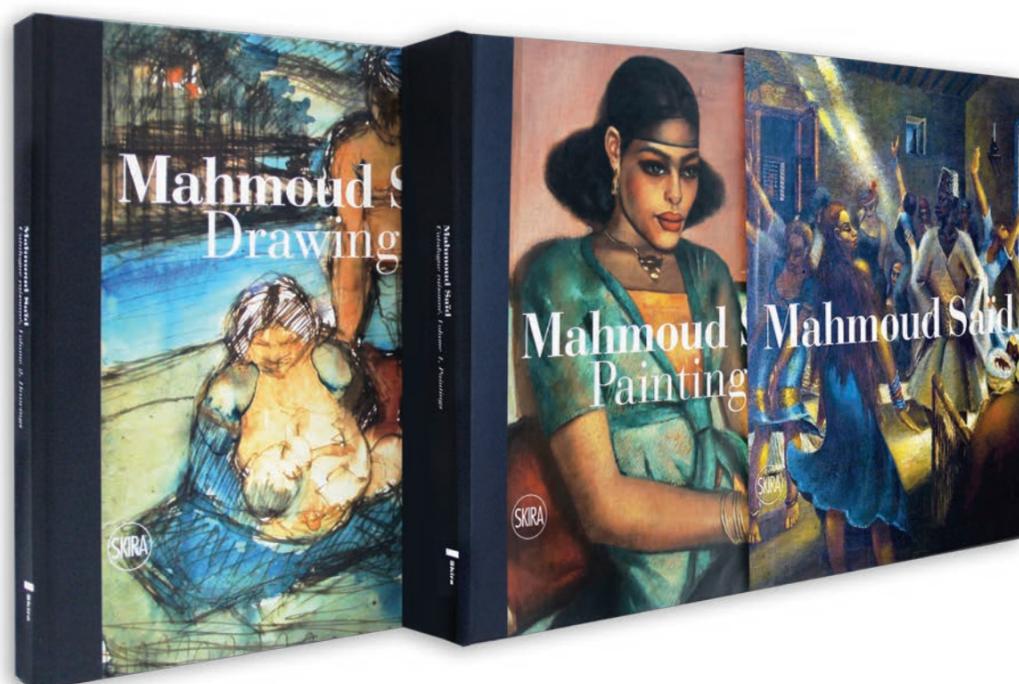


MAHMOUD SAÏD: CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ

Review by Andrew Humphreys



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A few years ago a publisher expressed interest in a proposal of mine to write a monograph on the work of Egyptian artist Mahmoud Saïd. Christie's in Dubai had recently sold two pieces by him for the head-turning sums of \$2.43 million and \$2.54 million, making him one of the most highly priced artists from the Arab world. The sales were widely reported in the international art press, but few outside Egypt and collectors of art from the region had any knowledge of who the artist was. It seemed the time was right to stake a claim for Mahmoud Saïd's place in the panoply of world art history. I began the research, but after only a few months I emailed the publisher to explain that sadly I was abandoning the project. The problem was that most of Saïd's work is in private hands and many of the owners were, for whatever reasons, not interested in having their paintings written about or photographed. Without their cooperation the book was impossible. So suffice it to say that I have enormous admiration for the dedication, perseverance and, not least, the diplomatic abilities of Valérie Didier Hess, a sales manager at Christie's Dubai, and Dr Hussam

Rashwan, a scholar of modern Egyptian art, the authors of the *Mahmoud Saïd catalogue raisonné*.

The ambition of this monumental two-volume work goes far beyond a basic monograph. It attempts to document every known painting by the artist through a long career that stretched from teenage muddy experimentation in oils in 1917 to the radiant Greek harbour scenes painted during the last year of his life (1964). The task obviously was not without problems – this is the first art book I have ever encountered that begins with a seven-page legal disclaimer followed by a 52-page discussion of international art market law written by a specialist in intellectual property rights. If all this lawyerly verbiage was necessary to make the project happen, then fine – nobody has to read it. Several of the nine essays that follow are similarly optional reading. They contain a lot of repeated biographical information and peculiar sentences like: "At school, Saïd was also known for his special attitude at recording different human



characters by preliminary expressive lines," which is a particularly torturous way of saying that he was good at drawing.

The exceptions are Hess's own pieces, the first of which deals with the pertinent issue of Saïd's dialogue with European art. As she points out, before Saïd there was no such thing as modern Egyptian art, so it was inevitable that at the beginning of his career, he would have to look elsewhere for inspiration. She is good at pinpointing specific influences: the borrowing of architectural elements from the medieval Italian painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti for the backgrounds of a couple of Saïd's portraits; the compositional echoes of Albrecht Dürer in Saïd's masterly *Café arabe*. All of this is well-illustrated. Her second essay is even more illuminating, dealing partly as it does with one of the most contentious areas of Saïd's oeuvre, his nudes (there is another good contribution on the same subject by Amal Nasr). He painted over 40 of these and among them are some of his finest pieces. Two in particular are striking for placing the naked women in open landscapes. It is the contention of both writers that these golden-skinned,

sumptuous and sensual ladies represent the fertile spirit of Egypt, "sanctified in their noble nudity". It's not a spirit modern Egypt is entirely comfortable with – both these pieces hang together in the Mahmoud Saïd Museum in Alexandria, the artist's home city, and the last time I visited the guide skipped this particular room, informing me there was nothing of interest in it.

It is pleasing to be able to see the ladies again, along with close to 380 other paintings, of which over 100 have not previously been seen in print. A second volume accompanying the paintings contains selections of Saïd's drawings, plus photographs and letters, and translations of articles on the artist from the 1930s to the 1960s. As I mentioned, it is a magnificent achievement. However, such a lavish and comprehensive production comes with a high cover price. As welcome as this book is, it feels like it has been produced with the Saïd collector in mind, and while this small group of connoisseurs will find the *catalogue raisonné* essential, it does little to promote the deserving Mahmoud Saïd to a wider international audience.