

Catalogue Reveals a Pioneering Egyptian Painter's Legacy

Ursula Lindsey / 11 Sep 2017

CAIRO—Last year, the Italian publisher Skira issued a catalogue raisonnée—an exhaustive overview of all the authenticated works—of the great Egyptian painter Mahmoud Said. It was my great pleasure to pore over it recently. Two volumes, edited by Valerie Didier Hess and Hussam Rashwan, are dedicated to paintings and drawings respectively. They contain stunning reproductions of all of Said's works; essays by art historians and critics; translations into English of reviews of his work that appeared over the years in Arabic; letters, photographs and sketches. Its authors claim it is the first catalogue raisonnée of any modern Arab artist. Its goal is both to facilitate the authentication of Said's works, and to collect knowledge that could be useful to academics and amateurs.

Even as the market for modern Arab art has boomed in the last decade, criticism and scholarship has lagged behind. Said is an obvious place to start to address this lacuna. He is one of the best-selling Arab artists: In 2010, one of his paintings sold at auction for \$2.4 million. Since then, several more have sold at similar prices (Christie's auction house and other individual patrons sponsored the catalogue project). He is also widely regarded as the father of modern art in Egypt, a pioneer whose bright, sensual, dream-like images enriched a new national identity.

Said was born in Alexandria in 1897 into an aristocratic family. His father served twice as prime minister; his niece became Egypt's Queen Farida.

Said did not attend Cairo's School of Fine Arts, which had opened in 1908. His elite family showed almost no appreciation for his artistic aspirations and insisted that he study law. But he was able to frequent the ateliers of Italian and Greek artists in Alexandria, and to travel to Europe and attend art classes in Paris.

Following his family's wishes, he became a judge. Until he retired from the bench in 1947, at age 50, Said painted in his spare time (he also found inspiration in court, drawing sketches of his fellow judges as well as lawyers and defendants).

Said was a pasha who painted fascinating portraits of his well-born entourage but was most deeply inspired by common Egyptian folk. He imbued his figures of fishermen, farmers, shepherdesses and Alexandrian girls by the seaside with a timeless grace and beauty and placed them within bright, enchanted landscapes dotted with stylized palm trees, sail boats and donkeys. He depicted dancing clubs, whirling dervishes, men at the mosque and the café, and the Alexandria corniche in all sorts of weather. His work is marked by a powerful sense of composition, and by the extraordinary light that emanates from water, sky, and human bodies—especially women's bodies.

A few of the essays in the catalogue indulge sentimental or simplistic dichotomies, arguing that Said shed his upper-class background out of his love for the common folk, or that it was only by overcoming Western artistic influences that he was able to achieve "true Egyptian identity."

Yet many other contributions offer nuanced and fascinating insights into his work. Valerie Didier Hess, one of the book's editors, shows how Said transposed the composition of pious European masterpieces (the holy family, Christ's burial) into visions of ordinary Egyptian life, stripped of religious symbolism but not of a mystical atmosphere.

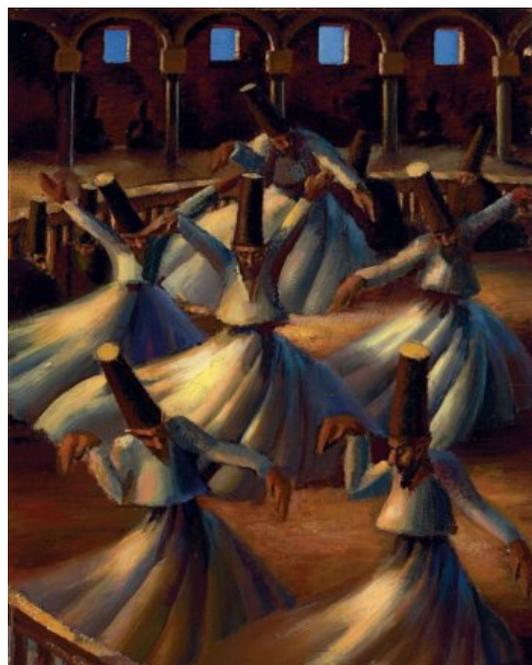
One of Said's favourite subjects was female nudes, and all his nude models were by necessity lower-class women. He captured depths of beauty, sensuality, sadness and fierceness in his sitters. As artist and art professor Amal Nasr notes, in some of Said's most striking and mysterious paintings he placed naked women outdoors, against his iconic views of the city or the bay, "releasing" into the open female bodies that were usually never displayed in public. (The absence of a free female body in public continues to this day, and drawing from live models—let alone nude ones—hasn't been the practice at Egyptian art departments since the 1980s).

The book is a delight to anyone interested in Said's work, a beautiful object and a precious resource. I only wish that it was available in Arabic as well, and that the full catalogue of images was shared online. I also hope that it will inspire similar efforts with regard to other major modern Arab artists.

Said and his generation were inheritors of the Egyptian el-nahda, an intellectual movement that called for reform in the arts and sciences and catalysed hopes



Said works on his "Bain des chevaux à Rosette" in his studio in Ginaklis, Alexandria, in 1950. His family residence is now home to the Mahmoud Said Museum. (Photo by Henri El Kayem)



Mahmoud Said's "The Whirling Dervishes," 1929 (Image: Christie's)

for social progress. Said's generation of artists was preoccupied with absorbing Western forms of culture, with reviving heritage, and with creatively defining a national identity. His contemporary Mahmoud Mukhtar developed a captivating neo-Pharaonic style in sculpture; in 1913, Muhammad Husayn Haykal published *Zaynab*, considered the first Arab novel.

In the view of Fatenn Mostafa Kanafani (another contributor to the catalogue and the founder of the gallery ArtTalks) one of the reasons for the extraordinary appeal of Said's art today is that it represents a moment in time when "the possibility for a better Arab society" seemed close to realization. In his paintings Said "moulded the ideal Egyptian identity, one that is extravagantly human and sincerely optimistic," writes Kanafani.

Said himself, speaking to *El-Bassir* magazine in 1948, tempered his optimism with a clear awareness of the hurdles to artistic creation— which sound very reminiscent



"Le Canal de Mahmoudieh"



"Portrait of Madame Batanouni Bey," 1923 (Image: Sotheby's)

of those artists in the region face today. He argued that "the fine arts can flourish only in environments of stability and prosperity. Recently the environment in Egypt has been very far from stability and completely inappropriate for art. Everything revolved around political issues and means of livelihood. All we could hope for is that the beginning of the revival of modern Egypt could also be the beginning of a revival of sciences and arts, for each developing nation must have an art that expresses its feelings and its inherent instincts."