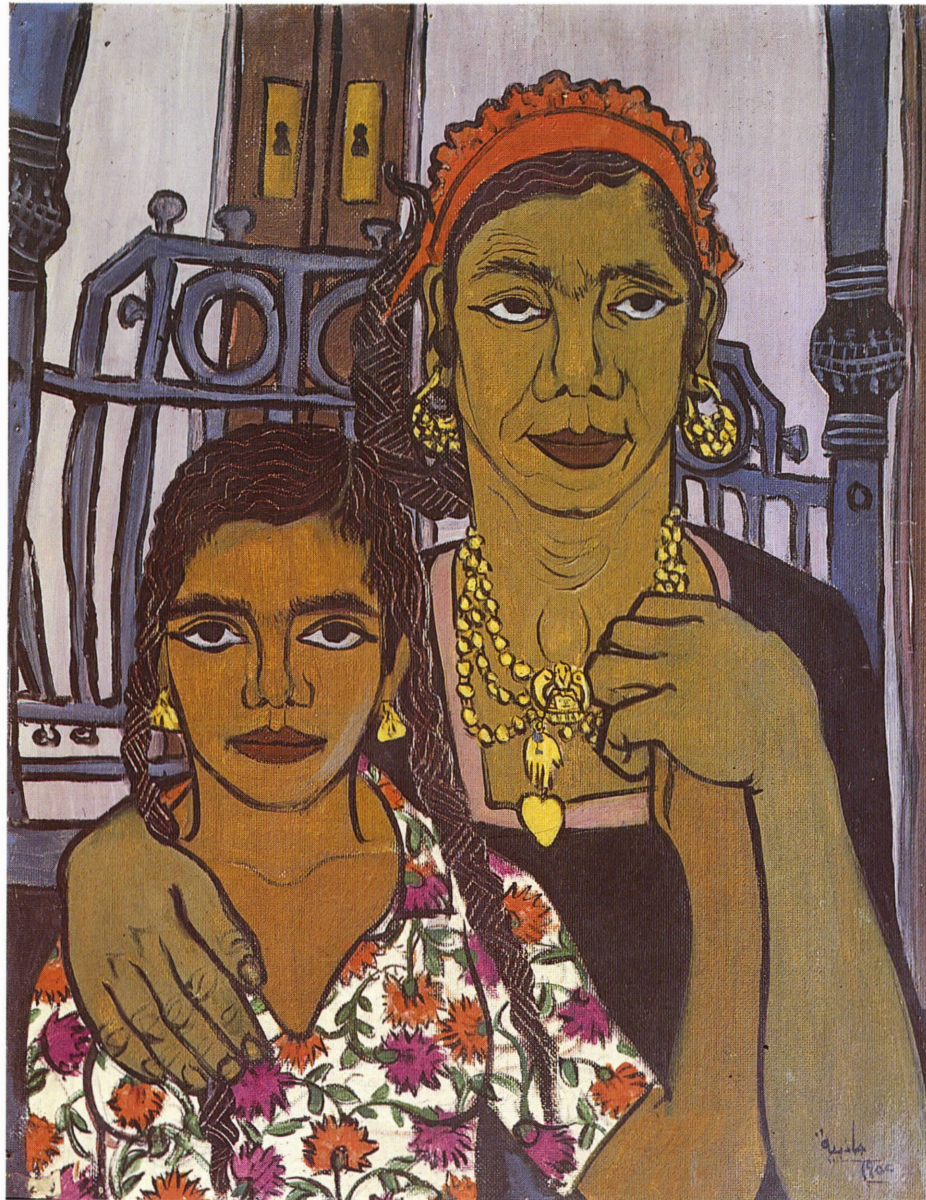




L I L I A N E K A R N O U K

Modern Egyptian Art
1910-2003



Gazbia Sirry, *Om Ratiba*.
Oil on canvas, 1952

ness to creative initiatives and genuinely wishing to participate in the revolutionary effort. This was immediately reflected in the cultural scene.

Its most noticeable expression was the appearance of a dynamic group of women artists whose public recognition was only the latest step of a process of evolution toward increasing legal recognition of the abilities and rights of women. This had been initiated more than thirty years earlier with the struggle of the Feminist Union (founded in 1923), led by Huda Shaarawi and her journal *al-Misriya* and supported by other women publishers like Fatma al-Youssef (founder of the weekly *Rose al-Youssef*), Labiba Hashem (the paper *Banat al-Sharq*), Rose Haddad (the magazine *Hawa al-Gadida*), and Doria Shafik (the magazines *Bint al-Nil*, and *La Femme Nouvelle*). These publications spoke to a new generation of educated women among whom were those admitted to the nation's only university in 1930 for the first time in Egyptian history.

Groundwork for women's sudden success in the area of the fine arts had already been laid by women in the performing arts. No one, even in the most conservative circles, could deny the great artistic talent of singers like Umm Kulthum or Asmahan, or actresses like Faten Hamama.

Before 1950, Egyptian women had been actively involved in patronizing the arts and promoting new cultural and artistic directions. But it was mainly cosmopolitan women like Amy Nimr, Lucie Carole Rainier, Michaela Buchard-Simeika, and Clea Badaro who were publicly exhibiting their work.

In the 1950s, the quality of the work presented by women painters, as well as the timing, accounted for their immediate success and recognition. The paintings shown reflected a human warmth combined with a fresh perception of human relations, and together these two elements communicated and expressed the optimism prevailing at large.

Although women were clearly beneficiaries (albeit by no means the

greatest) of the 1952 Revolution, the earlier struggle for their rights had also secured a few victories. At least the phase of unveiling, immortalized by the sculptor Moukhtar in his monument *Egyptian Awakening*, had led to the uncovering of their own sculptures and paintings. As the woman's right to play an active role in public was honored by the secular revolution, women artists in return showed the nation a feminist reflection of itself.

At the beginning, this reflection was spontaneous and extroverted. Reality depicted in the present revolved around their community, their social sense of selves or others, and tactile familiarity with the objects surrounding them. Their perspective plunged into the street through the open shutters of their urban apartments, like Zeinab Abd al-Hamid's painting *Cairo Clutter*.⁷³ Their themes expressed a range of emotions from the satirical humor of Marguerite Nakhla's painting *Turkish Bath*, the antipode of the erotic Orientalist exploitation of the same theme, to the uninhibited sketches in water color of Taheya Halim's *Young Male Nudes*.⁷⁴ Their paintings exposed the humble social condition of women with realism, as in *Woman of the Said*⁷⁵ by Vassila Farid, or expressed their inner feelings and personality through the anecdote, as in *The Engagement*⁷⁶ by Gazbia Sirry.

In 1953, Aimé Azar published a book entitled *Femmes peintres d'Egypte* in which he asserted that, although the women artists shared a single affinity, and that was audacity, the "temperament, tradition and culture of each one of them being the fruit of diverse conjunctions, it follows that their aesthetic approaches are contradictory in their very essence."⁷⁷

By the 1960s the range of creative diversity expanded even further. The following are examples of three choices made by woman painters who were each part of the same upper bourgeoisie. Khadiga Riad was the first woman to exhibit abstract expressionist paintings and to open her house to the first Cairo surrealist avant-garde. Indji Aflatoon, one of the first woman political detainees, exhibited landscapes she painted while she was in confinement serving a sentence for Communist political activity. Effat Nagui, an obsessive collector of local magic and primitive artifacts, began to free herself from the conventional mediums by inserting pieces of her collections in her own art.

In general, women artists did not escape the currents or trends that moved across the art scene, which involved five identifiable groups. The first, the



Vassila Farid. Gouache
on paper, 1982



Hamed Abdallah. Tempera on board, mid-1950s

struggles and among those who contested the originality of Western arts, based on its non-European borrowings. (This historical view had already been represented in many public exhibitions, such as the 1939 *Sources of Modern Painting* show of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and, in the mid-1950s, the exhibition *Orient–Occident*, held in Strasbourg.)

However, beyond his intellectual concerns, what distinguished Abdallah as an artist and a teacher was his profound humanity rooted in his indignation over fatality and oppression of any sort. It overpowers his earlier paintings where atmosphere, movement, and facial expression reflect a social consciousness which is deeply internalized by the painter. This is reflected in his portraits of orphans and Egyptian peasants painted in the early 1950s.

But there is another side to his character, manifested in his tolerance and in the attraction his studio had for personalities as diverse as Aflatoon, Queen Farida, Taheya Halim, Georges Bahgouri, and Adly Rizkalla, who were all part of his circle. That tolerance and cultural curiosity, a distinctive feature of the Cairene personality in general, has its drawbacks.

Perhaps it explains Abdallah's restlessness and the inconsistency. With the exception of the work he produced in the 1950s, his art does not match his intentions. And that combines to make us see him as an important personality, a teacher and an artist of integrity who struggled to fully assume his national identity; who in the course of that struggle gained an intellectual awareness but was distracted from his creative potential as a painter.



Taheya Halim, *This Land is Ours* (detail). Oil on canvas, 1965

emanating from one of her paintings, *Affection*, representing a man sheltering a small child in his white galabia that won her the International Guggenheim Award for Egypt in 1958.

Taheya Halim (1919–2003)

Abdallah's most talented student and his first wife, Taheya Halim dazzled everyone in the 1950s with her colorist vitality, her fresh and assured brushing, and the free and unself-conscious manner with which she approached grand themes like *Cairo on Fire* or *Demonstration*, events she witnessed in 1951.⁸⁴ These and other grand social themes—disasters of war, popular rebellions, poverty, and uprisings—were translated into intimate poetic canvases.

A great admirer of Halim, the art critic Azar admitted that "before all else, what speaks to you is a woman's heart whose humanity does not fail to seduce you."⁸⁵ It was that quality



Taheya Halim, *Solomon and the Hoopoe*. Oil on canvas, 1958

Later, while on a government grant between 1960 and 1961, Halim was invited, like many other artists, to have a last look on the Nubian land, and to contemplate and record the industrial magnitude of the High Dam construction. The exposure to the folk community of the Nubians before their migration inspired her new period.

In that late folk period, instead of the broad panoramas of her earlier works, she concentrated on a closer examination of her subjects expressed in shadowless forms contoured and stylized like Egyptian reliefs. Her depictions of Nubia appear to be beyond history and substance—charming paintings like *The Lamb of the Feast* (1961),⁸⁶ depicting two girls and a child playing with a healthy lamb about to be slaughtered for feasting and sacrifice, and provoking the viewer to wonder about the artist's cognitive sense of reality in the face of that great drama about to be enacted.

The Group of Modern Art, founded in 1947, was most representative of the attitudes prevailing after the mid-1950s. It mainly involved students from the Institute of Pedagogy, and it eventually crystallized around a few figures: Abd al-Hamid, Sirry, Hamed Oweis, Ezzedin Hammouda, William Ishak, Salah Yousry, and the sculptor Gamal al-Sighini.

These artists found their momentum in the early 1950s, when their philosophy seemed particularly appropriate. They displayed an extroverted orientation, rejected surrealism, and approached folklore formally.

They had a simple and clear stand: that the past was not primarily significant in shaping the future and that, in a revolutionary time, the artist's duty was to try new ideas. They also felt that the creative exploration of new lan-



Taheya Halim, *Encounter*. Oil on canvas, mid-1970s

Zeinab Abd al-Hamid (1919–2002)

The paintings of Zeinab Abd al-Hamid are like old melodies performed by a modern player. They affect our visual memory of permanence and change. They are little portraits of places, updating the register of Islamic miniatures. Abd al-Hamid expressed, as if anticipating nostalgia, the life in the city at a time when colorful public markets and streetcars were the heart and lungs of a lively urban society. She also recounted the changes by capturing the narrow alleys of the medieval city jammed with television antennas but still haunted by the sound of glasses in juice bars and the voices reduced to a criss-cross of telephone cables, roofing the old neighborhoods, now empty.

Abd al-Hamid's shadowless images are Oriental in their two-dimensional rendering. The reliance on the dynamic of the line instead of the volume is almost graphic, but it is appropriate to her early depiction of cityscapes, seen from bird's-eye perspective, as in *The Nile at Boulak* (1958).

The schematization of shapes and the rhythmic application of color are used to simplify the narrative. They also achieve an effect of calculated linear modernism, alluding to an affinity with Raoul Dufy and Viera Da Silva, especially in Abd al-Hamid's later period, as in *al-Husseini District* (1974),¹⁰¹ when bird's-eye views were replaced by geometric perspective's crisscross of lines targeting hidden vanishing points.



Zeinab Abd al-Hamid.
Oil on canvas, mid-1970s



Zeinab Abd al-Hamid,
Cloth Market.
Oil on canvas, mid-1980s

Anna Boghiguan (b. 1946)

The drawings of Boghiguan take us back to the late 1940s and to the earlier works of the Group of Contemporary Art (see Chapter 3), like Hamed Nada, Mamdouh Ammar, Margo Veillon, Miriam Abd El Alim, and Zeinab Abd al-Hamid to name only a few. Like her predecessors, this painter captured with her sketch pad and paintings the effervescence of street life with all its scenographic incongruities. But Boghiguan is an artist of the the present; she is at home everywhere from Cambodia to Canada, where she captures her observations while going through the complexities of survival as well. The nomadic lifestyle of this artist is therefore inseparable from her work, it sharpened her observation, highlighted her sense of humanity, and like many great travelers, transformed her into a superb travel writer. The recent publication of her book, *Anna's Egypt: An Artist's Journey* (AUC Press, 2003) attests to her sharp observations while it reveals much about her artistic self. But there is more to this painter than her illustrative sketches: her mural work in the staircase of the American University in Cairo Press offices reveals a rich sense of design. The artist has remarkably adapted her chromatic scales to the movement and rhythms of the unevenly lit four-storey escalade of narrow steps. The whole mural, dedicated to authors' texts and books, is integrated through the theme of books on shelves, each book like a year in the dusty shelves of the centuries.



Anna Boghiguan, *Mustafa Kamel*.
Pencil on paper, 2000, from *Anna's
Egypt*



Anna Boghiguan, Detail
of mural on stairwell
of AUC Press building,
Cairo. Acrylic, 2000