

## Mindful of the masters

**Gamal Nkrumah** encounters the subject matter and twin narrators of *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art: The Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei* by Mona Abaza with Collector's Notes by Sherwet Shafei

*Now watch one thing... don't let yourself slip and get perfect characters in... Keep them people, people, people, and don't let them get to be symbols -- Ernest Hemingway, Letter to John Don Passos*

Al-Maskhout (The Dwarf) is a fiendish fetish, a frightening figure like the ancient Egyptian god Bes. The Dwarf, is not a literal translation of Al-Maskhout? Is it? The Arabic conveys a more sinister meaning. It implies the man that has wizened or shriveled up, has become childish -- menacing rather than childlike. Yet it has mysterious, nay, impish protective powers. This work, like everything else in Sherwet Shafei's collection is energetic, poignantly retentive and pertinent to contemporary Egyptian art. Al-Maskhout may be a symbol, but he is certainly not perfect. Yet, like Hemingway admonishes, he keeps people human beings, people.

No harbinger of sensual *bonheur*, the artist who created Al-Maskhout, Effat Naghi, was a personal friend of the collector, Sherwet Shafei. She brought into being this demoniacal artwork, so labouriously accomplished, that her unconventional skills risked over-complicating her vision of the ogre of the unpretentious Egyptian peasant. Shafei was obliged to assess a market value for Al-Maskhout.

The artist on the other hand was not particularly concerned to give a precise answer to the question of her masterpiece's market value. Shafei was enamoured with its aesthetic merit. Meanwhile, the artist metamorphosed into a more conceptual master who discerned in the spooky object's essence a boiled-down machismo.

Al-Maskhout is the very antithesis of the giant exulted like the biblical Goliath, and yet there is something strikingly lofty about him, or it. "I remember always seeing the dwarf on my visits to her villa in Muharram Bey in Alexandria. It stood in a niche on the staircase, shielded by iron bars, appearing as though it were the house guardian," Shafei muses. "Effat Naghi's husband, Saad El-Khadem, was also an artist, but is best known for his long and thorough research on the history of traditional dress in the Middle East. He also wrote a book about his wife's brother, Mohamed Naghi, another artist with a strong interest in folk culture."

Effat Naghi added *oyma*, decorative material made of gypsum, used by those mired in poverty, to beautify their scanty furniture. Not a perfect technique, perhaps. Yet it is replete with symbolism, and again it is a substance that keeps poor people, who cannot afford the finer furnishings of life, a people with a purposeful sense of the aesthetic.



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**Clockwise from top: El-Hussein Fawzi: Spontaneous Worship; Hamed Nada: Seduction; Tahia Halim: Motherhood; Salah Abdel-Kerim: Crocodile; Pierre Beppi-Martin: Motherhood**

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Exquisitely crafted works such as Effat Naghi's *The Doll*, "a masterpiece of assemblage, in which Naghi has used old fragments of wood for the background, onto which she has placed the doll, originally purchased from an old barbershop in Upper Egypt. The face resembles those of the Fayoum portraits and the body with garment is markedly Pharaonic. Naghi was very attached to this assemblage, which hung in the entrance to her villa in Hadaiq Al-Qubba, Cairo," Shafei reflects.

Sky Matterson memorably asks in *Guys and Dolls*: "Is it wrong to gamble, or only to lose?" I decide to address the businesslike persona that instantly swoops in whenever Shafei spots an interesting artwork whether it is a potentially profitable portrait, sculpture, landscape or composition.

Is collecting art a calling, a trade or a gamble? As an art collector, Shafei is a saleswoman of sorts. There is money to be had, of course, in collecting pieces of art.

Hers was *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as Charles Dickens would have put it. "I have made some money buying and selling art," Shafei says with a mischievous smile. If this sounds sanctimonious, it doesn't seem so. It just seems sensible.

However, Shafei was resolute not "to hide [her] musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust," to paraphrase Dickens. She decided to go public, she had, after all, nothing to hide.

Hers is a remarkable entrepreneurial journey. She is an intense character who learnt the hard way how to tread the ethical uncertainty that surrounds the business of dealing in art. "You cannot manage what you don't understand," she tells me. "Facing up to your fears is paramount. But, if you are afraid of failing, you will have a hard time. I was very fortunate to have an understanding husband, Ahmed Said Amin. And, I did have mentors and artist friends who encouraged me in all my endeavours. To the untrained eye, a masterpiece can be hard to spot, identify and classify."

Shafei feels passionately about sharing her art treasures with those who cannot afford to buy them. We get down to the business of SafarKhan. Yes, a lot of lessons have been learnt the hard way over the years, but it is running.

The art collector with an exquisite Zamalek apartment that is laden with priceless eye-popping paintings and sculptures, timeless treasures of Egypt's most exciting 20th century artists -- painters and sculptors. The point is that with Shafei small talk magically metamorphoses into big talk.

Shafei has already mentioned in passing that any meaningful conversation that lingers a little on the eccentricity, the idiosyncrasies and the private lives of painters has nothing intrinsically wrong with it.

She speaks deliberately, sometimes with a touch of the scholastic, in unbroken cadences of thought. She has an animated, ready smile, even though her face turns mask-like in repose or when deep in thought. She talks freely for hours on end about her unique and extraordinary experience.

She has a quiet voice with a hint of French in the way she rolls her 'r's, singing paeans to the values, talent pool, and spirit of the heady days of the 1952 Revolution. It was, she recalls, an exceptional period that gave plenty of opportunities to those Egyptians, the peasantry for instance, who could not afford to find them.

The painters, certainly, predated the 1952 Revolution. Or at least many of the masters did. She has known some of the painters personally. Others she only set eyes on the works long after their passing. Shafei pursued those artists who had slipped into unjustifiable obscurity.

Yet it was the revolution that gave a new purpose and infused a fresh momentum in the trade of collecting art. For those excluded from the profession, to paraphrase Sky Matterson's words, the sky became the limit. For Shafei, too, "sky's the limit." There is an entirely different look in her face when she speaks about that particular period. That was when she became at first a disinclined, and then an avid apprentice.

"You have to have an eye, a good eye," she says nonchalantly. "You have to instinctively reach out for the top quality pieces of an artist's works. Those are the ones that will eventually fetch the highest prices and the potential profits are highest. For that you need a lot of patience and practice. It is an acquired skill," she notes.

Their juxtaposition in this beautiful book is simply inspired curating. They bring much cerebral interest and tracing in paint the true spirit of 20th century Egypt. From the mirage-like canvases of Shaaban Zaki, his dreamy watercolours and pastels on paper to the vivid sensual indulgence and sheer carnal appetite of Mahmoud Said's Banat Bahari (Damsels of the Delta).

A peculiarly Egyptian conceptual language develops out of local colour, curiously sparked by images of religion and ritual -- Muslim, Coptic Christian and ancient Egyptian. Egypt is a country with numerous artists, but with few if any patrons of the arts.

"Shafei's retirement coincided with her husband's death after a long struggle with cancer. This loss left a profound vacuum, which Shafei filled by reinventing what she calls her second career," Abaza reveals in her arresting story of Sherwet Shafei.

How does someone with no initial knowledge of a subject make such a dramatic success of her career? Shafei is keen to set SafarKhan's success in context. She would not say whether she is on a roll. However, she will tell you that it took time to get there.

Mona Said, Shafei's daughter and business partner, run SafarKhan together. "Mona was groomed specifically for that purpose," Shafei chips in. "But only because she felt sure that was her calling. I never coerced her into embarking on a career she didn't feel passionate about."

The winning mother and daughter team do not make the mistake of vainly believing they are good at everything. Whenever they feel their objectivity about a particular painting or sculpture is compromised they seek the counsel of a third party, preferably an expert in the field.

Instinct and intuition was initially her preferred method of identification. She recollects how she started trolling around for fresh ideas, for art treasures, for artists and ultimately for satisfying her sheer indulgence in the pleasure of understanding that works of art are subject to different interpretations. She also had to position herself as a trustworthy guru of the arts and delicately balancing such trust with being something of a go-getter.

All this activity -- passion, posturing and pastime -- would come in handy sooner than she anticipated. She came across artists living divergent lifestyles. Some she befriended and others she never had the chance to. Relatives of deceased artists did not always make her welcome, while others were mercenary and cared nothing for the intrinsic value of the artist in question's work. And as a mother, she had a family that came first.

"Creativity, artistic genius, human dignity and the nurturing of it, is what my collection is all about," Shafei explains somewhat defensively. "Then there is the critical question of how you are perceived by the public, your clients and artists. In short, you build your reputation."

And Shafei, too, remembers or retells her own tale. She rewrote her story and recreated herself. Her Zamalek apartment is stuffed with authentic Egyptian art. Sculptures are artistically strewn over the floor.

"Her amazing store of knowledge was fed by her legendary determination, using almost detective-like techniques, to track down the relatives of artists who were no longer alive, and also to identify possible collectors who might be found among the social elite," Abaza notes. "She was a successful and efficient high-level state employee in state television broadcasting until her retirement, and her husband Ahmed Said Amin was a prominent journalist who became a television celebrity. Both were members of the intelligentsia associated with cultural production within the confines of the Nasserist state."

Immortalising the masters is no easy task in a capital city of a country that is not the hub of the Middle Eastern art market. Cairo is no magnate for the world's top art dealers. Dubai is in the ascendant and Beirut has had its heyday. Cairo certainly can't compete with London. Christie's sold Back IV, a monumental sculpture by Matisse for \$48.8 million last year, and the Egyptian capital has no equivalent of Sotheby's.

"The success story of Shafei as a businesswoman, as it unfolds in the following pages, started in the early 1990s. It coincided with the gradual opening up and globalisation of the economy, the neoliberal orientation of the ruling elites, and the liberalisation of the arts."

Cairo is catching up, but whether it will ever become the hub of the Middle Eastern art markets remains to be seen. That question will only be answered some decades down the line. But that is not Shafei's business, and is no major concern of Abaza in this particular endeavour that she has undertaken with Shafei. What matters is that Shafei's collection counts. It focuses on Egyptian artists, primarily the works of deceased masters, rather than on international brand names. Moreover, it is a visually stimulating manner of documenting 20th century Egypt in a multi-faceted fashion.

"Very soon it became evident to me that Shafei was one of the most experienced and intelligent gallery owners in town. She deserves the credit for being one of the masterminds who have shaped the taste of collectors to recognise and appreciate quality in Egyptian art. By marketing the pioneers, Shafei created an independent market with extended networks."

Abaza and Shafei worked closely together to accomplish their mission. "Shafei opened the inner workings of the art market to me. She indirectly told me about the competitive world of most art dealers and the manouvres by some to discredit others by insinuating that they dealt in forgeries. She was generous in putting me in touch with her clients," Abaza concedes. Inadvertently, Shafei was extracting the very essence of the existential trauma of the contemporary Egyptian character, and proudly presenting the scaffolding behind the genius of the Egyptian artist.

Shafei made the transition from devoted amateur hobbyist to serious collector in stages. To begin with, it was a question of blowing the dust off paintings of long forgotten artists.

Her passion sprang from an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, a quest to educate herself about art and a yearning to understand both art and artists. She has always felt a strong sentimental attachment to most of her beloved belongings even though she would not divulge the "big secret": which of her prize possessions was the one she preferred. Yes, she does have favourites. She never thought of herself as a professional art dealer until quite recently.

"After Roxane Petridis passed away, Shafei transformed SafarKhan in 1995 into an art gallery, expanding it to accommodate more exhibitions of the pioneers of modern Egyptian art, and complementing these with next-generation artists."

Already her passion for collecting was in full swing. By then her searching for lost art trophies and treasures had reached new heights and her buying of rare artworks had become indefatigable. She became more determined not to remain a dilettante collector. She was now less uncertain of the value of her private collection.

"However, Shafei's mission was manifold. First, her aim was to revive interest in dead and mostly forgotten artists. Second, to highlight the works of contemporary artists. Third, Shafei insists on promoting a cosmopolitan outlook by exhibiting works by foreigners and Egyptians living abroad. Fourthly, 'for a change,' as Shafei says, and to bring in fresh blood, SafarKhan has recently exhibited works by young graduate students from the American University in Cairo and the Faculty of Fine Arts."

Shafei's inquiring intellect propelled her into professionalism and erudite expertise. "I read a lot, I read Mokhtar El-Attar. He had written about promising young painters who were unknown at that time, and I searched for them. I knew what I was looking for," Shafei boldly declares as she unveils her innermost thoughts and secrets.

She marvels at how the modest is made monumental. The beauty hovers on the borderline of perception in contemporary Egyptian art as it did since time immemorial. Pharaohs and peasants are depicted as reiterating timeless themes. The effect of this fusion is invariably contemplative. The artistic creations wed the simple with the sensual that creates and recreates a unique Egyptian essential quality, sum and substance. Shafei embarked on a lifelong search for artworks of those who were ensnared by Egypt -- antique and contemporary. Her collection is the hard-won fruit of her tireless pursuit. "I have no shame when it comes to searching for artwork in the alleyways and street corners, not even after being director of a television channel with 300 persons under my control. It is how to search for art that counts," Shafei emphatically told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

None reshapes Egypt's emotional understanding of its Coptic Christian heritage than Ragheb Ayad's magical Encounter -- oil on wood, 62x92 cm, 1980. He invented the genre of the painting of

contemporary Coptic Christian sensation. "Look at the eternal nature of the monastic scene. The animated conversation between two monks in front of a monastery demonstrates a rare camaraderie captured in a solemn moment. The loving relationship is echoed between two lambs in the bottom left of the painting."

What Ayad literally bequeathed to Egypt was the unmistakable double-edged nod to an authentic Egyptian aesthetic. *Nativité* -- oil on wood, 75x70 cm, 1961, is This was cultural tourism at its most uncorrupted. *Nativité* is a piquant rendezvous, the reception of the inhabitants of Upper Egypt to the Holy Family during the sojourn in the backwaters upstream. The indigenous perspective of Upper Egypt heightens all Ayad's responses to light, tone and mood. The freshness of vision, the accommodating spirit of the Egyptian peasantry is commemorated by the thrill of capturing the subtle gradations of time and hospitality in an eternal Egypt in tonal harmony.

Next, Shafei points out the taut mannish muscle and lissome curves of a bare-breasted woman -- Ragheb Ayad's *Dancing Gypsy of Upper Egypt*. Ink and pencil on paper, 45x57 cm, 1937. Using simple stroke lines and just three colours -- blue, red and black -- Ayad highlighted the beauty of the gypsy's see-through garment, her accessories, hair, and scarf. Her posture is resolute, poised and powerfully balanced.

Shafei swiftly moves on to the southernmost outposts of Egypt. "Contemplate Tahia Halim's, *The Howdah* -- oil on canvas, 66x90cm. After an invitation to visit Nubia in the early 1960s, Halim's work became inspired by the lives and folk traditions of the Nubians. She produced this magnificent painting of a Nubian bride on her wedding day, using the camel as the throne on which bride and musicians rest. The camel carries the bride through the wedding procession from her family's home to her new one and shares in her happiness by turning its head toward her. Vibrant texture and colours lend the composition warmth and dramatic emphasis. Isn't it just superb?"

A piece of sculpture Shafei is especially fond of is Salah Abdel-Kerim's devilish *The Cry of the Beast*. "Salah Abdel-Kerim was an innovator: the first artist to use wrought iron or the leftovers of iron parts used in car manufacture in his work. The assemblage of iron parts that can neither be counted nor defined, and the animal's countenance -- a cry against its gigantic solid mass -- are proof of this artist's creative genius."

Adham Wanli, *The Dancer*, oil on Canvas, 52x50cm, is a masterwork. However, we must end with a word about Mahmoud Said's masterpiece *La Fille en Rose*. Oil on card 60x96cm, 1929. "Mahmoud Said was the first modern Egyptian artist to explore the beauty of the female body. In this painting he expresses not merely the aesthetic qualities of the body, but the girl's hypnotic gaze, one that continues to mesmerise through time." Its heady mix of homeliness and classicism is entrancing, eloquently enchanting.

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