



Mahmoud Saïd

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MESRID

Introduction

For most art historians, the Bénézit dictionary, initiated by Emmanuel Bénézit (1854-1920) in 1911, is recognised as being probably the most important and comprehensive reference dictionary for painters, sculptors, draughtsmen and engravers from all across the world. Its full title in French is translated as ‘Critical and documentary dictionary of painters, sculptors, draughtsmen and engravers from all times and from all countries by a group of French and foreign expert writers’ in the 1999 fourth edition published in fourteen volumes. This encyclopaedia of artists consists of 13,440 pages for 175,000 names, yet nowhere does the name ‘Mahmoud Saïd’ feature. The entries under the ‘SAI’ section are alphabetically listed as such: SAIA, Pietro (1779-1833); SAÏD (See also LÉVY Alphonse Jacques); SAÏD, Anne (1914-1995); SAIDI, Aboul Ghasem (b. 1925); SAIER, Joseph (19th century).

In 2010, the Bénézit was acquired by the Oxford University Press, which then created an online version in 2011. Yet whatever way one types and transcribes the name ‘Mahmud Sa’id’ or ‘Mahmoud Saïd’ (as spelt out by the Egyptian authorities in two of his passports) from the Arabic, the same screen pops up: ‘No results matching your search request were found’.

Mahmoud Saïd does not seem to be even mentioned nor

referenced in art history courses in Western universities. Nada Shabout’s lectures and seminars at the University of North Texas are probably the most relevant to Saïd in terms of subject and historical context. In other words, it seems that Mahmoud Saïd’s name, as most of his fellow Modern Egyptian artists, has simply been omitted from the Western concept of the History of Art.

Paradoxically, several books and thesis written by locally and internationally acclaimed academics, from Aimé Azar in 1961 to Esmat Dawastashy in 1997, from Liliane Karnouk in 2005 to Nesma Atallah in 2010, have rightfully identified Mahmoud Saïd as one of the main pioneers of Modern Egyptian Art and arguably the father of Modern Egyptian Painting. It therefore comes with no surprise that one of the jewels of Alexandria, the artist’s native city, is a museum entirely dedicated to Mahmoud Saïd and home to many of his masterpieces. In the Egyptian capital, Cairo, Mahmoud Saïd’s crucial role for Modern Egyptian Art is remembered every time a visitor enters the Museum of Modern Art. The visitor is greeted by one of Saïd’s most monumental and iconic compositions, *La ville* (1937), proudly hanging in the main entrance hall.

For the Western individual who has not had the chance of visiting these two remarkable museums in Alexandria and Cairo, he/she can almost be excused of disregarding



One of Mahmoud Saïd’s passports, 1952-1953



View of the entrance of the Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria

Mahmoud Saïd and his fellow Modern Egyptian artists due to various geographical, historical and cultural circumstances. Indeed, Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art as a whole has drawn the attention of Western collectors, academics and museums only very recently in the last decade. Nada Shabout's justification for 'the absence of modern Arab art from the international scene, particularly in this age of instant global communication, is that Arab art is still associated with Islamic artefacts'. Geographically, Egypt, like the rest of the Middle East, was isolated from the West in terms of artistic development. Until the early 20th century, this region was seen as an exotic place, a land of curiosity producing solely 'Islamic artefacts' and a source of inspiration for Orientalist and Romanticist artists and writers. Historically, since Antiquity until its independence from Britain in 1922 with the last British troops leaving only in 1956, the story of Egypt was a succession of invasions by various people scattered over a period of more than 2,400 years, from the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arab-Islamic conquest, the

Kurdish/Turkish/Ottoman invasion, the Napoleonic expedition, until falling under the British military regime in 1882, creating a mosaic society of different ethnics. Without a national identity, Egypt could not have developed its own modern art. Like other countries governed by foreign powers, the outcome of colonialism led to a growing feeling of resistance and nationalism and finally concluded with the country's independence. Egypt may be one of the most ancient lands, yet it is a fairly young, independent nation. Hence the notion and recognition of a Modern Egyptian Art is also relatively recent in the timeline of history. Culturally, although there were many exhibitions organised for Egyptian artists throughout the 20th century supported by important collectors, patrons and galleries from the region, these events remained local and the art was rarely exported to other countries. Furthermore, contemporary literature on Modern Egyptian Art was not prolific. Most primary and secondary sources are difficult to access being often out-of-print and published solely in Arabic. For example, the most comprehensive



Inside the Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria

monographs on Mahmoud Saïd, such as that of Badr El Din Abou Ghazi (1971), Moustafa El-Razzaz (1997), Esmat Dawastashy (1997) and Nesma Atallah (2010), have all been exclusively published in Arabic. These circumstances have limited, to a certain extent, the exposure of Mahmoud Saïd, and more generally Modern Egyptian Art to the rest of the world.

However, with recent publications of critical studies in English on Modern Egyptian Art done by Shabout, Karnouk, Miller, or the impressive monograph in Arabic on Mahmoud Saïd put together by Dawastashy, there is a growing academic awareness and interest in that 'forgotten corner' of the History of Art. Simultaneously, there is an increasing number of local and international galleries, exhibitions, private collectors and museum acquisitions promoting, seeking and buying Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art including Modern Egyptian Art. In the last few years, global auction houses have contributed in raising the awareness by successfully selling this relatively new category of art and introducing a new taste for collectors. In terms of commercial value, Modern Egyptian Art currently dominates this category with a total of around \$14.5 million, consisting of roughly only 210 lots. This represents approximately one fifth of the total Arab art sold over the same period in terms of value and just under one sixth in terms of number of lots. Although the most expensive Modern and Contemporary Middle

Eastern lot ever sold at auction remains a monumental piece by renowned Iranian sculptor Parviz Tanavoli (Christie's Dubai, 2008, price realised: \$2,841,000), the two most expensive Modern and Contemporary Arab works ever sold at auction are Egyptian paintings, both by Mahmoud Saïd (*Les dervishes tourneurs* and *Les chadoufs*, Christie's Dubai, 2010, respective prices realised: \$2,546,500 and \$2,434,500), which have made the headlines in international and local press.

This article offers a brief overview of the artist Mahmoud Saïd in order to demonstrate his role within Modern Egyptian Art and to justify his place within the History of Art, focusing on specific aspects of his artistic career. The first part will explore Saïd's relationship with Western art: first, through his early beginnings and the historical and social background, then through his artistic training and Western influences, and finally through the observation of how he integrated and interpreted Western art in his works. Secondly, the national Egyptian character present in Saïd's oeuvre will be discussed through his homage to his native country's past and present, through the incarnation of nationalism and through his visual expression of tradition and spirituality. Before concluding this article, the socio-political, cultural and psychological tensions overshadowing Saïd's paintings will be examined: nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, tradition versus modernity, and artist versus lawyer.

Mahmoud Saïd: Faithful Or Disloyal To Western Art?

Historical and social background

In order to study Mahmoud Saïd's oeuvre, it is crucial to understand its historical, social and cultural setting. As mentioned briefly in the introduction, the notion of 'national identity' was very recent as the chain of multi-ethnic invasions raging through Egypt for more than 2,000 years was only breached in 1922 when the country declared its independence from British protectorate. The main consequences of this turbulent history are both political and cultural. On one side is the people's growing feeling of resistance against colonialism that led to nationalism and ultimately independence; on the other side, 2,400 years of history tainted by such a variety of ethnicities meant the accumulation of an unparalleled rich cultural heritage, overwhelming this new nation. In contrast to Western Art, which emerged from the common notion of nationhood, ethnic arts developed relatively independently from each other, being rooted in different races, cultures and nationalities from the Islamic diaspora. Hence the challenge for Mahmoud Saïd and the other Modern Egyptian artists was to reconcile the concept of nationalism, intrinsically linked to unity, with the disparity of their country's opulent and abundant cultural baggage. As emphasised by Liliane Karnouk in her critical study on Modern Egyptian Art, Egyptian artists needed to find 'a balance between loyalty to an imposing past and their effort to liberate themselves from its burden'.

The sense of nationalism in Egypt already existed under Muhammad Ali's (1769-1849) leadership, as he liberated Egypt from the French, although it still remained under Ottoman sovereignty until the First World War. Ahmed Orabi (1841-1911) also sought to quench this nationalistic thirst by forming a movement to go against the foreign ruling elites in Egypt. Yet nationalism in Egypt firmly established itself under British colonialism as the Egyptian politician Saad Zaghloul (1859-1927) led a nationalistic party, called the Wafd, against this colonial power, which culminated in three weeks of blood-drenched protests in Cairo in March 1919. At the Paris Peace Conference in April 1919, Zaghloul and the Wafd asked for Egypt's independence and it was only three years later that Britain finally gave in and put an end to its protectorate in Egypt. All these

political events were rapidly unfolding at the same time as Mahmoud Saïd's early beginnings as an artist.

In conjunction with these historical incidents there was an 'Egyptian Awakening' in the 19th and 20th centuries, as labelled by Liliane Karnouk, with regards to arts and culture. Karnouk describes all the elements of this 'Egyptian Awakening' in her chapter titled as such, starting from the Romantics who travelled to Egypt to seek the original beauty of Antiquity; the Orientalists who sought a new visual vocabulary through their travels in these exotic lands of the Middle East; Vivant Denon's (1747-1825) publication of *Description de L'Egypte* in 21 volumes pursuant to the Napoleonic 1798 expedition to Egypt; Jean-François Champollion's (1790-1832) deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822; the increasing number of acquisitions of Egyptian artefacts by leading European museums and the excavation of many archaeological sites in Egypt, which climaxed in Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Karnouk explains how the accumulation of these historical and cultural events became the ingredients that nurtured a new Egyptian ideology referred to as Neo-pharaonism, popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Mahmoud Saïd's counterpart in sculpture, Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891-1934), embodied this very notion of Neo-pharaonism through his graceful and monumental works, the most iconic being the imposing sculpture at the entrance of Cairo University, entitled *Egypt's Awakening* (1919-1928).

It is this confrontation between a growing nationalism and an increasing awareness or 'awakening' of Egypt's past that sourced the foundations of Modern Egyptian Art. Within this political and cultural context, the Egyptian artist had to create a 'national' style, and to achieve this, it was necessary to turn towards Western Art. Western Art had been introduced in Egypt over the past centuries with leaders hiring European artists to work for them. Moreover, Orientalism, Romanticism and colonialism brought waves of foreign artists who settled in Egypt. As described in Elizabeth Miller's extensive research, in the 1920s, Mahmoud Saïd's native city, Alexandria, counted more than a fifth of the population that was foreign, including predominantly Greeks and Italians, but also British and French nationals. Even so, there were many Egyptians in Alexandria as in Cairo



Front cover of Mahmoud Saïd's Calligraphy Book.

who were actually Jews, Armenians and Syrians who had obtained Egyptian citizenship. This large fraction of foreign expatriates, amongst which many were artists, and the alarming 90% rate of illiterate Egyptians at the turn of the 20th century, raised the awareness of elitist nationalist Egyptians to opt for an 'education of taste'. This coincides with the beliefs of the late 19th and 20th century Egyptian cultural renaissance known as 'Al Nahda' that emphasised the importance of learning from the West. Nada Shabout talks about an 'artistic vacuum and inferiority felt by the artists' in Egypt, as its various Islamic arts had stagnated since the Ottoman Empire. She concludes that for Egyptian artists, 'it was natural to adopt and imitate Western artistic traditions and aesthetics'. Prince Youssef Kamal (1874-1932) played a crucial role in creating this 'education of taste' by providing Egyptian artists with direct access to Western artistic aesthetics and techniques. Being an art lover, he was at the origin of the Société des Amis de l'Art of 1923. (Cultural events in Egypt will be organized in 2013 to celebrate the 90th anniversary of this society's creation.) Prince Kamal also founded the first Egyptian School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908, a privately owned school that funded the free education of its students. Amongst the first students who enrolled and graduated in 1910 were Mahmoud Mokhtar, Mohamed Hassan,



Page from Mahmoud Saïd's Calligraphy Book. The second and third lines are the artist's hand writing.

Ragheb Ayad and Youssef Kamel. The works of these painters and sculptors were showcased for the first time publicly in 1911 at the 'Première Exposition pour les Aïnés'.

Early beginnings as an artist & a discussion of Western aesthetics

Born in 1897 in Alexandria, Mahmoud Saïd was brought up in a cosmopolitan and aristocratic society. He was fluent in Arabic, French and English. Mohamed Saïd Pacha (1863-1928), his father, was of Turkish origin. He was Egypt's Prime Minister from February 1910 to April 1914, and again from May until November 1919 under Britain's protectorate. Hence, Mohamed Saïd Pacha and his son found themselves first-hand witnesses to all the drastic political and cultural changes sweeping through Egypt. Mahmoud Saïd was also directly linked with Egypt's royal circle: one of his nieces was Safnaz Zulficar, better known as Queen Farida (1921-1988), having married King Farouk I of Egypt (1920-1965) in 1938. Saïd's education was divided between four prestigious private schools in Egypt: the British-founded Victoria College and the school of the Jesuit Fathers, both in Alexandria; the best secondary private Arabic school in Egypt called El-Saidiya Secondary School, Cairo, where he was taught drawing by his teacher



Amelia Casonato Daorno, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 43x59cm., not dated. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

Tewfik Efendi; and finally, El-Abassiya Secondary School in Alexandria, where Mahmoud Saïd obtained his Baccalaureate in 1915. On top of this, between 1910 and 1914, his father Mohamed Saïd Pacha also hired local and international professors for his children's private education at home, as pointed out by the art historian Sidky El-Gabakhany. El-Gabakhany informs us in his article that the teachers included Mr. Ahmed Amin (who later became a member of the Academy of the Arabic Language, Cairo); Mr. El-Khodary, and European teachers, Ms. Blackburn and Ms. Casonato .

Heavily influenced by his family, Saïd followed the path of a lawyer's career, obtaining a licence in French Law from the French Law School in Cairo in 1919 . He was appointed judge at the mixed tribunal the year after. At the same time, having a passion for art, Saïd also

attended private artistic training classes around 1915 in the studios of Italian Impressionist Amelia Casonato Daorno (1878-1969), one of his private teachers listed above, and that of Arturo Zanieri (1870-1955), both of whom were graduates from the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. Saïd studied for three years in the 'Atelier Zanieri', rue El-Nabi Daniel, one of Alexandria's main streets, which was situated just above the studio of photographer Alban, author of the well-known black and white photographs of Mahmoud Saïd, currently displayed in the Mahmoud Saïd Museum. Ahmed Rassem's article in Dawastashy's book provides further information on the pupils studying alongside Saïd at the 'Atelier Zanieri', such as the painter's cousin Ahmed Rassem, whose portrait Saïd realised in 1915; Sherif Sabri, Queen Nazli's brother and King Farouk I's uncle, and Italian painter Giuseppe Sebasti. In 1918,



Arturo Zanieri, Portrait, oil on canvas, 60x48cm., 1938. Museum of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Alexandria.

Zanieri informed the students that he was closing down his studio and moving back to Europe, where he was later appointed Italian Cultural Attaché in Spain. Some of Saïd's earliest known works show his awareness of traditional landscape painting, such as the 1913 landscape, and academic portraiture such as the 1917 subtle portrait of his uncle Ahmed Mazloum. Others, like the small panel representing a waterwheel, are also reminiscent of Zanieri's and Daferno's paintings in their realist approach to nature.

Between 1919 and 1921, Mahmoud Saïd took the initiative of travelling to France in order to further study art in private Parisian schools. He spent the first year studying drawing in the 'free' department of La Grande Chaumière in Paris, where Nabis master Maurice Denis, amongst others, had taught. According to Ezz El-Din Naguib, Saïd attended the courses given there by Classical French sculptor and painter Émile Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929). Two of this art school's famous students were artists Fernand Léger (1881-1955) and

Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). In May 1919, the latter had just settled in his studio in rue de la Grande Chaumière, in the same street as the academy. During the summers of 1920 and 1921, Saïd pursued his artistic training at the Académie Julian, where some of the most important 19th and 20th century European Artists had been taught two or three decades earlier, such as the Orientalist painter Jacques Majorelle (1886-1962; studied in 1903); the Nabis masters Maurice Denis (1870-1943; studied in 1888), Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940; studied in 1886) and Paul Sérusier (1864-1927; studied in 1885); the German Expressionist Emil Nolde (1867-1956; studied in 1899); the Fauve artists Henri Matisse (1869-1964; studied in 1891) and André Derain (1880-1954; studied in 1904); and Fernand Léger (studied circa 1903). Makram Henein, an Egyptian art historian, documented that the academic French painter Paul Albert Laurens (1870-1934) was Saïd's professor at the Académie Julian. These months spent at both academies were crucial for Saïd's training as an artist as he found himself at the heart of the bubbling Parisian art scene. He learnt how to draw the human body from live models and how to capture the sitter's expression, as evident from the detailed sketches here illustrated. Furthermore, these art courses induced him to make frequent visits to the Louvre in Paris, where he learned the canons of Western Art from studying the museum's European treasures.

Saïd married Samiha Hanem Riad in 1922 at the age of 25. He nonetheless pursued his travels throughout Europe, visiting major art museums, churches and cities in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Switzerland and especially Italy. He absorbed as much as possible from this enlightening sightseeing, recording some of the cityscapes or landscapes he saw in small paintings or sketches. As pointed out by Elizabeth Miller, Mahmoud Saïd revealed some of his preferences in Western Art in his correspondence to French artist Pierre Beppi-Martin (1869-1954) who lived in Egypt. In one of his letters to Beppi-Martin dated 1927, Saïd had clearly been impressed by the art of Venetian Renaissance painters, Gentile (died circa 1507) and Giovanni Bellini (died 1516), as well as that of Vittore Carpaccio (died circa 1526), writing that 'their vision of things, the unforgettable charm of their landscapes where the eye



Mahmoud Saïd, Paysage, watercolour and gouache on paper, 22x53cm., 1913. Private collection.

loses itself in an unending enchantment, the vibrant rhythm of the ground, of the sky, of the architecture, were for me the subject of long daydreams'. As noted by Miller, some of the compositional and architectural elements present in Carpaccio's or the Bellini brothers' paintings have been quoted in a few works by Mahmoud Saïd. She gives the example of the cityscape in the background of one of Saïd's self-portraits dated 1924, that echoes the architecture present in Gentile Bellini's Procession of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco or Saint Marc Preaching in Alexandria, painted with his brother Giovanni. It seems that the architecture and spatial composition found in some of the Italian Primitives' works also influenced Saïd's works, such as Ambrogio Lorenzetti's (1285-c.1348) vast masterpiece fresco of the Allegory of the Good Government (1338-40) that decorates the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. The background in Saïd's *Naïma*, executed in 1925, seems to borrow, merge and re-interpret similar elements from these Italian artists' architectural components. Saïd also holds a lot of admiration for the Flemish Primitives, such as Jan van Eyck (died 1441), Rogier

van den Weyden (died 1464) and Hans Memling (died 1494). He claimed in an interview with Jean Moscatelli, published in the January 1936 issue of *La Semaine Égyptienne*, that their paintings 'carried me away by their carefully thought-out compositions, by their depth and the sobriety of their colour tones, by their enamelled surfaces so perfect, by their profound understanding of shapes, and particularly by their humanity so penetrating'. The revolutionary invention of superimposing thin, transparent, layers of oil paint, generally attributed to Jan van Eyck, produced the effect of enamelled surface. Saïd adopted and mastered this delicate painterly technique, as seen throughout his oeuvre of jewel-like paintings. He also explored in some works aerial perspective that predominated Flemish Primitive art over classical geometric perspective, an example of which will be discussed later on. As he mentioned to Moscatelli, 'the penetrating humanity' of these artists had a strong effect on Saïd, and one of his most striking paintings capturing this deep emotion is *Café populaire* (1929). Each of the four figures appear to be isolated from one another in their own space with



Mahmoud Saïd, Portrait d'Ahmed Mazloum Pacha, oil on board, 47x40cm., 1917. Dr. Hussein Mazloum Collection, Alexandria.

different expressions. Two are smoking pipes, with one crouched down in the lower left corner whilst the other one relaxes on the bench. Next to the latter is a seated bearded man, with his arms firmly crossed, absorbed in his own thoughts. The fourth figure dominating the composition is perched on a seat, with crossed legs, and is laying his head on his right hand. This body language traditionally expresses melancholy and reflection. It is found in many Northern Early Renaissance works, the

most iconic image being Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) engravings of *Melancholia I* (1514). Although the figures do not interact with each other in Saïd's painting, they are carefully brought back together by the architecture of the café, reminiscent of the Italian Primitives' serene compositions, such as Giotto's Assisi frescoes. In the Moscatelli interview, Saïd also disclosed that the 'turbulence' of Flemish Baroque master Peter-Paul Rubens and Rembrandt's 'magical light' had influenced



Mahmoud Saïd, *Moulin à eau*, oil on panel, 16x20cm., circa 1920. Private collection. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

his paintings until 1922. He further reveals his interest in El Greco (1541-1614) and Leonard da Vinci (died 1519), as well as Modern painters Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). Saïd's works only brushed past Impressionism as he seems to have quickly dismissed the 'plein-air' effects praised by these painters, confiding in Beppi-Martin that after discovering the Italian Primitives and Renaissance masters, 'I directed my research towards that contained tone of colour. Garish lighting effects, so-called 'plein-air' effects left me cold. I found them rather dark and grey compared to the real luminosity of some of the landscapes of Cima de Conegliano or Giovanni Bellini, painted in their workshop with the science of sacrifice'. Early works such

as *Femme espagnole* (1919), *La lessive dans les jardins de Koubbeh* (1920) or *El Norag* (circa 1920), illustrate how Saïd briefly experienced Impressionist Art through their execution of thick broad brushstrokes and the use of flecks of light (see 33). They show his acquaintance with the Barbizon and Impressionist painters, such as Alfred Sisley (1839-1899) or Camille Pissarro (1830-1903). Saïd's representation of his sister, Zeinab Saïd, in *Ma Soeur* of 1919, is particularly reminiscent of Édouard Manet's (1832- 1883) portraits in terms of painterly execution and in the way of capturing the sitter at a precise moment in time (18 & 19).

When Mahmoud Saïd came back to Egypt after his European tour, he took the position of Deputy District Prosecutor at the Mansourah Mixed Court



Mahmoud Saïd, *Visage de petite fille*, red crayon and pencil on paper, 31x27cm, not dated. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

in 1922. The mixed tribunal dealt with legal cases involving disputes between Egyptians and foreigners residing in Egypt, in which the latter could choose to be judged according to the jurisdiction of their country of origin. Saïd was later judge in the Court of Appeals in Alexandria and only retired from his legal career in 1947. He was nonetheless a very productive artist as his known oeuvre counts approximately 430 paintings and around 300 sketches and drawings. According to Aimé Azar, he shared a studio in Alexandria with expatriate Greek artist Aristomenis Angelopoulos (1900-1990), where Saïd could paint freely and draw from live nude models. Saïd was part of an active group of artists, both Egyptian and foreign, led by Mahmoud Mokhtar



Mahmoud Saïd, *Garçon portant un chapeau*, charcoal on paper, 44x32cm., not dated. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

under the name 'La Chimère'. This group was founded in 1927 and succeeded to the Egyptian Society of Fine Arts and the Society of the Friends of Art, founded respectively in 1921 and 1923. Its members also included Egyptian artists Ragheb Ayad (1892-1982) and Mohamad Naghi (1888-1956), as well as French artists Roger Bréval and Pierre Beppi-Martin. Saïd was therefore on the frontline of the Egyptian artistic scene, surrounded by bustling cosmopolitan artistic circles. To a certain extent, it seems that this also created a stimulating visual dialogue between Saïd's works and that of Western artists living in Cairo or Alexandria. For example, Beppi-Martin's mystical Egyptian landscapes, his portraits of female peasants, his depictions of daily Bedouin life, or street scenes are in some ways linked to



Good Government in the City, 1338-40 (detail)(fresco), Lorenzetti, Ambrogio (1285-c.1348). Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy. The Bridgeman Art Library.

Saïd's own versions of those subjects. The same artistic exchange seems to have occurred between some of Saïd's works and Angelopoulos's female peasant portraits and Greek views, or Charles Boeglin's landscapes. The close friendship between Saïd and several foreign painters in Egypt seems clear when looking at the various portraits he painted of them, such as that of Georges Khoury (1921), Aristomenis Angelopoulos (1934), Charles Boeglin (1936) or Dimitri Litsas (1940).

Saïd's Interpretation of Western Art

As per the above, Western influences throughout Saïd's oeuvre are present in various ways, yet they are complex and eclectic. Art historians have discussed at length how learning from Western Art was important and necessary for the 20th century Egyptian artist as a stepping-stone to form his own visual language. Nada Shabout highlights this as she writes that 'it was a means of liberating themselves from a restrictive, stagnant tradition'. This is, in many aspects, what Mahmoud Saïd achieved and it is probably one of the reasons why he has been identified as one of the founding fathers of

Modern Egyptian Art. The way in which Saïd employed Western aesthetics and interpreted them with his own style will therefore be discussed in the following paragraphs, leaning on several specific examples of Saïd's works. Yet, Saïd's first-hand encyclopaedic knowledge of Western art through his travels and his relationship with many foreign artists did not impede him in using everything he learned, heard and observed, to serve his own purpose. He clearly defined what he was searching for in his paintings when he wrote to Beppi-Martin in 1927: 'what I am looking for is radiance rather than light. What I want is internal light, not surface light, that blazing and deep light of some of the Limoges enamel work that can be found in the Cluny museum, or in the stain-glass windows of Chartres cathedral; or the one in Barcelona. Surface light pleases for a minute or an hour while internal light captivates slowly, but once it appears, it imprisons us, it possesses us'. It appears from this extract that Saïd wanted to grasp the intangible. What he visited and admired throughout his European travels, seems to have been one of the main catalysts that paradoxically made him reach beyond Western



Mahmoud Saïd, Naïma, oil on canvas, 108x85cm., 1925. Sherwet Shafei Collection, Cairo. Courtesy of Safarkhan Gallery, Cairo.

Art. Miller stresses that the key to understanding Saïd's art is to bear in mind the notion of art having an essence that transcends history and geography, hence the development of something that goes beyond the aesthetics of Western Art. She summarises by stating that 'Saïd's search was one for deeper meaning, meaning that went beyond specific nationalities and historical moments to capture a deeper essence of mankind'.

In *Ma femme au châle vert*, painted in 1924, Saïd depicts his beautiful young wife, Samiha Hanem Riad, two years after their marriage. She sits gracefully under a sumptuous portico, paved with cream and brick-

coloured, possibly marble, flagstones. She seems to be caught off-guard, shyly yet graciously turning her eyes away from her husband as he painted her. Mrs. Mahmoud Saïd is unaware of the scene happening behind her, with a horse rider climbing up the hill towards the village. The architectural setting hints to one of the masterpieces of Early Flemish painting that Saïd may have seen in the Louvre Museum during his trips to Paris, *La Vierge du chancelier Rolin* or *Vierge d'Autun*, painted circa 1435 by Jan van Eyck. The arches and the squared black and white pavement decorating van Eyck's setting may have been in Saïd's mind when



Mahmoud Saïd, *Le Café populaire*, 1929. Private collection.

he painted the portrait of his wife. Furthermore, the luxurious blue-green shawl covering most of Samiha's body and embroidered with gold floral patterns offers a similar sense of majestic opulence as Chancellor Rolin's cloak in van Eyck's painting or that of Doge Leonardo Loredan in the iconic portrait painted by Giovanni Bellini in 1501-2, now in the National Gallery of Art, London. Finally, Samiha's graceful gaze, turning away from the viewer, also seems to refer to van Eyck's Virgin in the Chancelier Rolin painting or his female figure in another treasure housed in the National Gallery of London, *The Arnolfini Couple* (1434). Samiha

can therefore be associated with these two iconic historical figures that have been immortalized by van Eyck throughout history and through his painting. In a similar way and by creating this resemblance, Saïd sought to capture the essence of his sitter and of her beauty. The setting, the landscape, the season and the time of the day are impossible to define. By choosing this arbitrary and anonymous background for his sitter, Saïd suspended time. He hence eternalised her beauty and perpetuated the moment during which he painted his loving wife, relishing every minute of it. *L'inauguration de l'ouverture du canal de Suez* is



Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I* (B. 74; M., Holl. 75), engraving, 24x18.8cm., 1514. Christie's Images Ltd., 2002.

Mahmoud Saïd largest recorded composition, measuring four metres wide. He produced a very complete preparatory sketch or 'modello', very much in line with Peter-Paul Rubens' and other European Masters' procedure to produce complex paintings. Painted in 1946-7, it recalls a historical event that occurred on 17th November 1869. Egyptian reliefs dating back to 1300 BC prove that the idea of piercing through the Suez isthmus to join the Mediterranean and Red seas was not an innovation of the 19th century. However, it was in the mid-19th century that a group of French engineers succeeded in realising the project following the Napoleonic expedition in 1798. In 1855, Ferdinand

de Lesseps (1805-1894) founded the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez* (1855-1956) that then realised the construction of the Suez Canal. It was inaugurated by the Egyptian Khedive Ismail Pacha in presence of Napoleon III's wife, Empress Eugénie, and of the Habsburg Emperor, François-Joseph of Austria. In Mahmoud Saïd's painting, these three historical figures are portrayed next to one another in the foreground of the vast composition, each with their official costumes and attributes. They seem to be arriving on a theatre's stage as Saïd added heavy velvet curtains of a deep red colour in three corners of his painting. The fourth corner in the lower left features an empty official's chair, yet ironically the three leaders are all walking and staring towards it. It perhaps symbolises Egypt's struggle for independence from foreign powers at the time, or, on the contrary, how these powers could now live hand-in-hand. Interestingly, the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 occurred less than ten years later, after Saïd executed this composition, resulting in the expulsion of most foreigners out of Egypt in one of ex-President Nasser's policies of nationalisation. In *L'inauguration de l'ouverture du canal de Suez*, Saïd filled in more than half of his large canvas by painting crowds of people who have come to witness this historical event, or who are part of the dignitaries' procession. Miller underlined the close comparison in terms of composition between Saïd's Suez Canal painting and that of Venetian painter Carpaccio's *The Pilgrims Meet The Pope* (1491-3), one of his great wall-paintings depicting the Life of Saint Ursula (1490-1500), currently on public view at the Galleria dell'Accademia of Venice. It is very probable that Saïd was inspired by these masterpieces, which he would have viewed in Venice. Nonetheless, Saïd's painting transcends Carpaccio's compositions in that he successfully attempts to grasp the essence of this historical moment. Since Antiquity, Egyptians had thought of building the Suez Canal and, twenty centuries later, the project was materialized. The genius and ideas that survived all these centuries are memorialized by Saïd through his painting.

Vue de la montagne de Dhour El Choueir is another example in which Saïd goes beyond Western Art aesthetics and only selects what he requires in order to encapsulate the essence of the scene. In this painting, he



Berthe Morisot with a Bouquet of Violets, 1872 (oil on canvas), Manet, Édouard (1832-83). Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. The Bridgeman Art Library.



Mahmoud Saïd, Ma Sœur (Zeinab Saïd), oil on board, 45x30cm., 1920. May Zeid & Adel Youssry Khedr Collection, Cairo.

records one of his many escapes in Lebanon from the heavy Egyptian summer heat. He depicts the spectacular mountainous view from Dhour El-Shoueir in this perfectly balanced composition, combining his own style with the theories of Italian and Northern European Renaissance works fused with early 20th century art trends. Dhour El-Shoueir is a picturesque mountain town, situated at an altitude of 1250 metres, just next

to the main Beirut-Damascus route and overlooking the Lebanese capital as well as the Mediterranean Sea. It was, and still is, one of the most popular summer resorts of the Governorate Mount Lebanon, despite it having been on the front line during the Civil War. The snapshot of the massive grey-white mountain in the background, the summit of which has been cut off by the canvas edges, gives it an even more dominant position in the



Pierre Beppi-Martin, Sans titre (Jeune femme), oil on panel, 36x 30cm., not dated. Museum of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Alexandria.



Aristomenis Angelopoulos, Fellaha, oil on panel, 50x40cm., not dated. Museum of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Alexandria.

composition as it lays majestically above the hills in front of it. These two hills in the foreground form the vibrant diagonals of the composition, supporting the depth and pyramidal structure of the colossal mountain. This clear triangular construction derives from Renaissance paintings that Saïd would have seen in Europe. The hills in the foreground are symmetrically displayed, simultaneously preserving a peaceful harmony through the theory of complementary colours, which had been extensively explored in various ways by the Fauves, such as Henri Matisse, and the Pointillist Modern Artists, such as Georges Seurat, at the beginning of the 20th century. Saïd uses a deep bright green, which answers to a vibrant burnt-umber orange tone in different places throughout his canvas. Whilst the depth of the warm-hued hill at the lower right of the composition is enhanced by the concentration of lush Aleppo pine

trees in the foreground, characteristic of Dhour El-Shoueir's surrounding forest, the other hill on the left appears to be almost abstract with its vast plain of green shaded tones, dotted with clusters of houses, painted with contrasting sharp orange and white touches.

In *Vue de la montagne de Dhour El Choueir*, Saïd also incorporates his knowledge of the aforementioned aerial perspective, praised by 16th and 17th century Dutch and Flemish artists, such as Jan Brueghel The Elder or Joachim Patinir. The invention of aerial perspective allowed painters to achieve an effect of depth through the use of layers of colours, displayed in a specific order, from the most saturated tones in the foreground to the less intense hues in the background. Yet Saïd took aerial perspective a step further in his distinct cut-out of the three traditionally used tones, a warm earthy colour in the foreground, followed by a luminous green pigment



Mahmoud Saïd, Fille au foulard, oil on panel, 55x45cm., 1948. Sherwet Shafei Collection, Cairo. Courtesy of Safarkhan Gallery, Cairo.



Mahmoud Saïd, Portrait du peintre Litsas, oil on panel, 79x63cm., 1940, Private Collection.

at the middle of the composition, finally leading on to the atmospheric grey, white and light blue tones in the background. These three colour planes, carefully superimposed on top of each other, again highlight the diagonal dynamism of the entire composition. This colouring, as well as the composition and the faceted rendering of the jagged mountain, are unmistakable nods to one of the fathers of 20th century European Modern Art, often identified as the bridge between Impressionism and Cubism, Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), and more particularly to his famous views of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire. Combining several different canons of Western Art in a single painting, Saïd surpasses them to achieve a long-lasting effect, as opposed to representing a particular moment in time, highlighting the imposing mountain's resistance to the passing of time.

Artist of The Nation or Egyptian Artist?

Homage to Egypt's past and present

It has been argued in the above that Mahmoud Saïd's oeuvre was in some areas inspired by Western Art, yet that he always sought to take his influences a step further in order to attain his own goal of capturing the essence of his subject and producing his own artistic and nationalistic, yet universal, style. From that point of view, he falls into the pattern leading to Modern Egyptian Art, as identified by Nada Shabout. She writes that Arab artists first needed to learn from Western art so that they in turn master it to achieve enough confidence in their own art and a sense of individual freedom. They then realize that Western art does not satisfy their own aims and hence the need to create their own art that reflects their national identity. They quickly understand that the key to succeed in this quest is to 'recognize



Mahmoud Saïd, *Ma femme au châle vert*, oil on board, 93x75cm., 1924. Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria.

their own artistic inheritance, offering them a modern model of nonrepresentational art by means of which they might reconcile their present and past'. Similarly to those artists categorized by Shabout, Mahmoud Saïd fused and re-interpreted Western visual vocabulary with what he observed around him and with what he revived from Egypt's past. According to Shabout, this is what leads an artist like Saïd to fall under the umbrella of 'Modern Egyptian Art'. This is particularly noticeable in his depictions of Egyptian scenes. These signature paintings are intrinsically Egyptian in the way in which they engage in dialogue with Saïd's fellow Modern Egyptian artists and seem to pay tribute to Egypt's past and present. Moreover, his approach to Egyptian



The Rolin Madonna (*La Vierge au Chancelier Rolin*), c.1435 (oil on panel), Eyck, Jan van (c.1390-1441). Louvre, Paris, France. The Bridgeman Art Library.

subject matters enables him to extract an authentic 'Egyptian-ness' from them in his manner of incarnating core nationalist and even contemporary feminist ideologies, and of embracing tradition and spirituality in his paintings. Saïd's cousin and art critic Ahmed Rassem best described this unique character in the artist's oeuvre, claiming that his 'painting is Egyptian in the most precise meaning one can give to the word. He Saïd is not like those poets who think they can create oriental work by putting Pyramids and the Bedouin into their verses'.

When looking through lavishly illustrated books treating the subject of Modern Egyptian Art, there is no direct visual evidence of stylistic consistency amongst all

the artists listed under that category. Nonetheless, a few examples in Mahmoud Saïd's oeuvre prove the existence of a rich artistic exchange between the painter and his Egyptian contemporaries. The most obvious appears to be between him and the other recognized pioneer of Modern Egyptian Art, the Cairene sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar. The latter's oeuvre is very much imprinted by the Egyptian ideology of Neo-Pharaonism in his subject matter and in the very medium he employed - sculpture. Whether Mokhtar intentionally provoked or promoted this 're-awakening' of Egypt's cultural past is debatable, yet he used it as a means to affirm his own artistic and national identity. Another reading of his oeuvre is suggested by Mahmoud Saïd in the very poetic and sentimental letter he wrote in Arabic following Mokhtar's premature death in 1934. According to this document, Saïd seemed to understand Mokhtar's art as an expression of the 'population's sacrifice for the sake of modernization'. Saïd praised his friend for the stimulating role he had in the artistic realm of his time, writing that Mokhtar 'had come in a moment when our hearts were beating strong and looking into the future'. He perhaps also insinuated Mokhtar's leading example of creating a national Egyptian art, concurrently flourishing within Egypt's politics.

Following this deep homage to Mokhtar the year of his death, it is not entirely unexpected to find that Saïd's masterpiece of *Les chadoufs* was painted that year, 1934. This work is one of the most deeply rooted in Egyptian soil, with its predominant earthy colours soaked in a warm Egyptian sunlight. It depicts the hard labour of the peasants drawing the water through the 'chadoufs' to irrigate agricultural land, replicating what their ancestors had been doing for centuries to obtain a rich fertile soil. The triangular composition of *Les chadoufs*, reminiscent of Renaissance perspective, is echoed by the workers' loincloths and by the setting's topology, very possibly hinting to Egypt's proud pyramids. The female figure in the lower right corner, carrying an amphora on her head, seems to quote Mokhtar's woman unveiling the Sphinx in his monumental sculpture *Egypt's Awakening*. Focusing on these various elements, *Les chadoufs* could arguably be described as being one of Saïd's most 'Neo-Pharaonist' masterpieces, as a tribute to his deceased friend. The art of other Modern

Egyptian Artists appears to have interacted with Saïd's oeuvre. Mohammed Naghi, a painter also based in Alexandria yet from a different social background, was part of the same artistic environment. He also studied art in Europe and obtained a degree in law, yet his father pushed him to become an Egyptian diplomat. At the end of the First World War, Naghi visited one of the pioneers of Impressionism, Claude Monet (1840-1926), in his legendary premises of Giverny. This visual and cultural encounter had an impact on Naghi's art, as seen in the present work illustrated, exemplifying an interpretation of Monet's 'plein-air' method of painting Saïd's legal and artistic career developed alongside Naghi's diplomatic and painter's career, bringing them close together within Egypt's artistic circle. Saïd's painting *El Norag* most probably dates from his early years as a painter, revealing his brief encounter with Impressionism. Two carefully drawn preparatory sketches for this painting have survived and are very academic in their execution, unveiling his recent training years in France. The visual similarities in terms of subject matter and painterly execution, stylistically leaning towards Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, between *El Norag* and Naghi's painting are undeniable. They show how both started painting in the same direction and how their social backgrounds and respective careers would later lead them to go on separate artistic paths. Despite their differences, Naghi definitively recognized Mahmoud Saïd as a crucial contributor to the creation of a national identity in Modern Egyptian Art. Indeed Naghi depicted Saïd, as well as Mokhtar, alongside himself and other critical Egyptian and foreign historical, political and cultural figures, in his most famous artwork entitled *The School of Alexandria* (1935-1959), which was unfortunately burned in 2011. Mahmoud Saïd was therefore an active participant in the artistic development of his country and there are other numerous examples of visual dialogues between him and other Modern Egyptian artists such as Salah Taher, Georges Sabbagh, and Ragheb Ayad. Yet the most 'Egyptian' influence in Saïd's art finds its root in what the painter observed around him. He painted more than fifty paintings representing Egyptian landscapes, out of which more than twenty include the Nile. In addition, there are approximately more than



Mahmoud Saïd, *L'inauguration de l'ouverture du canal de Suez*, oil on canvas laid down on board, 223x400cm., 1946-7. Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria (on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, Cairo).

twenty portraits that feature what appears to be the Nile River in their backgrounds. One of Saïd's masterpieces, heavily charged with Egyptian culture, history and geography, is *Le Nil vers Béni Hassan*, painted in 1951. Fan palm trees stand stoically along the west coast of the Nile, opposite the archaeological necropolis of Béni Hassan on the East, as the sail boats travel from North to South in the direction towards Abydos, a well-known ancient cult site for Osiris, god of the afterlife and the dead in Ancient Egypt. Béni Hassan was an Ancient Egyptian cemetery situated in the area between Assiut and Memphis. It was predominantly used during the Middle Kingdom (21st-17thC BC) for the burial of provincial governors in decorated rock-cut tombs.

In *Le Nil vers Béni Hassan*, he includes one of his beloved motifs, the quintessentially Egyptian vessels called feluccas, peacefully floating on the Nile with

their abstract triangular sails. Saïd subtly plays with the mirroring effects of the water, delicately blending in the reflections of each element from his composition with the bright beige tones from the Béni Hassan necropolis pouring into the Nile, as well as the blue, brown and white touches from the felucca in the foreground, which all underline the calmness and almost stillness of Saïd's painted scene. Yet his endless rigidity with his composition's lines is strengthened by the verticals created by the feluccas' sails and the palm trees' trunks, and by the curved diagonals from the Béni Hassan rocks, replicating the movement emerging from the felucca's bulging sail. All these compositional lines converge at the top of the sailboat's mast in the foreground, creating a peaceful balance within the composition, yet at the same time, breathing in a mystical dynamism to this scene on the Nile, very characteristic of Mahmoud Saïd's



Credit *The Pilgrims Meet Pope Cyriac before the Walls of Rome, from the St. Ursula Cycle, 1498* (oil on canvas), Carpaccio, Vittore (c.1460-1523). Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice, Italy Alinari. The Bridgeman Art Library.

pictorial structure. The bright firm light submerging Le Nil vers Béni Hassan possibly echoes the awakened national Egyptian pride. At the same time, the painting resonates much of Egypt's glorious past through the location of the scene next to the tombs of Béni Hassan, but also through its depiction of the Nile, one of the most important and vital elements of Egyptian civilization. To a certain extent, the boats sailing on the Nile could also be connotations of Ancient Egyptian religious burial rituals. The feluccas may symbolically refer to the Egyptian God Ra's boat, which carried the good souls of the deceased to the heavenly shores where they were ensured immortality by being offered an after-life. Said's feluccas are hence a tribute to Egyptian heritage, possibly hinting to some of the scenes lavishly decorating the Béni Hassan tombs and depicting the Ancient Egyptian belief of the quest for the afterlife.

Incarnation of Nationalism & Feminism

When the newly founded group 'La Chimère' held its first show in 1927, works of its European and Egyptian members, such as Mokhtar, Saïd, Ayad and Naghi, were exhibited. There were ladies of high society attending the event, who were 'outspoken feminists involved in the struggle for the emancipation of women initiated by Hoda Shaarawi'. Parallel to the growing feeling of nationalism, Hoda Shaarawi (1879-1947) was a leading figure in the history of feminism in Egypt. She was a very accomplished educated woman. She organised lectures for women and opened a school in 1910 for girls, teaching them academic studies with the aim of breaching the tradition of women being confined to the house or the harem. She shocked Egyptians by permanently removing the hijab after her husband's death in 1922. Furthermore, she was a prominent figure



Mahmoud Saïd, *Vue de la montagne de Dhour El Choueir*, oil on canvas, 72.5x99cm., 1954. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

in leading anti-British women's demonstrations during the 1919 protests, resulting in her election as President of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee. It is no coincidence that one of the symbols incarnating the concerns of 'La Chimère' was the 'fellaha', or peasant women, 'a symbol with three key elements: woman (beauty, art), veil (feminist emancipation), peasant (the land, nationalism)', according to Karnouk . The 'fellaha' was embodied in Mokhtar's sculpture *Egypt's Awakening*, which was unveiled in 1928. As described by Miller, Mokhtar's 'fellaha' was also a 'grand allegory that tied modern and ancient Egypt together in the hope of one great future' .

The 'fellaha' is also a recurrent subject matter throughout Saïd's oeuvre, though he extended the concept to other types of women. several times he painted female servants such as *Haguer* (1923) or *Black woman with bracelets*

(1926); peasant women such as *La fille à l'amphore* (1926) or *Fillette du Mariout* (1948); women from the Bahri district (1935), who may have been prostitutes, dancers or just girls from that neighbourhood, and he produced more than thirty paintings and countless sketches depicting female nudes. Although painting these types of women seems incompatible with Saïd's aristocratic background, they were the figures in which he found 'the essence of womanhood and Egyptian-ness' . Adding to this, the theme of motherhood seems to have also interested him several times. This is evident as early as 1928 and is visible from the elaborate preparatory sketches realised for his masterpiece *La famille* of 1936. The multi-layered meaning of the woman is sometimes directly insinuated such as in the two strange compositions of *La Mariée d'Alexandrie* and *Baigneuse*, both painted in 1937 and part of the



Mont Sainte-Victoire, 1900 (oil on canvas), Cézanne, Paul (1839-1906). Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. The Bridgeman Art Library.

collection of the Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria . In both works, an almost sorceress-like fleshy female nude leans against a wall or a boat, with a calm river scene in the background of *Baigneuse* in contrast to a dark sky and violent sea raging through the background of *La Mariée d'Alexandrie*. Their role and significance are unclear yet lead us to believe that they represent the city of Alexandria and that they can control its destiny. Transcending this physical appearance, they incarnate the idea of Egyptian female beauty and power.

One of the purest forms of Egyptian womanhood is illustrated in Saïd's exquisite depiction of a 'fellaha' in *La Petite Fille d'Assiout*, executed in 1945. Although the young sitter's clothes are very simple with dull colours and cover most of the 'fellaha's' flesh, he draws all the attention on her face. Her striking and almost bewitching eyes gaze straight in front of her towards

the viewer, engaging a direct interaction with her realm in the picture. Wearing the traditional hijab, she seems tightly wrapped in her clothes and, at first glance, trapped in her duties as a female peasant. However, she has an unusually serious look and her bronze-like skin enhances her dark yet confident expression, confusing her innocence as a child with her intimidating power of temptation as a woman. Behind her, an uneventful river scene with 'feluccas' sailing on the Nile along Assiut's riverbanks reminds the viewer where she comes from. She seems to be standing proudly in front of the source of life for all the fertile land in her country. The 'fellaha' appears to be a young girl yet he purposely makes it impossible for his viewer to guess whether she is a grown-up child or a young adult. By blurring this very fine line between childhood and womanhood, he appears to immortalise and grasp the 'fellaha's' youth



Mahmoud Saïd, *Les chadoufs*, oil on panel, 89x117cm., 1934. Private collection. Christie's Images Ltd., 2010.

and beauty – the girl herself seems to be clutching on to these attributes as she grips her right arm with her left hand. The social and political context in which this beautiful portrait was painted opens the door to further interpretations with regards to what this young ‘fellaha’ stands for. Whether she refers to Egypt’s growing notions of feminism or nationalism, it seems that she will never yield to modernisation. Through his painting of *La Petite Fille d’Assiout*, Saïd has ‘frozen’ this image of the Assiut girl that incarnates traditional Egyptian youth. In *Femme aux gargoulettes* (1930), he depicts a traditional scene of a female servant carrying two heavy water jugs on a tray. As opposed to the more customary image of the woman carrying the jug on her shoulder or on her head, as seen in some of Mokhtar’s

and Saïd’s works, the painter here decides to depict her as a seemingly strong woman, effortlessly bringing out the water jugs on the window’s ledge. He has idealised his model as her body and facial features do not show any visible sign of hard work or constraint. On the contrary, he used his signature warm pigments so that her skin has a glistening gold colour. He employed a vibrant yellow-ochre colour for her face and her chest, illuminating her in a supernatural and almost mystical way as she emerges from the dark background inside the room. Her almond-shaped eyes, her deep red luscious lips and her breasts almost glowing in the shadow make her an embodiment of female temptation. This aspect is highlighted by her plunging cleavage and by her vest’s straps sliding down her shoulders. Whether a simple

servant or a courtesan, her true identity intentionally remains a mystery to the viewer. Saïd appears to be minimalist in the variety of colour tones he used for *Femme aux gargoulettes*, yet the richness of those deep, warm, earthy pigments, ranging from different colour intensities of yellow, brown, ochre, burnt-umber and red, form a harmonious composition, emphasised by the verticals of the jugs and window frame. The monochromatic appearance of this work, underlined by a strange artificial light, enhances the woman's sculptural aspect. She almost looks like a statue, carved in a niche on a wall. It seems that he has trapped her eternally to capture and express the core of her beauty, a beauty that triumphs over her daily labour.

Tradition & spirituality in his art

Another important category in Saïd's oeuvre that represents a smaller number of works, yet some of his most intriguing masterpieces, is that of religious and spiritual paintings. The subject matters are not always as visibly 'Egyptian' as he depictions of the Nile river, Egyptian landscapes, Egyptian women and 'fellahas', but they are just as 'Egyptian' in their quintessence and complexity. The first religious ritual painted was *La mise au tombeau* in 1926, followed the year after by *Les tombes de Bacchus, Alexandrie*. These two works are imbued with the 'penetrating humanity' that had made such a strong impact on him when he had encountered the art of the Northern Primitives during his European tour. In some ways, he responds to this type of Western art through the two works depicting tombs, particularly to Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (circa 1435, Prado Museum, Madrid), giving his own interpretation of people's emotions and distress. *La prière* of 1934, currently part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, is another outstanding example of his approach to religious scenes. Miller observes that 'the figures and space are suspended in a moment outside of time' in *La prière*, and describes how Saïd played with light as a means to unify the composition. Saïd's light in this very serene composition also encompassed the spirituality of the scene, which he strove to express in all these religious works. He further explored the effect of light and its spiritual power in a later work entitled *Prière* of

1941. In the latter, he concentrated on only one figure who prays, unlike the geometric rows of men bowing deeply in the 1934 painting, illuminated by streaks of an almost metaphysical light.

Besides religious scenes derived from Islam, it seems that he was also inspired by the spirituality of biblical themes. In some works, the biblical reference is directly quoted, such as his version of *Adam and Eve* (1937) or the *Exodus* (1941). In his paintings of motherhood, it is difficult to dissociate them from the Christian imagery of the Virgin and Child. In a similar way, his paintings of *Maternité* of 1931 and *La famille ou Promenade* of 1938 may have been inspired by the Christian representations of the story of the Flight into Egypt. This biblical event is described in the Gospel of Matthew and refers to Joseph and Mary fleeing into Egypt with the Infant Jesus, after hearing that King Herod intended to kill every new-born in their area. Saïd would have most probably been familiar with the many European works of art depicting that scene, from Giotto to Rubens. The fact that the biblical story of the Flight into Egypt takes place in his native country could perhaps also explain his inspiration by that particular scene. Another element from Christian imagery that drew Saïd's attention was that of the miraculous catch of fish, leading him to title one of his works *La Pêche Miraculeuse* (1933; Egyptian Embassy, Washington D.C.). The subject matter and focus on fishermen in this parable was referenced in his own adaptations in several paintings depicting men fishing such as in *Pêcheurs à Silseleh* (1942) or *Pêcheurs à Rosette* (1941). Saïd made up his own parable by situating his scenes in Egypt, emphasising the fishermen's hard work, using the catch of fish as an image for Egypt's Golden Age, as a hope for a better future and as a representation of traditional trade that resists modernisation.

Although the spirituality of both Islam and Christianity seems to have sparked off interest for several of his paintings, specific traditional and religious rituals generated the realisation of some of his most mysterious masterpieces. These include the strange composition of *El Zar* (1939) and its stunning corresponding preparatory work, but also the current world record price for the artist at auction, *Les derviches tourneurs*, painted in 1929, which was preceded by a watercolour



Mohammed Naghi, *Paysage (Vache dans le pré)*, 40x50cm., oil on board, circa 1920. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

study as well as a smaller painting in 1928. All three depict dervishes from the Mawlawi order performing their own version of the 'zikr', the Islamic devotional act during which God is remembered through the repeated recitation of His Names. The Mawlawi dervishes' custom of the 'zikr' consists in a form of dance and musical ceremony known as the 'Sama', which was practised in the ritual hall called the 'samahane'. The dervishes usually spin on their left foot and wear a flared and loose white gown, as a symbol of death; a wide black cloak known as the 'hirka', standing for the grave; and a conical felt brown hat named 'kûlah' or 'sikke', that symbolises the tombstone. The Mawlawi dervishes believed that by performing the 'Sama', their spiritual ascent through the mind and love would enable them to reach the 'Perfect'. It is precisely this mystical journey of the human spirit that he illustrates in these three

paintings. What strikes the viewer when first looking at those works is the extraordinary virtuosity in replicating the swirling movement of the dervishes onto a two dimensional surface. The helical composition is dictated by the dervishes' carefully thought out positions, balanced by the direction of their opened arms and of their tall hats. Saïd appears to have experimented with two different ways of achieving the spinning effect of the dervishes' dance. The three dervishes are very differently staged when comparing the watercolour with the smaller 1928 panel. In the former, he tried out the composition on a vertical format and placed the dervishes very close to one another, to form a tight group at the centre of their rotational dance. The dervish wearing a light red cloak in the foreground is the spin's driving force, with his arms opened wide, almost like a propeller. In contrast, the horizontal option for the 1928 panel offers



Mahmoud Saïd, *El Norag*, oil on canvasboard, 25.4x36cm., circa 1920. Courtesy Meem Gallery, Dubai.

more room for the three dervishes to spread out into the pictorial space. Unlike the watercolour, there is no single nucleus for the revolving dynamics in the panel. Each of the three dervishes has their own individual rotational axis, emphasised by the folds in their wide white gowns. A fourth virtual axis at the centre of the composition, behind the figure in the foreground, seems to further stress the overall swirling effect, bringing all three figures together in a harmonious composition. The *Les derviches tourneurs* dated 1929 combines the experiments from both the watercolour and the smaller panel into a larger complex composition. The setting is the 'samahane' and its circular structure emphasises the dervishes' dance. Again the propeller-like arms of the dervish are used as seen on the right. He opted for a vertical format, hence for a tight composition, as he had tried out in the watercolour. However, he also focused on the reflection of light on the dervishes' white gowns

to highlight their folds and their whirling effect, hence preserving the different axis of each dervish that rotate around the central figure, as tested out in the smaller oil panel. The 'chiaroscuro' technique epitomized in Rembrandt's (1606-1669) and Caravaggio's (1571-1610) oeuvres seems to have been an element of Western Art that Saïd borrowed and adapted to his own use and style. As mentioned previously, light played a vital role in his oeuvre and he used it here as a means to amplify the mystical nature of the dervishes' 'Sama', likewise to Rembrandt's way of depicting a divine apparition in his famous work entitled *Belshazzar's Feast* (circa 1636-8; National Gallery of Art, London), hence capturing the essence of this traditional religious rite that has survived since the Ottoman Empire.

The Islamic devotional act of the 'zikr' itself features as the core of another monumental composition painted in 1936, for which he also produced a very complete



Mahmoud Saïd, *Le Nil vers Béni Hassan*, oil on canvas, 80.5x100cm., 1951. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

preparatory work the same year. When comparing the latter with the final painting, it becomes obvious that light was an essential element in his oeuvre and even more so for these spiritual subject matters, enabling him to express the ritual's holiness. The 'zîkr' oil sketch is superbly built up with impressionistic and spontaneous yet meticulous brushstrokes of thick impasto. The bright pigments and the repetition of white highlighted in the men's caps culminate in the central figure, wearing a white gown, to create an overall vibrant composition. Saïd painted a preparatory work most probably to cast and stage his characters in the pictorial space, before

transposing them onto a larger canvas. There are several types of 'zîkr' that can be performed in private or public, yet the one represented in both works seems to be the most common group ceremony known as 'hadra', that usually takes place in a public space as suggested by the houses in the background. 'Zîkr' is best translated from Arabic into English as 'remembrance' or 'invocation'. It is associated with liturgical readings, prayers, song and Qu'ranic recitals as a means to remember God. Musically, the celebrants recite repetitively on the same tone the Names of God whilst a soloist performs a separate song on top. In his paintings, he portrayed the



Mahmoud Saïd, *Petite Fille d'Assiout*, oil on canvas, 78x62cm., 1945. Private collection. Christie's Images Ltd., 2011.

participants caught in the act of repeating their prayers. The repetition sounds like a percussion instrument, the rhythm of which is punctuated by their body movements of bending forward to exhale and standing up straight to inhale. While the oil sketch transcribed the musical repetition of the 'zikr' into the recurrence of white, blue and brown pigments and the alignment of figures squeezed against one another, in the final painting the initial composition was significantly simplified by reducing the number of participants and by focusing on their facial features and body language.

Each figure seems to be absorbed in their prayers, in their own space, yet they are unified in their devotional act through the incandescent light flooding the scene. The sculptural aspect of each character, highlighted by a gold shimmering light, contributes to the overall monumentality and spirituality of the 'zikr', plunging the viewer into the transcending realm of divinity.



Mahmoud Saïd, *Les derviches tourneurs*, oil on panel, 97.5x69.8cm., 1929. Private collection. Christie's Image Ltd., 2010.

An Artist Torn Between Two Worlds

Socio-political tensions: Nationalism versus Cosmopolitanism

As discussed in the previous paragraphs, Mahmoud Saïd was a cosmopolitan artist who was influenced in some areas by a wide range of Western artistic canons. At the same time, he was part of a generation during which Egyptian nationalism reached its peak. Alongside of this, he sought to extract the essence of Egyptian culture and history through his paintings. It



Mahmoud Saïd, *Les derviches tourneurs (esquisse)*, watercolour and brush and India ink on paper, 16.5x10cm., circa 1928-9. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

was his own way of preserving this traditional national heritage as modernisation crept into Egypt at a rapid pace. Saïd may have been caught in the middle of all those pivotal changes, as his paintings sometimes reveal socio-political, cultural and psychological tensions. Miller pointed out that 'the particularity of Saïd's painting lies in the marriage of cosmopolitanism and nationalism'. These two ideologies often confront each other in his oeuvre in different ways, yet are most visible through his sitters' fashion or the setting of the



Mahmoud Saïd, *Les derviches tourneurs (esquisse)*, oil on panel, 39x67cm., 1928. Ms. Hala Halbouni Collection, Alexandria.

scene. On an art historical level, we have seen earlier on through various examples how he harmoniously blends Pharaonic art with Renaissance perspective in the same painting, or the subtlety of aerial perspective with Egypt's fiery colours. Yet Saïd takes this clash of Western and Egyptian cultures to another level through the disparity of fashion throughout his oeuvre. Depending on whether his sitter is a peasant girl or a lady of high society, the clothes and attributes change accordingly in most cases. For example, the girl in *Fillette du Mariout* of 1948 is portrayed with a simple white peasant's dress and a dark veil, whilst the *Portrait de Madame Mamdouh Riad*, dated 1938, depicts her seated on a European-style 'bergère', wearing a lavish black fur cloak, a Westernised dress and fancy jewellery. Although the social background has apparently dictated fashion in each work, there are a few examples of paintings in which the social distinctions have been blurred. Clothes are sometimes displaced and are not coherent with the social background of the model wearing them. This fusion of different social ranks may

reflect his own situation: coming from an aristocratic background, he was encouraged to have a judge's career as opposed to becoming an artist, a profession that was traditionally frowned upon by the high society at the time. Saïd's many portraits of family members or friends, sharing the same background as him, confront the painter's numerous fleshy nudes or his depictions of street girls, 'fellahas' or dancers. These seemingly incompatible types of subject matter discretely unveil the artist's social tensions and are sometimes merged into a single painting.

Femme devant le Nil, painted in 1936, is one example illustrating the artist's inner social conflict. An elegant woman with bright red sensuous lips, dressed in a Western-style blue dress, stands proudly with her arms firmly crossed over one another in front of the Nile. Although Saïd painted an exquisite background for his sitter, with his signature feluccas sailing smoothly across the river and the delicate layers of the water's transparencies, the woman seems unaware of the busy life behind her as she stares directly at the viewer



Mahmoud Saïd, El Zikr, oil on canvas, 128x162cm., 1936. Private collection. (Photographer Matthew Lazarus).

with her mysterious dark brown eyes. He attributes the anonymous female sitter with characteristically Egyptian dark features and sun-glazed skin, and gives her a statuesque and almost Pharaonic posture. At the same time, Saïd seems to nod his head to one of the best-known Renaissance masterpieces, the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, exhibited in the Louvre Museum, Paris. Hence, in some aspects, the woman comes across as Egyptian, yet her posture, clothes and attributes seem to suggest that she is a foreigner. The ambiguity of the sitter's national identity is further enhanced by the lack of psychological connection between the female sitter and the background. However, he unveils a visual link between the two through the woman's exaggerated large white collar, recalling the motif of the triangular sails of feluccas. Furthermore, the rich variety of the dress'

blue tones seem to mirror the reflections of the Nile in the background. The relationship between the sitter and the background is nevertheless betrayed by the woman's Picasso-esque elongated fingers with bright red nail polish, confirming that she is not a peasant from the land behind her. The *Femme devant le Nil* is left open to multi-layered interpretations as she can be seen as a 'victim' of cosmopolitanism yet at the same time a partisan of nationalism and of Hoda Shaarawi's feminism. She also embodies social incompatibilities, whether she be a Westerner or a high-ranked Egyptian, she seems to be physically, both in terms of appearance and distance, so far away from the Egyptian rural world. It reminds the viewer that if his sitter is indeed Egyptian, cosmopolitanism and modernisation will not uproot her from her native land.



Mahmoud Saïd, *El Zikr* (esquisse), oil on board, 32.5x40cm., 1936. Nabil Nahas Collection, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Gallery, Beirut.

Female nude paintings cover a relatively important part of Saïd's work. Working from private live nude models was confined to his friends' studios. This originally academic training would have been impossible in his own house and an embarrassment in his aristocratic milieu. However, several unique photographs of those female models have survived from artist Ezzat Ibrahim's archives. Most of them have not yet been identified, although according to the artist Ismail Abdallah and to the sculptor Professor Gaber Hegazy, one of them portrays a girl called Hamida. Dr. Gaber Hegazy was the artist who made a cast of Saïd's face and hand when he died, which are exhibited in the Mahmoud Saïd Museum. Hamida was paid 1/4 Egyptian pound per hour and lived in El-Dhahriya, a slum in Alexandria. She was known for her voluptuous lips and she posed

several times for Angelopoulo and Ezzat Ibrahim, most probably in the Greek painter's studio. After Saïd's death, she was hired first as a model for the Faculty of Fine Arts of Alexandria, and later as a 'Dada' or servant for that same institution. This unpublished documentation on Hamida provides a rare insight into Saïd's social background and into his work environment as an artist. The contrast between the model coming from the slums and the artist painting her, who had been brought up in Alexandrian high society, was a means to connect with the people of his native land and to understand more thoroughly their fascinating culture. It seems that Saïd sometimes dressed up his female models with Western sophisticated clothes, as depicted in *Nabouia à l'imprimé* (1952) and in *La Fillette en rose* (1945). Both works seem to have been inspired by the models in



Mahmoud Saïd, Portrait de Madame Mamdouh Riad, oil on panel, 104x73cm., 1938. Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria..

two photographs, who most likely came from the same lower-class background as Hamida. The two paintings portray a young, dark-skinned, Egyptian woman wearing a flowery dress and vest in *Nabouia à l'imprimé*, and a sober pink Westernised dress in *La Fillette en rose*. He also dressed them up with earrings, necklaces, bracelets and elaborate headdresses, merging street girls with upper class ladies. Yet, in both works, emphasis has been on their Egyptian features, preserving those

captivating dark eyes and the bronze-like skin standing out against their pale-coloured dresses. Both *Nabouia* and the *Fillette en rose* look away from the painter and viewer, as they gaze out of the painting towards the right in the former and towards the left in the latter. They seem disconnected from their surroundings and even more so from the costume they are wearing. Saïd may have purposely chosen these Western lady-like disguises to prove that his sitters' ethnicity and national identity prevail over modernisation. These two paintings explored the bi-polarity of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism and expressed the social tensions he encountered as an artist. Badr El Din Abou Ghazi clearly summarised Saïd's social duality, writing that 'Opulence and sensuality – such as the dominants in the painting of Saïd. He is the great Oriental lord, the man who paints for the joy of his exhilarated senses, who calls upon all the reminiscences of a refined culture without disdaining the humble daily spectacle offering itself to us in the spontaneity of moods or folkloric truth'.

Cultural Tensions: Traditions versus Modernism

There appears to be a common thread amongst most of the Mahmoud Saïd's paintings discussed in this article. Whether they can be described as being nationalistic, cosmopolitan, spiritual or sensual, they all incarnate the artist's complex feelings towards tradition and modernism. This profoundly sentimental aspect in his works is very much in line with Symbolist poetry and art. Symbolism was a late 19th century literary and artistic movement that developed in France, Belgium and Russia. It revived the mystical tendencies of Romanticism and believed that art should not represent life in a realistic or naturalistic way, but rather to 'clothe the Ideal in a perceptible form', as stated by the critic Jean Moréas in the Symbolist Manifesto he published in September 1886. Symbolist painters resorted to mythology and dream imagery, yet their works did not always have a precise literary reference. Their visual language is much more personal, introvert, obscure and ambiguous, close to his own pictorial vocabulary. The writers and poets which he defined as the ones he read most to Jean Moscatelli in his 1936 interview, were associated with Symbolism: Fiodor Dostoïevsky

(1821-1881), Marcel Proust (1871-1922) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). In a later interview with Dr. Moustafa Soueif, he again admitted being influenced by Dostoïevsky and Baudelaire. What attracted Saïd the most in Symbolism was its members' individual creations of personal myths, in which they sought to find the 'Ideal'. He composed his own Egyptian myths where the 'Ideal' corresponded to his commemoration of a better past, in resistance to modernism. Saïd is part of those 'Arab peoples', described by Nada Shabout of 'having been living somewhere between the past and the future but not in the present', and of only 'remembering the glories of their past golden age or dreaming about a better and happier future'. Despite this feeling of regret for Egypt's glorious days, he nonetheless produced some very 'modern' paintings, an example of which is *Le Dancing* of 1934. In this work, the electric light, one of the symbols of modernity praised by the Futurists in the early 20th century, stands out, shining above the dancers and flooding the dance floor. The dancing couples seem to be dressed in modern Western fashion and their posture, moves and steps are also reminiscent of Western ballroom dancing. These two paintings are very different to their Egyptian folkloric counterparts, which depicted belly-dancers, *La danseuse* (1936) and *Danseuse au takht* (1949). The *Dancing* paintings of 1934 embody modernism, whilst the two belly-dancers refer to the Orient's cultural heritage and traditional customs. However, as mentioned earlier on, these paintings are rarely so black and white and so easily recognizable through their settings, as he confronts modernism with tradition in his own made-up imagery. The subject matters are sometimes difficult to define and almost impossible to locate in time. His sitters often have an ambiguous physical appearance and his clever jumbles of social, cultural and artistic references result in strikingly unusual compositions. Like the Symbolists, he created his own personal myth through which he strived to grasp his own definition of the 'Ideal'. Two of his most incongruous paintings, *Femme aux boucles d'or* (1933) and *Invitation au voyage* (1932) have drawn academic attention because of their ambivalent subject matters. In both masterpieces, his subconscious crossroad between modernism and tradition is evident. A determined time, place and identity does not exist in



Mahmoud Saïd, *Fillette du Mariout*, oil on canvas, 78x57cm., 1948. Sherwet Shafei Collection, Cairo. Courtesy of Safarkhan Gallery, Cairo.

the inner crossroad, as it consists of displacements and juxtapositions of different times, places and identities that eliminate any ephemeral element. Hence in *Femme aux boucles d'or*, Saïd intentionally confuses the viewer with the mixed features of his bizarre sitter. Ramsis Younan described her as a 'creature' that 'is not a woman but a satanic being borrowing a human mask, expressing a confused thought, an enigmatic idea embodied by necessity in this material world'. Elizabeth Miller underlines the fusion of Arab, African and European traits present in the woman's face. Her thick red lips seductively smiling, her almost too perfect golden locks



Mahmoud Saïd, *Femme devant le Nile*, oil on canvas, 80x55cm., 1936. Dr. Hussam Rashwan Collection, Alexandria.

framing her face and her strangely raised eyebrows bring her on the verge of caricature. At the same time, her robust body and polished gold skin invade most of the pictorial space, as if the artist had blown out of proportion a traditional Renaissance portrait imbued with own imagination. This fantasy female 'creature' is like an indelible apparition, whose monumentality and highly finished sculptural aspect make her stand

out as an indestructible statue of which, according to Miller, 'the visual result walks a fine line between kitsch and a powerful and monumental expression of human mysticism'. *Femme aux boucles d'or* is the fruit of resistance to the rapid political, social and cultural changes unfolding around him and stands for his refuge of what can be described as a 'pre-modern temporality'. *Invitation au voyage* can also be read along the same



Mahmoud Saïd, Nabouia à l'imprimé, oil on board, 49.7x40.5cm., 1952. Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria.

lines with its snapshot view of two androgynous figures. The one wearing a necklace on the right gazes down to the second figure on the left who, in turn, looks back at her. This exchange of looks could be seen as an allegory for the future looking down at the past, with the present lost in between, illustrating mourning for a long-lost past that could tentatively only be accessed by detaching itself from the present modern world. The tone of *Invitation au voyage* resonates that of Marcel Proust's famous 'madeleine' extract from his book *À la recherche du temps perdu, Du côté de chez Swann* of 1913. The French Symbolist author remembers the taste of a 'madeleine' cake he had eaten in his childhood, which awakens many lively memories in his mind. Dr.



Mahmoud Saïd, La Fillette en Rose, oil on canvas, 72x57cm., 1945. Private collection. Christie's Images Ltd., 2010.

Amal Nasr, Head of the Paintings' Department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Alexandria University, wrote an extensive comparative study on Mahmoud Saïd and Charles Baudelaire, and the title *Invitation au Voyage* actually derives from that of a poem by Baudelaire from his renowned collection of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). This lyrical poem is imbued with a tone of profound longing for a place where 'all is order and beauty / Luxury, peace and pleasure'. Miller discusses this comparison stating that 'Saïd, echoing Baudelaire's Orientalist sentiment, replaced the image of a mythical Orient with one tinted with Pharaonicism, transforming the longing for a different place into one for a different time.'



Mahmoud Saïd, *Le Dancing*, oil on board, 70.5x57cm., 1934. Mahmoud Saïd Museum, Alexandria.

Psychological Tensions: Artist Versus Lawyer

Besides resisting the whirlwind of modernization and attempting to reconcile his social background with that of some of his sitters, Saïd was also faced with psychological tensions on a daily basis. As per his family's expectations, he pursued a lawyer's career, yet, as proved through his prolific oeuvre, he was an avid painter. It was only in 1947, at the age of fifty, shortly before his father's death, that he resigned from his position to dedicate

himself to painting. Throughout his artistic career he managed to bring together on canvas his professional outer world, that of the courtroom where he worked, and his inner passion for art by painting portraits of his colleagues. *Portrait du Président: Jaspas Brinton* is a very detailed and academic work that was painted in 1945 (53). Brinton (1878-1973) was an American lawyer and judge who was appointed as an American representative at Egypt's Mixed Courts (54). At the time



Mahmoud Saïd, *Femme aux boucles d'or*, oil on canvas, 80x60cm., 1933. May Zeid & Adel Youssry Khedr Collection, Cairo.

Saïd realized his portrait, Brinton was the president of the Court, from 1943 to 1948, before becoming a legal advisor to the American Embassy in Egypt until 1953. As early as 1930, Jasper Yeates Brinton already described his fellow judge Mahmoud Saïd as 'Egypt's leading painter' in the book he published on *The Mixed Courts in Egypt*. Although the people he worked with seem to have discerned his talent not only as a lawyer but also as an artist, it seems to have been much more challenging to gain similar recognition from his own family. Liliane Karnouk recalls the interview she had with ex-Queen Farida, Mahmoud Saïd's niece, on 22nd October 1983, in which she remembered how her relatives were indifferent to her uncle's art and how this lack of moral



Mahmoud Saïd, *Portrait de Jasper Brinton*, oil on panel, 108.5x84.5cm., 1944.

support affected him. Being a full-time artist was not a prestigious profession at the time and not something Saïd's family would have been proud of. Karnouk quotes the former Queen's most revealing passage expressing her relatives' attitude, 'Besides they could not relate to his art. The closest they came to showing a sign of approval was when they acknowledged that it must be good because foreigners seemed to appreciate it'. Saïd's struggle to come to terms with a disapproving family and with his daily function as a judge permeates particularly throughout his self-portraits. He depicts himself in six known paintings, possibly twice in 1919, once circa 1920, and again in 1924, 1929 and 1931. Two charcoal sketches of circa 1930 and another of

1943 have also been identified as self-portraits. In his first known self-portrait, dated 1919, he is in his studio in Ramleh, wearing a painter's blouse and holding his palette and paintbrushes, most likely sitting in front of his easel. He makes a firm statement in this work that although he has recently graduated from Law School and his family predestined him to become a judge, he is also a young 22-year old painter, eager to study art further. The year after he completed this self-portrait he embarked on his visits to the private artistic academies in Paris and on his European tour.

In his undated self-portrait here illustrated, the artist appears to be roughly of a similar age as in the Ramleh one dated 1919. This striking self-portrait is an unusual example in the history of art as the artist here omitted any reference to his profession as a painter and there are no attributes to locate this portrait, unlike the Ramleh self-portrait. The artist's focus was exclusively on his own facial features, and more precisely on the dramatic and almost cinematographic lighting employed to heighten his expression and to share his deepest feelings with the viewer, or at least to lash them out onto the canvas. There are very few examples of other painters depicting themselves in such a personal manner, as traditionally the artist is dressed in a particular way, working in his studio or the background of the self-portrait offers information on its location or its meaning. One of these uncommon examples is Paul Cézanne's self-portrait of circa 1862-1864. It contains similar lighting and a tenebrous background like Saïd's, yet it is much more restrained in terms of the artist unleashing his emotions. When Saïd stripped his head bare of any visual reference and even of his own body in this self-portrait, he strived to capture the tormenting feelings overwhelming him. Saïd's long career struggle and his endless social conflict overshadow this work. He also transmits these heavy tensions through his paintbrush and colour tones in this self-portrait. For example, the thick impasto around the eyes and in places on his face, and the agitated brushstrokes used for his white shirt and tie, directly translate the artist's psychological torment. The liveliness and tangibility of these torn emotions are further enhanced by the white ochre tones contrasting with the dark pigments, which illuminate his face and make it emerge from a deep background

of darkness. Saïd here again masters the chiaroscuro technique, yet takes it a step further using it as a means to heighten his expression and pour out his frustration, almost transforming his self-portrait into a scene from a dramatic movie.

This turbulent portrait is very different from his last recorded self-representation dated 1943, where he depicts himself as a much more settled artist, relaxing whilst smoking a pipe. The elaborated hatching and shading achieved through his charcoal medium is carefully balanced so as to obtain a dramatic light, making it a very lively portrait of the artist. Once again, concentrating all the tension on his face, through his features and expression, the portrait reduces his body to a few spontaneous thick dark outlines. The apparent contrast in terms of emotions and physical appearance between the undated oil self-portrait and this charcoal sketch offer a rare insight on his personal evolution, from being a young ambitious man torn between two opposing careers to becoming a praised artist who succeeded in reconciling his two aspirations and who would soon choose his passion over his legal career. Badr El Din Abou Ghazi best described Saïd's tumultuous life and the way he dealt with various social, cultural and personal tensions, writing that 'if the life of Saïd may have appeared peaceful on the surface, his inner life was torn between the values of his society and his personal desires, between limitations laid upon him by circumstances and his aspirations to freedom and self-fulfillment. He is one of those artists who were destined to integrate two conflicting vocations and ways' .

Conclusion

In a review of the 1938 Cairo Salon, where several works by Mahmoud Saïd were exhibited, a critic writing in the newspaper *Al Risala* observed that ‘the fundamentals of life are the same in all times and places. Environment and era are two factors without which art would not be complete, but the essence of art is one in any time or place... It is clear that Mr. Mahmoud Bey Saïd is the most excellent of all those exhibiting their work [at the Salon] and the one with the most depth of poetry and of feeling’. By 1938, Mahmoud Saïd was a very established and accomplished artist, having realised one of his most challenging and monumental compositions the year before, *La ville*, that now welcomes the visitor in the Museum of Modern Art, Cairo. The critic detected the intrinsic uniqueness of Saïd’s art, recognising its extraordinary ‘depth of poetry and feeling’. *Al Risala* writer also identified the core of the Alexandrian artist’s paintings when he talked about the notion of ‘the essence of art’, omnipresent throughout Saïd’s oeuvre, referred to several times in this article. This complex transcending quality that always infused his works may also be an explanation for the difficulty of ‘labelling’ the painter’s style and hence of finding him a place within the history of art. Although he falls under the roof of Modern Egyptian Art, his works are so rich in the variety of subject matter and diverse in terms of style and inspirations, that he cannot fall under one ‘-ism’. Paintings can be qualified by many contradictory artistic trends, as proven through the several examples referred to in the previous pages. His works are simultaneously Classical and Modern, Academic and Pharaonic, Impressionist and Expressionist, Egyptian and Cosmopolitan, Realist and Surrealist, Naturalist and Symbolist. Yet this apparent heterogeneity in his oeuvre is always incorporated into beautiful harmonious compositions, often rooted in Egypt’s rich ancient cultural heritage. They form a unity that surpasses the eye and define national and artistic identity. From that point of view, one could argue that the most relevant ‘label’ for his oeuvre, if it existed, would be ‘transcendism’. This appears to be the idea behind Gabriel Boctor’s extract in which he wrote that ‘Mahmoud Saïd has reinvented an Egypt that is golden-skinned, sensual, and sumptuous; a thinking

Egypt with its pensive sheikhs; above all a delectable, appealing Egypt with its peasants, its streetwise girls, its little donkeys, all looking for the Happy Isle’. All of the characters in his paintings look for that something that surpasses them, the ‘Happy Isle’, in this imaginary world is the lost glorious past of Egypt’s golden age, before it was metamorphosed by modernisation.

The multi-faceted aspect and seemingly incoherent style, tortured by various tensions, is precisely the reason why his oeuvre is so unique, but also so difficult to understand as a whole within the art historical context. The complication comes from the fact that he arrived on the artistic Egyptian scene following a long ‘artistic vacuum’ in his native country. Paradoxically, at the same time, the West found inspiration in the East, as argued by Tony Maraini that ‘while Modern art was born in the West, it is not uniquely Western’. There are numerous examples of Eastern influences, and more particularly Islamic art, on Modern European Art, such as Henri Matisse’s arabesque-style pieces (Matisse even admitted that ‘inspiration always came to me from the East’), or as seen in the art of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and the Nabis painters. Art history is a continuous thread of dialogues between cultures and artistic styles and, until Mahmoud Saïd’s arrival on the scene, that dialogue was only one-way. He, along with his sculptural counterpart Mahmoud Mokhtar, re-initiated the interrupted visual communication and laid the foundations for the art historical dialogue that Egypt’s future generations pursued throughout the 20th century and continue to pursue today. Although Saïd, like Mokhtar, Ayad and Naghi, was one of Egypt’s ‘re-awakened’ artists from the so-called ‘First Generation’, he also played the role of ‘awakener’ for all these younger artists who continued to develop the concept of Modern Egyptian Art. The lack of stylistic and aesthetic consistency within Modern Egyptian Art, yet embedded in a common cultural heritage, is exactly what defines it, as summarized by Nada Shabout claiming that ‘the nature of “modern Arab art”: [it] is not a unified organized movement but rather a plurality of styles and experiences, the sum total of creative individual experiments from various Arab countries’. Saïd showed how art could be used as the vehicle for the expression of those ‘creative individual experiments’ and deep emotions. Through

his paintings, he taught Egyptian artists to learn from Western art, to lash out their frustrations, and to search for inspiration in their nation's past in order to celebrate their intensifying feeling of nationalism, leading them towards the creation of Modern Egyptian Art. This pivotal part played by Saïd in world art history and in his contribution to Modern Egyptian Art was identified as early as 1932 when Count Michel de Zogheb (died 1964), King Fouad's cousin, stated in *Goha* magazine that 'Mahmoud Saïd is, together with Mokhtar, the most brilliant of Egyptian artists and the one who most closely represented his race, his background and the era through which he lived'. There is undeniably a desperate need for further academic work to be done not only on Modern Egyptian Art but also more generally on Modern Arab Art, in order to re-establish all these artists' place in world art history. Going to an exhibition in a world-acclaimed museum, where masterpieces by these Egyptian masters or other Modern Arab artists would be hanging side-by-side with 20th century Modern European works, still seems far away.

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