. This led to the fact that the predominating tendency is the national aspect, rooted in the Egyptian heritage. This gives different effects, both on the formal level and by the choice of motif. This Egyptian frame of reference which was established for modern art has never completely vanished, but has had different significance through the decades.

Both Moukhtar and Nagi got inspiration from the Pharaonic art, at the same time as they were rooted in a European tradition, and they used freely both these sources in their work. The figurative art is clearly dominant in this period. This is quite natural, as I pointed out in chapter 4.5, this is related to the position pictorial art had in expressing national identity.

After a while the artists use different sources of inspiration, the national romantic or folkloristic aspects become increasingly more important. The artists get their inspiration amongst peasants in the countryside and in the rich popular narrative tradition and in popular religiousness. Islam as such is not explicitly theme in this period, neither is calligraphic art. It is evidently that the predominant elements of this period are the '*pure Egyptian aspects*', which can unify all groups in society. Nagi, Saïd and Nada can in different ways be found within this movement.

Farouk Bassiouni<sup>(73)</sup> points out that there has been a rich diversity in Egyptian art since Ragheb Ayad in the thirties. He means that there was then a shift from a superficial '*impressionistic*' attitude towards a more participating '*expressive*' style. This shift did make way for other tendencies in modern Egyptian painting. Bassiouni claims that Egyptian artists from that time have used elements of the western directions, but combined them with Egyptian reality in a very personal manner.

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73 Farouk Bassiouni: *Gazbia Sirry*, p. 11.

The most important of the other tendencies in this period is the international tendency, with internationally interested intellectuals and artists, often connected to the political left-side and the surrealists. Before 1952 all Egyptian intellectuals had got their education and training at foreign schools and colleges either in Egypt or in Europe. It is therefore natural that many of these, as for instance Younan, was more inclined to follow the tendencies in Europe, than the growing national movement in Egypt. In other words we can clearly see several groups with different interests at that time. Egyptian surrealism also developed different from contemporary European surrealism. Egypt was however the point of reference also for these internationally inclined artists, but the Egyptian elements play another part than within the classical or national romantic aspects. This led to a living diversity, but also to great discord within Egyptian art and culture in the years before 1952.

In the years after the Second World War, and specifically after the 52-revolution, political art became predominant, with for instance different Pan-Arabic ideas. The attitudes of the West towards the Middle East after the establishing of Israel led to many intellectuals' dissociation from the West and western ideas, and led them to work with different means for Arabic unity. Egypt has also fought several wars against Israel. The solidarity with the Palestinian people and aggression against Israel was therefore strong in these years. Gazzar and Efflatoun have partly worked within this Pan-Arabic political orientation. Within political art there is also a strong national tendency.

In the seventies there was a shift within the political art, gradually the Islamic aspects emerged, and attained a stronger position in pictorial art than the clearly political and social realistic aspects.

The national aspect is the common denominator for the Egyptian pictorial art in this period. Looking at the whole period as an entity, reveals that Egypt and Egyptian culture have been a convergence point for *all* different tendencies of pictorial art. Another important feature of this period is also how artists change style or expressions according to what they want to express, to their message, they are not being *caught* by a specific style or trend. This is very clearly seen throughout this period from Nagi to Efflatoun.



### Tendencies in the Contemporary art (1980 – 1993)

The strong national tendency that was evident in the former generation continues also into contemporary art. This tendency is so deeply rooted that it has been determining for the cataloguing of the material. I have therefore also studied the contemporary art after a thematic and not stylistic division.

The national attachment is more or less necessary to exhibit, it therefore becomes a self reinforcing tendency. The tendency of seeking inspiration from the Pharaonic heritage or the popular culture continues. These are both aspects with a simple and clear national attachment and appeal.

In addition to the national aspect, the regional aspect, represented by the Islamic aspect, also plays an increasingly important part. This has both a national and an international aspect. The focus of international orientation has shifted from Europe to the common Arabic culture and Islam. The Islamic aspects appear in two different forms, either as calligraphy and calligraphic inspired works, or as religious, cultural or historic themes being treated in a figurative manner. This tendency to enforce the Islamic aspect, replaces partly the political art from the Nasser era. The political art, rooted in western social realism disappears as a tendency of vital importance. The same is happening to other western movements as for instance the surrealism. There is still a small number of artists keeping a clear international, western attachment, related to new movements within both abstract and figurative painting. These artists have usually lived and worked in Europe for several years.

Traditional painting on canvas plays indisputably the prominent part, installations and other experimental techniques are of secondary importance for contemporary Egyptian artists. An important tendency to register is even so the great variety of artistic expressions within all the different aspects of contemporary art. This diversity of expressions, which all in different ways get inspiration from ancient sources, leads to an impression of a *post-modern* tendency in pictorial art. Architectural elements, different symbols and calligraphy are taken out of their respective connections and brought together in new ways to create new *Egyptian* pictures.

It is very questionable to use a concept as *postmodernism* in a description of Egyptian pictorial art, because Egyptian art has not passed all the stages of western *modernism*. There are similar eclectic tendencies in earlier stages of Egyptian art. This implies that postmodernism is *not* a significant description. The problem of using such a description is also elucidated by the difficulties this research has shown, of using the other common western terms in the description of modern Egyptian pictorial art.

### Recapitulation

Through this research I have in different ways focused on how encounters between the Egyptian culture and the West are reflected in pictorial art.

The first field to focus on is that Egyptian artists relate different to tendencies in western art than the western artists do themselves. They are using elements of the different movements as concepts of style, that can be modified after their needs. The style is made into a tool for expressing the message. This is a circumstance that can be observed throughout the entire period.

The almost total absence of abstract art is also a noticeable feature, both in relation to western art of this period, and in relation to old Islamic art. This is probably connected to the overall importance of the national aspect of this period in Egyptian art.

It is obvious that the national aspect still plays a more important part in Egypt than in the West. The national aspect can be divided into two subgroups, the purely Egyptian aspect and the Islamic aspect. Artists sometimes get inspiration from specific parts of Egyptian history or present time, on other occasions they get inspiration from Islamic culture. The Islamic aspect has *two* important dimensions. In relation to western art it acts national, delimiting or independent. In an Islamic context it acts in a greater relation, it acts internationally and inclusively. The Egyptian film industry is also important in an Arabic context, it addresses the entire Arabic area. Egyptian intellectuals, actors, authors musicians and other artists, relate to and address usually the entire *Arab* world, not only Egypt. The present research shows even though that the specific *Egyptian* elements are more important than common Arabic ones as theme for pictorial art of this period.

My aim has been that this research should show that Egyptian pictorial art is not playing a passive and remote part in relation to western art, but that it relates to western art on its own terms. Egyptian artists achieve this amongst others by using elements from western art that fit for the purpose and combine these with elements from Egyptian culture. Egyptian pictorial art gets by this a unique and specific character, just as a result of the *encounters* between Western art, Islamic culture and Egyptian history.

## 7. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

This survey is sorted alphabetically on last name, even if this is not the family name. Arab naming is different from European, amongst others by the fact that surnames are not used in the same manner. In my sources there are several different spellings when the artists' names are transcribed to Latin letters. In some cases the Arabic spelling vary as well. To achieve the best consistency I have used the form that is most prevalent in my sources, and which the artists themselves use. To avoid too much confusion I have also added the Arabic writing. In parenthesis I have placed a *simplified* transliteration, to facilitate the pronunciation. This means amongst others that I make no distinction between weak and strong consonants, e.g. that both **س** and **ص** are being transliterated to **s** in Latin letters.

The most important, and in this context, most relevant information about the artists are included. It has not been possible to give a complete account of their exhibitions.

### 7.1. The Pioneer-generation

*Injy Efflatoun* (Inji Aflatoun) **إنجي أفلاطون**

Born in Cairo, 1924, dead in Cairo, 1989.

Private tutoring by Kamal al-Talmisani from 1940.

1941 participated for first time at one of 'Art et Liberté's' exhibitions.

Participated in the biennial in Venice 1952.

Participated in the biennial in São Paulo 1953.

Imprisoned of political reasons for 4 years 1959-63.

*Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar* (°Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar) **عبد الهادي الجزار**

Born in Alexandria 23.3 1925, dead in Cairo 7.3 1966

Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo 1944 to 1950.

I 1946 Husayn Yusuf Amin established 'Groupe de l'Art Contemporain', Gazzar joined this from the beginning.

1950 employed as teacher at Academy of Fine Arts after his graduation.

1954-55 one year of studies in Italy.

1957-61 four years of studies in Italy.

Participated in the biennial in Venice 1956 and 1960.

Participated in the biennial São Paulo 1957 and 1961.

*Mahmoud Moukhtar* (Mahmud Mukhtar) **محمود مختار**

Born in Tanyra 10.5 1891, dead in Cairo 27.3 1934.

'École Egyptienne des Beaux-Arts', Cairo 1908-1911.

'École des Beaux-Arts', Paris, 1911-1913.

Lived in Paris for most of his life, worked for several years on different projects for 'Egyptian Awakening'. Exhibited often in Cairo. Made several portrait-busts of Egyptian politicians.



*Hameed Nada* (Hamid Nada) **حامد ندا**

Born in Cairo 1924, dead in Cairo 1990.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1943 to 1948.

Member of 'Group de l'Art Contemporain'.

1960 one year of studies in Spain.

Worked for many years as professor at the Academies of Fine Arts in Alexandria and Cairo.

First one-man-show in Paris 1949, has later had several shows both in Egypt and abroad, and participated at numerous group exhibitions and biennials e.g. in São Paulo and Venice.

*Mohammed Nagi* (Muhammad Nagi) **محمد ناجى**

Born in Alexandria 17.1 1888, dead in Cairo 1956.

Studied law at the University of Lyon (1906-10).

Studied later painting at 'L'Accademia di Belli Arti' in Florence (1910-14).

Employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1924 to 1928, during this period he was stationed amongst other places in Rio de Janeiro and Paris. Between 1937 and -39 he was the first Egyptian director of 'École des Beaux-Art' in Cairo.

Between 1939 and -47 he was director for 'Musée d'Art modern du Caire'.

From 1947 he was director at 'Accademia d'Egitto' in Rome, an academy established by Egyptian government to provide the possibility for Egyptian students to study in Italy. He was also Cultural-attaché at the Egyptian embassy there, he stayed in office until 1950.

*Mahmoud Saïd* (Mahmud Sa'id) **محمود سعيد**

Born in Alexandria 4.8 1897, dead in Alexandria 4.8 1964.

No formal art-education, but got tutoring by miss Blackburn and Mrs. Emilia Cazonato in Alexandria.

1919 'Bachelor of Law' from Cairo University, 3 years stay in Paris for further law studies and some art studies.

Worked as judge, at the same time as he painted, retired from the position as judge at an age of 50 in 1947.

*Ramsees Younan* (Ramsis Yunan) **رمسيس يونان**

Born in Cairo 1913, dead in Cairo 24.12 1966.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1930 to 1933.

Art teacher in Port Said between 1936 and 1940, moved then to Cairo.

Stayed in Paris between 1947 and 1956, where he worked in the Arabic department of Radio Française.

Awarded with state scholarship from 1960.

## 7.1. The Contemporary artists

### *Mohammed Abla* (Muhammad °Abla) محمد عبلة

Born in Bilqas i Mansoura, 1953.

Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria, 1977.

6 months studies in Spain and Franc in 1979, 6 months studies of graphics in Vienna in 1980 followed by 6 months studies of graphics and sculpture i Zurich, also in 1980. Lived in Germany for 3 years between 1982 and -85. He has had more than 25 shows in Egypt, Germany, Holland, Sweden and Italy.

### *Mariam Abdel Aleem* (Maryam °Abd al-°Alim) مريم عبد العليم

Born in Alexandria 1929.

Diploma from Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria 1954.

MA. University of Southern California, 1957.

Further studies at 'Brat-Institute' in New York, and in Italy.

Professor and head of the Graphics department at Academy of Fine Arts in Alexandria.

More than 15 shows in Egypt, Lebanon, US, Norway, Italy and Germany.

Participated in numerous international print-biennials and triennials. Received several prizes, e.g. the jury-prize in Fredrikstad 1989.

### *Sarwat El-Bahr* (Tharwat al-Bahr) ثروت البحر

Born in Alexandria 16.2 1944.

Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria 1964.

Has had 20 shows since 1964.

Represented Egypt at the Biennial in Venice 1981.

Participated at many group exhibitions of Egyptian art, both in Egypt and abroad.

### *Mahmoud Bakshish* (Mahmud Baqshish) محمود بقشيش

Born in Kafr El-Zayat Gharbiya 25.12 1938.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1963.

Worked as art teacher in Kafr El-Sheikh in the delta for 20 years until 1984, at present time living in Cairo. Works mainly as painter, but is also writing art critics and articles, and has written two novels.

### *Ali Dessouki* (°Ali Disuqi) على دسوقي

Born in Cairo, 1937.

Autodidact, but followed the free-class at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo 1959-64.

Has worked with layout i Al-Ahram, book covers and illustrations, at present he is working in 'Ministry of Culture' administering studios in 'Wekalet al-Ghoury'.

Has had more than 15 show, and participated in several group exhibitions.

*Salah Enani* (Salah °Anani) صلاح عنانى

Born in Cairo, 1955.

BA. Academy of Art-Education, Helwan University, Cairo 1977.

MA same place 1987.

Has had more than 5 shows in Egypt.

Professor in painting at Academy of Art-Education.

Director of 'El-Ghoury Palace for Cultural Inheritance', Cairo.

*Husein El-Gebaly* (Husayn al-Gibali) حسين الجبالى

Born in 1934.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo and Urbino, Italy.

Has had nearly 50 shows i Egypt, Italy, Netherlands and Qatar. Participated more than 40 times at the most important international print biennials and triennials.

Professor and head of the Graphics department at Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo.

*Farghali Abdel Hafiz* (Farghali °Abd al-Hafiz) عبد الحفيظ فرغلى

Born in Diarout 1941.

BA. from Academy of Art-Education, Cairo, 1962

Dr. Art. from 'Accademia di Belli Arti', Florence, 1967.

Has had more than 30 shows, mainly in Egypt, but also in Italy, France and Kuwait. Participated at more than 25 international group exhibitions.

Dean at Academy of Art-Education in Cairo from 1989.

*Farouk Hosni* (Faruq Husni) فروق حسنى

Born in 1942.

BA. from Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria 1964.

Studies in Belgium and France.

Cultural-attaché i Paris 1971-78, Cultural-attaché in Rome 1978-87, Director of 'Accademia d'Egitto'1983-87. Minister of culture from 1987.

Has had numerous shows in e.g. Egypt, Italy and France, participated at several group exhibitions.

*Taha Hussein* (Taha Husayn) طه حسين

Born in Cairo, 1929.

Diploma from Academy of Applied Arts, Cairo, 1951.

Diploma from Academy of Art-Education, Cairo, 1953.

Diploma from Institute of Design, Cairo, 1955.

Diploma in ceramics from Academy of Fine Arts in Krefeld, BRD, 1959.

Diploma from Academy of Fine Arts, Düsseldorf, BRD, 1961.

Ph.D. from Cologne University, 1965.

Has had more than 35 shows of paintings and ceramics in Egypt and Germany.

Participated at many international group exhibitions.

Dean at Academy of Applied Arts at Helwan University, Cairo 1978-81.

Professor and head Department of Industrial-design, same place since 1981.



*Ahmed Abdel Karim* (Ahmad °Abd al-Karim) أحمد عبد الكريم

Born in Cairo, 1954.

BA. from Academy of Art-Education, Helwan University, Cairo, 1981.

MA. from Academy of Art-Education, 1985.

Ph.D. from Academy of Art-Education, 1990.

Has had approximately 10 shows in Egypt, and participated at more than 25 group exhibitions.

*Essam Marouf* (°Issam Ma°rouf) عصام معروف

Born in Cairo, 1958.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo, 1976-81.

Accademia di Belli Arti, Rome, 1982-85.

Living in Amsterdam since 1986.

Has since 1989 had 5 shows in Egypt and in Netherlands, and participated at several group exhibitions.

*Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen* (°Abd al-Wahhab °Abd al-Muhsin) عبد الوهب عبد المحسن

Born in Balkas, 1951.

BA. from Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria, 1976.

Has had 12 shows in Egypt, and 1 in Basel in Switzerland.

Participated at 15 international print biennials and many group exhibitions in Egypt.

*Mostafa Abdel Moity* (Mustafa °Abd al-Mu°ti) مصطفى عبد المعطي

Born in Alexandria, 1938.

BA. from Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria 1962.

MA. from Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria 1972.

Ph.D. from 'Accademia San Fernando', Madrid 1974.

Teacher at Academy of Fine Arts, Alexandria from 1962. Vice minister of culture from 1980-88. Director at 'l'Accademia d'Egitto', Rome from 1988.

Has had approximately 30 shows in Egypt, Italy and Spain.

Participated at about 25 international group exhibitions.

*Abdel Wahab Morsi* (°Abd al-Wahhab Mursi) عبد الوهاب مرسي

Born in Cairo, 1931.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1957, Academy of Art-Education, Cairo 1958.

Started as art teacher at a secondary school in Aswan. Later curator and artistic supervisor at the 'Antiquities Documentation Centre'. For many years director for the 'National and Art Museums of Egypt' until 1991.

*Atteya Mostafa* (°Atiya Mustafa) عطية مصطفى

Born in Alexandria, 1937.

BA. from Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1970.

He has had 23 shows in Egypt, Kuwait and Malaysia.

Participated at about 10 international group exhibitions.

*Ezz El-Din Naguib* (°Izz al-Din Nagib) عز الدين نجيب

Born in Sharkia, 1940.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1962.

Director of 'Wekalet Al-Ghoury Art studios', he is also working as an art critic. He has written 'The Dawn of Egyptian Modern Painting'.

Has had about 15 shows in Egypt and 2 in London. Participated at several international group exhibitions, first time in 1964.

*Ahmed Nawar* (Ahmad Nawwar) أحمد نوار

Born in Cairo, 1945.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo, 1966.

Ph.D. 'Accademia San Fernando', Madrid.

Has had more than 50 shows in Egypt and abroad.

Participated at the important international print biennials since the sixties.

Participated in numerous group exhibitions in Egypt, and in several Egyptian exhibitions abroad.

Professor in Graphics at Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo, and director at 'National Centre of Art'.

*Adly Rizkallah* (°Adly Rizqallah) عدلى رزق الله

Born in Assiut, 1939.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo, 1956-61.

Lived in Paris 1971-80.

Works as illustrator in addition to independent artistic work. Has had about 30 shows in Egypt, France, Kuwait and Jordan.

*Mohammed Sabry* (Muhammad Sabri) محمد صبرى

Born in Cairo, 21.12 1917.

Academy of Applied Arts, Cairo 1937, Ph.D. 'Accademia San Fernando', Madrid.

Diploma of Spanish from Madrid University, 1956.

Numerous shows in Egypt and Europe.

Director of Exhibition at 'General Council of Art', Cairo, Assistant director & expert at 'Egyptian Institute of Islamic Studies' in Madrid for 20 years. Professor at Academy of Applied Arts at Helwan University, Cairo.

*Rawya Sadek* (Rawiya Sadiq) راوية صادق

Born in Cairo, 1952.

BA in French literature from Cairo University 1978, and Diploma of Film-direction from 'Institute for Film and Cinema' at Cairo Academy of Arts.

Autodidact as painter.

2 shows at Mashrabeia Gallery and 2 i Centre Culturel Française in Cairo.

*Reda Abdel Salaam* (Rida °Abd al-Salam) رضا عبد السلام

Born in Suez, 1947.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1977, Ph.D. same place.

Professor of mural-painting at Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo since 1977.

Participated at several international group exhibitions and has had many shows in Egypt.

*Gameel Shafik* (Gamil Shafiq) جميل شفيق

Born in Tanta, 1938.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo 1962.

Worked with ALESCO (Arab UNESCO) in Oman 1979 - 1985. Previously worked as journalist and illustrator in magazine for the peasant's union.

*Gazbia Sirry* (Gazbiya Sirri) جازبية سرى

Born in Cairo, 1925

'The High Institute of Art Education for women', Cairo 1947-49.

Studies in Paris 1950 and Rome 1952.

Diploma from Slade College London 1955.

Several long stays in the US.

More than 50 shows in Egypt, Europe and US.

Participated at numerous group exhibitions in Egypt and abroad.

Former professor in drawing and painting at Academy of Art-Education in Cairo, Helwan University, and at the 'American University in Cairo'.

*Adel El-Siwi* (°Adil al-Siwi) عادل السيوى

Born in Cairo, 1952.

Diploma as MD. from Cairo University 1976.

Attended classes at Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo, 1974-78.

Lived, and worked as artist in Milan for 10 years (1980-90).

Has had several shows in Italy, Egypt, Germany and Lebanon, first time in 1980.

*TAD* (pseudonym) تاد

Born in Cairo, 1946.

Academy of Fine Arts, Cairo, 1966.

Worked as cartoonist in different Egyptian magazines since 1966.

Has had 5 shows and participated at 15 group exhibitions.

*Ali Nabil Wahba* (°Ali Nabil Wahba) على نبيل وهبه

Born in Fakos, 1937

Academy of Art-Education, Cairo, 1962. Ph.D. same place.

Worked for several years as teacher at the Academy of Art-Education. Was then for 10 years professor at Academy of Fine Arts at Riyadh University, Saudi Arabia (1974-1984).

Different administrative offices in 'Ministry of Culture', (1984 - 1992), before he was appointed director for 'Museum of Modern Egyptian Art', in 1992.



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