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## Raisonné: A catalogue of work by legendary Egyptian painter Mahmoud Said coming to town

Dina Ezzat, , Thursday 24 Aug 2017

Painter and professor Amal Nasr speaks to Ahram Online about the process of collecting the work of the late prominent artist's and making it available to the public



Skira publishing house is planning to provide copies of its Mahmoud Said catalogue raisonné for sale in a limited number of Egyptian bookstores this September.

The 864-page catalogue documents the work of the man who is rightly called the founder of Egyptian modern painting, complete with descriptions, explanations and scholarly comments.

The catalogue, which was launched earlier this year, was the result of three years of work under the direct supervision of prominent collector and scholar Hussam Rashwan and Christie's Valérie Didier.

"This is an unprecedented effort in documenting the works of an Egyptian artist and of course it made perfect sense that the first to merit this hard work would be no other than Mahmoud Said," said painter Amal Nasr.

Nasr, a professor at the Alexandria University School of Fine Arts, is one of the scholars who contributed to the catalogue.

"It was not at all an easy job to work on this catalogue, essentially due to the fact that a considerable number of the works of Mahmoud Said are not in his museum nor for that matter in the private collections that are kept in Egypt," Nasr said.

According to Nasr, as to others who contributed to this task, it took a considerable deal of effort to locate all Said's paintings, sketches and notes, and it took almost as much work to get the permission of the collectors to have their pieces photographed.

“Obviously too it was an expensive job and it was thoroughly funded by collectors and donors who wished to contribute to an overdue exhaustive documentation of Mahmoud Said,” Nasr added.

Born to an aristocratic family in Alexandria on 8 April 1897, Said passed away at the age of 68 on 8 April 1964.

It was at his early teens that Said started to experiment with drawing. However, due to the conservative social norms of his time, he was not allowed to follow this artistic path.

Said had to succumb to the wishes of his father and study law and take the subsequent judiciary path. He would not, however, abandon his interest in drawing and throughout the years he accomplished one portrait and painting after the other.

“Clearly, he did portraits of his family members; but his real work as I would call it was with the outstanding drawings of the poorer women of Alexandria rather than of the aristocratic women of his family,” Nasr said.

Nasr is the author of a chapter in the catalogue dedicated to compare Said’s vivid drawing of young Alexandrian women, often nude, who worked as house-helpers, escorts or in other humble jobs, and the later stage where the artist spent more time on scenery drawings.

“Many people tend to think of Said in the limited scope of his nudes; his nudes are stunningly beautiful not just in terms of portraying the instinctively beautiful and sensual models he chose but certainly in showing the defiance that these women had and the pride they carried themselves with no matter the humble setting they were from,” Nasr argued.

She added that Said’s passion for drawing beautiful poor women was “in fact more about his passion to break away from the limitations of his aristocratic family and circle and also to defy the norms of the time about forcing women to succumb to tamed patterns of conduct and behaviour.”

“His women are not at all tamed – and in fact the way he drew them made them more impulsive and defiant than they might have been, as I learned upon comparing the photos of these models to the final drawings,” Nasr argued, adding that he had given “a daring gaze” to his models.

As Nasr argued in her study in the catalogue raisonné, away from the portraits, it would not be possible to isolate the beauty of the bodies and the features of the models that the artist drew from the setting of the painting.

“Actually, after the liberation he had from his assumed social status after the death of his father, Said dedicated considerable effort to the scenery drawings,” Nasr said.

She added that “there are many ways of looking at the works of Said and the evolution of his style of painting and this would all be possible in an academic fashion due to the compilation of his catalogue raisonné.”

Nasr argues that this catalogue will help many realise the wider talent of Said, which is not at all given a fair representation via the collection displayed in his house-turned-museum on Mohamed Said Pasha Street in Alexandria.

It should also, she added, bring attention to the need to dedicate more time and funds to document modern and contemporary Egyptian artists. “With this catalogue raisonné it would be actually possible, perhaps for the first time, to expect Mahmoud Said to be given his due in terms of being studied, and to be compared to world painters,” Nasr said.

She argued that this catalogue should also bring more attention to the poorly attended and poorly managed

museum – “to the works of Mahmoud Said and also to the works of Seifand Adham Wanly.”

The Wanly brothers were born in the early years of the 20th century – 1906 and 1908 – to a wealthy Alexandrian family. Like Said, the Wanly brothers were not encouraged to take up art by their family but they too did end up pursuing their chosen path.

Their works, which they started to produce in the 1920s, are partially displayed in the Mahmoud Said Museum, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and elsewhere.

“This is another overdue task but this would be a much harder one given the huge volume of stored works of the Wanly brothers,” Nasr commented.

She suggested that the next task that the Alexandria art community is willing to take up relates to prominent Alexandrian painter Abdel-Hady El-Gazzar, who was born in 1925 and who represents the generation following that of Said and the Wanly brothers.

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