

An enigmatic presence

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By Anna Boghiguan

The Gazzar family originates from Syria from whence they first moved to the Delta and then to Alexandria and Cairo. Abdallah El-Gazzar, a prominent Shari'a scholar at Al-Azhar University, was the father of five children, of whom Abdel-Hadi was the middle one. He was born in Alexandria, on 14 March, 1925, and died on 7 March 1966.

Abdel-Hadi began his career as a medical student, though after only a year of studies he switched to fine arts. He was initially drawn towards music, particularly the oud, but his father opposed such a career, as he was also to oppose his son's interest in the visual arts. Abdel-Hadi, though, did not listen, and both painting and music were to become his lifelong passions.

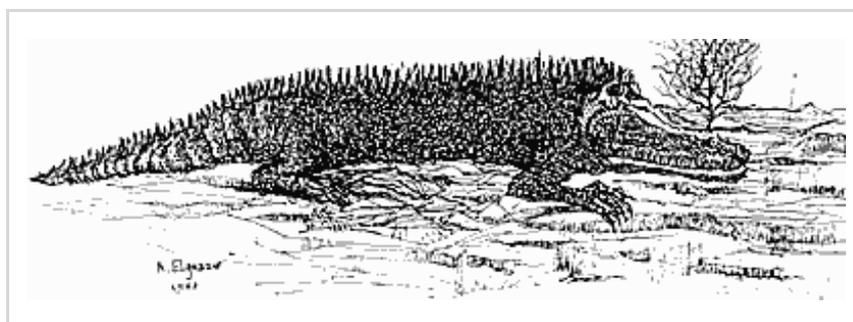
Abdel-Hadi was born in Gabbara, Alexandria. After moving to Cairo he lived in Al-Helmiya Al-Guedida, near Al-Sayeda Zeinab, and attended the local secondary school. He joined the artistic club animated by Hussein Youssef Amin and the Egyptian contemporary art group in 1945/46, arenas in which he was to develop an Egyptian art that broke free of the influence of the orientalists and European academic schools.

Hussein Youssef Amin, a man of great culture, was an inspirational teacher who knew how to direct those young artists gathered around him, and he was to direct Abdel-Hadi's talent to a certain point,

indicating how he might use it to better express his environment.

Abdel-Hadi did not live very far from the Refa'i Mosque, which is celebrated for, among other things, its mulid. He frequented Al-Hussein, and very close to it there was the tariqat al-rifa'iya. He also went to Al-Sayeda Zeinab, becoming closer to his roots and his people. Active and dynamic, he passed his time enriching himself. He knew several languages, a little hieroglyphics. He read extensively on ancient history, on bees and space.

He was against tawakkol (dependence). He lived with his times, closely observing the social and political happenings of the country, an observation we see clearly in his work. An excellent draughtsman, he was able to articulate his profound interest in the human condition away from accepted aesthetic norms, imbuing his works with a mystical and religious dimension.



His paintings constitute a narration, as in Arabic miniatures or manuscripts. Everything is drawn to complete the narration, to allow the image to tell a story. It is Gazzar's sense of line, colour and music, though, that elevates his work above its narratives. Like miniature painters, Gazzar first drew then filled in the colours. In two works, *The Naked Infant* and *The Lover for the Jinn*, both at the Museum of Modern Art in Alexandria, he adds an additional dimension, his own writing. His early works show urgent signs of the struggle for personal liberation from intense frustration and oppression. He felt closest to the

oppressed classes of Egypt, and shocked the existing bourgeoisie by painting the grotesque and the poor. His characters are androgynous. Sometimes males have females characteristics and vice versa. Most of his characters are from his own neighbourhoods, be it Al-Hussein, Al-Sayeda Zeinab or Manial.

A Western influence can be seen in his paintings, mainly from Picasso's blue period, something apparent in both line and subject, though it may equally convincingly be argued that the line Al-Gazzar used is Arab in its basis, even close to Arabic calligraphy. Picasso, after all, borrowed -- like many other Western artists -- heavily from the east.



El-Gazzar knew colour and line. His line relates to colour and the colour vibrates with the line so together they melt into harmony. This is an evidence of his sense of music. He paints and draws like an oud player plays on his strings to compose a song. The degradation of his colours, his hues, and systematic arrangement of the colours also gives a dimension of both music and the arabesque. In some cases his characters are closed, introverted, gazing, but their silence is not banal -- rather it is a pure pose

within a mysterious world.

With his knowledge of symbolism he adds tattoos, jewelry and animals to further give meaning to his work. When one looks at his animal world, one sees that Gazzar had closely observed his personal bestiary of turtles, snakes, cats and ducks. He uses these animal symbols to further an explanation of his characters and their tales. Some, like the snake,

are used somehow as it would be in the tariqa refa'iya.

Al-Gazzar went through the walls of Cairo, excavating from the popular hajj drawing to the Mameluke walls to the Pharaohs. He knew that the walls of Egypt were narratives of the city's present, past and future. These walls cover the backgrounds of his paintings. The movement of the hands, exaggeratedly large hands, is sometimes seen in peasant women. Such movements can sometimes be seen, too, in ancient Egyptian frescoes, in souks in popular areas.

Gazzar shows keys, keys with which he unlocked the treasures of Egyptian mystery. He combined the modern with the ancient. He created and gave to Egypt its image, symbolism and history in a very simple and clear manner, making the human condition accessible and comprehensible.

He was closely connected to Amin, Nada, Rafe'i, Massouda and others. According to Tharwat El-Bahr, director of the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, Gazzar is definitely the master of them all. Nada's *Al-Hayat Al-Fanniya* (1947) shows how indebted Nada was to Gazzar -- a Nada of this period is easily confused with a Gazzar. But perhaps this is a result of the philosophy Amin introduced and taught his artists to explore, to view Egypt as an Egyptian rather than an Egyptian exploring the illusionary world seen by the West. The real difference between Nada and Gazzar, though, is that Gazzar is more other-worldly, Nada more carnal. Samir Rafe'i is a little more distant, though still the big hands, the human condition and certain symbolism reveals that human suffering is present. While we cannot deny that Gazzar was a master, however short-lived, and Nada had a long career, the other two, Rafe'i and Massouda, have all but disappeared.

The group had several exhibitions from 1946 onward, but the third exhibition, held at the Young Christian Association in 1949 -- which was later sent to Paris -- marks an historical era. Gazzar and Hussein

Youssef Amin were arrested because of *The Theatre of Life* (1948 oil on cardboard, Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, Cairo) by Gazzar. Mohamed Nagui and Mahmoud Said came to their rescue. The painting has nine characters, eight adults and one child.

The painting might be interpreted as the nine faces of Egypt, one standing next to the other, like many Egyptians do, or as icons of Pharaonic scrolls where one person has different faces. Gazzar, being Egyptian, makes clear what Western artists like Gauguin were unable to say. He makes the concept of Um Al-Dunya (mother of the world) accessible, the message being the human condition itself. Egypt is hungry -- empty plates, bare feet, multicoloured skin and faces represent Um Al-Dunya; the water jug with serpents, the jug representing the water of the Nile, the serpent design life, the whole the thirst of the people from time past to time present; the character of the darwish (dervish) holding a serpent cane; each woman representative of the different faces of Egypt, brown and white, naked and dressed, covered as a peasant or a middle class woman: obviously the painting created a commotion for it had a deep political message.

Gazzar used ink to draw his characters and then filled them with oil colours, making modern Egyptian icons out of them. In other works by Gazzar, like *Portrait* (Museum of Modern Egyptian Art) and the *Moulid of the Darwish* (private collection) we come across characters that are particular to Gazzar. They relate to asceticism and aestheticism, with a concept of the beautiful particular to Ibn Al-Arabi. The serpent is present, decorating the handle of the dagger. The walls have drawings like the calligraphy seen in mosques or in Mameluke tombs. The darwish looks calm, suffering, introvert, meditative, somehow in tune with a distant and inner music. The texture of the long hair, the sharp pencil marks and the soft shading on the walls makes the drawing texturally rich. In contrast the woman, half seen at the other extremity of the drawing, has her face half covered with lace, a textural contrast to

the heavy clothing of the darwish, gazing into a world of mythical sensuality.

In *The Wedding of Zuleikha* (1951-52, oil on cardboard, private collection) Gazzar speaks of moral values and his revolt against certain traditions like child marriage. He shows the injustice and the suffocation of youth and life. He narrates the story and makes it a historical issue. The mother, with very big hands, is strangling a flower that is seen everywhere in Cairo. The flower symbolises Zuleikha and youth. The cat by the jug, another animal that Gazzar relates to, is white, showing the virginal purity of marriage. Zuleikha is a child dressed with her gold and her small wedding dress. The painting is devoid of aestheticism in the Western sense, but in terms of composition the boat on the wall with an Egyptian flag conveys moral values which, when seen together, all flow in harmony: the symbol, the subject, the line and the colour elevate the painting to a harmonious ensemble that creates a sense of the beautiful by using everyday symbols. One looks at it and thinks of the morality of child marriage.

Al-Majnoun Al-Akhdar (*The Green Madman*, 1951, private collection) is considered one of his most important works. Gazzar, though, produced a number of works of similar import. The figure is painted green, with a red poppy flower in its ear. Two uplifted hands, making undulating patterns -- a serpent, life pattern or musical design -- makes of the character a mystical darwish who lives in his own world. The uplifted hands seem to say "I am innocent, may peace be on you, I cannot do anything." The portrait stares towards an unknown point. The character looks androgynous. The earring is decorative. According to Aimée Azar, the red dress represents the colour of revolution. However, the circular motion used in the painting is like the waning of the moon. The painting is poetic and musical -- the little heart in an undulating pattern is not different from the earring the man is wearing. Some say this man did exist, that he was a ticket seller at Al-Husseini or Al-Sayeda Zeinab.

Whether he did or not the painting has moved beyond the real. The green, the ochre and the red meet like ultimate poetry and music -- the movement within life as a whole. This painting is open to unlimited interpretations. Although very simple, it is also very complicated, the ultimate mysticism of Egypt condensed in a portrait.

After the revolution, Gazzar moved with the times. He did drawings like the Bandung Conference (1955) with Nasser and other representatives, with a chained monkey and a dove on the hands of Nasser who is dressed like a pilgrim. His drawings of Dinshewai testify to his knowledge of ink and watercolour. The drawing is like a scroll of human life and torture. Instead of calligraphy, the message is conveyed by images, for the image is stronger than the word. One sees the horror of physical torture in a purity and wholeness of line that one sees in Arabic calligraphy. In the same year, 1955, he did An Abstraction (private collection) that relates to the earlier sea and sea shell works.

Traces on the Beach (private collection) is like a page from a manuscript. The 1961 Abstraction uses sea shells and sea materials within a collage.

Like most artists, Gazzar went back to his earlier work to develop what was undeveloped. He explores sea shells and the sea, and the forms of the human body. With his vast experience he is able to take his characters out of their immediate surroundings, making manuscripts out of their remains which are at once mysterious and metaphysical. When man walked on the moon, Gazzar became involved with space. The Magnetic Belt (1964) and Bodies Descending from the Sky (1964) show the destruction of the world, the result of an invasion from outer space or some apocalyptic judgement. In From the Cosmos (1964) we have another outer space episode, in which the world is invaded by space and cosmonauts.

Gazzar celebrated the great achievements of the revolution. In The High

Dam he shows the building of the dam in Aswan with the people and, partially, the face of Nasser.

In *Al-Missaq* (*The Character*, 1962) and his last painting *Peace* (1965), two men are on the stairs. Behind them a white building with wings appears on the verge of taking flight. All the characters of the previous paintings -- the astronauts, literacy, the new dignity of the Egyptians, a bride in a sea shell, the Mediterranean coast -- give the feeling of air and new hope.

After this painting Gazzar died. He was a man who was appreciated during his lifetime. He had a family with three children, was a professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts, had many exhibitions and was sent to Italy in 1957 on a three-year scholarship to study technology and art restoration. In 1956 and 1960 he participated in the Venice Biennale, in 1961 in S \grave{c} o Paolo. He participated at the Alexandria Biennale several times and received a prize for his painting of *The High Dam*. In 1961 he taught fresco and technology at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo and was loved as a teacher for allowing his student to develop individual styles. He left behind a number of followers and a very rich body of work, although he died just before his 41st birthday. His work still nourishes the Egyptian public. Gazzar is an important master of Egyptian art.

He remains, too, a mysterious figure. He spoke little, and when he did, to his small circle of friends, it was mainly about painting. And until 1954, when he got married he would go every full moon to Ain Helwan, to meditate and swim.

The writer thanks the widow of Abdel-Hadi El-Gazzar and Aimée Azar