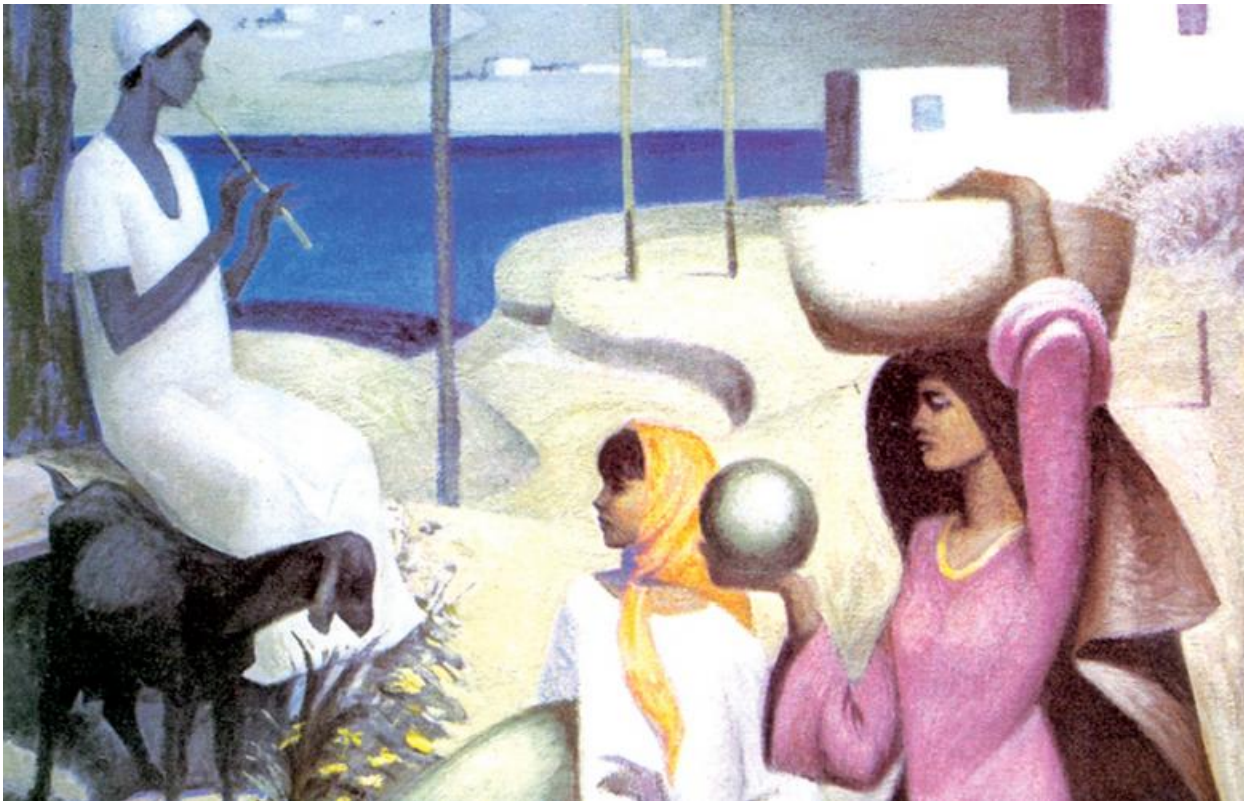


Hussein Bikar: Rescuing an Egyptian Artist's Legacy

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The sketches and personal possessions of pioneer Egyptian artist Hussein Bikar (1912-2002) have been saved by pure luck. The late artist's valuable belongings were scheduled to be sold at an auction, to benefit Nasser Social Bank of the Ministry of Social Solidarity.

Luckily, Egypt's Minister of Culture Emad Abu-Ghazi intervened an hour before the beginning of the auction.

In an interview with *al-Akhbar*, Abu-Ghazi said that Bikar's heritage had been subjected to systematic looting by artists and relatives. The latter group frequently visited his home after his death under the pretext of taking care of his wife, who passed away one month ago.

According to Abu-Ghazi, these friends and relatives are responsible for the dispersal of the artist's rare sketches and paintings, many of which have

ended up in public exhibitions or art academies.

These works had previously been stored in his small apartment on Hassan Assem Street, close to Helwan University's Faculty of Fine Arts.

But how can Bikar's huge legacy be saved, stored, and made available to the public? The Egyptian culture minister explains that it is hard to turn the apartment into a museum given that the building houses several other apartments. And the artist's possessions, including his well-kept home furniture, were damaged during his wife's illness. On the legal level, the picture is complicated by the fact that **the artist did not designate any legal heirs.**

Thus, in accordance with Egyptian law, **his possessions were turned over to a foundation run by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. The foundation then announced it planned to auction Bikar's belongings, without any real appreciation for the value of these treasures.**

It was writer Somaya Ramadan who called the minister of culture to stop the auction. Ramadan asked Abu-Ghazi to intervene and save the contents of the apartment from being sold.

The apartment contained rare sketches by Bikar, one of the most prominent artists of his time, of the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser, in addition to a small piano and *buzuq* (Arab stringed instrument). It also included other valuables items that Bikar collected during his lifetime.

After contacting the social solidarity minister, Gouda Abdel Khalek, **the auction was postponed for an hour, until experts from the fine arts department of the culture ministry arrived. The experts collected the remaining sketches and stored them in a room at the artist's apartment.**

According to the head of the fine arts department, Salah Meligi, the room was officially sealed to preserve its contents. Experts will document its contents and assess their artistic value before they can be **displayed at the Modern Art Museum in Cairo.**

Meligi says that except for the sketches, experts have not found any complete sets of paintings by Bikar, as most of the artist's works have been scattered.

He points out that Bakir's *buzuq* and other possessions are still in custody of one of his relatives, who promised to hand them over soon after identifying their location.

The artist's fans expressed their concerns that the ministry failed to stop the auction of some of the artist's belongings. Book and furniture dealers managed to purchase a library that contains rare works.

Some artists close to Bikar have taken the initiative to found a museum that includes all these possessions under the supervision of the ministry of culture.

The initiative coincides with the 9th anniversary of Bakir's death on 16 November 2002. The artist was known for his keen interest in developing journalistic and children's art.

Bikar was the co-founder of *Sindibad* magazine, published by Dar al-Maaref, along with Said Aryan. The magazine contributed to the unveiling of several art talents in writing and drawing for children.

Bikar was a man of many talents. He was interested in portraits and drew several paintings of contemporary Egyptian figures. He also immersed himself in the world of graphic design, particularly developing book covers.

His fans still remember the book cover he designed for prominent Egyptian author Taha Hussein, the outstanding autobiography *al-Ayyam* (The Days).

He also managed to work on a few mural paintings. One of his most beautiful murals can be found at the Cairo Tower.

Music was also among the late artist talents and he could play the oud proficiently. Egyptian photographer Ahmad Sabri testified to this with his famous photo of Bakir playing the instrument. He was also known for his passion for the *buzuq*.

Debate over his conversion to the Baha'i faith has been renewed recently following the controversy associated with the legal status of Baha'is in Egypt.

The artist was arrested in 1975 with a group of Baha'is practicing religious rituals under his direct supervision.

It was said that the group had links with Israel. But the incident did not damage the artistic value of his work or his position in contemporary Egyptian culture.

A part of Bikar's legacy has now been saved, but many of his paintings are scattered among collectors across the country.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.