



Egyptian
modernist
master



*Largely unknown in the West, Mahmoud Saïd's paintings provide
a unique insight into the enduring culture of his homeland*

Text. PETER FEELY



Most of us probably haven't heard of Mahmoud Saïd but his life and work were exceptional. Born in 1897, Saïd was an aristocrat from the Mediterranean city of Alexandria. He lived through a golden age in the city, when glamour and wealth permeated society and art and culture thrived. He also witnessed the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, which saw his close friend, Queen Farida, the daughter of the deposed King Farouk, sent into exile. His father, Mohammad Saïd Pasha, was Prime Minister of Egypt, twice.

Saïd's profession, until the age of 50, was a high court judge but he was also a prolific painter, producing more than 400 artworks during his lifetime. He is viewed by many as the founder of Modern Egyptian art.

The artist's work is unmistakably Egyptian, depicting Nile River scenes, landscapes and the everyday life of citizens. Yet there are also Venetian Renaissance echoes, with colours and compositions inspired by artists, such as Gentile Bellini and Vittorio Carpaccio, seeping into his work. The structure and composition of Flemish Primitives also galvanises much of his creations.

You may well not have heard of Saïd but the burgeoning society of Arabic and Middle Eastern art collectors certainly have. In April 2010, Mahmoud Saïd's painting *Les Chadoufs* sold at auction in Dubai for \$2.4 million (Dh8.8 million.) Later that same year, Saïd's, *The Whirling Dervishes*, fetched US\$2.5 million. The painter was suddenly the most valuable Modern Egyptian artist in the world. Yet, remarkably the Alexandrian's work, in comparison to his contemporaries, such as Matisse, Picasso,



Kandinsky and Klimt, is relatively unknown.

One person who is looking to change this is Valérie Didier Hess. Officially, she's Director Business Development Christie's Dubai. Unofficially she's potentially the planet's most enthusiastic advocate of Mahmoud Saïd.

Having travelled across the world in her quest to piece together fragments of the artist's life, the most surprising revelation was the consensus, from those that knew him, was his introverted nature. "Every family member I spoke to, who either knew him directly, or who were young when he died but remember him, consistently refer to his, "humility and kindness." I find that surprising because when you see his paintings, they're flamboyant, with colours," says Hess.

In the context of Saïd's depictions of women, he seems anything but retiring. His portrayals

Previous page: *The Whirling Dervishes* (1929) fetched \$2,546,500 at auction in 2010.

1. *Petite fille d'Assiout* (1945) oil on canvas 2. *Sunset On The Nile At Luxor* (1945) was sold for \$902,500 at auction 3. *Pêcheurs à Rashid (Rosette)* (1941) depicts a fishermen scene, with an intrinsic Egyptian character captured through the artist's harmonious composition.

are intimate and sensual. There's no grandeur or aristocratic primness. Hess refutes the idea that Saïd was a philanderer. "I honestly believe that he enjoyed the beauty of women but he was definitely a dedicated husband and father. He had one daughter, Nadia. He painted around 40 nudes out of 430 works, so only around 10 per cent. I think they represent the essence of female beauty, which is the idea of the woman."

After five years tracking down the Egyptian's paintings, drawings and photographs, Hess is publishing her findings. *The Mahmoud Saïd Catalogue Raisonné* is presented in two-volumes; one on his paintings and the second on his works on paper, archives and photographs. Hess collaborated on the project with Dr Hussam Rashwan, an important collector of Modern Egyptian art and a scholar.

Collated, the scope of Saïd's talent and ability, particularly when it comes to capturing the nature of humanity is incredible, considering he's an artist who is largely omitted from the history of Western Art. Saïd doesn't belong to the Van Gogh, Vermeer and El Greco club of dying in obscurity, only to be elevated to the level of genius posthumously though. He actually enjoyed relative success during his career. His major exhibition was in 1937, where he was commissioned by the Minister of Culture at the time to paint his famous work that's three metres wide called, *The City*, that's now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. This was exhibited, alongside two of his other paintings, in the Egyptian Pavilion of the Paris Exposition.

He participated four times in the Venice Biennials in the late 1940s and early '50s. He also exhibited in the mid-1930s in New York. "He had many international contacts through his social background and through his job as a judge. It was his friend Jasper Brinton, who was a high court judge, who opened the doors to New York to him," says Hess. During his life, Saïd had three retrospectives. One was small, in the 1940s. The first major retrospective was in 1951 where he had resigned from his role as a judge, aged 50 and he exhibited 145 works. His retrospective in 1960 was in the Alexandria Museum of Fine Arts and 130 works were exhibited. In 1964, a few months after his death, another retrospective was held. "For an Egyptian Modern artist he was probably one of the most popular during his lifetime. The Museum of Cairo purchased works of his art as early as 1935, if not before, when he was not even 40 years old," says Hess.

Hess doesn't believe though that Saïd was a privileged networker, who used his status



to cement his career. She cites a photograph of the artist as a child at a formal gathering as an illustration of the fact that he was very much an outsider, content to observe rather than impose himself on a scene. "When you look at a photograph that shows him with Queen Nazli, the mother of King Farouk, it's a big royal party in the 1940s and he's completely to the side, sitting on the floor in the extreme right corner of that scene. He was an outsider, observing the aristocracy. He was appreciating its positives but also not getting

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soaked into it. That's why I think he tried to get closer to this peasant life and this more working class lifestyle."

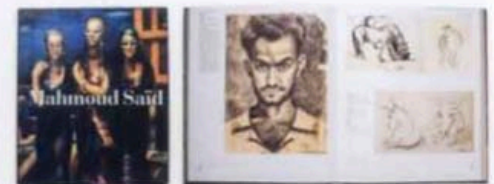
Hess refers to females in Saïd's scenes as *fellaha*, or working class or female peasant women. In his painting, *The Three Women of Bahari*, which is the neighbourhood where the artist grew up in Alexandria, three attractive women dominate the scene. They are wearing lipstick, with full lips and almond eyes. There's an allure to them but Hess is reluctant to acknowledge any salacious undercurrent. "I don't believe he's sexualising them at all. It's really just beauty and a transcendental beauty. He didn't have access to these nudes directly because of his social status. He had a Greek friend and painter, called Aristomenis Angelopoulos, who lived in Alex and he brought in girls. Many of these paintings are called women with earrings or women with

bracelets. He universalised the woman," says Hess.

In stark contrast to Saïd's apparent affinity to women, Hess believed that he had a complicated relationship with his father. She speculates that he may have been the one who forced the artist to take the profession of a judge. Hess alludes to Saïd's portrait of his progenitor as evidence for her theory. "If you look at the painting he did of his father, the date is quite strange. It was painted between 1924 and 1949 – that's 25 years. I think it took him so long to finish it because he didn't know how to represent his father and that's probably what tormented him. It's undeniable that his father definitely had a say in what his career was going to be," she says.

What is undeniable is that Saïd lived through a fascinating period of history. He saw the collapse of the Egyptian monarchy and was alive during the Second World War. It was also an interesting era in the world of art, with Impressionism and the advent of Cubism, which he dismissed as too loose and lacking structure ●

MAHMOUD SAÏD CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ



DOCUMENTING MAHMOUD SAÏD'S LIFE AND WORK
Volume 1 (left) and Volume 2 (right)