

Artist Dossier: Ibrahim El-Salahi

[Ladun Ogidan](#) December 05, 2019



Renowned revolutionary painter Ibrahim El-Salahi was born on September 5, 1930, in Omdurman, Sudan, to a Muslim family, and is arguably one of the most important figures in Arab-African Modernism. El-Salahi's father was an Islamic scholar and proficient transcriber of the Holy Qur'an who taught at the Omdurman Islamic Institute. The young El-Salahi developed an early interest in calligraphy from watching his father draw on whitewashed surfaces with date-palm kernels, interlacing geometric forms of scripture in an Africanised arabesque style.

El-Salahi had little interest in school, and his low marks prevented him from pursuing a medical profession, which fortunately led him to begin

his art career at the School of Design of Gordon Memorial College (currently the University of Khartoum). After graduation, El-Salahi won a scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he began to experiment with artistic styles and forms of abstraction. Some of his work at this time resembled the pointillism of Pissarro, Seurat, and Sisley. Despite comparisons to both European Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists, El-Salahi's main source of inspiration continued to be the calligraphic forms and figures he had known in Islamic scripture.

At the school of fine art, where he studied from 1954 to 1957, he was exposed to European schooling, modern circles, and historic artists, like Cézanne and Giotto, who would serve as inspirations. Upon his return to Sudan, El-Salahi channeled calligraphy and the decorative elements of Islam into his work.

He went on to teach at the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum. There, El-Salahi and fellow Sudanese painters Ahmed Shibrain and Kamala Ishaq formed what came to be known as the Khartoum School. United by the abstract and representational symbolic potential of the Arabic letter, the artist simplified Arabic script into abstract shapes. This aesthetic, called *hurufiyya*, a style pioneered in the late 1940s by the Syrian artist Madiha Omar, became one of the hallmarks of the Khartoum School.

The school attempted to synthesise elements of Western Modernism with cultural elements originally from Sudan, becoming the foundation of visual Modernism in Sudan and subsequently influential in areas of Africa and across the Arab world. El-Salahi's painting *Untitled* (2015), included in the S|2 exhibition in London held in October 2017, retains elements of the scrolling abstract shapes that were prominent in the work of the Khartoum School.

In 1962, El-Salahi received a UNESCO scholarship to study in the United States, where he visited South America. From 1964 to 1965, he returned

to the US with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, and in 1966 led the Sudanese delegation during the first *World Festival of Black Arts* in Dakar, Senegal.

In 1975, El-Salahi was wrongfully accused of participating in a failed anti-government coup and was imprisoned for six months. During his time in prison, he would collect and cut food wrappers into small pieces and draw on them with a pencil he kept buried in the sand. He assembled these pieces to create a larger painting with the small paintings embedded in it. According to El-Salahi, this style was later well received by painters in the West, who saw it as new and inventive. "[The style] was used to express several topics in many works of art that are fitted with detailed components that, to me, were similar to the organic growth of an image."

These drawings and prose became known as *Prison Notebook*, which captures a period of introspection in El-Salahi's life. The work was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2017. His time spent in prison, where he had access to pencils only, also led him to pay attention to black and white painting, a prominent feature of his oeuvre from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. "I focused on black and white in images, looking for a grey colour... yet I maintained the thickness of black and the purity of white without mixing the two."

After his release from prison in 1976, El-Salahi became frustrated with the political situation in Sudan and voluntarily went into exile two years later. He lived in Qatar for two decades, before moving to Oxford, England, in 1998, where he presently lives.

El-Salahi was the first African artist to have a retrospective at the Tate Modern in London. His style stems from a combination of European styles with traditional Sudanese themes, resulting in a balance of pure expression and gestural freedom in his work. The mask-like faces and earth tones of his early graphic works channel elements of Cubism and

Surrealism and incorporate Muslim iconography. His art encompasses and explores a range of compositional forms, including fragments of Arabic calligraphy, but perpetually evokes transnational, African-influenced surrealism.

His highest-selling work to date is *Standing Figure*, sold for £50,062 at Bonhams' *Modern & Contemporary African Art* sale in March 2019 in London. Other highlights include *Portrait of a Sudanese Gentleman* (1951), sold for £27,500 at Bonhams' *Africa Now: Modern Africa* sale in May 2016 in London; *Untitled XII* (2001), sold for £23,750 at Christie's *Post-War & Contemporary Art Day Auction* in March 2017 in London; *Untitled* (1969), sold for £13,750 at Sotheby's *Modern & Contemporary African Art* sale in October 2018 in London; and *A Set of Drawings* (1970), sold for £10,000 at Sotheby's *Modern & Contemporary African Art* sale in April 2019 in London.



Portrait of a Sudanese gentleman, 1949-1951, oil on board, 52.5 x 36cm, sold for £ 27,500 inc. premium

In 2001, El-Salahi won the Prince Claus of the Netherlands Award. His work can be found in several important collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Chase Manhattan Gallery, all in New York; the Museum of African Art in Washington; the Guggenheim Museum of Abu Dhabi; the Library of Congress in Washington, DC; the National Gallery of Sydney; the Gallery of Lambert in Paris; the National Gallery of Berlin; and the Cultural Department of Khartoum.

Ibrahim El-Salahi has participated in significant exhibitions and fairs, such as *Art Dubai 2019*, TAFETA, Dubai; *A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah (2018);

By His Will We Teach Birds How to Fly, Vigo Gallery, London (2018); *Arab Print | Volume III*, Meem Gallery, Dubai (2017); *New Tate Modern Switch House: Extension and Installation*, Tate Modern, London (2016); *Mystics and Rationalists*, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (2016); *Flamenco*, Vigo Gallery, London (2015); and Ibrahim El-Salahi, *The Tree*, Vigo Gallery, London (2014).

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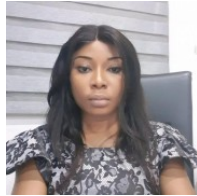
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