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Celebrating Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar 120th birthday

On what would be Mahmoud Mokhtar's 120th birthday, we can celebrate the Egyptian nationalistic sculptor's legacy, reviving the art of sculpting after being lost in the midst of centuries of wars and foreign occupation

Rowan El Shimi, Tuesday 10 May 2011



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Cairenes often pass by the “*Egyptian Renaissance*” statue in front of the Giza Zoo, or the famous “*Saad Zaghloul*” statue next to Qasr El-Nil Bridge. Today is an opportunity for us to commemorate the artist behind the poignant statues on what would have been the 120th birthday of the iconic, Egyptian sculptor, Mahmoud Mokhtar - born on 10 May 1891.

Mokhtar, the father of modern Egyptian sculpture, was born in a small village near Mahalla called Tanbara, where his father, Ibrahim El-Essawi was the mayor (or locally known as the *omda*) of the village. His grandmother raised him in his uncle’s home in another village near Mansoura where, as a child, he was often seen next to the canal moulding sculptures out of mud. In 1902 he moved to Cairo and later in 1908 when the School of Fine Arts opened its gates he was amongst its first students sculpting statues inspired by Egyptian peasant and city life. He was highly influenced by Laplagne, who was the director of the school and a professor of sculpture.

Even in early life Mokhtar’s work caught the attention of Egyptian prince, Kamal Youssef, a major sponsor of the institute at the time, who decided to send him to *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Paris to continue his education under the supervision of the world’s most renowned artists.

In Paris he met the soon-to-be 1919 independence leader, Saad Zaghloul who was leading Al-Wafd Party. Upon his return to Egypt he joined the party and dedicated much of his art to the sovereignty cause against the British occupation.

According to Liliane Karnouk, a mixture of idealism and political nationalism inspired Mokhtar’s art. “This idealism became a spiritual force, emerging through the content of his sculpture as a form of Middle Eastern Humanism. Mokhtar’s ability to translate this into three dimensions is to be regarded as his greatest and most truly personal attribute” She wrote in her book, *Modern Egyptian Art 1910 -2003* (AUC Press).

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He was able to demonstrate through his sculpture, "*Egyptian Renaissance*," of the sphynx and a peasant woman unveiling, which were symbols of Egyptian heritage and the rise against the occupation.

His nationalistic trends excluded xenophobia, however. For example in *The Beggars* and *The Blind* (1929) he showed that western influence was adaptable to Egyptian Art, Karnouk explains.

According to prominent, contemporary Alexandria-based sculptor, Sarkis Tossoonian "Mokhtar revived the art of sculpting since pharaonic times, bringing it back to life with an introduction to modernity. He was the first to mix the pharaonic influence with contemporary sculpting" he gives his analysis to Ahram Online. "His style was unique in the way the light and shadows shift in his sculptures."

Tossoonian's own sculpting and those who have practiced this art since Mokhtar's time were all influenced by his contribution to the art world.

It is often said that Mokhtar lived and died before his time. He died at the young age of 43, but not without leaving behind a legacy. He was the first sculptor in Egypt in almost 2000 years and set a high bar for those who followed.

To commemorate his work in 1962 the ministry of culture, under the supervision of culture minister at the time, Dr Tharwat Okasha during former president Gamal Abd El-Nasser's era, opened the gates to the Mahmoud Mokhtar Museum.

Women's rights iconic figure, Hoda El Shaarawi, spent years organising the donation of his works from collectors in that era to the museum. She succeeded in collecting money from artists and art aficionados through an IPO (Initial Public Offering) to build the museum.

The Museum

The Museum's exterior is designed after Pharaonic temple architecture, with its iconic columns and rectangular rooftops to commemorate Mokhtar's utilisation of Pharaonic inspiration in some of his sculptures.

The pieces included in the museum are well preserved and there is apparent effort in the design, lighting and showrooms of the space. Each room highlights a different type of material used or is themed by historical figures.

The first statue featured at the entrance is "*The Jar Bearer*," an Egyptian female peasant carrying a jar. Mokhtar often made sculptures featuring this character, who, to him, represented Egypt and the jar the Nile River.

As you walk in, the first room exhibits Mokhtar's marble figures, representing different ideas and historic icons, like a statue of Abd El-Khalek Tharwat and the pharaonic Egyptian goddess, Isis. On the edges of the marble room lie the carvings that are featured on the sides of the Saad Zaghloul Statue at Qasr El-Nil Bridge; one representing justice and the other persistence, both values Egyptians, led by Zaghloul, were striving to achieve during the British occupation. Zaghloul's leadership against British occupation and the first Egyptian peoples' revolution recorded inspired many of Mokhtar's works over the years.

Next is the bronze room, which includes some of his iconic bronze statues. "These statues are first made from mud," Explained Fawzy El Gombalaty, fine arts specialist at the museum. "Then they are coated by liquid bronze," he describes to Ahram Online.

Deeper into the bronze section lies the iconic figures room, featuring an unfinished project of eleven statues, each representing Egypt's then eleven directorates, now known as governorates. These were supposed to be implemented on a large scale and placed in main squares of each of the directorates. However, Mokhtar's untimely death at 43 impeded the project from being implemented.

In the *khamaseen* room, (*khamaseen* is what Egyptians call the wind-driven sand storms that take place every spring) is named after one of Mokhtar's most iconic statues, made in 1929 "El Khamaseen." It is of a woman going against the strong wind, representing persistence at the time of the British occupation. "The details of the wind's effects on the woman's dress is very lively, which has a very high artistic value" El-Gombalaty pointed out.

Many of the exhibition halls hold Mokhtar's statues and carvings, smaller models and large-scale photos of Zaghloul placed in Cairo and Alexandria. "He always used Saad Zaghloul to represent the Egyptian struggle against the occupation and the hope for a just future" El-Gombalaty explained.

The museum's visitors are mostly Egyptian, "I would say we get 70 per cent Egyptian visitors and 30 per cent foreign visitors, including people from Arab countries," museum Director Tamer El-Koumy told Ahram Online. "Definitely not enough people know about the museum or visit it."

El-Koumy explained that the ministry of culture is not the only entity that has a role to play in encouraging people to visit the museum, "The media and ministry of education also have a role" he asserts, "Especially the media; how often do we see advertising of some product or only theatre production and films that bring money to the channels? Egyptian media needs to shift its focus to raise awareness about museums like

this, galleries and events at the opera.” El-Koumy stated “The goal should not be what brings in more money, but rather governmental entities should be spreading ideas and enriching culture.”

The Cultural Centre

Mahmoud Mokhtar Cultural Centre was launched in 2006 following the renewal of the museum three years prior. The Nahdet Masr Gallery features all kinds of media under the sun: paintings, sculptures, photography, video installations, etc.

In addition to the show rooms there is also the cultural garden theatre that hosts concerts, theatrical performances and poetry recitals on opening nights of exhibitions or on weekends.

Performers and artists interested to exhibit their work are encouraged to approach the culture centre staff, who welcome diversity. “We try to feature different types of exhibitions each season” El Koumy explained.

For graffiti enthusiasts the centre has a graffiti wall that they open for the public twice a year in their “Graffiti Festival.” Participants don’t necessarily have to be artists or even possess artistic talents. They encourage anyone to participate “Graffiti art started in Europe as the peoples’ art, and that is why it is done with spray paint in public spaces: it is self-expression” El-Koumy said.

While Mokhtar’s career was short-lived, his art has been a starting point for sculpting to make reappearance in the Egyptian art scene and his work outlived his short life for generations after.

Hours:

The Museum opens everyday from 9am - 6pm, except on Mondays where it closes at 2pm. Students enter at a discount and fine arts students for free.

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