



## ARTS & CULTURE

# Chronicling the life and work of Egyptian artist Mahmoud Said

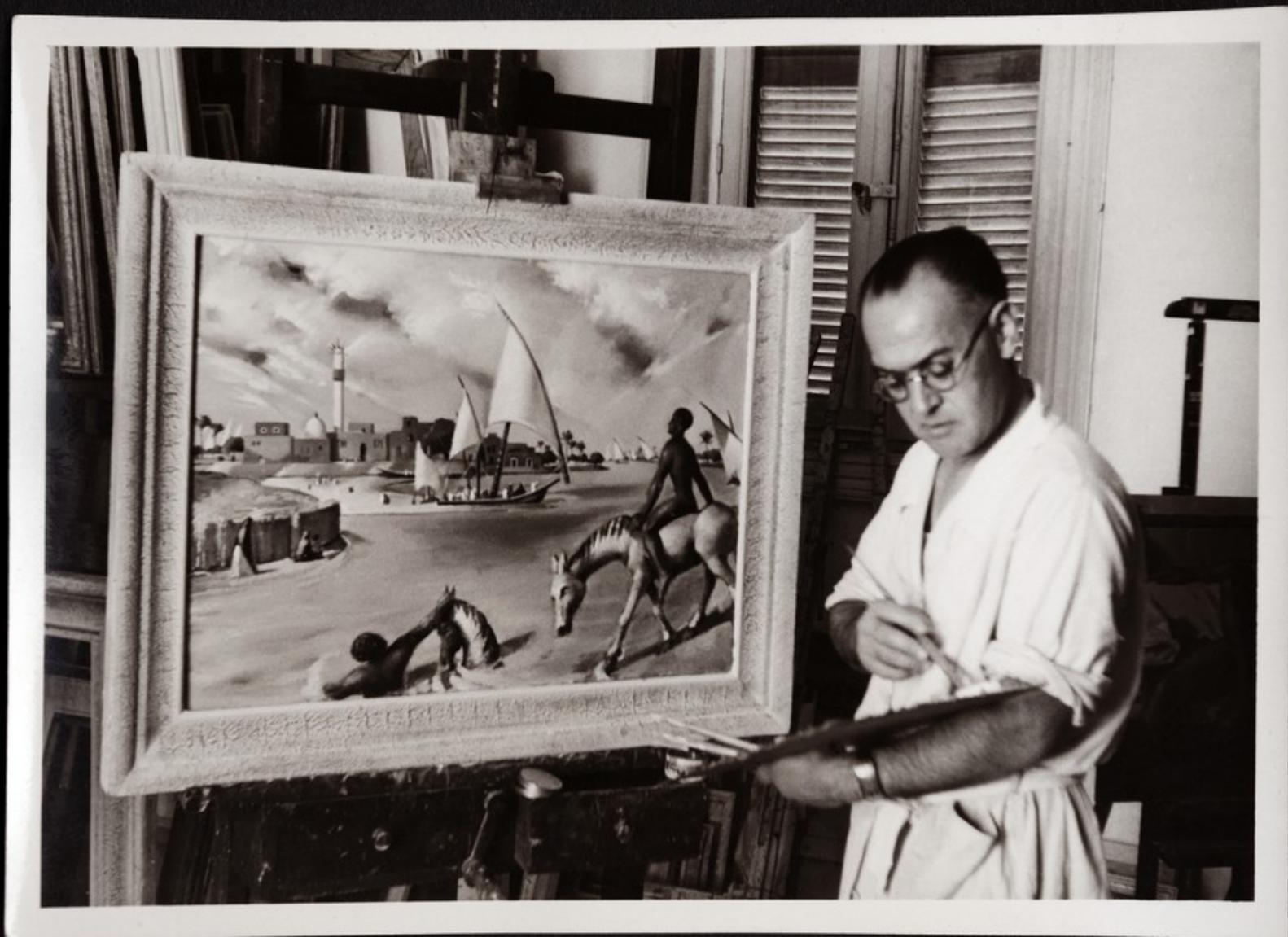


Mahmoud Said was born into high society. His family were rich landowners from Alexandria in Egypt and his father, Mohammed Said Pasha, served as Egyptian prime minister from 1910 to 1914, and again briefly in 1919.

His sister's daughter, Safinaz Zulficar, became Queen Farida of Egypt, and her reign lasted almost 11 years. Even then, in the early 20th century, as Said simultaneously worked as a top judge and pursued his interest in painting, nobody could have known he would one day be one of the region's most expensive artists.

In 2010, Said's 1929 painting *The Whirling Dervishes* achieved a sale price of US\$2.5 million (Dh9.3m) in auction at Christie's Dubai, setting a world-record price for the artist and for any Arab work sold at auction.

It was during that sale, which featured 30 works from the collection of Mohammed Said, that Valerie Didier-Hess, client liaison and sales manager at the Christie's Middle East office in Dubai, became familiar with Said's works.



“I was enthralled by his paintings, his use of light, colour and subject matter,” says Didier-Hess.

“At the same time I met Hussam Rashwan, who is a prominent Alexandrian collector and a living encyclopaedia on modern Egyptian art. As we were talking, I realised that someone needed to record all this information before it was lost.”

The pair decided to compile a catalogue raisonné for Said, the first-of-its-kind for any Arab artist, and the results were published in December, with an official launch taking place this week in Dubai.

A catalogue raisonné is a fully comprehensive, annotated listing of all the known artworks by a specific artist, and is used as a document of authenticity for third parties. Didier-Hess and Rashwan spent five years tracing every painting, drawing and sketch that Said has ever produced and documenting it in the book.

Next to each piece are the dimensions, annotations made on it or around it by the artist, its current location, provenance, and any exhibitions it appeared in or literature written about it.

The final result, published by Italian publishing giant Skira, is in two volumes. The first, subtitled Paintings, contains 430 paintings, which range in subject from portraits of friends and family often dressed in luxurious western clothing with refined gestures to portraits of

“falaheen” or plebeian woman.

His small landscape paintings, particularly those of the Egyptian countryside of which there are several, have also become very important collectors’ items in recent years.

“Mahmoud Said is so special because he did not have one specific style or recognisable subject matter. It is his use of colour that can characterise him but he doesn’t belong to any group, -ism or trend because he influenced himself so much from many different sources,” says Didier-Hess.

She also writes about these influences in one of the several commissioned essays from the many authors that appear in the first volume. The second volume, subtitled Drawings, contains sketches from his notebooks and other drawings, as well as essays translated from Arabic and French written about Said during his lifetime.

It also shows photographs of Said working in his studio, as well as letters, postcards and even his passport.

A key observation between the two volumes is that he did not have one set style or subject.

It was an exhaustive task but one that Didier-Hess hopes will pave the way for the future of art history research in the region.

“I did it because I am passionate about Mahmoud Said’s work, but I also did it because as a westerner I find it very frustrating that we don’t have access to all these paintings and a comprehensive overview of his oeuvre. I am hoping that through Skira and its international network, these copies end up in universities in America and Europe, and that they will inspire others to put together catalogues for other important artists.”

In fact, many others are already following suit. The families of the Iranian calligraphic artist Charles Hossein Zenderoudi and Lebanese-Armenian master Paul Guiragossian are already working on similar catalogues, and a digital archive is being compiled for Chafic Abboud, a renowned Lebanese painter.

“There are a number of reasons why catalogues raisonnés are so important,” says Sultan Al Qassemi, a prominent collector of Arab art and the founder of Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah.

“They give us a clear understanding of an artist’s oeuvre and are a legitimate point of reference for every work, including the provenance. In that respect, they are a way of countering the forgeries of the art world.

“Finally, they are important archival and scholarly documents that advance education about any specific artist. I think we need as many catalogues raisonnés as possible. They are vital in safeguarding the legacies of the region’s artists.”

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