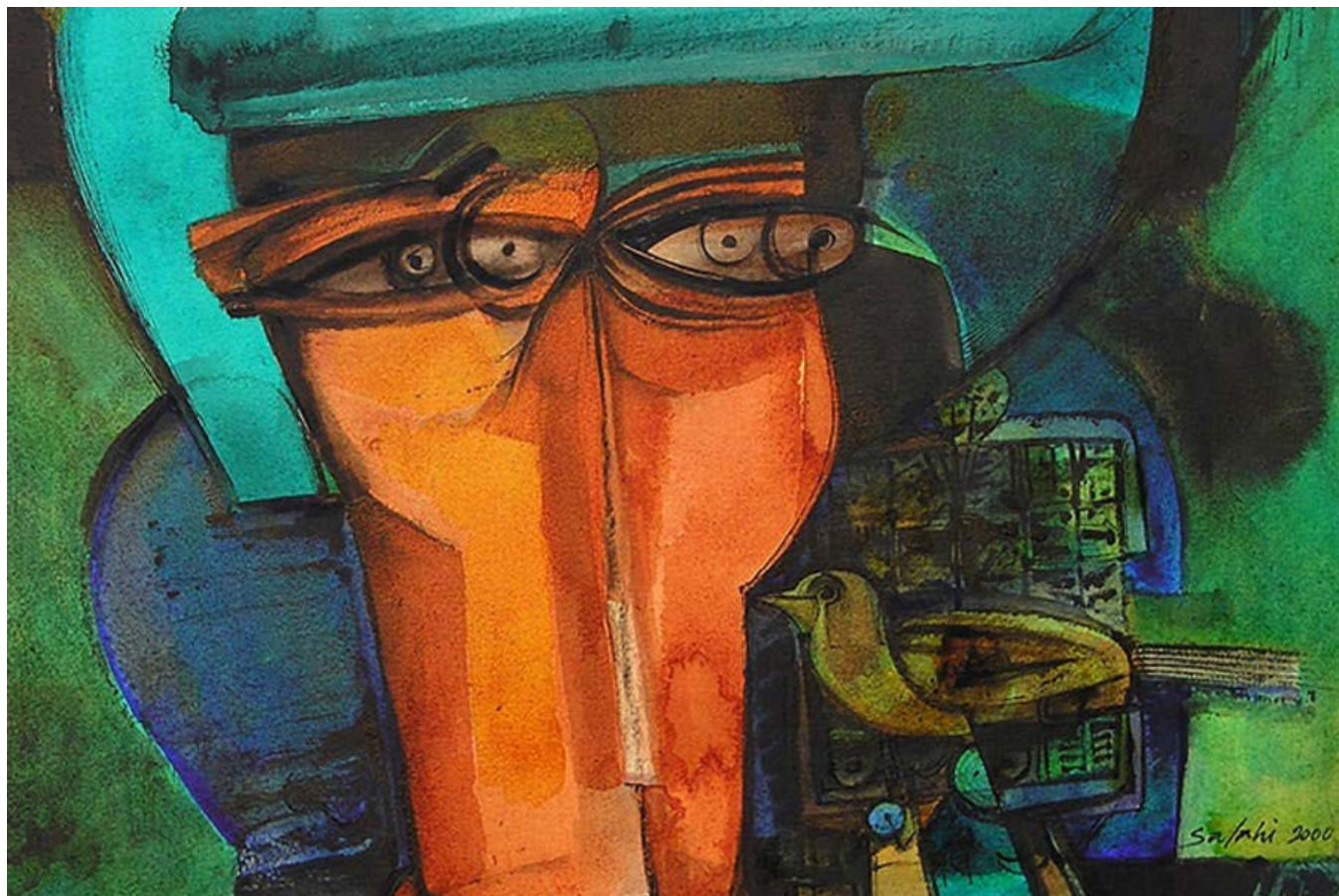


# The calligraphic lines of Ibrahim El-Salahi

[Rowland Bagnall](#) 8 May 2018



*Head of the Undersecretary* (detail; 2000), Ibrahim El-Salahi. Courtesy of the artist; © Ibrahim El-Salahi

Following a trip to Andalusia in 2009, Ibrahim El-Salahi produced a series of large-scale drawings and paintings inspired by the sights and sounds of southern Spain, from the Moorish architecture of the Alhambra to the energetic rhythms of flamenco dancers. In a multi-panelled oil painting from 2012, El-Salahi invokes the swirling muscularity of these performers: sun-baked earth tones climb the canvas, growing into semi-abstract shapes, suggesting limbs, plinths, and musical instruments. Between these figures thinner, fainter, twisting lines emerge from the painting's crisp white background: El-Salahi's signature abstraction of the forms of Arabic calligraphy, the almost-language that appears so often in his work.



*Flamenco Dancers* (2012), Ibrahim El-Salahi. Courtesy the artist and Vigo Gallery; © Ibrahim El-Salahi

The painting, *Flamenco Dancers*, presides over a showing of El-Salahi's work at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Sudanese artist's first exhibition in the city he has lived and worked in since 1998. Following the success of the Tate Modern's retrospective in 2013, this exhibition continues the work of bringing El-Salahi's contribution to African and Arab modernism to a global audience. Modest in size, though carefully thorough, it documents his stylistic development over more than 60 years, revealing the presence of several important motifs that have recurred throughout his long career.

Foremost among these is El-Salahi's interest in calligraphy. Returning to Khartoum in 1957 following a three-year scholarship to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, he was surprised to find that his painted portraits and landscapes, heavily indebted to European influences (particularly Cézanne), didn't seem to resonate with Sudanese audiences. El-Salahi began to incorporate aspects of traditional Sudanese decorative design, folk art, and Arabic script into his work. Gradually subjecting the written letters of the latter to greater and greater

abstraction, he developed a unique pictorial language, where linear marks invite and then resist interpretation, charging his pictures with an evasive meaning. In *Head of the Undersecretary* (2000), for instance, the eyes of a long-faced, solemn figure appear to be constructed from a kind of cursive text, while the image of a bird on the figure's left shoulder is encased within a gridded, cage-like structure, made from the markings of an indecipherable code. The same calligraphic lines can be seen again and again in black-and-white ink drawings of the artist's many diaries and notebooks, as well as the intricate *Pain Relief Drawings* (2017–18) on the backs of envelopes and medication packages.





*Head of the Undersecretary* (2000), Ibrahim El-Salahi. Courtesy of the artist; © Ibrahim El-Salahi

In El-Salahi's work, calligraphy is intertwined with the representation of organic forms, as in *Untitled* (1976), in which the fluid, overlapping lines of coloured ink suggest both a language to be read and the outline of a blooming tree. Trees, alongside the human figure, are one of the central subjects of El-Salahi's works. Here, too, El-Salahi's interpretation of his subject matter is connected to the habits and traditions of Sudanese culture. By way of illustration, the exhibition displays his work in dialogue



with several examples of ancient Sudanese pottery, selected with the artist from the Ashmolean's collections. These pairings reveal the extent of El-Salahi's absorption of ancient decorative traditions, from the geometric and biomorphic designs which adorn the artefacts, to a colour palette of red and yellow ochres, charcoal blacks and chalky whites.



*Untitled (Yellow Tree)* (1977), Ibrahim El-Salahi. Modern Forms. © Ibrahim El-Salahi

The Western canonical influences and relationships in El-Salahi's mature work are harder to pin down. The dreamlike, biomorphic forms of *Meditation Tree* (2008), for instance, or his notebook drawings, might bring to mind the alien landscapes of Yves Tanguy, and while Mondrian would seem to be the obvious influence behind the the free-hand drawn series *Oxford Tree* (2001–03), the delicate arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines and internal frames resonates, too, with works by Agnes

Martin and Sol LeWitt. Ultimately, El-Salahi's is a singular aesthetic, characterised above all by a feeling of natural, organic growth. In his composite pictures, such as *Flamenco Dancers*, the image grows out from a single point (what El-Salahi calls a 'nucleus'), unfurling across multiple panels which seem like they could go on indefinitely. When outlined on a single sheet, his trees and drawn-out faces appear to push against the boundaries of their frames, as if to somehow go beyond them. These works more than justify their place in the history of global modernism, and the opportunity to view them within the context of the Ashmolean's ever-impressive archaeological collections is not one to be overlooked.

**'Ibrahim El-Salahi: a Sudanese artist in Oxford' is at the [Ashmolean, Oxford](#), until 2 September.**