

Safarkhan gallery remembers Egypt's iconic painter Mahmoud Said

The exhibition of Mahmoud Said's works opened at Zamalek's Safarkhan (or Safar Khan) Gallery invited viewers to remember one of the pillars of Egyptian visual art.

Considered a pioneer of modern Egyptian art, Mahmoud Said (8 April 1897 - 8 April 1964) is known to have captured and asserted Egyptian identity. With subject matter ranging from landscapes to portraits, Said always draw from an Egypt he saw and deeply loved- his are paintings like snapshots- capturing the collective essence of a culture.

“He is a philosopher who observes his people and draws from them value, recording them in images by mixing colour with moral and spiritual aesthetics,” Hussein Sobhy, Alexandria’s governor at the time, said to describe Said.

Said studied law and was a practicing judge. It wasn’t until 1941, when he was 50 that he dedicated all his time to painting.

Yet from early on he nurtured his artistic passion and skill, independently learning under the apprenticeship of the Italian artists Amelia Cassanato and Arturo Zanieri, and later studying at the Académie Julian, an art school in Paris which hosted some of the most important 19th and 20th century European artists.

“In the first stages of his art, his work was influenced by his mentors’ style, but he quickly developed a very unique and distinct style, becoming the top Egyptian artist not just locally, but regionally and internationally,” Sherwet Shafei, the owner of Safarkhan told Ahram Online, as she looks at his works, most of which are prints from her private collection.

The pieces on display at the gallery include some of Said's most iconic works including *The Girl with Hazel Eyes*, *Alexandrian Girls* and *Whirling Dervishes*, presented through the high quality prints blown up to twice their original size.

Shafei keeps her privately-owned originals of Said's paintings safe and sound, choosing not to display them at the gallery. "It's too dangerous. I know," she commented.

She also took it as an opportunity to amplify the details and show the careful play of light in Said's subjects.

"These pieces are not up for sale, my goal with the gallery has always been to educate the passerby on art, and in this case it's for people to experience the joy of seeing this art," Shafei says.

Said's pieces are constructed and composed very carefully. According to Shafei, plastic art in Egypt didn't get a chance to thrive, with most of the public not informed on how to read a painting to really appreciate fully.

To offer visitors a glimpse and understanding of Said's art, statements placed over the pieces at Safar Khan feature works by the artist and testimonies by others who appreciated his material, highlighting his significance in the history of art.



Works by Mahmoud Said on display at Safarkhan Gallery (Photo: Ati Metwaly)

“I’m searching for the light within, not the light on the surface,” Said wrote in a letter to French artist Pierre Beppy Martin in the 1920s.

Shafei looks to the large print behind her, Naima.

Reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, Naima dominates the foreground, with the city of the dead hosting a procession of visitors in the background.

“This is part of Said’s death series, four pieces he made when he was young and very sick; Before Burial, After Burial, The Prophet, and Na’ima.”

Shafei points out the many triangular elements in the composition that balance the piece. Naima, like all of Said’s characters, pops out of the canvas like a sculpted portrait.

Shafei met Mahmoud Said only once, in 1960, a few years before the artist passed away. She was then launching her career in TV with a program on

artists, along with artist Salah Taher.

Choosing the first artist on the show to be Mahmoud Said, she got to know the artist by filming in his home.

“As a person Said was the most humble man, never acting like the big deal that he was,” says Shafei, recalling how he invited the entire team to stay for dinner after filming.

Shot on 16mm film, the show has sadly been dissolved along with other footage that wasn't properly preserved.

“I'm honored to express this esteemed [Egyptian] wealth, but sadly it won't last,” Said wrote.

“The true artist has a premonition for the future,” says Shafei, with a knowing smile.

She tells of how Said painted a futuristic portrait of poet Ahmed Rasem, who was 21 at the time, depicting him at 50.

“Rasem later said that the portrait truly looks exactly like me now that I'm 50,” Shafei said.

Said's work serendipitously finds its way into Shafei's care.

Besides obtaining his works through her travels abroad, many owners of Said's works have contacted her from around the world to sell her paintings that they own.

One such instance was when a collector in France called her with a desire to retrieve Said's works to his hometown.

“They tell me they know me, and they know I care about Mahmoud Said, and they offered me the painting,” Shafei says.

Today, the exhibition stands as an important commemoration of Egypt's visual art wealth, represented by one of its most remarkable painters.



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