

**HAMED ABDALLA**

مَدِينَةُ  
الْمَدِينَةِ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



*Cover*

*1962*

*Hamed Abdalla in arabe*

*46 x 37 cm, mixed med on wood*

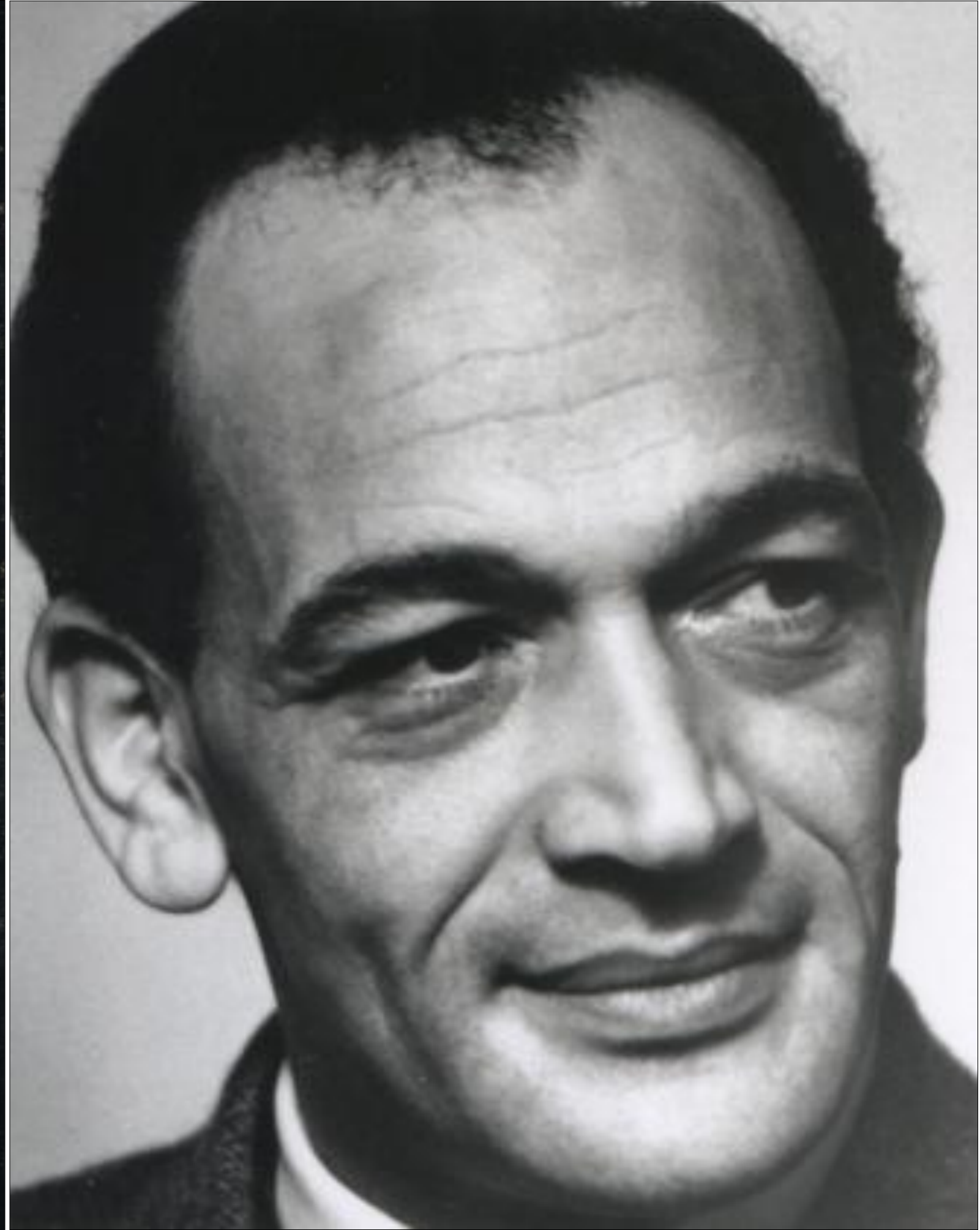
*1977, Women = Man*

*29,5 x 21 cm, stencil, acrylique, spray*

*Next page*

*1970, Quo Vadis ?*

*48 x 36 cm, ink, silk paper*



**HAMED ABDALLA**



1951 – Le grand-père, 32 x 22cm, lithographie

## Story of a life HAMED ABDALLA

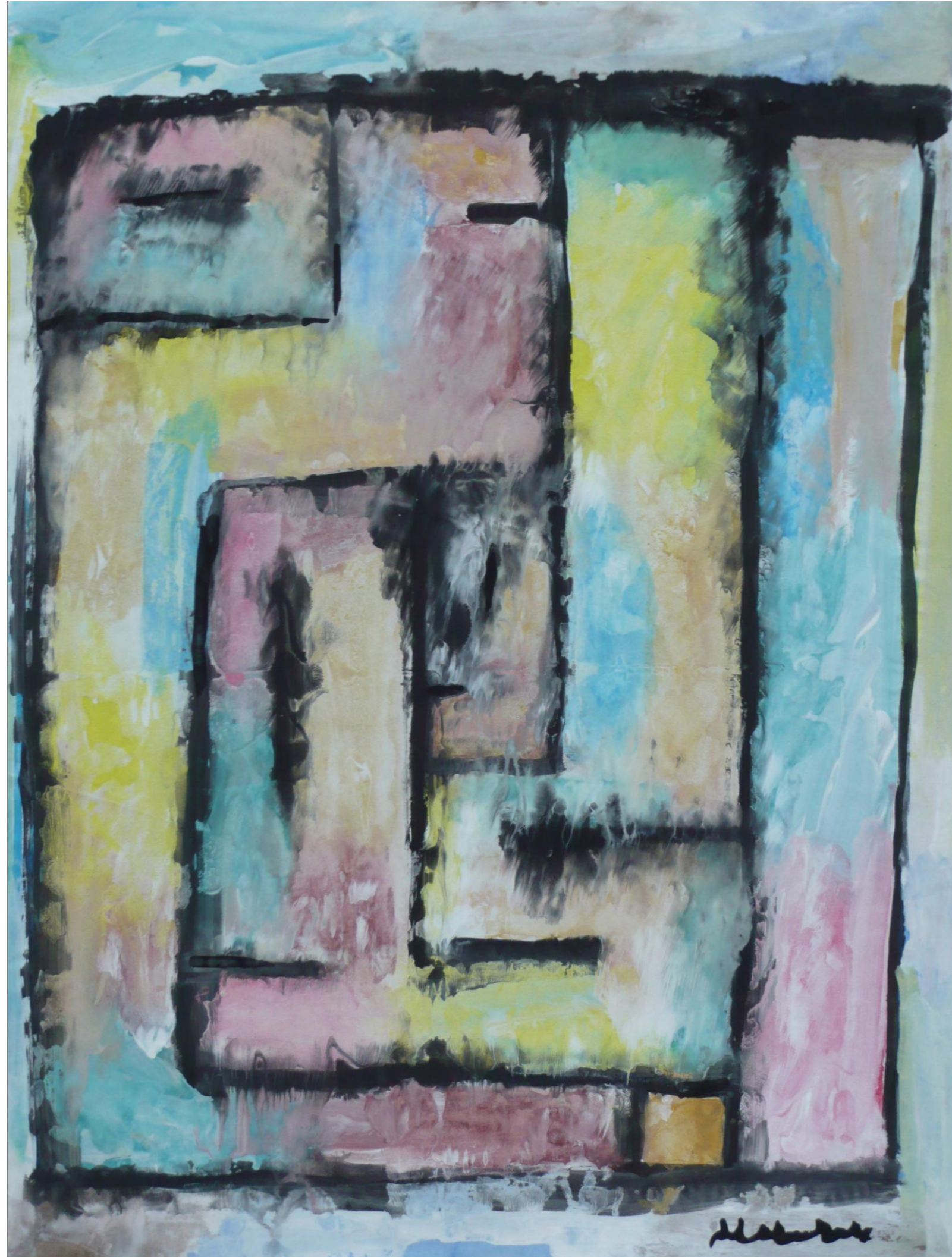
(1917 – 1985)

by Roula El Zein

*His works of art tell of revolt and resistance, of injustice and hope, of fellahins and modest people. They speak of revolution, of equality between man and woman, of death and spirituality... He drew his subjects from Egypt, his native land, from its Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic past and from its everyday life in the streets and the coffee-houses... For more than fifty years, Hamed Abdalla worked relentlessly, leaving behind him a big amount of paintings, drawings and lithographs that witness today of an ongoing research and a creation that knew no boundaries. Moreover, Hamed Abdalla left many writings for beyond drawing and painting, the man cultivated his art theory and had a passion for philosophy. Several exhibition catalogs, dozens of interviews done in various languages, hundreds of newspaper articles, studies made by others on his work, and a large number of letters were recorded and kept by his family; a precious documentation that reveals the life and work of a great artist who was also a great humanist.*



1954 – Autoportrait de l'artiste, 39.5 x 29.5 cm, Gouache



1983, Al Joua' - Hunger, 65 x 50 cm, acrylique



1978, *Thot*, 61 x 46 cm, aquarelle



1935 – *Grand-father*, 16,5 x 11,5 cm, sanguine

His life was not an ordinary one. Born in Cairo in 1917, Hamed Abdalla comes from a family of *fellahins* that settled on the outskirts of the big city at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He grew up in the modest environment of Egyptian peasants as his son Samir relates: "Our grand-father Abdalla Hamad left his village Al Awameyya, near Sohag in the Saïd (middle Egypt) and walked up the Nile until he reached the surroundings of the capital, still green at the time. He worked the land in the neighborhood of Manial where he established himself with our grand-mother Baheya. As a young boy Abdalla helped his parents in their hard labor (...). Throughout his life, our father kept from this childhood a carnal relationship with the land which is very present in his art works, and a deep respect towards the people who cultivate it (...)."

Hamed Abdalla gets his first education in a 'koranic' school where he learns the Arabic language and the Koran, and where he is

appreciated for his beautiful calligraphy. Since adolescence, he begins to draw. His eldest son Mogniss, who published a special issue on his father in the magazine that he manages *IM'Media*, writes: "He develops a liking for drawing by watching his close relations. One day, his uncle draws for him a lion as he imagined it. Abdalla looks closely, fascinated. His passion for drawing is born. At home or in the streets, in the coffee-house, he works on sketches (...)."

His father is proud of him and gives him the opportunity to enroll at the School of Applied Arts in Cairo so that he learns a craft. In an article published in 1949 the art lover and founder of the magazine *Images*, Gabriel Boctor, writes: "At school, he was revolting constantly against his art teacher who did not make much effort in his teaching. He would put in front of his students a jug or a pair of wooden sandals, asking them to make a faithful reproduction of the objects. It was a fierce fight between Abdalla and the teacher until the day came when he was fired from school. He decided then to join the School of Fine Arts, thinking that he might get there a more intelligent education on art but he was not accepted for he lacked the necessary degrees." This refusal did not stop his determination to continue in the path that he had chosen. He draws with passion, especially in the popular coffee-house of Manial el Rodah where he goes regularly. Skillfully, with a nervous hand, he makes sketches of the neighborhood's inhabitants who come in large numbers to see him work and listen to "his vivid ideas on art, philosophy and life."



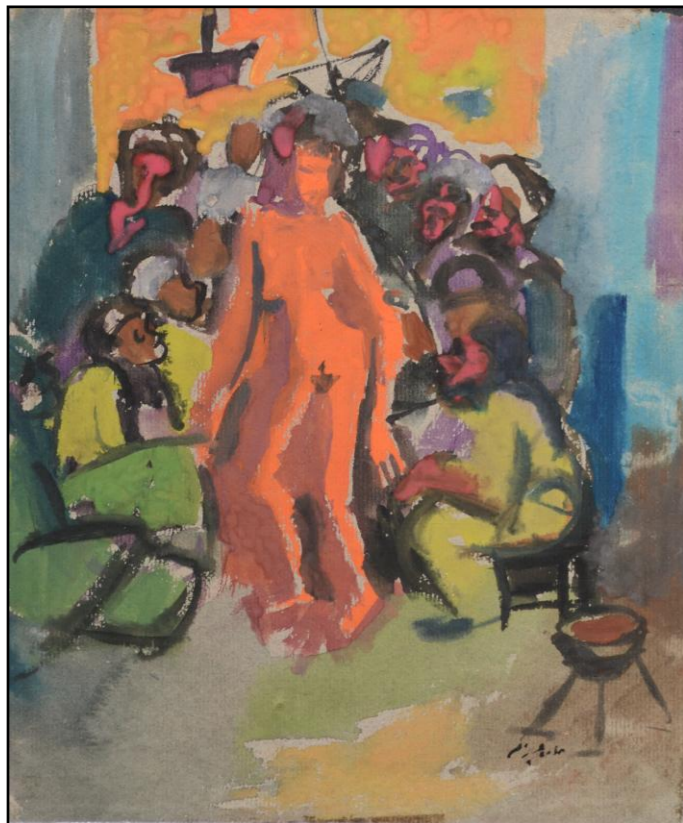
1939 – *At the Coffe*, Cairo Museum



1937 – Taamira (Narguilé), 18 x 25 cm, aquarelle



1939 – At the Coffe, Cairo Museum



1939 – Dancer in the coffee, 27 x 23 cm, gouache

In the lives of many artists, there are important encounters that open the way to discovery and freedom of expression. For Hamed Abdalla, the encounter that helped him to move forward took place in the coffee-house of Manial.

An Egyptian of Greek origin by the name of Yanakakis noticed the young and brilliant artist who seemed so different from the rest of the customers. Yanakakis was a sponge trader and a communist, and the friendship that grew between them gave Abdalla the possibility to learn more on the political and cultural levels.

The reproductions of Greco he discovers at his friend's house fascinate him and incite him to learn more. He spends hours reading about the great artists from different periods and discovers at the same time, with passion, the Egyptian cultural heritage. And he continues to paint and to draw, in his own manner, the persons close to him...

A red chalk portrait of his father dating back to 1935 reveals maturity in the work as well as strength and fluidity in the drawing. As for the watercolors of the years 1937-1939, they show that the artist, at the age of 20, is well ahead what was known in Egypt at the time.

Hamed Abdalla searches, tries, experiments; he wants to go further and liberate himself from the constraints of classical art. The colors blend, the forms are diffuse and the atmosphere, always related to everyday life in Egypt, is vividly rendered: *Taamira, Family, At the Coffee-House, Al-Dolika...*

In 1938, Abdalla is 21 years old. With a lot of courage, he decides to present some of his paintings to the jury of the "Salon du Caire". Gabriel Boctor writes: *"Hamed Abdalla inevitably reminds us of those whom Alphonse Daudet has said that their life can be summed up in a combination of lines, forms and colors (...). Here, there were few portraits of persons from his neighborhood, attitudes of his friends from the Al Manial coffee-house and various Egyptian landscapes."*

Further down in his article, Boctor describes

A look at Hamed Abdalla's whole work shows to what extent the man was multiple. An innovative artist, he was also a poet, philosopher, humanist, intellectual and revolutionary.

With a fiery temperament, he was fully committed to conquer both worlds: the visible and the invisible. The first by its countless pictorial researches, scenes of everyday life, everyday objects, ancient and contemporary paintings. As for the invisible, he tried to approach it by his readings and deepening in various subjects.

Hamed Abdalla had a Sufi soul, thirsty for knowledge, nourished by his intuition, quests and encounters. He did not content himself with understanding things in areas that interested him only, but sought to act, to go beyond the threshold of the ordinary by leaving his own touch always. From very early on, he was interested in modern and contemporary artists as evidenced by the windows left open in his paintings, that allow us to glimpse at Picasso, Matisse, Fautrier, Soulages, and others...

But in no case, he let himself be pervaded or totally influenced by those whom he admired. It would have been contrary to his being, to his way of living and seeing things. He who sought, permanently, to understand where he came from and where he was going dug under his feet first while fixing the distant horizon.

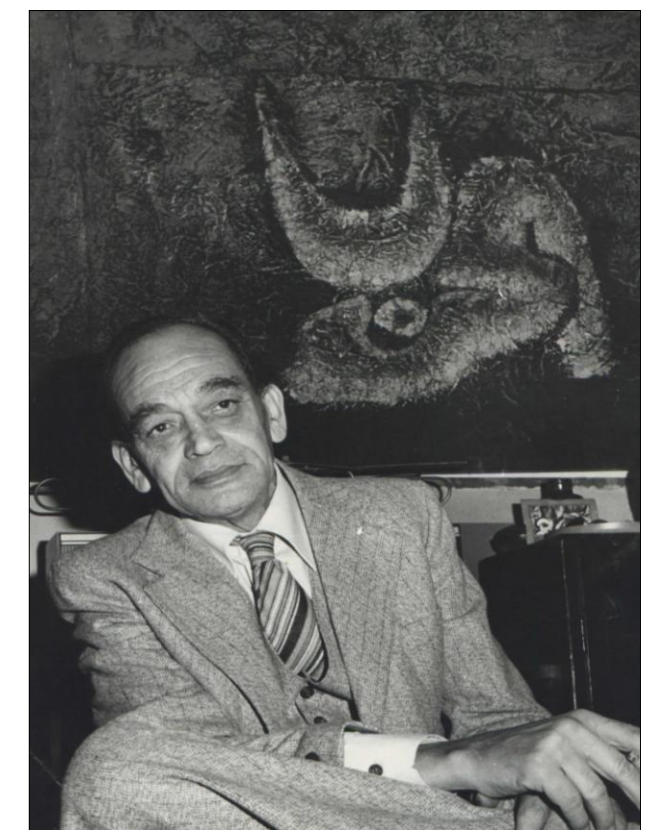
1975 – Al Mout – Death  
34,6 x 25,4 cm, acrylique

The work of Hamed Abdalla is a journey through space and time. We see through the different stages the various forms, techniques and materials...

But, the most important aspect of his work remains for ever his unique innovation. It is where there is neither before nor after.

His whole world is present there: Hamed Abdalla, the son of peasants, the artist, the innovator, the revolted, the Arab-Muslim, the Egyptian who is the descendant of Copts and pharaohs, and the profoundly universal. His work on words resumes perfectly everything that interested him. He made of these words full-fledged human beings, free human beings, like himself, that speak independently of their meaning...

We look, we linger on and we remain with the feeling that those words carry the burden of a lifetime - of a whole experience - the life of a man who marked his time, while staying loyal to his moral and pictorial convictions.



1978 – Abdalla and his « Al Harb » (The War)



this unique scene: *“Then, for the first time in the Salon du Caire, we watched the arrival of a delegation of the Manial’s inhabitants wearing new galabiehs for the occasion. They came to see their image on the wall, exhibited to a large number of visitors.”*

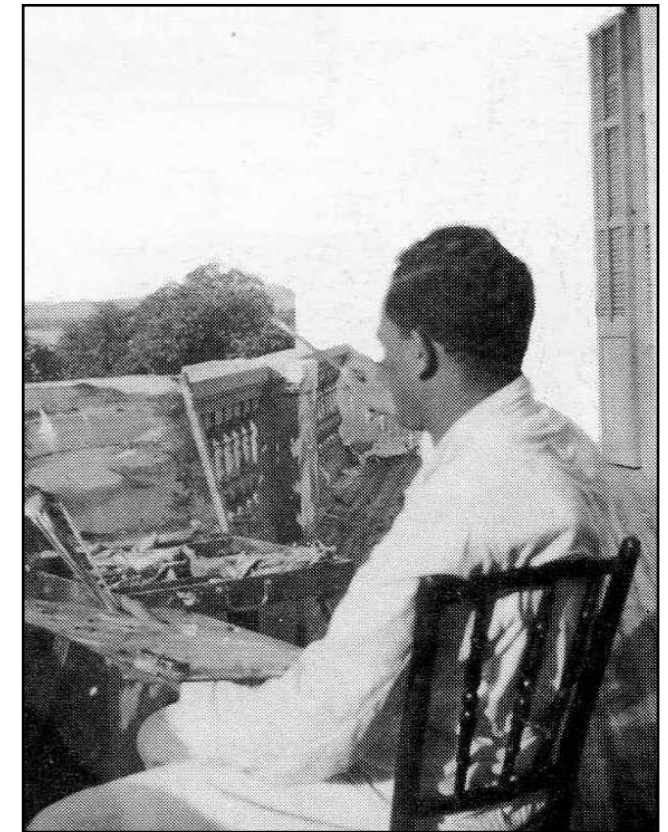
Following his intuition, Hamed Abdalla developed a new mode of producing art and presenting it.

His work is appreciated and the Ministry of Culture buys two of his paintings to feature at the Museum of Modern Art. In the meantime, the inhabitants of Manial, proud of their artist, decide to offer him the post of art teacher at the new primary school that had just been established by the notables of the district. He takes the job, but does not stay long. According to Boctor *“he needed every minute of his time to cultivate himself and improve his art. He would burn his eyes reading about the life of great artists. With the money he had, he constituted for himself a library of reproductions of his favorite masters: Greco, Rembrandt and mainly Daumier with whom it was said he had affinities even before discovering him (...).”*

On Rembrandt’s painting, Abdalla will write later: *“We notice that Dutch painting has followed from the beginning three directions, each one going back to a different source. One of these directions – perfectly represented by the widely famous painter Rembrandt, author of The Night Round – is a democratic direction. It tends toward realism and is attracted by the life of the people, the life of simple men as well as the beauty of nature. In this, it differs from Italian painting of the Renaissance which was marked by an aristocratic eye and tinged with legend (...).”*

Along with the readings and the research, Hamed Abdalla undertakes his first trips in Egypt, namely Nubia and Assouan, discovering the various aspects of his country.

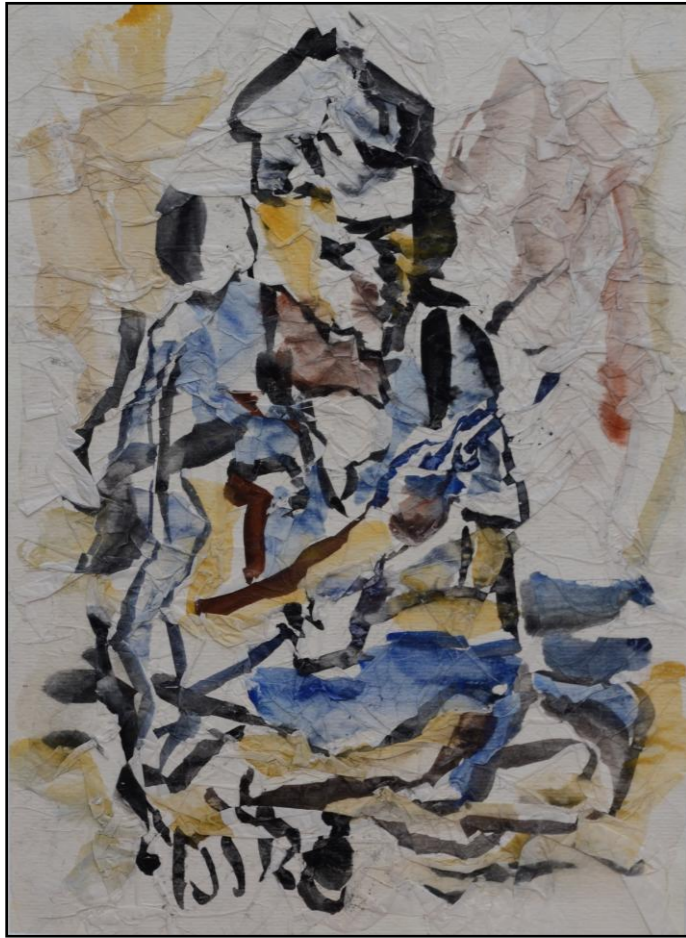
In 1941, his first personal exhibition is organized by *“Les Amis de la Culture Française”* (Friends of the French Culture) at the Horus Gallery in Cairo but the young man had already acquired some recognition.



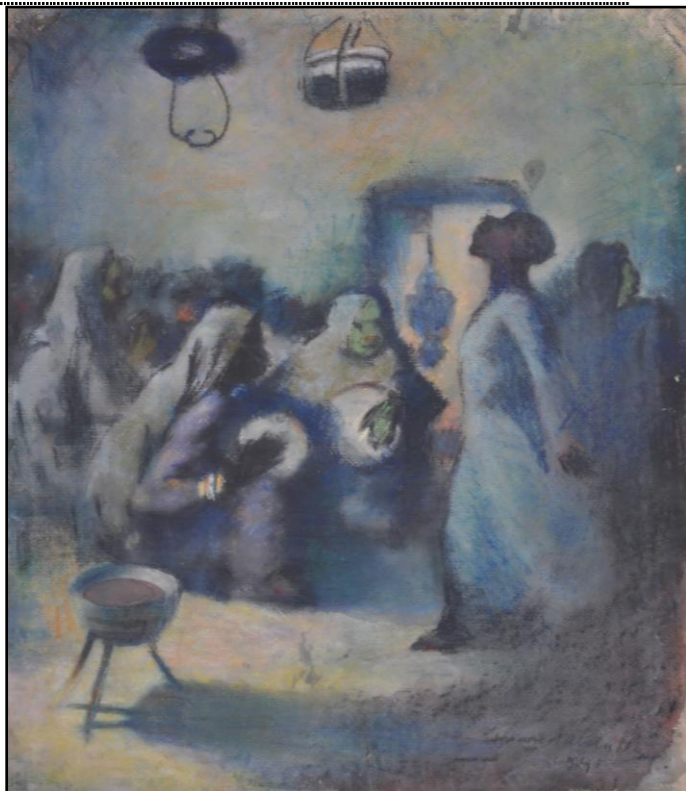
1939 – Hamed Abdalla in Nubia



1949 – Lady from Assouan, Cairo Museum



1944 – lost in the smoke, 24,5 x 18 cm  
aquarelle on silk crisp paper



1941 – Al Dallouka, Cairo Museum

As of 1940, the art critic and later Minister of Cultural Affairs, Badr-Din Abu Ghazi, had asserted that *“thanks to his personal effort and ongoing fight, Hamed Abdalla has created a new school of Egyptian painting with its own personality, its own laws and philosophy.”*

During this period, Abdalla works hard and organizes many personal exhibitions in several cities: Cairo, Alexandria, Port-Saïd, Port-Tawfik, and Ismailia. In 1943, the critic John W. Palmer writes in *“Egypt Gazette”* on a group exhibition where Hamed Abdalla was present alongside Nazir Khalil, Tahia Halim, Sassa Zeremis and Leslie Dyer: *“(…) As for Hamed Abdalla, it is difficult for me to do verbal justice to the work of this young man. In most ways he is surely already the best among contemporary Egyptian painters. He shoots no fireworks; he subscribes to no ‘isms’; he scorns slickness and Cairo-gallery commercialism. He has no tricks up his sleeves; he is no red-and-purple shirted pseudo-intellectualist shrewdly eying a fickle and uniformed public twenty years behind the times. What he is is no more than this: a modest artist of rich and delicate imagination with the manipulative skill to convey its forms and substances to others. He belongs to no mode. He paints just as he knows. And what he knows is immensely worth knowing.”* These sentences written at the very beginning of Hamed Abdalla’s career perfectly resume the character of the artist who has always despised the commercial aspect of art and kept his distances with some intellectual circles, according to the accounts of his close relations.

A man with integrity, Abdalla was not afraid of saying high and loud what he thought. This strength which he drew from his origins and from the rich historical experiences of his country was translated into a creation that was attracting more and more people.





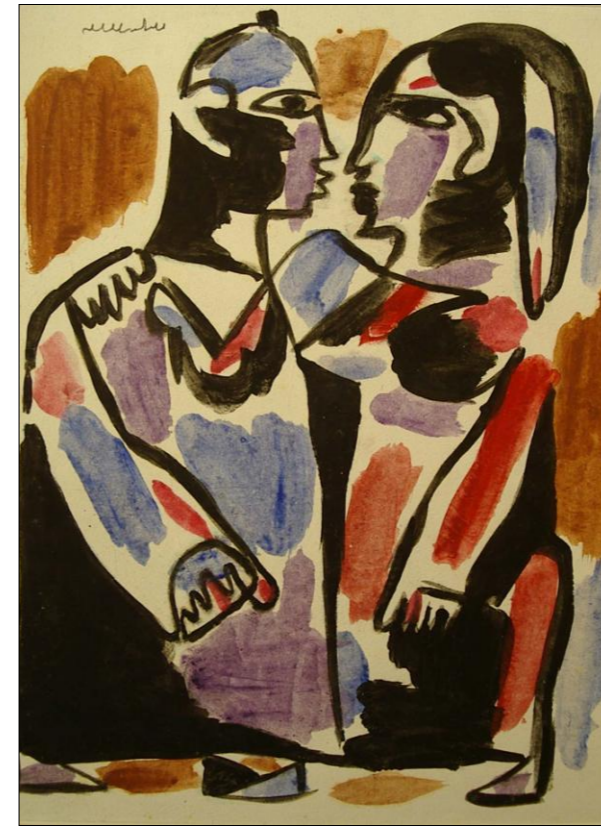


1946, *Worker*, 34 x 24 cm, Gouache mixt

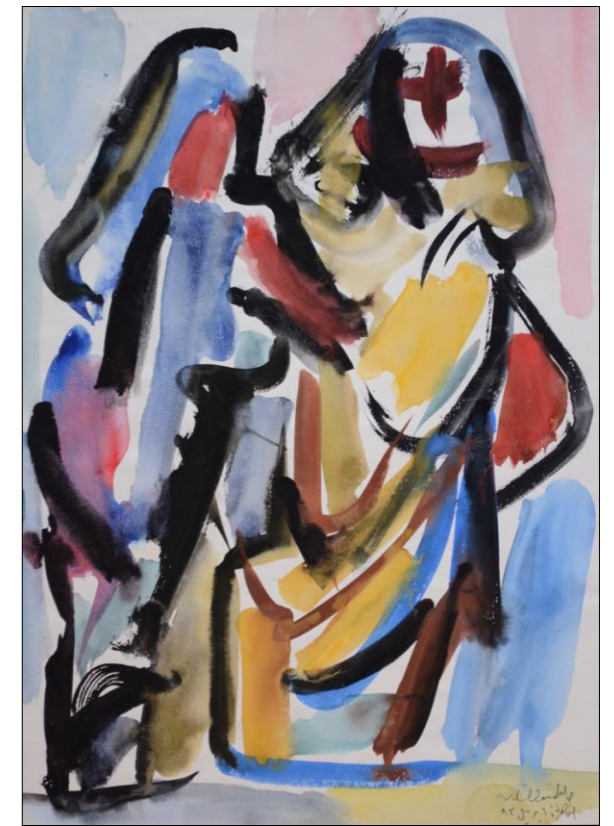
1974, *Al Thawra - Revolution*  
65 x 50 cm, acrylique



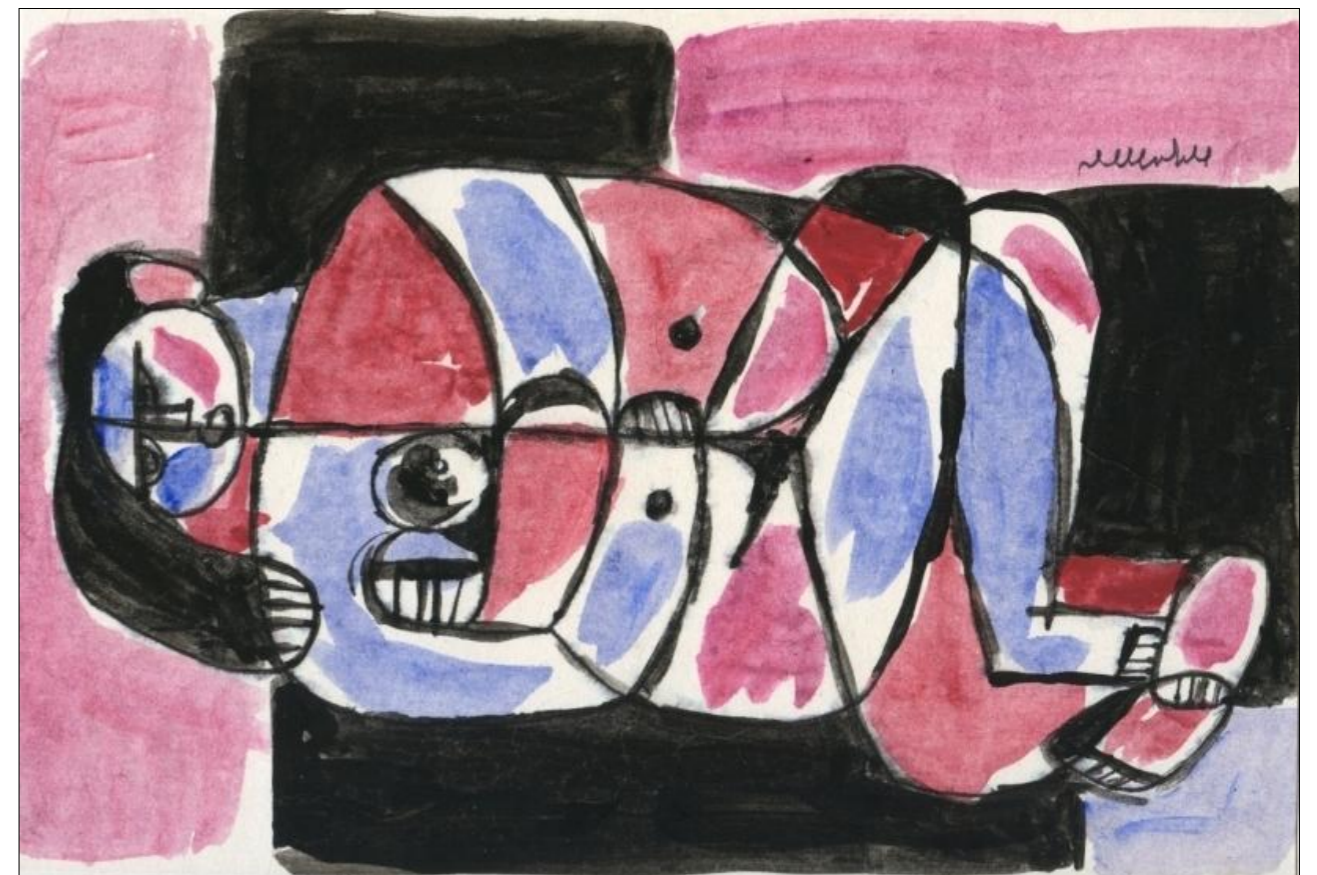
1948, *In fields*, 30 x 24 cm, aquarelle



1955 - *Lovers*, 33 x 24 cm, aquarelle



1983 - *Lovers*, 47,8 x 32,4 cm, aquarelle



1958 - *Lovers*, 14 x 19.5 cm, aquarelle

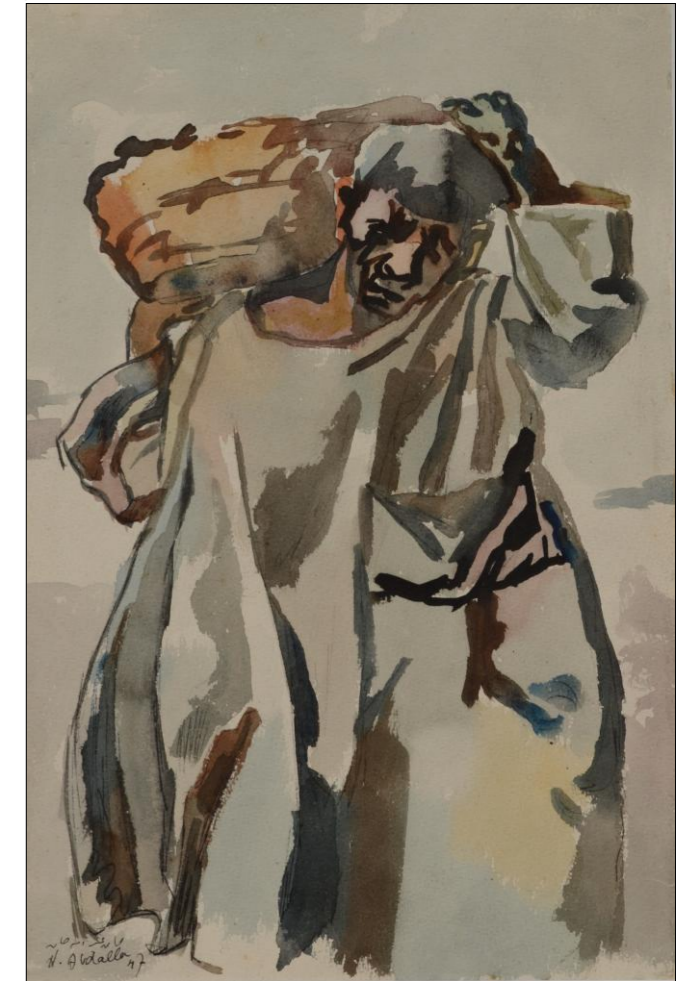


1975, Ahl el Kahf, 26,5 x 18,3 cm, acrylique

In 1945, one of his many exhibitions where he presented around a hundred paintings at the *Musée de Cire* in Cairo was very well received by the press. For the occasion, the magazine "Foyer" published an article that reads as follows: "We admired with pleasure these watercolors' pictorial values. They constitute one of the surest and most authentic productions that Egypt has given birth to. It is the light and the sun of Egypt that have shaped our famous watercolorist. As we have already testified, this painter has strength and a sense of rhythm and color that confer a very particular resonance to his paintings when combined with a native vision of the landscapes."

Abdalla continues his personal search and development: he creates forms with strong lines, integrating in them vivid colors. In some paintings, he insists on the relationship between form and space and tends toward the sculptural form without imitating the cubists nonetheless. His knowledge of contemporary occidental art is vast; he gets his inspiration from it but does not enter into a direct relationship, in the same way as he tries getting away from any known artistic doctrine. He remains in his time and the local figures while every single work is technically well achieved.

For the "Petit Larousse de la peinture" published under the direction of Michel Laclotte from the Department of Painting at the Louvre Museum, the educational role of Abdalla was "to eliminate the picturesque from the representation of the physical space and to subordinate the subject to the demands of construction. He rejected official art in order to develop his own style, in contact with Egyptian physical reality."

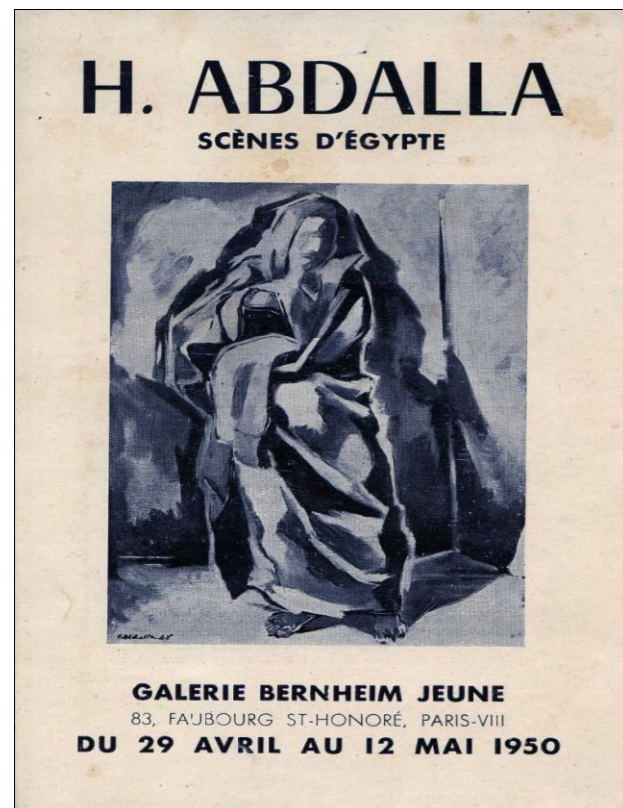


1947 – Worker, 34 x 23 cm, aquarelle



1951 – Al Balata, 26 x 20 cm, aquarelle

Passionately involved in painting, Hamed Abdalla loved to talk about it and share his knowledge. In 1943 he opens with Tahia Halim - his student who will become his wife - the "Abdalla Studio" on Mariette Street in city center where he receives many artists. Among them was Gazbia Serri, Munir Kana'an, Cleopatra Shehata, Inji Efflatoun and Queen Farida, the wife of King Farouk. Mogniss Abdalla writes: *"Simultaneously, Hamed Abdalla cultivates an irreverent attitude, integrating progressively in his work naïve figurative art of the people, the "folk art". The resigned characters, carrying the heavy load of exploitation and misery lighten up with malicious or sarcastic expressions. This challenge to turn to derision, found in the work of the surrealists George Henein and Albert Cossery, was aimed at the local authorities and the foreign occupation. For that matter, Abdalla did not hesitate in helping the anti-British resistance, but underground activities did not suit him. He preferred to show that he, the son of poor peasants from the Saïd, was able to be the equal of westerners. Better, that he could be their professor, their intellectual guide."*



In the meantime, his art works continue to be presented to the public of important Egyptian cities, and in 1950 he exhibits at the Gallery Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. The exhibition is acclaimed while Abdalla invited everywhere. In an interview broadcasted on a French radio, Robert Vrinat, a critic of the *"Age Nouveau"* speaks of the maturity of Abdalla's art and of his confidence saying that *"many artists of your age -33- can envy you."* Vrinat insists on the tones' luminosity, devoid of violence and the lightness of the colors: *"You give us a very different vision of Egypt, which was brought to us by western painters."* To this remark, Abdalla answers: *"My colors suit my Egyptian nature. The western painters believe wrongly that the Orient inspires warm colors like yellow, orange etc whereas it is white that dominates the Egyptian palette. This is due to the fact that the dazzling light which characterizes Egypt softens the intensity of colors. On the other hand, the chiaroscuro does not exist in our countries because the strong light lightens the shadows by the effect of its reflections (...)"* In this interview, the artist expresses his warmest thanks to the critic Waldemar George who had presented him to the Parisian public, speaking in these terms about his painting: *"H. Abdalla, who is in Paris, is doing his humanities. He brings to the study of a difficult craft a real fervor. He turns to account the experience of French masters but does not imitate any them. At the very most, he discovers through the maze of contemporary art his own past and his own history. By measuring the length of the loan incurred by modern painting towards the East, he finds his hereditary way. But he does not renounce, like many westerners, the purely European tradition of Hellenism and the Renaissance (...). The work of H. Abdalla marks the advent of an Egyptian School that goes back to the sources of the Latin West, although acquiring its own identity and fulfilling an original mission! All seems to indicate this and everything makes us believe in this."*



1975, Talisman, 19,5 x 28 cm, acrylique

*“On the public level, refusing to admit defeat, Abdalla seeks to break isolation. He travels through the Arab countries between 79 and 83 before making his return to Egypt. But there, he found a stagnant and rigid society. He is revolted against the state of misery in which his people are immersed. He knows the part of responsibility that should be assumed by the regime, but also the entire political class, and notably by the left and the intellectuals (...). Nevertheless, he wanted to settle in Egypt, he was restless”, recalls his son Samir.*

This change is also reflected in his work which takes another dimension; it loses in violence and gains in serenity and transparency. According to Edouard El Kharrat: *“ This last period indicates a unique harmony between pain and sweetness, between torment and endurance on one part, and aptitude on the other part, to sublimate these effects, receive them - not accept them - and overpass them without denying them. Moreover, in his late works, there is a return to omnipresent monumental bases, with a destitution that Hamed Abdalla has spent all his life touching, teasing, succumbing to its temptation without giving it full powers, resisting without denying”.*



1975 –Lovers , 26,5 x 18,6 cm, acrylique

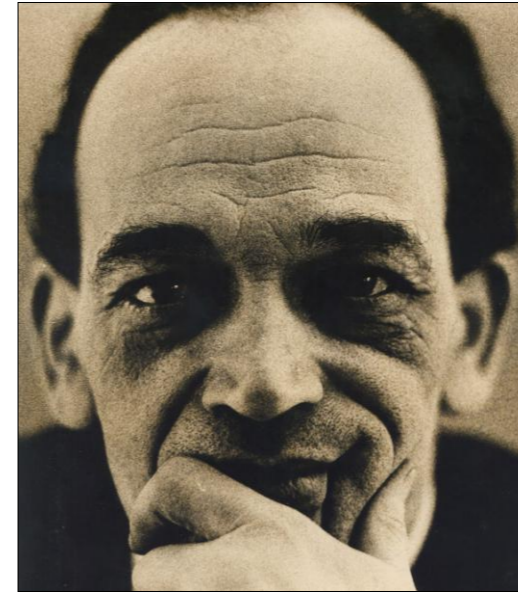
Painter Adli Rizkallah (who died in 2010) who considered Hamed Abdalla as his teacher and friend goes back, in a posthumous article published in the daily *Al-Hayat* in 1998, to the different phases of the artist’s life and relates, with great emotion, the last trip of Abdalla to Egypt in 1983. Rizkallah remembers his enthusiasm when talking about painting, and his projects to teach young Egyptian artists as he did in the 40s and 50s. *“He said this activity was essential to him, after 60”.*

Rizkallah relates their meeting in a café at Boulaq with artist Zahran Salameh: *“He took his papers and started to draw men and women with a mastery that impressed us. At that point, I turned to my friend Zahran and whispered “our Hamed is back”.*”

This much desired return remains however unfinished. Hamed Abdalla, suffering from an esophageal cancer, is forced to be hospitalized in France, and dies on the last day of 1985, at the Bellan hospital, in Paris, where his wife used to work.

As for Adli Rizkallah, he goes back to the poignant testimony of painter Georges Bahgoury who sees himself as the “student” of Abdalla: *“We were passing in front of the hospital and George told me how Hamed Abdalla joined his hands and shouted “you will not defeat me”. He was talking to death; it was a day before his passing away”.* That word “Death” which appears grandiose, mysterious and solemn in one of his paintings (1976).

*“The way of an artist is full of avenues and is never-ending...it continues endlessly. He suffers...he tracks the meaning of things that is always obscure and vibrant. He reveals, bit by bit, his inner world...these things that his alerted eyes make us rediscover. This world that contains a part of us...To approach a painting, the lyrics always seem too many. A passionate attention, a look is enough...”* Andre Chedid wrote.



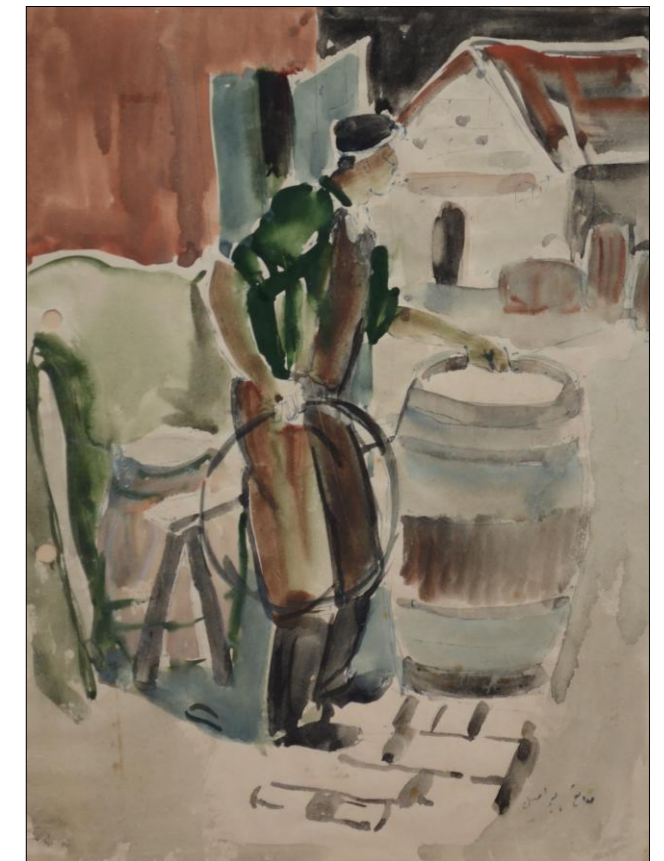
1955

Despite his remarkable rise and his innumerable successes, Hamed Abdalla remains attentive to the sufferings of modest people. In a text written in Arabic entitled *“The Path...”* and signed Paris, October 1951, he notes down his thoughts in an elegant and meticulous handwriting: *“(…) The path I’m talking about... is not the path we take back and forth... it is the path of life (...) the path I’m talking about is the path of the people... the path of those who have know misfortunes... misfortunes of the dignified who have endured the blows with heroism throughout the centuries... misfortunes of those who own nothing... except their pride and their hope.”*



Even his Parisian paintings are tinged with sadness. He is particularly attracted by the profoundly human aspect found in big cities: the coopers of Bercy, the workers of the Halles, the down and out persons from the working class...

*“The soul of Abdalla is sad. It finds under other skies its same solitude and misery”* writes Aimé Azar in his book *“Modern Painting in Egypt”* (1961). Later, Azar adds: *“Back in Egypt, Abdalla continues to strip his forms to the extent of giving them – in their harsh truth – the accent of a whole class drunk with misery and yet so awake! (...). He confines his vision to one, two or three figures, encloses the wholes, twists the forms and concentrates the lines, submitting them to the audacity of his character; he is not afraid of turned down, subdued colors, neither of pinks on blue neighboring a thick brown. Poetry is born from the sobriety of this being who is trying to gain time and to “steal” the supreme magic of the neutral space (...)”*



1951 - Paris, Bercy, 26 x 20 cm, aquarelle



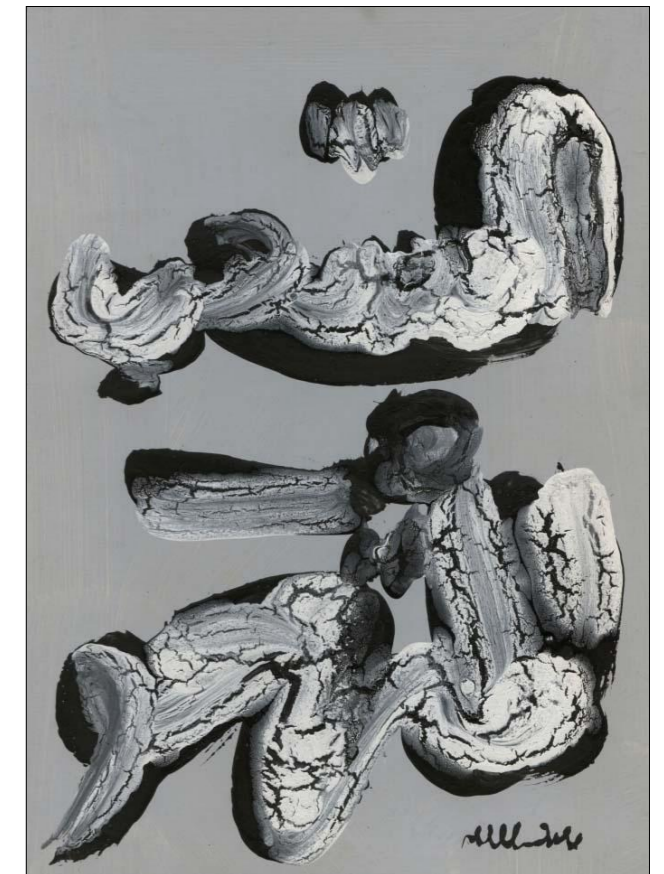
Deeply concerned by the world in which he lived, Abdalla conveys all his emotions in his creation.

A film, produced at that time by a young student of Egyptian cinema, Abdelaziz Soukary, shows the only images of Hamed Abdalla working at home, in the Parisian suburbs. Samir Abdalla notes: « *One is struck by the power and accuracy of the painter's gesture, by its fast execution. It looks like he is in trance. He sweats abundantly. We can say that onomatopoeia is escaping from his brush* ».

On her part, his daughter Anisa recalls: « *My father often suffered from backache, and he remained lying, thoughtful. During these moments, he liked to listen to the Egyptian great voice, Oum Kalthoum, as well as Abdelwahab, the important Oud players and Sheikh Imam who spent his life in prison, in addition to classics, such as Beethoven, Dvorak and the Russians, with Chostakovich in particular. Their stories interested him. He was very inspired during these moments. Suddenly, he used to get up and start painting with passion and determination, and also with high accuracy. Thereafter, he was so exhausted that I helped him clean his brushes and massage his back. He always used to ask me to comment on his paintings and suggest titles...* ».

Far away in France, he was constantly caught up by the events in his country. The Camp David accords signed in 1978 by President Anwar El Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin and the ostracism of Egypt by the Arab world seriously affected Hamed Abdalla who was politically engaged in favor of the Palestinian cause.

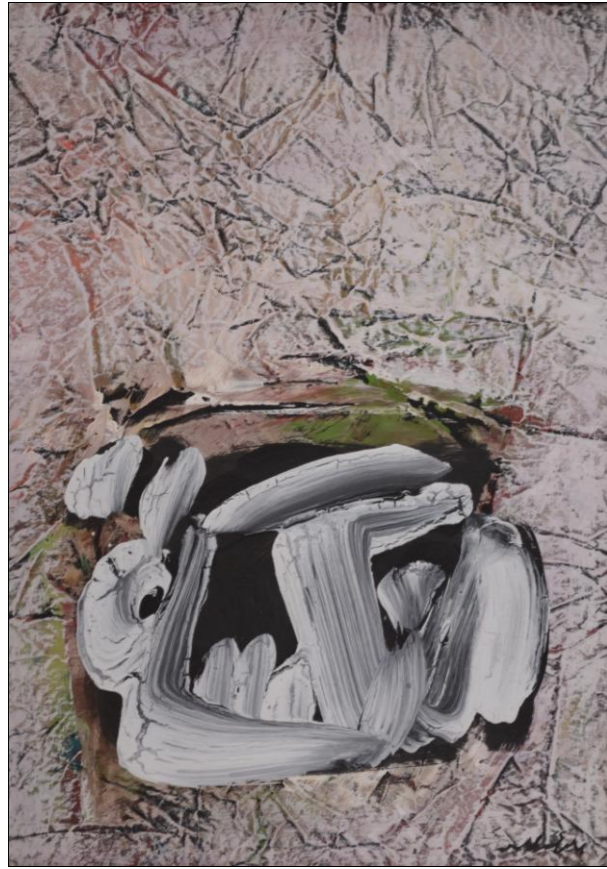
During this period, his work takes back the themes of surrender and dishonor. That year, he participates to the *International Exhibition for Palestine*, organized in Beirut and in 1980, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Teheran, he joins other artists in an exhibition entitled *Art Exhibition of the Palestinian Resistance*. In 1982, a new group exhibition for Palestine presents his works at UNESCO in Paris.



1975 – Stolen people, 28,4 x 20,4 cm, acrylique



1973 – Oktober al 'Obour, 200 x 140 cm, acrylique



1967 – Al Naksa – The Defeat, 64 x 45 cm, acrylique

However, when in June 1967, comes the humiliation of the Arab defeat in front of Israel, Hamed Abdalla feels very disturbed. He is in a terrible state.

Samir recalls: *“The French media displayed images of hundreds of Egyptian soldiers’ shoes abandoned in the desert (we knew later on that it was a fake picture). He forbade watching television at home. And the small screen remained closed for more than ten years. When he discovered that gallery managers and artists have supported Israel in the conflict, he finally broke with art dealers. He plagued endlessly against the bureaucratic and incapable dictatorships that lead the Arab world, and devoted a fierce hatred for the Americans and their allies (...).”*

Three years later, another incident deeply touches him: the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970.

Samir Abdalla remembers that when his father heard of the news, he gathered his children in the living room and read with them the first Sura of the Koran (The ‘Fatiha’) for the Raïs’ peace of soul.

And as if longing for his country became stronger after this loss, Hamed Abdalla makes a trip to Egypt in 1971. This is a period during which he works hard: *« It looks as if Abdalla is struggling physically against his depression by painting up dozens of paintings daily. The seventies were the most productive years of the artist’s life »*, says Samir.

*Sadness, Capitulation, Slavery, Prostration, Pain, War, Defeat, Resistance, Freedom, Revolution, Zionism...are among the topics covered by Hamed Abdalla during those years, but there are also his Talismans, Love, Affection, The couple, The Lovers, Poetry and Al-Moutannabi. Furthermore, there are Hunger, Victims of the Bourgeoisie and a painting where the artist wrote clearly the following words « Two kilos of beans per month for a family! ».*



1969 – Defeat, 114 x 146 cm, relief and painted wood



1970 – Victims of Bourgeoisie  
42,6 x 58,8 cm acrylique

During this period, the paintings of Hamed Abdalla are without perspective, without shadows. The line is vigorous, glorified and the surfaces powerful, unified. The colors are strong, without excess, diffusing a particular glow. In a text entitled *“A revived art”*, the art historian Bishr Fares explains: *“Hamed Abdalla turns his back to the scholarly formula of coloring. With our painter, the color lights up; it cuts up instead of scattering, embellishing or overloading. Moreover, color interferes in the composition; it aims at arranging things. The elaboration of space is not dependent on the different volumes. It is perceived thanks to a shifting relationship of contrasts and harmonies between the colors. This is the legacy of an ancient oriental language, glorified with the prodigious discovery of a Van Gogh or a Gauguin (...).”*

It is a period in which Abdalla evokes the folkloric or primitive aspects in the forms he creates: the face is deformed, the eye is hugely made bigger, the nose protruding, the mouth fleshy, the cheek stretched up...

According to the writer Edward El Kharrat, in his article *“Hamed Abdalla... Artist of the Monumental”* published in 1994 in the newspaper *“Al-Hayat”*, these are paintings *“where the artist is satisfied with exterior features that are almost primitive – or childish – but that express his thoughts and his feelings in a strong and simple manner, and where he even introduces at times irony, cheerfulness and teasing (...). In this beautiful distortion – if we are allowed to use this expression, which is right – hides the artist’s scoffing towards visible realist appearance. He plays with it in a spirit of freedom, trying to tear off the bourgeois masks that Hamed Abdalla hated so much.”*

< 1953, Cham Ennessim  
39 x 29 cm, gouache, silk paper

In one of his paintings that go back to this period, *Cham Ennessim* (1954), the artist represents with a lot of humor an Egyptian couple wearing the traditional costume of the local people, looking at each other in profile. This drawing finds great success and is selected by Steubenglass in New York to be produced on crystal.



1955 - Cham Ennessim,  
at Steubenglass Museum, New York

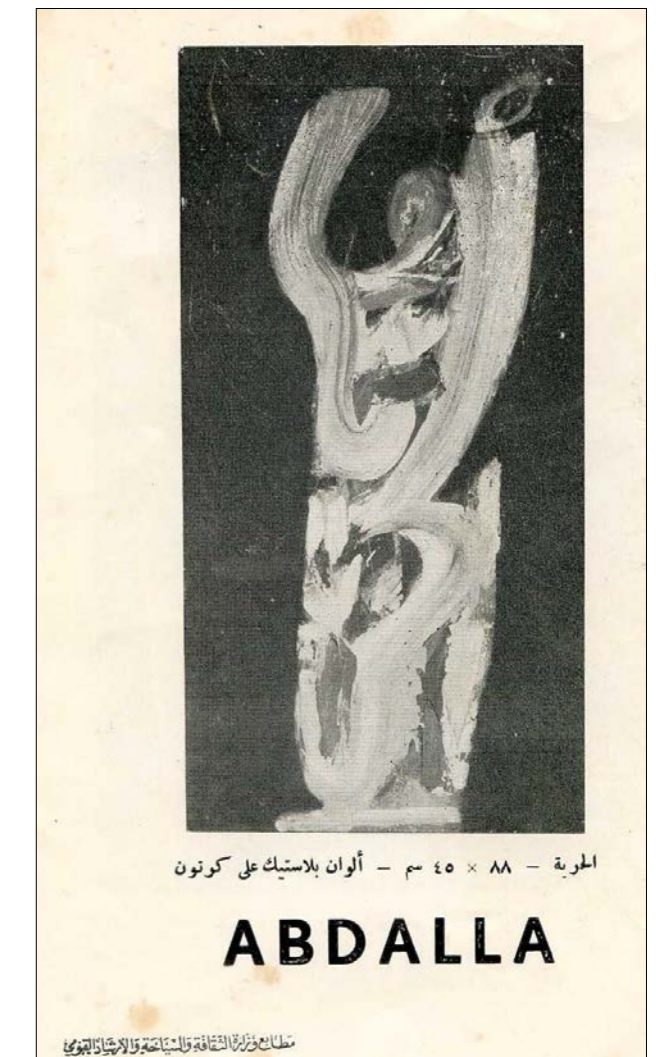
For the Danish critic, J. Moller Nielsen, what attracts most in Hamed Abdalla was « *his fondness of the huge relief, the rude and swelling material, the monumental and magnificent figuration. In this, he says, he resembles his ancestors, those who created the Sphinx, the huge statues of Ramses and other Pharaohs, the Pyramids and the Memnon colossi. For the first time in the history of art, they created « the great form ». In a way, it rises in a modern shape in Abdalla's art.* »

Despite the success of his work, his numerous exhibitions and activities, Hamed Abdalla decides to leave Denmark in 1966. In an interview to a Danish newspaper a few years before, he had explained: « *When a man wants to look at himself, he has to look through something else – a mirror, for instance. Therefore, an artist, if he is to see himself must look through others, look into the cultural traditions of other people in order to truly understand his own. On the other hand, my ambition was, and still is to make of my work a bridge between our worlds, to create mutual understanding... Living in Denmark has helped me realize how Arab I am.* »

After ten years in this country, he felt himself confined and wanted to get closer to the world artistic life. With his family, he eventually settled in Paris where he was « *more surrounded with his Arab and Egyptian friends* », explains his wife Kristen. « *In our house, where Hamed had his studio, there were always friends visiting Paris or living there. It is true that from this point of view, he was less isolated* », she says.

Abdalla resumes his artistic activity and exhibits in different countries, including Syria where a retrospective exhibition of his paintings was organized at the National Museum of Damascus. A conference on his art gathered, among others, the Syrian artist Fateh Moudaress and the historian Afif Bahnassi.

In this regard, the journalist and writer Michel Kilo wrote in the magazine *Al-Ma'rifa*: « (...) *Hamed Abdalla has offered us a well-developed Arabic art, a well-studied art that represents the beginning of openness of Arab art on the way to universality. He succeeded in this openness, although the path of universality of Arab art is long and hard to accomplish.* »



1967 – Exhibition at National Museum, Damas



1972 – Hamed Abdalla and family in France

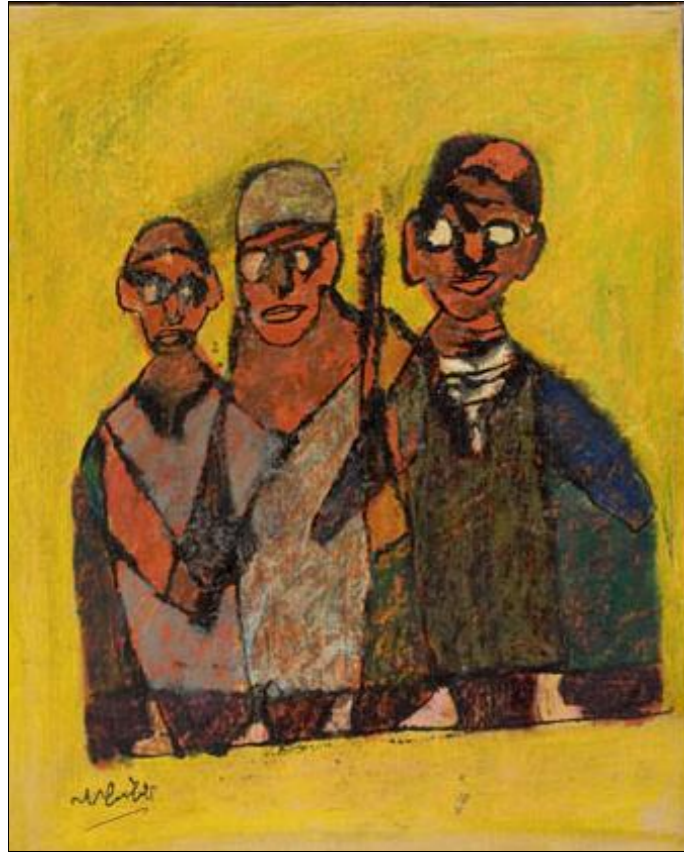
1955 - *Asfour*  
130 x 90 cm, mixed medium





1968, *Al Tahrir – Freedom*, 65 x 46 cm, acrylique





1956 – *The Authority* (private collection)

In 1952, Hamed Abdalla is naturally carried away by the fervor of Gamal Abdel Nasser's national revolution and participates to the large movement of 'egyptianizing' the cultural milieu. He dismisses the ladies and princesses who were painting under his direction, and puts all his efforts in the new revolution. At the "Atelier du Caire" (Cairo Studio), he inaugurates his first conferences in Arabic and organizes exhibitions for Egyptian painters. He works hard to improve the status of artists in his country, though it wasn't long before he gets disappointed with Abdel Nasser and the State's bureaucracy. Paintings from this period carry titles such as *The Authority* or *The Prisoners*...

Abdalla is appalled with the brutal repression and "will never forgive Nasser for sending tanks against the workers who were on strike at Kafr El Dawar, nor for having ordered the execution by hanging of the strikers Al Khamis and Al Bakkari" writes Mogniss Abdalla.

In 1956, he starts a new international tour. His works are exhibited in several European cities including Paris, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Copenhagen... and in group exhibitions in New York and Seoul.

But this year witnesses the association of France with Great Britain and Israel in the Suez expedition. Hamed Abdalla is in Paris and watches, with great pain, the media flood against Abdel Nasser who was compared to Hitler in the "Actualités Cinématographiques" (Film-making News) of the time. True to himself, he could not bear to live in contradiction. Despite his anger against the regime, he defends Nasser forcefully and refuses to reside or exhibit in the countries that made war to his people.



1957 – *Djamila the Algerian* (private collection)





1961 – Brake , 31,5 x 48,2 cm, acrylique



1959 – Lovers, 14 x 22 cm, gouache



1960 – Lovers, 27,2 x 34,5 cm, relief painted plaster



1970 – Hamza, 80 x 65 cm ciment

He builds some of his paintings with thick pastes and he introduces in some others materials such as polystyrene, linoleum, plaster, cement, lime and jute... The Egyptian artist and critic Farouk Al Bassiouny describes the paintings of Abdalla where the letters are all-pervading, as follows : « (...) He completely frees himself of the academic track of the Arabic letter that becomes a pure vital stimulus in a formal dynamic, that forms vibrant entities of a volcanic red, flowing, entangling, interacting on a neutral monochrome surface with which they are in constant contrast, particularly at the level of material treatment, which gives them an immediate effect requiring no reading (...) ».

Abdalla goes from small sizes to large ones, from delicate touches to broad brush strokes, from dynamic and shifting forms to geometric ones, well built, that Edouard El Kharrat calls « the architectural or geometric abstraction current ».

According to El Kharrat, « the letters-words conceived in a cerebral and conscious manner, stand, calm, cast of body congestion or emotional exuberance, similar to almost rectilinear buildings resembling, from a far distance, the Arab-Islamic calligraphy on the mosques walls or in big Korans, evoking to a certain extent some kinds of « Arab hieroglyphics » where the linguistic sign blends with the image, where abstraction approximates personification (...) ».

1970, Arab Hieroglyphe  
46 x 33 cm, mixed med



1954, Hope, 42 x 33 cm, gouache, silk paper



1958, *Sheherazade*, 41 x 30 cm, gouache, silk paper

On his part, the Danish curator, Harald Ditzel, talks about “a particular philosophy” which serves as the basis for the pictorial world of Abdalla. He says: “Each painting begins as a sign- character that covers, at a very high level, a concept rather than a word. The first origin of the form can be called calligraphy. However, the handwritten sign does not remain, at this stage, a decoration on the surface. The image-concept indicated by the text appears in the consciousness of Abdalla as a pictorial form - an unusual plastic form related to the world of the sculptor, but highlighted by colors that are probably unknown to most sculptors (...). Everything is integrated in a mystic form of expression that is clearly the only means by which the artist and the philosopher can find themselves in the painting (...).”

In Denmark, his artwork is highly appreciated and he regularly exhibits in major galleries. Hamed Abdalla frequents Danish artists such as Mogens Ziegler and Henry Heerup who repeatedly invite him to present his works, at the « Decembrists » exhibition, a group of artists opposed to the all- abstract. In a letter of Ziegler dated January 8, 1961, we read: « Dear Abdalla, there is an old Danish proverb saying: “all good times are three” and since we can prolong a guest invitation three times, I hereby invite you to participate once more in our exhibition, which this year will open on Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> of March (...).”



1960 – With the « Decembrist », Copenhagen

Hamed Abdalla also made friends among Anglo-Saxon artists: Herbert Gentry, an American black artist who lived in Copenhagen at the same period of Abdalla, between 1958 and 1963, and Murray Brown who was a passionate for the painting of the Egyptian artist and dedicated a collection of poetry to « Abdalla, the Creator ».

As a master of technique, Hamed Abdalla was always trying to innovate in the choice of materials and experiment with different mediums, sometimes little familiar. Among his numerous exhibitions in Copenhagen, he organizes one entitled *The Mirror* in which he presents paintings with metallic colors on glass plates (*Tribute to Narcissus*). When the mirror shines and unifies the sheen of the color, the effect becomes quite special.

Elsewhere, he applies textures that blend well with his colors, such as the Japanese crumpled paper on the surface of the image to provide a basis for his refined works.

In a painting of 1962, *Mahzoum* (defeated), Abdalla uses a tar lined with a silver foil and heated with a torch to achieve a surprising result. He does not hesitate to use vivid colors, with casein sometimes, or to mix the casein with oil.



1963 – *Mahzoum*, 80 x 65 cm, mazout & silver



1960, Ihzan – Sadness, 43 x 35 cm, relief, plaser, wood

Nevertheless, despite his nationalistic feelings, he stays far from Egypt and decides to settle in Denmark with Kirsten Blach, a young Danish nurse he had met in Paris, with whom he will marry after divorcing Tahia Halim.

Rapidly he becomes involved in the Danish artistic scene and gives interviews to the local press.

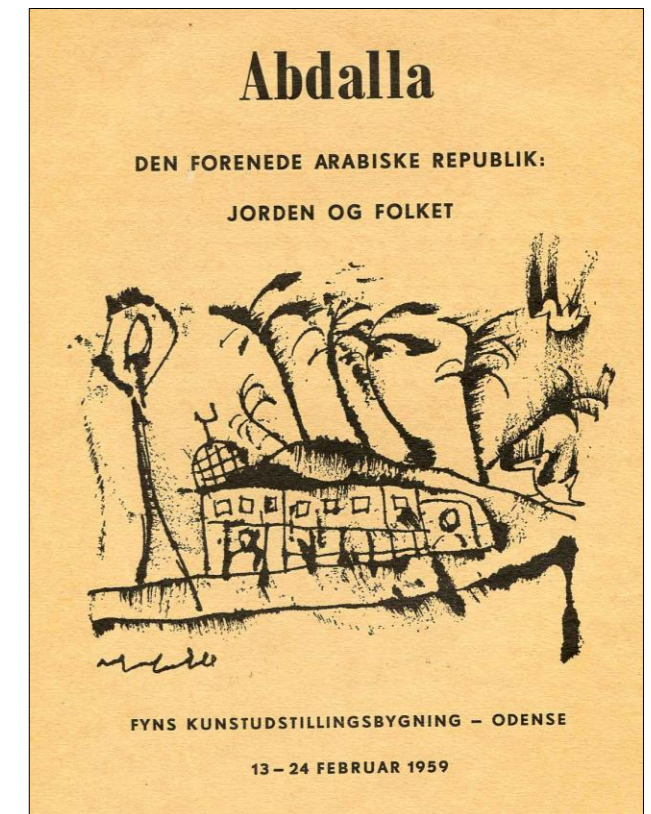
Upon his arrival in 1956, he explains to a journalist: *“I do not intend to close the Suez Canal or any other. On the contrary, I came to Denmark to open one, namely that which is a connection between my art and the Danish public.”*

To the question asking him about the situation of the artist in Egypt, he says: *“Bad as in any other country. People have no money to buy works of art. I managed to have an art class. At home in Cairo, I had among my students both Swedes and Norwegians. They encouraged me to visit Scandinavia. I am not interested in politics, and art in my opinion creates friends.”*

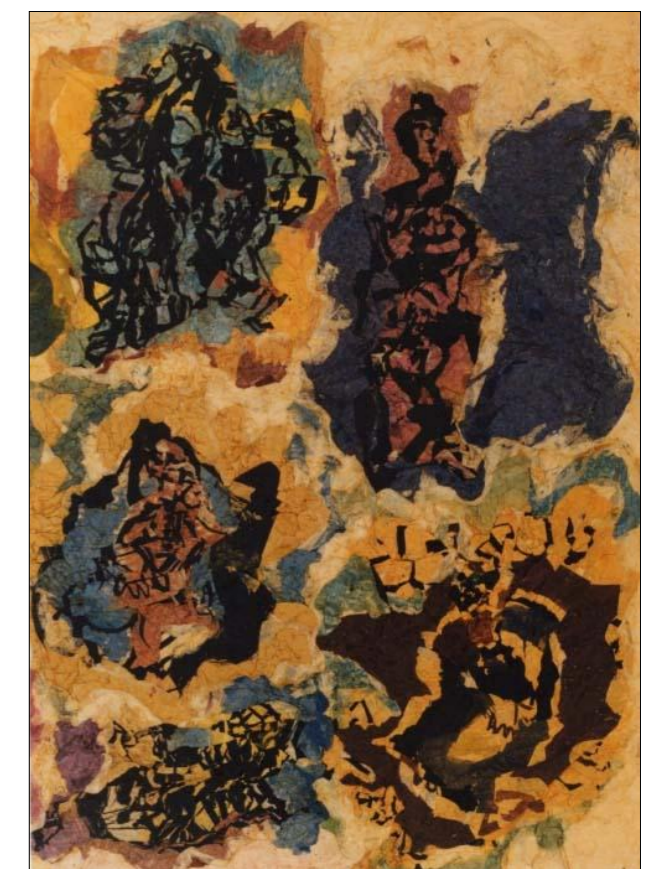
*“He likes this small country where he does not suffer from the exhausting spirit of competition between artists that holds sway everywhere else”* recounts Mogniss. *“The simplicity of the people here reminds me of the fellah’s simplicity”* he used to say.

Abdalla opens his studio in Copenhagen where he receives Danish artists. He advises them to take more roots in the pictorial traditions of their country such as the lime paintings found in medieval protestant churches. Wasn’t he, himself, inspired by Oriental culture to develop his art?

In an interview published in *“Kunst”* in May 1958, he says of Egypt: *“Every village has its anonymous artist who builds its houses and paints its façades in a creative manner with geometric motifs and primitive images, integrating in them sacred writing. Ancient traditions have been assimilated by the Copts and fully developed by the Muslims (...).”*



1959 – Exhibition book, Odense (Denmark)



1956 – Signs from Egypt  
44 x 33 cm, gouache on crimped silk paper



1956 – Lovers, 40 x 24 cm, gouache on silk



1957 – Lovers, 29 x 20,5 cm, ink & gouache

From the start, personal exhibitions of his works are organized in several Danish cities, of which one in Skive where the local newspaper writes: *“One would imagine that a painter like the Egyptian Hamed Abdalla would seem quite strange! This is not the case. Though he presents, in color, quite another part of the world, other customs and habits, one feels at once well in company with his works (...). If one enters the exhibition with the intention of finding paintings, which represent things in the familiar way, one will be disappointed. Hamed Abdalla is a spokesman for the younger Egyptians, and tries to paint nature and human beings, as he sees them – not with his eyes but with his temperament (...).”*

Along the same lines, another newspaper publishes: *“The painter is Hamed Abdalla, and how he landed in Denmark, only the Gods might know. But it is good that he is here because it is only rare to get the opportunity to see art from the other side of the Mediterranean. And here, it is art of real carat (...). In his choice of subject-matter, Abdalla is also in harmony with something originally Egyptian. It is the intimate themes with which he is preoccupied. But the artist raises these themes up to a level, where they maintain a universal character. The canvases turn to be something more than pictures, visions. Nature is perceived and filtered through a temperament.”*



1957 – Palermo, Italy



1975, *Al Abd, The Slave*  
92 x 73 cm, acrylique

Thus, at the exhibition the creative word in Denmark (1965), he outlined excerpts of the Gospels in Danish to make the natives rediscover the meaning of the sacred words. His experience and research on ancient texts dating back to the books of the Dead and Akhenaton were rewarding for his interlocutors of whatever origins (...)."

Kirsten Abdalla who followed closely the creation of her husband, says about him: "he studied a lot the sacred scriptures, the old texts from the time of the Pharaohs, the Bible and the Koran that he considered as the greatest of poems, and felt happy when he found similarities in the various sacred texts. He often cited St. John in the New Testament: "In the beginning was the word". Thus, he developed the concept of the "creative word."

His work on the « word-form » continues to evolve, and from 1958, all his artistic creation is channeled in this direction and this research.

Edward El Kharrat speaks about the « letters period » of Abdalla and writes: « (...) Hamed Abdalla will innovate with unprecedented works and probably no one will follow him: the transformation of the letter or the Arab word to plastic beings having their own features (...). His artistic ambition was to cross the gap between the literal precise meaning of the word and the plastic physicality of the meaning, independently of the letters that form the Arab word, or by ignoring them (...). The artistic effort here, in my opinion, is the accomplished traverse from the reduced, precise and trivial literal meaning - a sort of silent mold - to the plastic meaning with all its physical, colorful, full of visual value and almost structural richness, at a time."



1962 - *Shandawili*, 73x32 cm, relief, wood, isorel

From Denmark, Hamed Abdalla continues to travel and exhibit in various European countries.

On the occasion of his exhibition in Palermo, he visits the Palatine Chapel. The Italian critic Franco Grasso writes: "I met him at an important stage in his journey to the West: Sicily that retained then intact the treasures of Arab art - in the chests of Norman temples, in the architecture of palaces, in the domes that the builders of mosques erected for the Arab conqueror. I saw him bent down, as a fervent Muslim, over the mosaics that adorn the Palatine Chapel of Palermo to study the geometric composition of the tesserae, the gold put between the greens and roses, blue and violet gradations that multiply and gather into a huge kaleidoscope fixed in its position by a skilled hand only (...). It is there that Abdalla sought, beyond his inspiration, his atavistic memories: the trace and proof of the nobility and antiquity of his art."

The trip to Sicily was the beginning of a new collection of paintings called "Faces", inspired by the frescoes discovered in the Palatine Chapel.

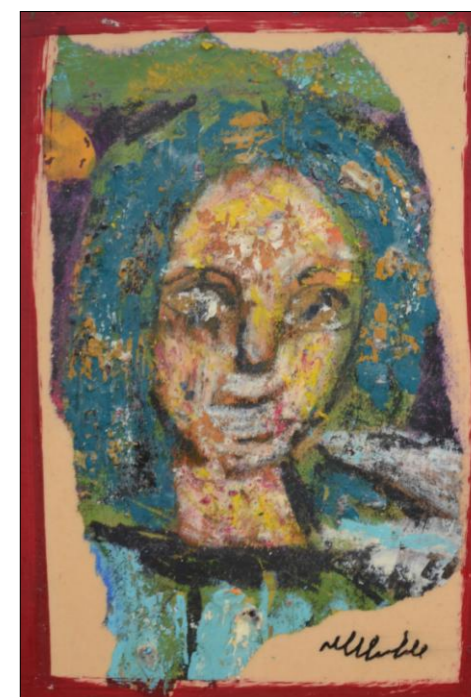
When we examine the two paintings of 1957 that represent each the face of a woman in a frame, we have the sense of a very old world that resurfaced.

A work of 1958 evokes a face where the eyes, ears and mouth are drawn from Arabic writings. It is the beginning of what the artist called his "calligraphic improvisations", the moment he started to introduce the Arabic calligraphy in his work and to build, based on a face research, the conception of the "word-form".

However, the search of Hamed Abdalla in the Holy places of Islam, his deep study of the representations that decorate them, had already started.



1957 - *Face*, 33 x 25 cm, gouache/silk



1957 - *Face*, 17 x 11 cm, mix med



1957 - *Face*, 24,5 x 23 cm, mix med



1958– Allah Akbar



1958 – Sheherazade, 41 x 30 cm, aquarelle



1958 – Allah Akbar, 34,5 x 31,7 cm, ink

His wife Kirsten recalls that he used to buy many books on Islamic art and that he was interested in pottery: *“He read a lot, spent whole days going with passion through the books he had bought, and then the production was intense and very fast. It went out like a jet (...).He used to work mostly at night”,* as she remembers.

Following a study on an Islamic pottery of the twelfth century, Abdalla unveils a graphic improvisation about the invocation of *“Allah Akbar”* (God is great): a seated woman, left in white, against a black background is *Maternity* (1958). The body of the woman brings to mind the Persian figures found on pottery and miniatures, figures that also inspired Abdalla in the series of paintings where he paints Scheherazade.

We find the theme of maternity in another painting of 1962 where the artist inscribed the letters in an ample pictorial movement, with abundant touches of paint, that hardly permit to recognize the meaning of the word.

It is clear that Hamed Abdalla loved to retake and rework some subjects at different times.

A very beautiful example is illustrated by the painting entitled *Al Amal* (the hope): the first one goes back to 1946, and reproduces the slender silhouette of an Egyptian peasant in his white *jellaba*, whose arms are raised to the sky with grandeur. The second, painted in 1957, reproduces the word *Al Amal* with letters that overlap and intertwine and eventually reproduce the same movement of the raised arms of the *fellah*, to express the same feeling of strength and hope.

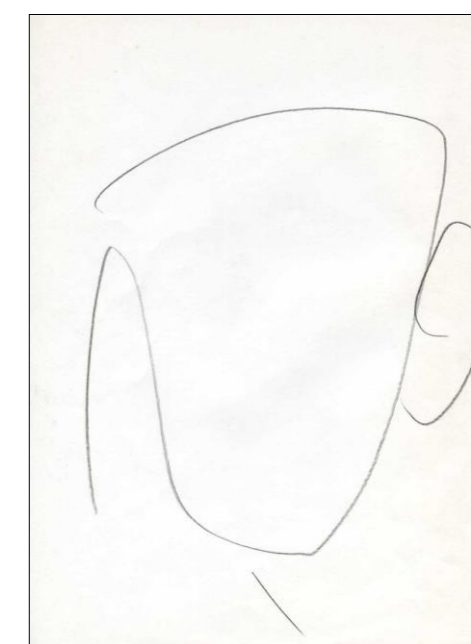
1978, Allah Akbar  
55 x 46 cm, acrylique

In his research, Hamed Abdalla explored in particular the reciprocal influences between East and West. In a 1956 study, he writes: *“(…) We also note that the discovery of the Islamic arts has represented openness to Western art - the arabesque that the German philosopher Kant places atop the arts of the whole world, as well as the oriental scriptures, such as hieroglyphics or the Chinese calligraphy. Those arts opened to the Western painter windows on a new plastic world, as it is found at the origin of abstract art (...).”*

In another text on these influences between East and West, Abdalla makes a surprising finding: *“The Muslim artist, to whom Islam forbids the representation of figures, has animated the work space with abstract geometric designs, to indirectly form figurative elements left in “white”. Has that lesson of the Muslim artist influenced Cézanne, while he was working on the space in order to create forms? I do not know. But since the nineteenth century, the lesson of the East has been in general respected by the European painter, who wanted to transform the three-dimensional object into a plastic element, within the two-dimensional domain of the painting. There has been much talk about “the flat painting” (...).”*

By seeking to understand the works of Giotto, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso and Klee... Abdalla was trying to find himself: *“My painting is part of the Arab-Egyptian tradition, it is placed in the line of development of our civilization; it is not my fault if we recognize in it certain elements that you, westerners, have come to collect in our countries (...).”*, he said.

In a text entitled *“Convulsions”*, Mogniss Abdalla writes about his father: *“His concern was not to be understood by the West, but to assert his own experience of the Egyptian history (...). Abdalla is not satisfied with pulling the blanket over him.”*

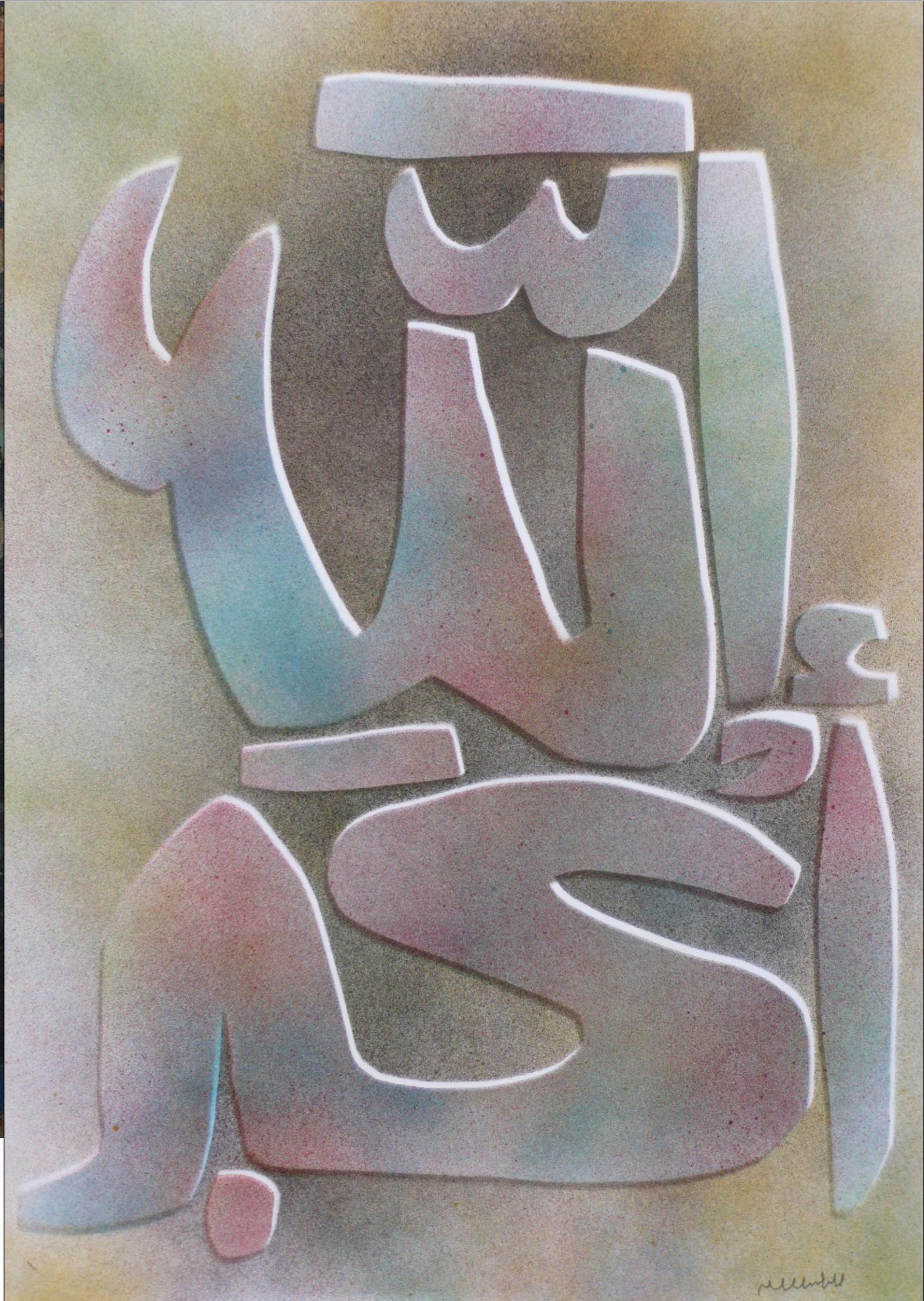


1957 – Study on the word «Wagh» (face)

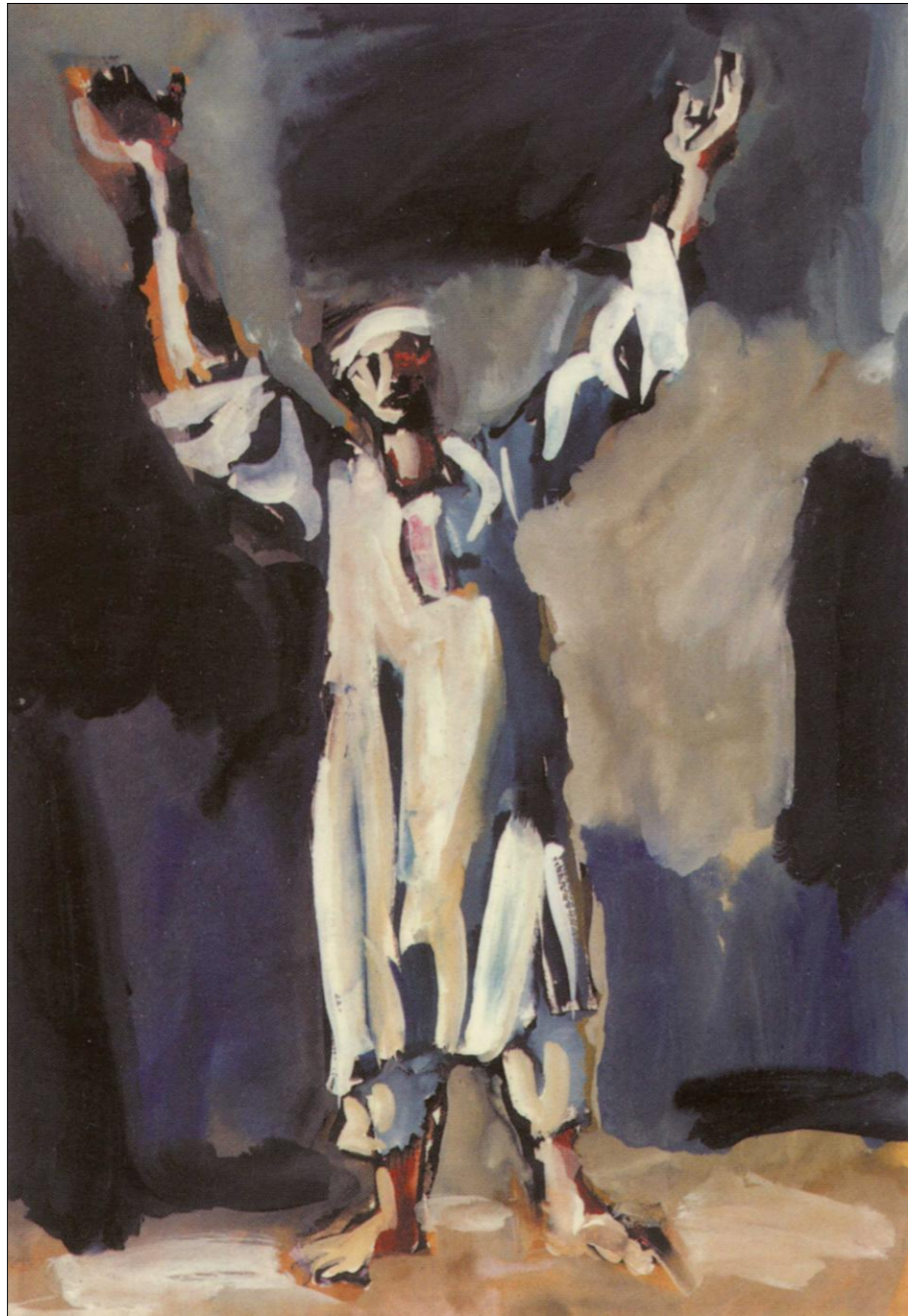




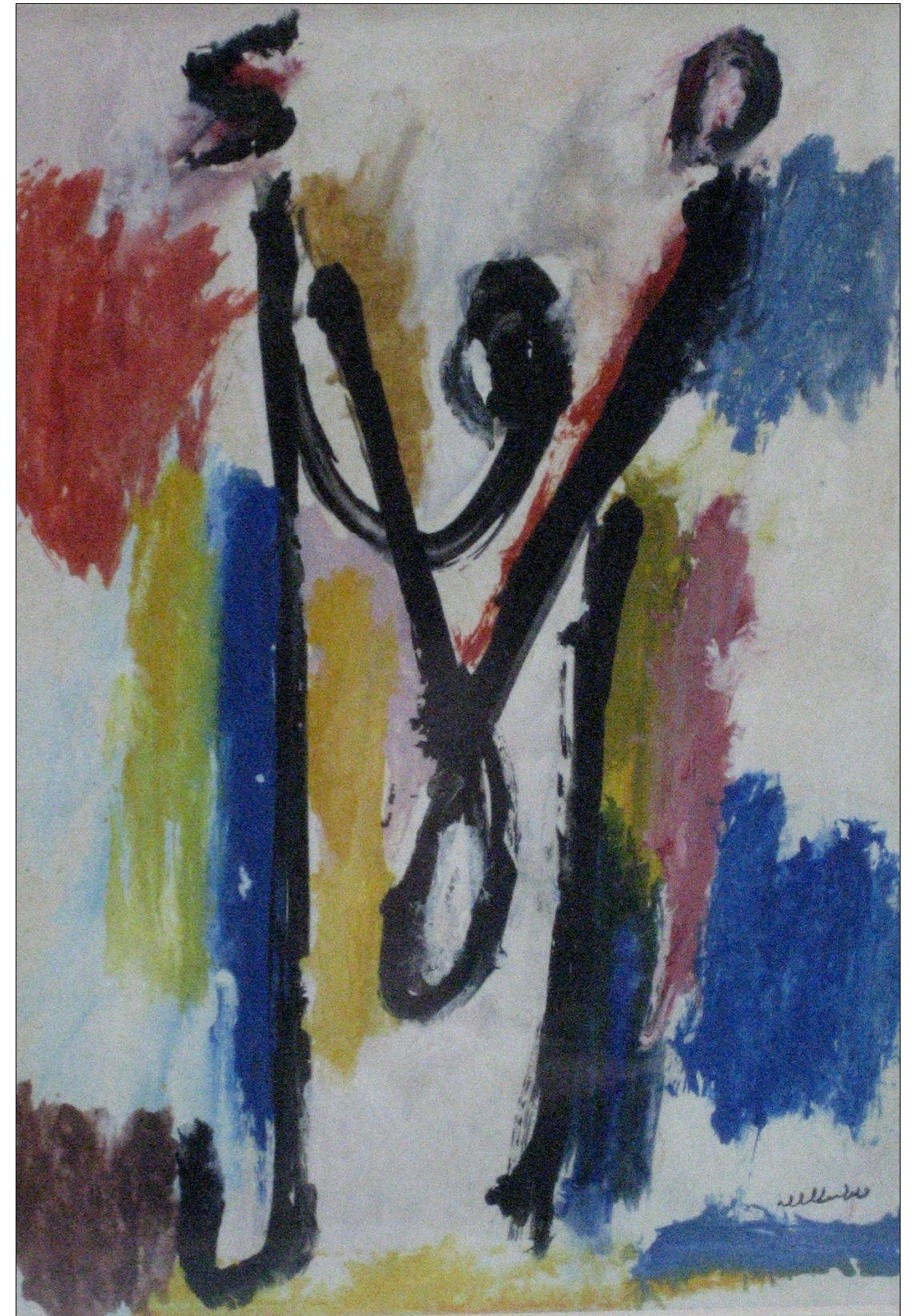
1960, Wagh, 55 x 46 cm, casein mixt



Wagh



1946, *Al Amal*, 41 x 30 cm, gouache



1958, *Al Amal*, 41 x 26 cm, gouache