

## The new Mahmoud Said Museum

The Mahmoud Said Museums Centre in Alexandria was officially re-opened on Tuesday by Minister of Culture Gaber Asfour and Alexandria Governor Tarek Al-Mahdi. Egyptian and foreign painters, journalists, and top government officials flocked to the centre for the official inauguration. The re-opening comes after completion of a four-year restoration project costing some LE18 million.

Nazira Taman, director of the centre, told Al-Ahram Weekly that the restoration project began immediately after the centre's closure in 2010. Due to political instability after the 25 January Revolution, the work was put on hold, she said, but was later resumed. In addition to work on the building, new state-of-the-art security cameras were installed to monitor movements inside and outside the museum 24 hours a day.

The centre is located on a bustling commercial street in the Janaklees district of Alexandria. The Italianate building contains some of Egypt's most priceless treasures. These are not ancient Egyptian statues or artefacts, however, but the artwork of three pioneers of modern Egyptian art: Mahmoud Said and the brothers Adham and Seif Wanly.

The Mahmoud Said collection is exhibited in seven halls on the ground floor. These include the first hall, just off the entrance, which holds the awards and honorary certificates Said received over his lifetime. To the right, in another hall, visitors come face-to-face with his giant 1947 mural, "Inauguration of the Suez Canal."

The mural is 2.7 metres wide and 4 metres long, and depicts the opening of the Suez Canal by Khedive Tawfik, accompanied by France's Emperor Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie. The dignitaries are shown walking towards their seats, where they can enjoy a view of the canal and its flotilla of passing boats. Canal developer Ferdinand de Lesseps can be seen walking behind them, along with other dignitaries and palace officials.

Near the museum's foyer are two large showcases displaying Said's personal belongings. These include his sunglasses, camera, pipe, a clay mask of his face, pen, paint brushes, and an invitation card to his first exhibition. There is also a bust of the painter. In a side hall, Said's wooden desk, leather-upholstered chair, mirror and a set of arabesque chairs are also displayed, along with a collection of his paint brushes and

sketches.

The museum's other five halls exhibit his paintings, including portraits of his wife, mother and other relatives, as well as servants who worked for the family. There are also self-portraits of Said, along with paintings of Alexandria neighbourhoods and coastal landscapes.

These include the Banat Bahari paintings (Bahari girls), showing young women with typically Egyptian features taking a stroll along the seashore, their clothes lit by the sun. The lace of the girls' clothing and the waterseller's white galabiya are painted with an intense emphasis on the light.

Said's paintings of nudes are also on display. "They are an important part of his production," said author Mohamed Baghdady. He added that it is the first time that the nudes have been exhibited in Egypt since 1973.

Painter Anna Boghigian described the paintings as voluptuous, erotic and unreal, the sense of unreality being a function of the artist's handling of the light. One of the paintings, "The Girl with The Scarf," she said, was probably painted in the mid-1930s and contains echoes of Renaissance depictions of the Virgin Mary.

But, she continued, by exposing a single breast, and keeping the rest of the body clothed, the artist had undermined the religious connotations of the image and added an erotic element.

Boghigian also noted that Said, in his painting "The Bathers", shows a reclining nude woman with her feet in the Nile, along with a water jug and doves. The woman appears to be about to receive the blessings of the sun. The blues of the Nile and the sky have an extraordinary quality, she said, and contrast with the darker hues of the wet earth.

Mahmoud Said was born in 1897 in Alexandria. He was the son of a wealthy aristocratic family that initially objected to his desire to become an artist.

"They simply could not relate to his art," ex-queen Farida, a niece of the painter, said in a 1983 interview. "The closest they came to showing a sign of approval was when they acknowledged that his work must be good because foreigners seemed to appreciate it."

Said received his education at both the Victoria and Jesuit Colleges in Alexandria. He later studied law in Paris. During his stay in Paris, Said visited the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and received direction from Antoine Bourdelle, an influential French sculptor, painter and teacher.

Following his return to Egypt, Said was appointed assistant magistrate at the Mixed Court of Mansoura in 1922, fulfilling the hopes of his father. Even after his father died, Said continued to abide by his father's wishes and pursued a legal career.

At the same time, however, he joined the Zananiri Studio in Alexandria and began classes with Di Farino, an Italian artist. During the summertime he would travel to Europe, where he spent long days in galleries and museums. Said retired from the law in 1947 and devoted himself to painting.

The first floor of the museum is dedicated to the work of the brothers Seif and Adham Wanly. Their work is shown in seven halls, including 71 paintings by Seif and 16 by Adham. According to the catalogue, Seif, who lived until the age of 73, was able to produce far more paintings than his brother Adham, who died of cancer at the age of 58.

Seif and Adham were born two years apart (Seif in 1906 and Adham in 1908) to a wealthy Alexandrian family that encouraged them to follow their vocations as painters but advised them not to take up painting as a career. The brothers, however, ignored their parent's advice, and became full-time painters. Beginning from the 1930s, with their blend of European-influenced, yet distinctly Egyptian, styles, they brought vitality to the country's art scene.

Both brothers studied at the studio of Italian artist Otorino Becchi. After their mentor's death in 1934 they opened a private studio to teach painting to their own students. Adham signed his canvases as "Wanly" while Seif used "Seif" for his signature. While they received similar training, the brothers developed very different styles.

Adham explored nature through the everyday life of his hometown, depicting the sea and fishermen's boats, among other scenes, while Seif developed a more abstract style influenced by futurism and cubism.

According to Baghdady, Adham's paintings are known for their speedy execution, strong touches, colour, and an expressionistic character. "They were very successful

when they were exhibited at the Venice and Sao Paolo biennales," he said. Adham was also very talented at drawing caricatures, publishing some of them in the Rose Al-Youssef magazine.

By contrast, according to Baghdady, Seif's paintings blend the geometry of simplified shapes with futurist and cubist influences. The brothers were members of the teaching staff of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria.

Adham died in 1959. Seif was active in the country's art scene until his death in 1979. Together, the brothers took part in more than 17 exhibitions in Egypt and abroad, notably at the Venice and Sao Paolo biennales. They were also asked by the Ministry of Culture to paint the heritage of Nubia and Egypt's ancient monuments.

In 1963, a museum dedicated to the work of the two brothers was established in Alexandria, but was later closed when the building housing it was demolished. The museum's artworks were acquired by various institutions and collections, including the Cairo Museum of Modern Art, Alexandria Museum of Modern Art, Egyptian Foreign ministry, and several Egyptian embassies.

In addition to the displays devoted to Said and the Wanlys, the centre's basement contains a collection of the work of other important modern artists. These include Ahmed Nawar, Abdel Hadi Al-Gazar, Margret Nakhla, Ahmed Sabri, Ragheb Ayad, Salah Taher, Ahmed Nada , Gamal Al-Segini and Ahmed Al-Sotouhi, among others.

As part of the building's renovation, a temporary exhibition hall called "Agyal" (Generations) is displaying the work of modern and contemporary Egyptian artists.

At the inauguration, Asfour said the Mahmoud Said Museum as an important part of Alexandria's cultural and artistic heritage, and that Alexandria is in a great city that has long embraced different cultures and civilisations. There were plans, he added, to create an Alexandria Culture Day, and the ministry is studying proposals for when this might be.

Al-Mahdi, in his address, described the re-opening of the centre as an important event that sends a powerful message against terrorism. The new centre will encourage tourists to visit Alexandria, he said. Along with the museum, there is also the recently re-opened Royal Jewellery Museum and Al-Shatbi Cultural Palace.

Ahmed Abdel-Ghani, head of the Fine Arts Section at the Ministry of Culture, said that the re-opening comes within the framework of plans to renovate and re-open to the public all of Egypt's art museums.

The Modern Art Museum, in the grounds of the Cairo Opera House, was recently renovated, he said. In January 2015, more museums are scheduled to be re-opened, including the Aisha Fahmy Museum in Zamalek, previously known as the Arts Complex, and the Gamal Abdel-Nasser Museum.