



## Creating A New V The Vanguard of Egyptian M

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*By Nadia Radwan*

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The first generation of modern artists blended European fine arts with Egyptian themes and traditional techniques. Currently enjoying revived interest, they succeeded in reflecting the cultural renaissance of their time and created a fertile environment for successive generations of artists.

Until recently, artistic output in Egypt was mainly studied through the lens of its Pharaonic, Islamic or Coptic cultural heritage. The multiple modernities that emerged in the field of visual arts at the beginning of the twentieth century were largely neglected. Lately, however, an increasing interest for modern and contemporary Egyptian art has emerged in academia and in the curatorial world. This has been stimulated, to a large extent, by the nascent interest of the international art market in Middle Eastern art, as well as by the emerging field of world art history that aims to re-evaluate non-Western artistic expression from a global perspective.



**Mahmoud Saïd**, *Femme devant le Nil*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 80cm x 55cm. Born in Alexandria into an aristocratic family, Mahmoud Saïd (1897–1964) was the son of a former prime minister and uncle of the future Queen Farida of Egypt. One of the pioneers of the Egyptian art movement, he stands out among Egyptian artists of the time for his superior skill, style and range of subjects. Saïd became interested in art in his teens and at first studied with the Alexandria-based Italian artist Amelia da Forno Casonato and then later with Arturo Zanieri. Social expectations prevented him from pursuing a full-time career as an artist and he studied law, graduating from Cairo University in 1918. Two years later, he travelled to Paris, and for the following five years (1920–1925), he took drawing classes at the Academie de la Grande Chaumière for three months a year. In the meantime, he continued in his career as a judge until he retired at the age of fifty in order to fully dedicate himself to his art. He died on the day of his birthday, 8 April 1964.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

## European Influence, Egyptian Themes

The work of the generation of Egyptian artists referred to as *al-ruwwad* (the pioneers) reflects a moment of tremendous cultural change in Egyptian society. Their work not only embodies the *nahda* (renaissance) in intellectual thought at the dawn of the twentieth century but also underlines cross-cultural interactions between Egypt and Europe at the time. It is precisely because of this interaction, however, and because of the influence of the European fine arts on their work, that the pioneers have often been regarded as ‘imitators’ rather than ‘innovators’. This is a considerable misjudgement considering the significant contributions made by *al-ruwwad* to the advancement of modern Egyptian art. Their rich and varied production is much more complex and cannot simply be dismissed as imitation of European models.



**Georges Sabbagh**, *La Bretagne*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 80cm x 99cm.

Born in Alexandria to a wealthy Catholic family of Syrio-Lebanese origin, Sabbagh (1887–1951) was educated at the Collège de la Sainte Famille (Pères Jésuites) in Cairo before his father sent him to Paris in 1906 to study law. He showed little interest in his studies and instead started to take painting lessons at the Académie Ranson in 1910. From then on, he dedicated himself entirely to art. In 1917, Sabbagh held his first individual exhibition at the Galerie Chéron in Paris, which was a success. He became a renowned painter in Paris and was in touch with many of the artists working there during the interwar period including Amadeo Modigliani, Jules-Emile Zingg and others. In 1920, on the death of his mother, he returned to Egypt for the first time after more than ten years. While in Egypt, he produced several paintings addressing the themes of motherhood and family. He returned to France in 1922 and continued to live and work between Cairo and Paris for the rest of his life.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS AT MOHARRAM BEY, ALEXANDRIA

In 1908, the *Ecole des beaux-arts* was founded in Cairo by Prince Youssef Kamal. To begin with, the school—which is today located in Zamalek and part of Helwan University—was

housed in a villa in the Darb el-Gamamiz neighbourhood and administered by a French sculptor named Guillaume Laplagne. The overall mission of the school was to participate in the modernization of Egypt through exposure to European culture and the practice of European fine arts. The school's programme was modelled on the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and dominated by French and Italian professors, such as Nicola Forcella, Camillo Innocenti and Gabriel Biessy. The young students were expected to learn techniques and genres embedded in European tradition, such as oil-painted landscapes, portraits and nudes. Their challenge was to use these techniques to reflect Egypt's visual identity through experimentation with different subjects and new methods of expression.



**Mahmoud Mokhtar**, *Au Bord du Nil*, bronze, dark brown patina, height: 119.4cm.; 47in., Cast in circa 1920s.

Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891–1934) is generally regarded as the unequivocal founder of modern Egyptian sculpture. The son of an omdah (local village mayor), Mokhtar was born in the village of Tunbarah near the central Delta town of al-Mahallah al-Kubra. In around 1900, he moved with his mother and two sisters to Cairo and in 1908, he was the first student to walk through the door of the *Ecole des beaux-arts* on the very day it opened. He graduated at the top of his class and travelled on a scholarship funded by Prince Youssef Kamal to attend the *Ecole des beaux-arts* in Paris. He lived between Cairo and Paris for the rest of his life and forged a name not only as a pioneering artist, but also as a nationalist symbol, producing the most important works of nationalist public art in Egypt.

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Mahmoud Mokhtar, Ragheb Ayad, Youssef Kamel, Mohamed Hassan and Ahmed Sabry were among the first graduates of the *Ecole des beaux-arts* in Cairo. Once they obtained their diplomas, they received grants to pursue their studies in Paris, Florence or Rome. They would then start a long journey, leaving Alexandria by boat to remain several years in a foreign country where they had to learn a new language and start a new life. The sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar, for instance, was one of the first non-European students to pass the exam of the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris in 1912. It was also in the French capital that he sculpted the first models for what was to become one of Egypt's major public monuments. Entitled *Nahdet Masr* (Egypt's Renaissance) and supported by Saad Zaghloul and the Wafd Party, the monument (located today in front of Cairo University) was unveiled in 1928 in Bab al-Hadeed Square in front of Cairo's main railway station. Other artists such as Ragheb Ayad, Mohamed Hassan and Youssef Kamel studied together at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. Many of these artists maintained strong ties with Europe and spent their lives shuttling between either side of the Mediterranean. Georges Sabbagh, for instance, was considered an artist of the *Ecole de Paris* and regularly exhibited his works in the *Salon d'automne*.

When they returned to their homeland, the pioneers worked tirelessly to promote modern art in Egypt. They taught and exhibited their works forming the nucleus of a flourishing art scene stimulated by the establishment of numerous galleries, cosmopolitan art hubs and exhibitions. Among these was the annual *Salon du Caire* founded by the *Société des amis de l'art* headed by the politician and art collector Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil Bek. Prominent intellectuals such as feminist icons Hoda Shaarawi and Ceza Nabarawi also played a major role in promoting the arts by sponsoring artistic events and providing patronage for aspiring Egyptian artists.

The *fellah* (peasant) and Ancient Egypt were the two main subjects addressed by the pioneers in their works and would remain intimately intertwined with Egyptian art for a long time. These themes echoed the nationalist discourse and soon became the leitmotifs of Egyptian artistic output. One can see this aspect, for example, in the folklorist works of Ragheb Ayad, who was very much inspired by Egyptian rural life but also referenced the formal pictorial canons of the Pharaohs. Traditional crafts and local traditions were another source of inspiration. Starting in the 1920s, an important movement emerged to revive traditional arts and crafts. In 1924, Hoda Shaarawi founded a ceramics school in the poor neighbourhood of Rud el-Farag to encourage young people to earn a living by learning the art of traditional pottery. Following that initiative, several pedagogues, such as Habib Gorgui, the father-in-law of the architect Ramsis Wissa Wassef, established schools to revive traditional techniques. The Ramsis Wissa Wassef weaving school still exists to this day in Harraniyya close to the Pyramids of Giza.



**Youssef Kamel**, Untitled, date unknown. Oil on wood, 38cm x 50cm.

Considered the father of Egyptian impressionism, Kamel (1891–1971) was born in the neighbourhood of el-Dahir in Cairo and was among the first students to join the Ecole des beaux-arts. In 1912, he was appointed as an art teacher at a secondary school and he later travelled to Italy to continue his studies. After receiving his diploma from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, Kamel returned to his homeland in 1929 and was appointed professor of painting at the Ecole des beaux-arts. In 1937, he became the head of the Painting Department. Kamel also worked as a curator and was director the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art (1948–1949) before he was named director of the Ecole des beaux-arts in Cairo (1950–1953).

MUSEUM OF THE FACULTY OF FINE ARTS, ALEXANDRIA



**Ragheb Ayad**, Untitled, 1938. Oil on wood, 57cm x 94cm.

Ayad (1892–1982), was one of the first students at the Ecole des beaux-arts in Cairo and later became known as the father of expressionism in Egypt. After graduating in 1911, he worked as an art teacher in Cairo before travelling to Italy to further his studies. His experience there prompted him to lobby the Egyptian government passionately for the establishment of the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome. In 1930, he was appointed as department head at the School of Applied Arts in Giza and later became a professor and department head at the Ecole des beaux-arts. Ayad also worked as a museum curator and played an important role in reorganizing the Coptic Museum in 1941. From 1950 to 1955, he succeeded Youssef Kamel as director of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art. In addition to oil painting, Ayad mastered the art of sketching and produced numerous drawings enhanced with watercolours. Throughout his career, he depicted scenes of rural and popular daily life. Here, he depicts a bridal procession, on its way to the bride's new home with her trousseau. Women would typically dance and sing as they accompanied the furniture being delivered to the marital household in Egyptian villages.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS AT MOHARRAM BEY, ALEXANDRIA





**Mohamed Hassan**, Self-portrait, 1956. Oil on wood, 48cm x 38cm.

A painter, caricaturist and sculptor, Hassan (1892–1961), who was a colleague of Ayad and Mokhtar, held several government posts which while adding to his influence on Egyptian art policy, somewhat took him away from fully exploring his artistic talents. Hassan held titles such as director of the School of Applied Arts (1937), dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts (1939–41), director of the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome (1952) and director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Alexandria (1958–1961).

MUSEUM OF THE FACULTY OF FINE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF ALEXANDRIA

## Legacy and Revival

The legacy of the pioneers was particularly prominent in the field of art education. After almost thirty years of domination by European professors, the painter and diplomat Mohamed Naghi became the first Egyptian to be appointed at the head of the *Ecole des beaux-arts* in Cairo in 1937. Naghi had travelled to France and studied under the impressionist Claude Monet in Giverny. He strongly encouraged the study of Ancient Egyptian heritage, which had been neglected in favour of art from Ancient Greece and the European Renaissance. In order to introduce young Egyptian art students to the sculptures and reliefs of the Theban Valley, he founded *al-Marssam* in Luxor in 1942. This tradition continues to this day with the Aswan International Sculpture Symposium established by the renowned contemporary Egyptian sculptor Adam Henein.



**Ahmed Sabry**, Untitled, date unknown. Oil on canvas, 129cm x 87cm.

After graduating from the Ecole des beaux-arts in 1914, Sabry (1887–1955) studied at his own expense in Paris at the Atelier Julian. He returned to Cairo to work first as an art teacher, then as an entomological draughtsman at the Ministry of Agriculture. He eventually joined the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1929 where he established a free section in 1942 to offer evening classes to students who had to work during the day. Famous for his portraits of aristocrats, he received a gold medal in 1929 from La société des artistes français for *The Nun*, of which the painting presented here is a possible variation.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS AT MOHARRAM BEY, UNIVERSITY OF ALEXANDRIA

The pioneers created a fertile environment for the emergence of a second and third generation of artists. They introduced the concept that art had a role to play in all layers of Egyptian society even though they themselves were regarded as belonging to a ‘westernized’ elite. From the end of the 1930s up to the 1950s, artists such as Amy Nimr, who studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London and Seif and Adham Wanly, who were trained in Alexandria by the Italian painter Ottorino Bicchi were an extension of the pioneers’ transcultural model. They were followed by the Egyptian Surrealists, led by the writer Georges Henein, and the Contemporary Art Group, founded by the painter and art educator Hussein Youssef Amin, who would progressively break away from the academic manner of their predecessors and express social issues and political concerns. Members of

these generations—Hamed Nada, Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, Inji Efflatoun or Hamed Ewais, just to name a few—owed much to the pioneers who had established a vibrant art scene and initiated new ways of engaging with art.

Today, the pioneers are being re-evaluated by academia as an embodiment of transcultural exchange and a reflection of the values of the *nahda* project. Artists such as Mahmoud Mokhtar or Mahmoud Saïd are considered giants of modern art in the Middle East and their works can be found in international museums, auctions and art fairs, particularly in the Arab Gulf. People from around the world come to visit the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art—built by the architect Mostafa Fahmi—in Cairo to discover new facets to Egypt’s modern history. Many other museums in Egypt also deserve to be valued not only for their outstanding collections but also for the history of the buildings that house them. Not far from the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art is the Mahmoud Mokhtar Museum conceived by the architect Ramsis Wissa Wassef, whose father had supported the sculptor throughout his career.



**Mohamed Naghi**, Quail Hunting, date unknown. Oil on canvas, 79cm x 114cm.

A diplomat-turned-artist, Naghi (1888–1956) is one of the most significant figures in the development of the arts in Egypt. He studied law at Lyons and art in Florence (1910–1914). After WWI he travelled to France and lived in Giverny for a while where spent time with Claude Monet and was greatly influenced by impressionism. Over his prolific career, he held several influential official posts. He was the first Egyptian director of the Ecole des beaux-arts in Cairo (1937) and later became the director of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art (1939–1947). He also held the post of director of the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome from 1947 to 1950.

Mohamed Naghi’s works include two famous murals at the parliament building in Cairo and for Alexandria Hospital.

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS AT MOHARRAM BEY, ALEXANDRIA

Among the less well-known collections is the villa of Princess Fatma Ismail, which belongs to the complex of the Agricultural Museum in Cairo and maintains an outstanding collection of modern Egyptian art produced on the theme of rural life. The Mohamed Naghi Museum, situated in his former studio built in the modern style close to the Giza Pyramids, displays an exceptional collection of paintings including the artist's works from his journey to Ethiopia. Finally, the Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil Museum, located in his former villa in Giza does not only constitute one of the most important collections of nineteenth-century French art in the Middle East, but also represents a testimony to the history of patronage and art collecting in the region.

While these museums house exceptional collections, much remains to be done to catalogue, preserve and value these public collections. Educative programmes and activities, publications, and curatorial events are critical to reigniting interest in these artists. Today, other countries are acquiring and prizing the works of the Egyptian pioneers. It is now more crucial than ever to value and promote this outstanding heritage within Egypt as well.

*art*

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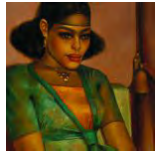
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