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10 things to know about Mahmoud Saïd

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Valérie Didier Hess of Christie's, co-author of Saïd's newly published catalogue raisonné, offers an expert guide to the great pioneer of modern Arab art

1

He was the son of a prime minister and the uncle of Queen Farida of Egypt

Mahmoud Saïd was born in Alexandria on 8 April 1897, the son of Mohamed Pacha Saïd

(http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=6061318), who was Prime Minister at a critical time in

Egypt's history (1910-1914 and again briefly in 1919) — one that

witnessed the rise of nationalism which ultimately paved the road for

the country's independence. Saïd was brought up in a privileged



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aristocratic milieu, and was educated by foreign private tutors. He was also the uncle of the future queen of Egypt, Safinaz Zulficar, better known as Queen Farida.

2 | He spoke fluent French and English as well as Arabic, and travelled across Europe in the early 1920s

Saïd went on to attend some of the most prestigious schools in Alexandria and Cairo. In the early 1920s he embarked on a cultural trip across Europe, which included three weeks in Paris in July 1921, whereupon he attended drawing classes in the 'free' section of the prestigious Académie Julian. He also took classes at Antoine Bourdelle's school, L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière. During his stay in Europe, Saïd also visited Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland, discovering masterpieces of Western art in museums and churches. The work of Flemish Primitives such as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memling, and the vibrant colours of the Early Italian Renaissance painters, including the Bellini brothers and Vittorio Carpaccio, had a particular impact on the young artist.

3 | Art was his hobby and passion — his full-time job was as a judge

Following his father's wishes, Saïd pursued a career in law, graduating from the French Law School of Cairo in 1919. He was appointed assistant judge at the Mixed Courts of Egypt in 1922, first judge in Mansourah in 1927 and in Alexandria in 1937. He only resigned from his legal career in 1947, aged 50. Up until that point he had painted in his spare time, being torn between his passion for art and his professional obligations.

4 | He was a pioneer of modern Arab art

Although somewhat figurative in style and sometimes classical in subject matter, Saïd broke away from academic art and the traditions of the West, using them as stepping stones to forge his own signature style. In doing so he became a pioneer of modern Arab painting, producing art that was truly groundbreaking. Even the rebellious young artists of the Art et Liberté group — the so-called Egyptian Surrealists, who were highly critical of all the other Egyptian pioneers

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of the First Generation — invited Saïd to participate as a guest of honour in their first and second controversial exhibitions held in Cairo, in 1940 and 1942.

5 | He painted around 40 female nudes

Around one in ten of Saïd's 400-plus paintings depict female nudes. He portrayed various models in different positions, often characterised by gold-bronze skin and sensuous bodies, and complemented by simple attributes such as headscarves, jewellery, bracelets, anklets, curtains, cushions or sofas. Although Saïd had his own painting studio (originally on the top floor of the family villa in Ginaclis, Alexandria, where the current Mahmoud Saïd Museum stands), it was in the Alexandria studio of his friend, the Greek artist Aristomenis Angelopoulos (1900-1990), that he gained access to female models. These models represent the 'plebeian' women of Egypt — figures that Saïd regarded as embodying pure and intrinsic Egyptian beauty.

6 | He exhibited four times at the Venice Biennale and once at the International Exhibition in Paris

One of Saïd's most monumental paintings is *La Ville*, which now hangs in the main hall of the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo. It was most probably a commission from the government and displayed at the Egyptian Pavilion of the International Exhibition in Paris in 1937, after which he was awarded a medal of honour. Saïd's international exposure extended to America, where he exhibited works in New York in 1936 and 1937, and to Italy, where several of his paintings featured in the Egyptian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale held in 1938, 1948, 1950 and 1952.

7 | He had two major retrospective exhibitions during his lifetime — and a third one shortly after his death

Saïd's first solo show was organised by the Atelier d'Alexandrie in 1942, and his first major retrospective exhibition was held at the Gezira Centre for Modern Art in 1951. On the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the 1952 revolution, another retrospective exhibition of

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Saïd's works took place at the Museum of Fine Arts of Alexandria, comprising 120 paintings. A third comprehensive exhibition would be organised in the same premises a few months after the artist's death, in 1964.

8 | He created replicas of his own works

On at least two occasions, Mahmoud Saïd is known to have produced a replica of his own work. In 1932, he reproduced *La fille aux yeux verts* (1931), a painting that now hangs in the residence of the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations in New York. In 1948, Saïd also painted a replica of *Belles de Bahari* (1935), the masterpiece owned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt. The artist carefully inscribed on the reverse of both that these were authentic replicas by his hand of original works he had painted earlier.

9 | He died on his birthday and has his own museum in Alexandria

Mahmoud Saïd passed away at the family home in Gianaclis in Alexandria on 8 April 1964, having suffered a fatal asthma attack on his 67th birthday. The next day, a grand funeral was held, with a procession headed by the students and professors of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Alexandria. The sculptor Dr. Gaber Hegazy was asked to produce plaster casts of the artist's face and hands, which are now on view at the Mahmoud Saïd Museum in Alexandria. In 1969, the museum was sold to the Ministry of Culture, which also acquired a large part of Saïd's art collection. The Gianaclis villa was later altered to become what is today's museum complex. Opened in 1999, it comprises the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, the Mahmoud Saïd Museum and the Seif and Adham Wanly Museum.

10 | Three of his paintings have sold for more than \$1 million at auction

Mahmoud Saïd is the only Arab artist to date to have three paintings selling for more than \$1 million at auction. Given the limited number of his works that come to market, the Alexandrian master remains one of the most sought-after modern Arab artists. Christie's Dubai was proud to offer six works spanning four decades in its March 2017 sale. The large painting of *Assouan — îles et dunes*

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[Mahmoud Saïd Catalogue Raisonné by V. Didier Hess & H. Rashwan](http://www.skira.net/en/books/mahmoud-said) (<http://www.skira.net/en/books/mahmoud-said>) is published by Skira Editore, Milan

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