

## This Portrait by Mahmoud Saïd is on Sale for the First Time





## Mahmoud Saïd, Portrait de Madame Batanouni Bey, 1923

*Tomorrow, Sotheby's London will be auctioning off Mahmoud Saïd's Portrait de Madame Batanouni Bey, 1923, for bids beginning at £150 000. This is the first time the portrait, which was painted for relatives, will be exhibited, let alone be up for auction. On the eve of the Sotheby's 20th Century Art / [Middle East auction](#) on April 25, Vogue Arabia investigates the story behind the striking [painting](#).*

"Mahmoud Saïd's painting is Egyptian in the most precise meaning you can give to the word. Saïd is not like those poets who think they can create oriental work by putting the pyramids and the Bedouin into their verses," wrote Ahmed Rassim in *Shadow: A Page From Modern Art*.

With a successful career spanning 45 years, Egyptian artist Mahmoud Saïd was a prolific oil painter. As an artist who was equally captivated by the glamour and modernity of Egypt as much as the country's traditionalist culture, Saïd addressed these twin themes in much of his painting. Many of his works are reminiscent of Orientalist artists that preceded him – and this is particularly telling in his depictions of the Nile Valley and other Egyptian landscapes, in his female figures, both clothed and nude, traditional dancers and musicians, as well as his interest in Islamic customs. Sensuality and a wealth of compositional narrative dominate his paintings, intensified by his meticulous attention to color, form, and detail. In this way, passion and self-discipline find a perfect harmony, which speaks to the very essence of his subjects.





Madame Batanouni Bey on the far right with her nephew at a celebration in her home. Courtesy of the Batanouni Bey family

Born into an aristocratic Alexandrian family (he was the son of Mohammed Pasha Saïd, Egypt's Prime Minister during the reign of King Faud I), Saïd was not predestined to become an artist. Although he was trained and worked in law, it was never his passion, rather a career option designated upon him by his father. In juxtaposition to working in the mixed court systems of Egypt, Saïd painted, and his passion and unrelenting drive enabled him to maintain and further his art career. His

obsessive observational studies of local Egyptians were a stark contrast to the pseudo-European aristocracy surrounding him, and in 1947, Saïd resigned from practicing law and dedicated himself to his true calling: painting.

His initiation to the arts was under the tutelage of an Italian artist Amelia Casonato Daferno, who was a student of the Florence Academy. His education continued with another Florentine artist, Arturo Zanieri, where Saïd learned the classical methods of drawing. In 1920, he left for Paris to further pursue his artistic studies. Unlike other artists of the time in Egypt, Saïd enrolled into classes at his own expense, in particular at the Académie Julian in Paris. As opposed to the Parisian fashion of the time and innovation of the impressionist way of painting *en plein air*, Saïd remained dedicated to painting in his studio and producing veils of light without the assistance of the outdoors. He developed a rich style that encapsulated the golden era of glamour which pre-dates the Egyptian revolution of 1952.

It is very exciting news that for its upcoming auction, [Sotheby's](#) is going to present a work by Mahmoud Saïd, entitled Portrait de Mme Batanouni Bey. Unseen by many, this oil painting has remained in the private ownership of the family since it was painted in 1923. The beautiful sitter, Ferdous Hamada, was a cousin of Saïd. Unlike many of his paintings, Portrait de Mme Batanouni Bey is a combination of two paintings, with the portrait in the foreground and an Egyptian landscape in the background. Matchless in comparison to Saïd's oeuvre, the portrait is without a doubt unique.





Madame Batanouni Bey. Courtesy of the Batanouni Bey family

Ferdous, whose name means 'paradise' in Arabic, was a lady of prominence in Alexandria. She served as Queen Farida's lady in waiting. A philanthropist by nature, she was one of the founders of the Red Crescent Society in Egypt and led initiatives to improve orphanages and develop their financial sufficiency. Seated regally, Portrait de Mme Batanouni Bey shows Ferdous as both noble and connected to her Egyptian background. She is elegantly reclining on a fishawy chair, which is ubiquitous to the Egyptian café culture. Ferdous embodies both the liberated Egyptian woman of the 1920s and the universal art deco style from the Belle Époque era of Alexandria. Ferdous was a pioneering and independent woman. Saïd considered women to be a source of existential power, as wives, as mothers and as revolutionaries; as such, he represented them with reverence as symbols of Egypt's national identity. The painting captures the heritage and splendor of an era in Alexandria that has faded. It renders

the viewer with nostalgia for the vibrant and cosmopolitan Alexandria of Saïd.

The beauty of the woman is unmistakably Egyptian, depicted with characteristic full lips, high cheekbones and dusky skin, and imbued with a serene yet sensual sense of magnificence. Saïd's masterful grasp of light is particularly evident in the distinctive luminosity of her skin. The rich palette of this painting draws on the exotic colors of Egypt, accentuating Saïd's affinity for the distinctive colors of the Middle East and also his celebrated landscapes – from the boats on the Nile to the traditional buildings.

Portrait de Mme Batanouni Bey is an example of the society portraits that are omnipresent across countries and history. Romanticised or mimetic in its rendering, portraiture remains a deeply intimate gateway into a shared cultural history. From the Renaissance to today's portraits and the use of photography, artists keep using portraiture as a representation of their times and culture. The beauty and uniqueness of Portrait de Mme Batanouni Bey can be attributed to its dual nature, being a portrait and a landscape at the same time, depicting a sitter but also representing the era. *Sotheby's 20th Century Art / Middle East auction takes place on April 25 with Mahmoud Saïd's Portrait de Madame Batanouni Bey, 1923 taking to paddle for the price of £150 000.*

**[Sheikha Moza Attends Reach Out to Asia Gala Dinner](#)**