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The Egyptian Modern Art Museum

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by Seif Kamel

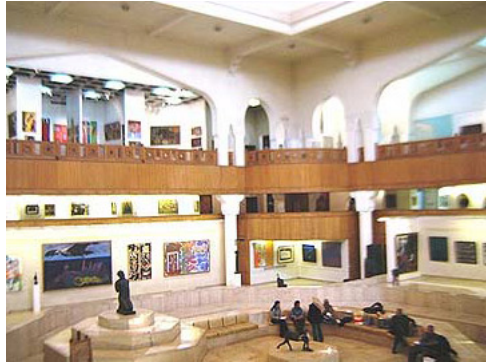


About us

Tour Egypt aims to offer the ultimate Egyptian adventure and intimate knowledge about the country. We offer this unique experience in two ways, the first one is by organizing a tour and coming to Egypt for a visit, whether alone or in a group, and living it firsthand. The second way to experience Egypt is from the comfort of your own home: online.

In Egypt's urban centers in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, the growing interest in world art was part of an expanding international awareness and a booming modernist culture. The era of modern Egyptian art started from a need to manifest the cultural variety of a new nation by a greater artistic diversity. In the process, imported aesthetic forms like the painted canvas, the free-standing

statue and the printed image were infused by Egyptian artists with new meanings expressed in a variety of individual styles. Those creative statements confronted preexisting traditions and challenged conventional artistic norms. Before the early 1950s, they evolved in three major phases: interpretation of academic styles derived from neoclassical and Egyptian inspirations; adherence to art trends like post-impressionism, cubism, surrealism and expressionism; contextualization of aesthetic style through explorations in folk arts and in regional architecture. Since then, a chain of dramatic events that has kept the Middle East in the headlines has affected Egyptian culture in general, and artists in particular.⁽¹⁾



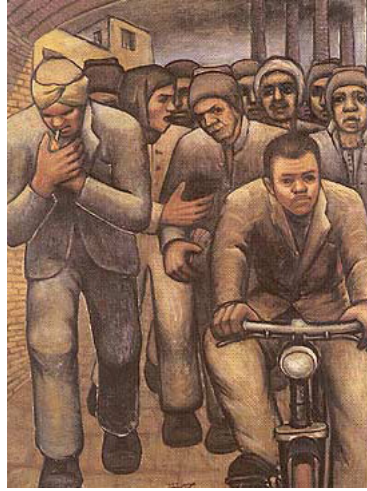
The main venue for contemporary art in Egypt is the Egyptian Modern Art Museum

Living in Cairo (/cairo/), I have been to the Opera Complex (/operahouse.htm) in Zamalek (/featurestories/zamalek.htm) many times in the past. I usually enjoy the performances, which are for the most part very entertaining. There is also considerable diversity. For example, I attended three Mohamed Mounir Concerts in the open air stage, but the last time I saw Swan Lake performed.



Today, however, as I took the taxi to the Opera Complex, I was not going to see a live performance. The Cairo Opera House is also the venue for the Egyptian Modern Art Museum, and while I am certainly no art critic, nor really even an enthusiast, I wanted to see this well known gallery. Hanging from those walls are the works of well known Egyptians and foreign artists who once lived in Egypt. Most of the work dates from the beginning of the last century though the present day.

I should note that it would have been very easy for me to take the metro, the underground subway to the complex, as there is a station just by the gates of the opera. Upon arrival, I entered the gate near the Qaser el-Nile Bridge and started to walk about as I wanted to actually tour the complex before heading to the museum. A walk in the Opera Complex is usually very pleasant, providing a welcome relief from noisy Cairo (/cairo/). It is quiet, and there is nice greenery spread around its gardens. It promotes the sort of contemplative state that suits a visit to the Art Museum.



After a short walk though, I wandered over to the museum, which is a large, three story building, with a small open air display of a few statues in the building's little garden. One must purchase a ticket to visit the museum, but they are very inexpensive, costing only two pounds for Egyptians and ten pounds for tourists.

Inside, the museum must be like many other art museums in the world. It is, of course, very quiet, and the few visitors on this day were strolling pleasantly around, in no rush to leave this solitude. It was spotlessly clean, as art museums are apt to be, and each piece of artwork hangs proudly in its own proper space, giving them a sense of privacy.

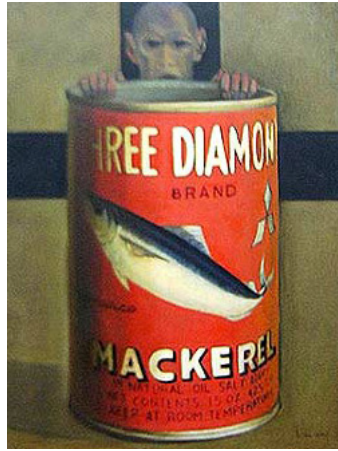
Many, if not most, of the visitors to the museum are art students, perhaps once again somewhat common to art museums elsewhere in the world. Many tourists and other foreigners with an interest in Egypt may not realize how popular a subject art is in Egypt, but upon a bit of reflection, it should come as no surprise that many Egyptian students find their way into art classes. Ancient Egypt is, after all, well known for great works of art, and today many young Egyptians seek to follow in their ancient master's footsteps.



Therefore, upon entering the museum, one may notice first of all the many students sitting about in the central foyer, quietly chatting or at work on this study or that. About them, hanging from every wall, or upon stands in the round, are the works of those who came before them and reached the apex of their profession.

Of course, art is not all about beauty, or simple decoration. It is about life, and it is meant to evoke emotions and even understanding. Art, I believe, should be a window to the real world, even clarifying our view so that we might perceive from reality a new meaning. Indeed, this is why the Modern Art Museum is so important. It provides one with a glimpse of Egypt that few outsiders, in particular, might otherwise stumble past.

This idea of modern art is no better portrayed than in the famous unemployment portrait by Mohamed Oweis, the first painting that truly grabbed my attention in the museum. It depicts a singularly tormented man, clearly desperate for the work that might put food on the table of his family. The painting was completed in 1989, when unemployment was rampant in Egypt, and so it is clearly a window into the frustration so often simply invisible to the casual visitor to Egypt.



Nearby that one was another depicting life around Bab Zuweila (/babzuwayla.htm), the great gate of Fatimid Cairo. This is a historical piece, by Mohamed Sabry, that at once gives us a sense of a magical era and what life must have been like in a bygone age.

In fact, many of these paintings on the ground floor are works by the most famous of Egyptian artists. They mainly show the way of life in Egypt, but others are whimsical, while still others are not even titled, very abstract, and allow the viewer to come to their own conclusions. Here, there is a portrait of Bastet (/godsofegypt/bast.htm), the Pharaonic cat goddess, in brilliant colors, executed by Gazebya Serry, one of Egypt's most famous female artists. Over there, in an amazing portrait by Zakana El Zieny (born 1932), is a work titled "Hunber", that simply portrays a hungry, skeletal man looking down on a can of mackerel fish.



It may seem as though there is a certain chaos to the arrangement of art in the museum, but most fall into specific themes, which are scattered about the museum in 400 works.

One important theme concerns women, and how they view their hopes, dreams and problems, and even how men view certain manners in women. Some are classic, such as Men and Women by Mahmoud Afify, depicting a man and woman, clearly in love, within a garden setting. It provides one with a sense of the natural idea and course of love between men and women. Then we also find Motherhood, a portrait by Ingy Aflaton, revealing the enduring love and bond between a mother and child with such emotion that the canvas seems to seep into the heart of the beholder.



Another example of a topic related to women, by Shafiq Shaborream, concerns safety and security that women seek out, in a charming portrait of a lovely, though nude lady, attempting to hide her body from view as best she can. In another painting by Mohamed Hussan titled Immaculate Suzanne, we find perhaps the same theme, more graphically portrayed, as a young girl attempts to flee two men who are grabbing her from her robe.

In her composition entitled, Turkish Bath, Marguerite Nakhla provides us with a view of a very private place in the life of historic women in Egypt. This was a time when public baths were prominent, and obviously segregated for use by men or women. How else might one observe this rather unique experience but through the eyes of a female artist?



The most extensive theme within the Egyptian Modern Art Museum is the display of paintings depicting Egyptian life and its history. One of the most beautiful portraits in this group, and perhaps the finest piece in the entire museum is a masterpiece by Hussein Fawzy called "Sustainable Hope" It reveals a very lovely peasant with a bright smile, whose essential optimism and strength convey to the viewer the character of all Egyptian people. Another of the finest examples is one named "Bird Seller", by Mohamed Nagy. In it, an old woman sells her birds in a scene that speaks of the timelessness of Egypt and a theme as valid today as a century ago. Anyone wandering about the markets in Cairo (/cairo/) may still find this old lady and her birds.



Born in 1892, Ragheb Ayad was one of the true masters of this sort of work. One of his pieces, a portrait called "The Village Market, was executed in 1938 and depicts a typical market in the Egyptian countryside. It is alive with different people buying and selling, and at once reveals the social drama of such a country market. There is also "Folk Dancing" by Mohamed Raief, which portrays a small celebration in the countryside. Another fine painting by Mohamed Nagy reveals a scene of women, who once spent considerable time toiling before a fire to bake their bread. Not all of these are agricultural related. One historical example is "Slave Trader", by Fatheya Zouhny, conveying a much darker side of life during a bygone era in Egypt.



Another leader in this theme is Mahmoud Said. His portrait, titled "Girl and Hans Scarf", is a wonderful masterpiece that he completed in 1943 and is also considered one of the most important works of the Museum. It portrays a very beautiful, smiling Egyptian woman on a warm afternoon, representing the basic good natured and warm attitude of most Egyptians. Another of his works, "The Prayer", dates from 1934 and reveals a scene of prayer within an old mosque, imparting on us an emotional understanding of religious conviction.



Other artists were inspired by their respective cities and regions, such as Ragheb Ayad, who's works include paintings of Aswan (<http://www.touregyptphotos.com/member.php?ppaction=profile&uid=376>) and Nubia (</historicalessays/nubia.htm>) in Southern Egypt. "A Cafe in Aswan" is a nice scene from an Oriental cafe. Most visitors will see Aswan, but this is an Aswan of the early 20th century, no longer visible to us today.

Yet, "The Port Said Battle" by Mohamed Sabry is perhaps the best example of a historic painting. Steeped in pride, it reveals the strength of Egyptians during the Port Said (</portsaid.htm>) battle in 1952.



There are also some very amazing statues, many of which follow the theme of life in Egypt, especially in rural areas, but others vary, and include a number of abstract works.

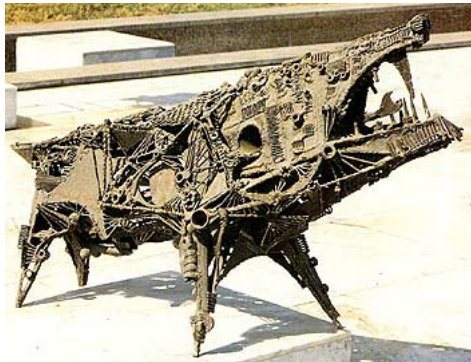
One more typical piece is known as "The Picnic", by Ahmed Othman, revealing two women walking side by side in the Egyptian countryside, a view from everyday life as common one hundred years ago as it is today. A second beautiful statue is by Abdel Aziz Abdel Hay, displaying a Sudanese child that looks so lifelike one might expect the child to speak at any moment.



Other statues include a nude by Mostafa Naquib, executed in bronze, and even a work entitled, "The Monsters Scream" by Salah Abdel Kareem, all made of black metal pieces that together, form a somewhat abstract monster shape.

Another main theme within the museum is abstract composition. Clearly these works will appeal more to those with a genuine interest in art, as opposed to the more casual visitor who finds meaning in the more traditional works. Of these, the finest example may be an untitled statue by Ahmed Abdel Wahab. My interpretation of it was that of an animal face with the horns of a devil, but others may see it differently.

Another interesting work looked to me for all the world like a security device or a utilitarian part of the museum itself. It consisted of three metal bars placed vertically on the wall, and I had to actually be told that it was a work of art but my imagination refused to decipher it as such. Clearly, I am no art expert. Other works include a vague piece by Sadeq Mohamed, consisting of a hand, I suppose, making a strange gesture. I did enjoy "The Meeting," by Mohamed Khater, a beautiful piece which imagines how a meeting among animals might appear.



The museum overall is pleasant. Although I am not an art aficionado, viewing all these wonderful works in the museum made for an enjoyable morning. Like a typical tourist, perhaps not altogether an informed art critic, I enjoyed most of all the portrayals of Egyptian history, problems and hopes. The Museum of Modern Egyptian Art is convenient for many tourists, for example, being only a very short distance from the Sheraton Gezira ([/egypt-info/magazine-mag05012001-mag8b.htm](http://egypt-info/magazine-mag05012001-mag8b.htm)), and not very far from the Cairo Marriott ([/egypt-info/magazine-mag09012000-magf2a.htm](http://egypt-info/magazine-mag09012000-magf2a.htm)), and many other hotels in Zamalek ([/featurestories/zamalek.htm](http://featurestories/zamalek.htm)) and downtown Cairo ([/cairo/caironew.htm](http://cairo/caironew.htm)). Therefore, one may only take a few steps, and learn much about Egyptian culture.

(1) From Contemporary Egyptian Art by Liliane Karnouk

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