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Understanding the art of Mahmoud Said

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A painting by Egyptian artist Mahmoud Said.

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AL ARABIYA

It's been a lazy Friday and like all lazy Fridays, one of the things I like to do is to read about art. There is nothing quite like gazing at the works of the great masters. I believe great art has tremendous power to uplift you and though it may sound like an exaggeration, also to alleviate human suffering.

If I'd had the choice, I would have chosen to be born during the time of the high Renaissance, in Florence, which was its birthplace. Most of my favorite artists are from that period: Leonardo da Vinci, Michaelangelo, Raphael, Tintoretto, Titian, and Giotto. Maybe I could've been an apprentice to one of these, who knows?

This afternoon I spent time looking at the art of the Egyptian artist, Mahmoud Said (1897-1964). He painted oils and is considered a very important artist from the Arab world. Said's great innovation was that he adapted Western painting techniques to express an individual and national character. This is a dominant characteristic in his work from the late 1920s onwards. This is what sets his work apart from other painters of the First Generation. During this time, the National Egyptian Movement flourished as did the formation of an "Egyptian" character for Egyptian art.

Of the work of Said, the painting accompanying this article is one of his most distinctive. One needs to

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look at “Le Chadoufs” carefully to understand its importance. The painting is an example of the application of the finest geometry and iconography. (iconography in art is about interpreting the content of the images.) The design of this painting follows the principles of Italian renaissance while its iconography reflects key periods in Egypt’s long history.

This painting is without doubt Said’s most classically inspired compositions in which he links Egypt’s antiquity to his own time. The pyramidal line dominates the painting, which is populated by several figures: men, women and donkeys. There is great clarity of composition and it is geometric in nature with its single point perspective.

The painting has symbolic associations with the pyramids; which is a spiritual metaphor and carries additional meaning in an Egyptian context. The single point perspective is clear, rational and progressive and strongly suggests Florentine renaissance influences.

To soften the powerful geometry Said has introduced veiled, statuesque women, carrying water jars, men drawing water from wells and long eared donkeys. The men wear turbans and loincloths and with their exaggerated postures and frieze-like distribution resemble the carving of the gigantic temples in Egypt.

The veiled women serve as a link between the Egypt of Said’s time and the country’s classical past. These veiled women are also a tribute to the work of the artist Mohammad Mukhtar whose work he admired. Mukhtar’s statuesque veiled women filling their water jars or carrying the jars on their heads, in adverse conditions suggest that grace, ability and labor can co-exist in harmony.

There—all this might sound academic and so it is. But it is required knowledge if you really want to understand a painting and what it is about the painting that makes it great.

About the artist: Mahmoud Said was born to an aristocratic Alexandrian family in Alexandria. His father, Mohammed Said Pasha, was Egypt’s Prime Minister and was a keen supporter of culture and arts. Said’s career ranged from becoming a lawyer to serving as a prosecutor, and then as judge in Mansouria, Alexandria and Cairo. He rose to become Justice Councilor of the Alexandria Mixed Court. He finally resigned from legal work in 1947 to dedicate himself solely to his art.

Said was taught by the Italian artist, Emilia Fazotano de Foreno, a resident of Alexandria who had studied at the Florence Academy from whom he learnt the classical methods of drawing faces, harmonizing colors and shading. He also took lessons with another Florentine artist: Artoro Zanoneri, before leaving for Paris in 1920 for further study.

A favorite subject in Said’s paintings was women and girls. Apparently, Mr. Said used the same model from Alexandria throughout his life, drawing and painting her in many situations—poor, bourgeois, and even aristocratic.

Said participated in international exhibitions in Venice, Madrid and Alexandria. He staged exhibitions in New York, Paris, Rome, Moscow, Alexandria and Cairo. He was admitted to the French Legion d’Honneur, winning a medal for Honorary Merit in 1951, and in 1960 was the first artist to be awarded the State Merit Award for Arts by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser.

After his death in 1964, his family donated some of his artistic works to the ministry of culture, and his house was converted to a museum in 1973 where his work is now exhibited.

“La Chadoufs” was auctioned in Dubai last year for \$2.43 million. It set a record for modern Arab art.

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