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Mahmoud Said, catalogue raisonné

The arrival of the first encyclopaedic catalogue of a Middle East artist is a major event and an example to emulate



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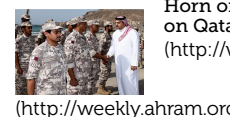
Without doubt, the most important event this year for the Arab visual arts is the publication of the first international encyclopaedia exclusively focused on the works of the pioneering Arab artist, Egyptian painter Mahmoud Said (1897-1964). This is the first catalogue raisonné ever published on an artist from the Middle East. Not only did I have the fortune to be able to attend the launch of this work in Dubai, I had the honour to unveil it to the public at that event together with its compilers, the French art expert Valerie Didier-Hess and the Egyptian researcher and scholar in the fine arts Hossam Rashwan.

A catalogue raisonné is a comprehensive, descriptive list of all the known works ever produced by a particular artist. Catalogues of this sort, which are produced for all major artists, are used to ascertain and document the authenticity of their work. The Arab region is sadly lacking in this type of comprehensive and authoritative reference work, and this lack courts a number of dangers. Firstly, works by an artist could get lost to posterity. Secondly, the appraisals of the value of the artist's oeuvre and his/her artistic evolution and contribution to the arts might be partial or incomplete. Thirdly, of course, without such works there is greater risk of forgery and fraud. In spite of the enormous output in modern art in Egypt since the beginning of the 20th century, very little work has been done until now to document this valuable heritage. This is why the catalogue raisonné for Said is such a landmark.

The contemporary arts movement in Egypt has ancient roots, harking back to the ancient Pharaonic period that inspired some the major exponents of modern art in the West, such as Picasso and Gauguin. Generally, art historians date the beginning of this movement to 1908, which is when the Academy of Fine Arts was founded in Egypt. Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891-1934), another great Egyptian modern artist, is renowned for sparking a revival in modern sculpture in Egypt, drawing inspiration from the lines of ancient Egyptian sculpture. Said, who was a member of the Egyptian royal family, eventually left his post as a judge in the Egyptian mixed courts in order to dedicate himself full time to art.

At the outset of his artistic career Said experimented in some Western schools of art that were popular at the time, such as impressionism. Although he excelled in this genre, in which he produced some of his most beautiful paintings, he soon began work to found a purely domestic approach for expressing Egypt visually. As is palpably evident from his oeuvre, he loved his country and dedicated much of his career to immortalising the people of the popular classes. He also had a passion for nature in Egypt – the River Nile, the countryside, and the desert expanses. His landscapes succeeded in capturing the subtleties of the inherent beauty of these phenomena. Said pioneered a unique, Egyptian school of modern art. In the process, he built up an enormous collection of works in which he recorded, with a judge's meticulous eye, the details of life around him. This collection has now been fully itemised and described in the catalogue raisonné published by the famous Italian art book publishers, Skira.

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Rashwan told me that sometimes Said would produce a painting more than once, but that he was always careful to number these additional essays and to note this in his diaries, which are now in Rashwan's possession. He and Didier-Hess worked extensively to search for the paintings mentioned in Said's diaries, and then to photograph them, describe them and document their current location and provenance. It took five years for them to compile this encyclopaedic work which is about 1,000 pages long and filled with pictures of the artist's work and critical texts. The book is divided into two volumes: the first, over 600 pages long, featuring his 382 paintings, and the second, over 300 pages long, covering 410 drawings and sketches and 238 documents related to his works. In the course of their research, Didier-Hess and Rashwan discovered the whereabouts of some previously unknown works that the artist had mentioned in his diaries. However, there remain some 40 paintings that he mentioned the whereabouts of which the compilers were unable to pinpoint. They also discovered some paintings that were falsely attributed to Said. One is the painting of a Spanish lady that is hanging in the Mahmoud Said Museum in Alexandria.

While working on the catalogue, Didier-Hess was surprised to receive a phone call from the grandson of king Farouk and the king's first wife queen Farida. Queen Farida, nee Safinaz Zulfikar, was Mahmoud Said's niece. The grandson told Didier-Hess that he had heard that she was compiling the catalogue and that he wanted to let her know that he possessed some of Said's paintings. Similarly, Rashwan received a call from an Egyptian living in Canada telling him that he had a painting the location of which had been previously unknown. For my part, I had seen an original of the painting, "The City", in the Egyptian Embassy in Stockholm. When I told this to the catalogue compilers, it transpired that they had never heard of it before, so they immediately contacted the Foreign Ministry and arranged to have the painting photographed and documented for inclusion in the catalogue.

The catalogue raisonné of the works of Said offers testimony to a major facet of Egypt's soft power, even if, somehow, the rest of the world always precedes us in recognising it and in dedicating attention to documenting it. If the international auction house Christie's was the first to supervise the production of this invaluable catalogue that ushers Said into the ranks of artists of world renown, and if Skira publishers preceded us in publishing this catalogue, and if Dubai took the lead in organising the book launch, then we can only ask the National Translation Centre to publish the Arabic version of this catalogue so as to make it available to the fellow citizens of that famous Egyptian artist at a reasonable price. The English version costs 400 euros, or around LE8,000. We also hope that the Customs Authority will soften their hearts and release the copies of the book that have been detained in Alexandria for outdated bureaucratic reasons, so that its launch can proceed as planned on 8 April in Egypt, Said's homeland, the country that he loved and to which he dedicated his life, and the beauty of which is the subject of his splendid paintings that elevated modern Egyptian art to the global status it merits.

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