

- 01 - 2007

Salah Taher: The yogi of Zamalek

Interview by Youssef Rakha

Born in 1911, Salah Taher enrolled in the Fine Arts College in 1925, later travelling to Europe to resume his studies. Among "the second generation" of modern Egyptian artists, he has survived such trailblazers as Mahmoud Mukhtar, Ragheb Ayyad and Youssef Kamel; he was particularly close to Abbas Mahmoud El-Aqqad -- among the most important names in 20th-century Arabic literature, but also befriended Tawfik El-Hakim, best known as the father of Arab drama, and interacted with some of the 20th century's biggest names in art and literature, partly via his work in Al-Ahram in the mid-1960s.

Through the 1950s and 1960s he held various high-profile positions: among others, head of the Modern Art Museum, artistic affairs office manager for Minister of Culture and National Guidance Tharwat Okasha, and director of the [Cairo](#) Opera House. In three years, 1959-61, he received the State Incentive Award, the [Alexandria](#) Biennale Award and the Guggenheim Award, later supplemented by many others including the State Merit Award and the Mubarak Award. He exhibited triumphantly in the widest range of venues worldwide. And he never limited his energy to one style or subject, but he was always prolific. To celebrate its soft opening in 2001, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina published an encyclopaedic volume documenting his life and work, honouring him alongside Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz in a fully dedicated programme called "The brush and the pen".

In the public sphere Salah Taher is beyond reproach -- almost. He fits into the "pioneer" mould through which earlier men of accomplishment are routinely celebrated. Not only is he old, "intellectual" and "international", albeit not "formerly oppositional", which would have helped even more; he is, more importantly, a socialite -- a man whose public presence has been at least as important as his work.

The main charge levelled against him, that he has always allied himself with the powers that be, no matter what their orientation or how he might feel about it -- as one journalist recently described him, "the painter of leaders and palace walls" -- finds resonance in his avowedly apolitical stand.

From a political standpoint, at first sight, he would seem to be on the side of the conservative free market. He famously painted President Sadat and his wife Jihan -- two symbols of the anti-socialist open-door economy of the post-Nasser years; and Richard Nixon, the conservative to whom Sadat referred as "my friend", bought one of Taher's paintings, which takes up space on the walls of the White House to this day.

More openly -- also in line with Sadat's policy of reconciliation with [Israel](#) -- Taher championed peace, accepting many a commission to this end. He has been accused, wrongly, of "cultural normalisation", due in part to his relative willingness to engage with the interests of the Sadat and the post-Sadat regime. In fact he has never been particularly enthusiastic about the regime, but neither was he critical of it.

At bottom Taher is far more interested in what he refers to as "spirituality" than politics. An accomplished yogi who practised every day for 45 years, in portraiture he believed that producing a recognisable likeness mattered less than the ability to "go beneath and beyond the face"; perhaps to balance out his consistent disengagement from political action, an interest in the subliminal, even the transcendental has informed his every step.

Even so, with what can only be described as an uncanny pragmatism, Taher has managed to maintain his position at the forefront of the cultural establishment -- first as an original and exciting talent, then as a celebrated guru and finally, increasingly, a reference point -- a benchmark in modern Egyptian and Arab art history.

At first sight this might seem to be the application of an intentional strategy -- the position adopted by most of Taher's critics. But the more likely explanation is that, coming into his own in the early 1950s, Taher found

himself increasingly called upon to participate in the growth of the newly independent nation, and simply accepted the perks.

One of his earliest commissions was to catalogue and estimate the value of the art works adorning the royal palaces -- a topic on which Sadat would later seek his advice. Long before the peace process, he painted President Nasser in situ, as it were, attending the presidential address to work while it progressed.

I was fortunate to spend half an hour or so with Salah Taher towards the end of 2006, but rather than [Giza](#) or Zamalek, where he lives and works, respectively, the meeting took place in the new residential compound of Sheikh Zayed, adjacent to 6 October City.

It took place in the well-equipped outhouse he had occupied since falling ill two months before, located on the luxurious property of none other than his only son, interior designer-cum-aerial and underwater photographer-cum-Sharm El-Sheikh eco-resort owner Ayman Taher -- who had graciously arranged the interview.

A quiet little man was dispatched to meet me outside the nearest landmark, and occupying the passenger seat he navigated the rest of the way.

We drove down a gravel path into an as yet empty stretch of desert, then swerved dramatically towards the circular depression where the imposing structure stood, flanked by expensive cars, French windows and, notably, green.

When I arrived Taher Junior was discussing the growth of a particular species with one of his helpers. Taher Senior was just getting out of bed, he explained later, leading me into the impressive interior, also studded with plant life -- for which (as the little man had informed me) he won a major interior design award.

"[Cairo](#) has become un-livable," he observed, while, in pigeon English, he gave the young Filipino maid instructions concerning his father's breakfast. Sipping coffee, we spoke of his life and work, but he seemed distracted.

"There is something that you should take into account," he confided. "One journalist came over a few weeks ago and he ended up quoting him as saying some pretty mean things. In his condition, you should be careful how you quote him. You see, he isn't always very lucid -- not always fully aware of what he says."

This turned out to be unnecessary advice: the interview was too brief, and Taher Junior contributed too much to it -- an effort to ease the burden off the shoulders of the nonagenarian, who was too exhausted to speak, rather than a deliberate intervention on his part -- for any "red lines" to be crossed.

Indeed the "painter of palace walls" appeared remarkably frail, with a whole team of helpers attending on him. But mentally he was as lucid as they come, not only able to recall an incident but ready to comment on its significance and weave it into the narrative tapestry of his life. Only his hearing failed him, and occasionally his voice. It was heartening to realise that his vision was intact.

"Politics," he exclaimed, after a series of progressively louder attempts at communicating the word -- only his son's voice seemed to register.

"Ah! I was twice nominated to be minister of culture and I refused both times. The second time, when I didn't want to say no to the person in charge, I left for [Alexandria](#) and stayed there for a month -- until they had found themselves another minister. No offence intended," he went on, "but I don't have the nature of a minister. The story of the minister is a totally different story." Later he commented, "Politics as a way of life is unnatural."

Knowing our encounter would be inevitably brief, I had no more than three questions for Taher Senior, one of which he had already answered. The other two were about religion and ambition -- and he stressed "destiny" in response to both of them.

"A human being is made up of three things: a soul or a spirit, a mind and," the nonagenarian stumbled a little over the third constituent, "a body. All the time, each of these things is trying to get the better of the other two; and art

as a way of dealing with that ongoing battle is a kind of spirituality in itself -- this is the art that interests me.

"In the civilised world, you'll find that the spiritual impulse is prevalent in art. Sadly we have lost that; even the newspapers used to make room for contemplation in this sense -- no longer. But the point is that I never set out to do or to achieve anything; I leave that to destiny. God can determine the path to be taken.

"There was no ambition as such, because I never sought out anything in particular. I had some popularity as a portrait painter, and that was an achievement in the material sense. In a portrait," Taher Senior went on, "you don't simply seek a likeness; anyone can achieve a likeness. You must possess the mental equipment to assess and understand the person in front of you. I always spent time with a person before I started painting them. Only then can you produce a portrait of any significance..."

Portraiture, which Taher considered not only secondary but inferior to his spiritually oriented "real work", was the main arena in which his persona operated; and in this context, given that it was also his source of income, it seems all too natural to have accepted high-profile commissions -- and what politics went with them.

Perhaps most famously of all, Taher did a series of portraits of Egypt's best-known diva, the singer Umm Kulthoum, but as he said in an interview last year, when it came to her male counterpart, composer Mohamed Abdel-Wahab, he "tried but could not engage with his face". He was more successful with friends like El-Aqqad and El-Hakim as well as heads of state like Josip Broz Tito, a close ally of Nasser's.

Interestingly, Taher has also described his interest in portraiture in terms of a personal loyalty to artist Ahmed Sabri, a first-generation "pioneer" who was among his earliest teachers. But no doubt his success has, since then, had as much to do with accomplishment as the constantly unpredictable developments of his aesthetic.

In 1956, a year he associates with discovering photography, which "rendered millions of dollars' worth of portraits worthless", Taher, having achieved an excellent reputation as a realist, experienced an intense depression that led him to abandon figurative art in favour of abstraction; it was then that he became a colourist and began to experiment with form, producing what, for most contemporary artists, really made his name.

It is interesting that this should happen at the same time as the nationalisation of the [Suez Canal](#) -- which established Nasser's credibility for many. Leading to the [Suez War](#), by which Taher was presumably little affected, that event was to be a political point of departure for the whole nation; for Taher, in a parallel line, it was a point of departure for a new creative concept, linked as always with a "spiritual" development and an incumbent aesthetic. It is as if history progressed on one plane, Taher's life on another.

Throughout the conversation Taher Junior had provided invaluable insights into Taher Senior's statements. One particularly poignant moment was when he referred to his mother, the painter's late wife, as the principal household administrator and "finance minister". The old man immediately perked up, exclaiming in rapture and grief.

Soon after his mini lecture in portraiture, however, Taher Senior said, "Ayman will give you a lot of very useful information. I suggest you go on talking to him." And so Ayman and I ended up sitting in the small garden outside to resume a conversation whose principal interlocutor had just announced that he was retiring back to bed.

"You must understand that he is a kind of hermit," Taher Junior explained. "His only genuine link to the world is through his art. He never once went shopping, he has no idea what anything costs. Had there been no one to sell his work for him, he wouldn't even have done that. You know he has held many important positions, but every time he would select a subordinate he could trust and delegate the work wholesale. At each of his offices he even set

up a little studio so his work would not be interrupted no matter what. It was what he lived for in the most literal sense of the term. There was nothing else in his life."

Was he a religious man? "It is interesting," Taher Junior said, examining a stalk he had just picked up. "He was never a practising Muslim as such -- he was always more interested in spirituality. But very recently he started going back to religion: his latest works are a kind of figuration of the Beautiful Names of God; he doesn't do calligraphy, he tries to bring out the meaning of the Name or the set of Names directly in painting."

Taher Junior got up again to pick up another stalk. "I think it's something few people understand about him. He really had no interests in life..."