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Nationalism and the Birth of Modern Art in Egypt

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For my family, Dad, Mom, John,
Emily, Lens, Jacob, Moe, and Lena,
who never let me take myself too
seriously.

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Abstract 1: Nationalism and the Birth of Modern Art in Egypt

(265 words)

This dissertation covers the emergence of a tradition of the fine arts in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century and its relationship to discourses of nationalism. Taking as a starting point the canon of the ‘pioneer’ generation as it is defined in the historiography, I follow the careers of the sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar and the painters Ragheb ‘Ayyad, Muhammad Nagi, and Mahmud Sa‘id, each of whom is treated in a full chapter.

Narratives surrounding the life and work of these artists have tended to emphasize the ways in which the images they created participated in the definition of a single cohesive nation – through the use of Pharaonic imagery, which anchors the nation in a distant past, through rural symbolism, which ties the nation to the land and the Nile, and through a female iconography that links the nation to ideas of virtue and purity – what I term here, following Timothy Mitchell and Homi Bhabha, a pedagogical narrative of the nation. However, I suggest that the process of imagining the nation as a unified whole necessarily involves a negotiation of difference, sometimes that of the peasant or the woman who pose a challenge to the assumption of an unproblematic national collectivity, sometimes that of the artists themselves, who, for reasons of foreign education, religion, or social identity, are unable to fully identify with definitions of the nation that were themselves constantly contested. This negotiation of difference – what Mitchell has

termed the performative - and how it appears within works of visual art, constitutes the main subject of this dissertation.

Abstract 2: Nationalism and the Birth of Modern Art in Egypt

(912 words)

This dissertation covers the emergence of a tradition of the fine arts in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century and its relationship to discourses of nationalism. Taking as a starting point the canon of the ‘pioneer’ generation as it is defined in the historiography, I follow the careers of the sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar, and the painters Ragheb ‘Ayyad, Muhammad Nagi, and Mahmud Sa‘id, each of whom is treated in a full chapter.

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However, I suggest that the process of imagining the nation as a unified whole necessarily involves a negotiation of difference, what Mitchell and Bhabha have termed the performative. We will see that this difference within the nation, or otherness as it will sometimes be termed, occurs on multiple levels. The rural world, perceived to be in urgent need of reform, posed a challenge to the assumption of the nation as an

unproblematic whole. As a result, it was the frequent object of a pedagogical narrative, as when the idealized peasant occurs as a symbol for the nation. Women constitute another form of otherness that was negotiated in the process of imagining an unproblematic national collectivity, as changing gender roles and family structures were the subject of widespread debate. As a result, female symbolism occurred frequently in representations and definitions of the nation.

The difference within the nation was also located in the identities, and work, of the artists themselves, who, for reasons of foreign education, religion, or social identity, were unable to fully identify with the imagined community. Definitions of the nation were themselves, as we will see, constantly contested. The negotiation of difference within the nation versus the assumption of a homogenous whole, and the ways in which this negotiation can be discerned in works of visual art, constitutes the main subject of this dissertation.

Take as a starting point the pedagogical narrative of modern Egyptian art as it has been defined in the historiography and in museum displays, and whose heroes are Mukhtar, ‘Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa‘id, will allow us to explore the relationship between this narrative and the question of otherness that underlies definitions of the nation as a cohesive whole.

In Chapter 1, I look at the work of the sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar, often seen as the most unequivocally nationalist artist of the first generation of Egyptian artists. While his work was, in many ways, in line with the secular nationalism of the 1920s, using the Pharaonic,

the rural, and the woman as symbols for the nation, I argue that his sculptures, in particular his monuments to the nation, are also revelatory of the complex political and social circumstances in which they were created. In particular, Mukhtar's depictions of women must be understood within the context of changing gender roles.

In Chapter 2, I look at another early graduate from the School of Fine Arts, Ragheb 'Ayyad. I argue that his commitment to depicting the nation must be understood in light of his own delicate relationship, as a member of the Coptic Christian community, to the nation. His work must be understood within the context of the changing relationship of the Coptic minority to the Muslim majority and to the idea of the nation between 1930 and the revolution of 1952. Indeed, throughout his career, he used images of the peasant, one of the nation's most prominent and problematic others, to emphasize the unity of the nation, or at times, the difference within it other than his own, in order to firmly align himself with the nation.

In Chapter 3, I turn away from the context of Cairo, where the two first artists were based, and towards the more cosmopolitan Alexandria. The painter Muhammad Nagi, who spent time in Egypt, France, Brazil, Ethiopia, and Cyprus, and was the son of a rural landowner, further complicates the picture. As a member of a landowning family, Nagi had to deal with the peasantry in concrete ways, and this had an impact on his representation of them. While 'Ayyad used depictions of the peasant to create images of an unproblematic collectivity, Nagi's depictions of the peasants reveal the hierarchy that structured his relationship with them. I argue that Nagi's complicated relationship to

parameters of individual and collective identity is woven into the very fabric of his paintings.

In Chapter 4, I delve more deeply into the cosmopolitanism of early twentieth century Alexandria, as I look at the work of the painter Mahmud Sa'id. I argue that Sa'id's careful and slow elaboration of compositions in oil, and the monumental, timeless, and mystical sheen that he gave his depictions of the Egyptian nation can be understood only within the context of his aristocratic and cosmopolitan Alexandrian milieu. Indeed, Sa'id's Egypt is very different from that of 'Ayyad, for example, and I suggest that a desire to capture something permanent and universal is present in Sa'id's painting.

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Note on transliteration, translation, and images

Because this dissertation is conceived of as falling into the discipline of the history of art, I have used a simplified form of standard transliteration from the Arabic alphabet, omitting diacritics. The Arabic letter *‘ayn* and the *hamza*, which have no equivalent in the Latin alphabet, are respectively rendered as ‘ and ’. For the names of well-known figures or those who have been written about in more depth by other authors, I have maintained standard or previously used transliteration.

In the list of figures, where Arabic titles of art works are known to me, they are given first in Arabic then in English in parentheses. The first time they are mentioned in the text, they are also given in Arabic, then in English. To simplify the reader’s understanding, all subsequent references are made in the English translation. Likewise, captions underneath the images are given only in English.

All translations from French or Arabic into English are my own, unless specified otherwise. I have included the original text in the footnotes only for unpublished material, and in instances where I deem the translation to be delicate, or the original wording to be important.

One of the biggest difficulties facing those researching modern Arab art is to find adequate reproductions of images and the basic material facts surrounding works of art. For this reason, the quality of the images used here often leaves much to be desired, and the list of figures sometimes lacks basic information about dimensions, material or location.

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Introduction

This dissertation covers the work and lives of four artists who constitute the canon of the ‘pioneer’ generation of modern Egyptian art: one sculptor, Mahmud Mukhtar (1891-1934), and three painters, Ragheb ‘Ayyad (1892-1982), Muhammad Nagi (1888-1956), and Mahmud Sa‘id (1897-1964). The question of Egyptian national identity was central not only to the concerns of these artists in the first half of the twentieth century, but also to the ways in which the history of modern art in Egypt has been written in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, and the reasons for which these four artists have been enshrined in the historiography are intimately linked to the historical development of Egyptian national identity and their relationship to it.

These four artists not only constitute the canon, they were also central to the development of Egyptian art during their lifetimes. However, the image of these artists that appears in the historiography and museums is one that removes them from their context, presenting them as isolated individuals, spontaneously responding to the inspiration provided by the Egyptian nation, which itself is understood, in this oversimplified narrative, both as a given and as coherent. Their work has often been read as the unequivocal expression of a unified nationalist discourse, whereas the reality of the emergence of a practice of modern art in Egypt, and the contribution of these canonical artists to it, was in fact far more complex. The aim of this dissertation is to retrieve some of this complexity, using as a starting point the canon enshrined in the historiography.

In the first part of this Introduction, I will look at the canon and at some of the historical and art historical circumstances surrounding its emergence in Egypt. In the second part, I will map out the key theoretical concepts that I draw on pertaining to modernism and the nation in postcolonial contexts. Finally, I will outline my method and the four chapters that constitute this dissertation.

I. Historical

1. Identifying the Canon

Upon entering the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art in Cairo, visitors find themselves in a large octagonal hall surrounded by smaller exhibition rooms on the ground floor, and balconies on the first and second floors (figs. 1 and 2).¹ The museum is organized semi-chronologically, with the exception of the ground floor, which is devoted to contemporary art from the 1970s until the present day, interspersed with other works from throughout the twentieth century considered to be landmarks in the development of modern Egyptian art. The chronological layout begins on the first floor with the *ruwwad* or ‘pioneers’ of modern Egyptian art, as those born around 1890 are termed in the historiography, then moves upwards, to be interrupted only on the second floor by a series of rooms devoted to specific artistic movements.

The vast central space on the ground floor hosts several sculptures. The most prominently displayed of these is Mahmud Mukhtar’s *‘Arus al-Nil* (or *Bride of the Nile*; date

¹ For floor plans of the museum, see *Museum of Egyptian Modern Art 2005* (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 2005), 22 and 94.

unknown; fig. 3) which sits on a three-tiered platform, off-centre to the left, facing the entrance of the museum (fig.1).² Level with the entrance, between the two doors, hangs Mahmud Sa'īd's monumental canvas, *Al-madina* (*The City*, 1937; fig.4, also seen to the right in the fig. 2). According to the museum's catalogue, these two works were chosen to be displayed on the ground floor alongside works of contemporary art, because they 'achieve the link (...) between the old generations and the new ones they have influenced.'³ In addition to this, as the visitor raises his or her gaze towards the balcony across from the entrance, he or she sees three alcoves, each devoted to one of the major painters of the 'pioneer' generation, Muhammad Nagi, Ragheb 'Ayyad, and Sa'īd.

Other artists' work is also exhibited on the first floor among the 'pioneers.'⁴ However, the space is essentially structured around these four major figures: Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa'īd.⁵ Immediately upon entering the museum, it is their work that the visitor sees. The axis of the viewer's gaze is directed upwards from the entrance directly below Sa'īd's *The City*, through the sculptural work of Mukhtar, to the alcoves where, together with Mukhtar, the three painters are enshrined as the ultimate 'pioneers' of modern Egyptian art.

It is not only in the layout of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art that these figures are presented as canonical. Of the four, three have museums devoted solely to their work.

² For the museum's catalogue entry on this work, see *ibid.*, 70-71.

³ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁴ These include the important teachers and academic painters, Ahmad Sabri (1889-1955; fig.3) and Yusif Kamil (1891-1971; fig.4), the one time Inspector of the Fine Arts Muhammad Hassan (1892-1961), and the Syrian painter Amy Nimr (1902-1962; fig.5).

⁵ The museum catalogue expresses a clear intention to make the pioneers of modern Egyptian art immediately visible to the visitor upon entry: *Museum of Egyptian Modern Art*, 320.

The Mahmud Mukhtar Museum, designed by the important Egyptian architect, Ramsis Wissa Wassef (1911-1974), occupies a central space in the Cairo cityscape (fig. 5).⁶ The Mahmud Mukhtar Society was founded shortly after the sculptor's death in 1934 and the museum became a public institution in 1962. Mukhtar's work is also visible in Egypt's major cities as he was the creator of public monuments such as *Nahdat Misr (Egypt's Awakening)*, 1920-28; fig.6), which stands on the road leading to the main entrance of Cairo University and which we will consider at length in Chapter 1, and two monumental statues of the nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul, one in central Cairo on the island of Gezira in front of the Opera Complex (which also houses the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art), and one in Alexandria on Sa'd Zaghlul square (1930-38; fig. 7-8).

The Muhammad Nagi Museum on the outskirts of Cairo is harder to access, hidden away not far from the pyramids in the suburb of Giza, in a residential area little known to taxi drivers, and barely frequented by tourists. It is housed in the studio that he occupied in the last years of his life, and that became a museum in large part through the efforts of his sister 'Effat Nagi. The low visibility of the museum compared with the higher visibility of the Mukhtar museum parallels the relatively low visibility of Egyptian painting as compared to public sculpture: in a country where the presence of modern and contemporary painting continues to have very low visibility, it is significant that the Nagi museum exists at all.

⁶ The Museum is across from the Opera complex that houses the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, on the island of Gezira, near the Galaa bridge that leads across the Nile from Tahrir Square.

The Mahmud Sa'id Museum is housed as a separate institution in the same building as the Museum of Modern Art in Alexandria, in the villa that was the artist's home during his lifetime, thus enforcing an idea of Alexandrian painting as constituted of Sa'id on one hand, and everyone else on the other. (I will have more to say in following chapters about the differences between Cairo and Alexandria, one of the important lines of fracture that are glossed over in accounts that present both Egypt and its modern art as part of a unified trajectory.) The villa, along with a significant number of paintings, was donated to the Ministry of Culture after Sa'id's death in 1964, and converted to a museum in 1973. As the cases of the Nagi and Sa'id Museums suggest, efforts at developing institutions for the fine arts in the first half of the twentieth century were often the result of private initiative and were only later taken up and funded by the state. (The Cairo School of Fine Arts is another prime example: founded privately in 1908, it became public in 1928.⁷) It seems fair to say then that the fact that Ragheb 'Ayyad has no museum devoted to his work is less a reflection of his status (which, will become apparent, is as high as that of the others) than an indication that he had no family or friends with the vocation or funds to promote his work in that way.

A survey of the literature on modern Egyptian art written in the second half of the twentieth century confirms the canonical status of the four artists on whom I will focus: their names are consistently listed as the most important members of the 'pioneer' generation. Muhammad Sidqi al-Gabakhanghi's *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya fi misr ila 'am 1945* (*The History of the Art Movement in Egypt until 1945*) from 1986 showcases

⁷ For a brief history of the School, see Rushdi Iskandar, Kamal Al-Malakh, and Sobhi Al-Sharuni, *80 sana min al-fann (1908-1988)* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1991), 15-28.

them, though he adds two further names as pioneers: Ahmad Sabri and Yusif Kamil (more on them in a moment).⁸ Liliane Karnouk's *Modern Egyptian Art* from 2005, based heavily on al-Gabakhangī's work, pays particular attention to Mukhtar, Nagi, 'Ayyad, and Sa'id, mentioning others only in passing.⁹ The critic Badr al-Din Abu Ghazi devoted monographs to Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, and Sa'id. His survey of the 'pioneer generation' added Nagi to these three, and again, as had Al-Gabakhangī's, included Ahmad Sabri and Yusif Kamil.¹⁰

Ahmad Sabri (fig.9) and Yusif Kamil (fig.10), who graduated from the Cairo School of Fine Arts and made their careers as teachers in state institutions, are, as we see, often mentioned in the historiography among the pioneers (Al-Gabakhangī even devoted a monograph to Sabri).¹¹ However, during their lifetime, they were often passed over in the little art criticism that existed in Egypt, and their presence among the 'pioneers' in later historiography is not as consistent as that of Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, Nagi, or Sa'id. Aimé Azar's rapid dismissal of Sabri and Kamil in his critical survey of modern Egyptian art published in 1961 sums up the general attitude towards these academic painters: 'It is very unfortunate that modern Egypt's first artists were Ahmad Sabry and Youssef Kamel [sic]. Indeed, neither one of them is an authentic painter because they are lacking in temperament.'¹² Azar's assessment of these painters is probably in part due to the fact that their work presents no effort towards finding a form of modern visual Egyptian-ness.

⁸ Muhammad Sidqi Al-Gabakhangī, *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya fī misr ila 'am 1945* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1986).

⁹ Lilian Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Badr ad-Din Abu Ghazi, *Gil min ar-ruwwad* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1975).

¹¹ Muhammad Sidqi Al-Gabakhangī, *Sirat Hayat al-Fannan Ahmad Sabri* (Cairo: Dar al-katib al-'arabi 1967).

¹² Aimé Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte* (Cairo: Editions nouvelles, 1961), 20.

While Kamil often depicted Egyptian streets and people, he did so in an unremarkable Impressionist style, and Sabri tended towards European subjects. We already sense here one of the key questions for the artists we will be considering: how was their work seen as ‘Egyptian’ and/or ‘modern’, both in its historical moment and afterwards?

In addition to the publications in Arabic cited above, there is a small body of literature on the subject of modern Egyptian art published in French and in English that presents a similar narrative. Aimé Azar’s afore-mentioned *La peinture moderne en Egypte* (1961) traces the roots of modern Egyptian art back to the first generation only as a means of justifying the perceived poverty of those early expressions as a necessary transition towards art more worthy of attention because more authentically Egyptian. Liliane Karnouk’s *Modern Egyptian Art, the Emergence of a National Style* (2003) deserves mention because it is one of the only recently published books in a European language on the subject and covers the longest time span. However, it relies heavily on secondary sources in Arabic and as such, adds little to the canon as I have defined it above.

Mona Abaza’s recently published *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art: the Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei* (2011) provides images from this impressive collection that covers art produced in Egypt throughout the twentieth century, including a large number by the ‘pioneers,’ with special emphasis placed on Ragheb ‘Ayyad and Mahmud Sa‘id.¹³ However, the book varies slightly from the standard account as the collector Sherwet Shafei has maintained a strong interest in the work of European Orientalists working in

¹³ Mona Abaza, *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art: The Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010).

Egypt and her collection includes work by artists such as Pierre Beppi-Martin (1869-1964), Charles Boeglin (dates unknown), and Roger Bréval (dates unknown). Her collection also features pieces by members of the Armenian community.¹⁴

A number of publications treat the subject of the emergence of modern Egyptian art within a broader geographical context. Sylvia Naef's *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (1996) interprets modern Egyptian art as belonging to an Arab whole. She correctly emphasizes the newness of painting in the Egyptian context. However, her account does little to give a detailed view of the context within which the artists under discussion functioned. Wijdan Ali, in her *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World* (1989) and *Modern Islamic art: Development and Continuity* (1997), interprets modern art in the Arab world as part of an Islamic continuity marked by calligraphy.¹⁵ The period under investigation here does not fit comfortably into this paradigm, and again, by reading Egypt within an Islamic cultural reality, the possibility for retrieving a more diverse and detailed cultural landscape is negated. Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (2007) answers Ali's position by highlighting a shift in the conception of aesthetics between what she calls 'Islamic' and 'Arab,' the first stemming from a religious worldview, the second from a modern, secular one.¹⁶ This view is more compatible with my reading, which emphasizes the modernity of the practice of the fine arts in Egypt. However, like other overviews, it fails to account in sufficient detail for the

¹⁴ The Alexandrian collector Hussam Rashwan also shows a strong interest in the art of foreigners working in Egypt. His collection has yet to be the object of a publication.

The Armenian community of Egypt had a very active art scene. See for example Aimé Azar, *Peintres arméniens d'Egypte* (Cairo: Imprimerie Française, 1953).

¹⁵ Wijdan Ali, *Contemporary Art From the Islamic World* (London: Scorpion, 1989); *Modern Islamic Art: Development and continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

¹⁶ Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

historical circumstances of the emergence of modern Egyptian visual art, and the canon as it is defined in the museums and historiography of Egypt remains unquestioned.

As witnessed by the first conference of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA), an affiliate organization of the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) and of the College Art Association (CAA), held in Doha, Qatar in December 2010, there has been a rise in academic interest in the field of modern and contemporary art in the Arab world in recent years. Young scholars have begun to undertake the kind of primary research that is sorely lacking, and my own research is part of this trend. This should result in an increase in publications in coming years. The most relevant doctoral dissertation to be submitted on the subject of modern Egyptian art is Patrick Kane's 'Politics, Discontent and the Everyday in Egyptian Arts, 1938-1966,' from 2005.¹⁷ Kane's study focuses mostly on artists who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s, although he does devote a section to Nagi, and I will further engage with his work in Chapter 3.

Thus, after a quick survey of the historiography, museums, and public monuments, the interested party will remember only a handful of names, and what will remain is an impression of them that might be summed up with the following qualifiers: Mukhtar, the neo-Pharaonic nationalist sculptor; Nagi, the independently trained Alexandrian

¹⁷ Patrick Kane, 'Politics, Discontent and the Everyday in Egyptian Arts, 1938-1966 (Ph.D. diss., University of New York at Binghamton, 2005). I will refer to this dissertation in Chapter 3: Muhammad Nagi.

Impressionist; ‘Ayyad, the painter of the Egyptian people; and Sa‘id, the spiritual aristocratic.

All of them, despite their differences, are seen as the heroes of an emergent Egyptian modernism. Furthermore, this small group of individuals seem to function in a vacuum. Institutions, exhibitions, and events are described in accounts from the second half of the twentieth century as grand and important, yet they are strangely lacking in artists and a public. This generation of highly gifted individuals is portrayed as emerging suddenly as mature artists around 1910, fully equipped to provide the Egyptian nation with its own representations.

2. A Review of the Press

Evidently, there is something missing in the standard account described above that presents Mukhtar, ‘Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa‘id working in isolation under the sign of nationalist inspiration: how could such a small number of individuals without an institutional or social context for exhibiting, funding, diffusing, teaching, and learning art, in a country with no tradition in the fine arts, suddenly make a splash on the national scene? The answer to this question is twofold: first, they did not. In fact, Egypt’s budding art scene was, to begin with, a fairly insignificant affair whose existence was unknown to the vast majority of the Egyptian population; it is only later that their status as national artists became established. Yet, and this brings us to the second part of our answer, this art scene was nevertheless larger, and its composition more diverse, than the conventional narrative usually acknowledges.

A review of the contemporaneous Egyptian press gives us some idea of events related to the emergence of modern art in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century and their import in their own historical moment. The major foundational event in the historiography on modern Egyptian art is the founding of the Cairo School of Fine Arts (*Kulliyyat al-funun al-jamila*) in May 1908.¹⁸ The idea for an Egyptian art school on the French Beaux-Arts model had emerged towards the end of 1907 when the Prince Yusuf Kamal, a prominent Egyptian landowner, asked Guillaume Laplagne, who was in Egypt sculpting the prince's portrait, to think about how such a project might be accomplished.¹⁹ The result was the creation of an art school that opened its doors in May 1908 with four departments, painting, sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts, all of which were headed by European artists.²⁰ At the beginning, it was a rather makeshift affair, much like Cairo University, founded the same year, with evening and part-time classes and open lectures for the general public making up most of its activity.²¹ There were no prerequisites for admission, and most students did not have the slightest idea about art. Candidates were subjected to an entrance exam.²² The programme followed by full-time students was two years long, and was subsequently extended to four years.

¹⁸ See for example Ragheb 'Ayyad, *Ahadith fi l-funun al-jamila fi nisf qarn 1908-1958* (Cairo, 1959), 8-11; Iskandar, Al-Malakh, and Al-Sharuni, *80 sana min al-fann (1908-1988)*, 15-16; Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya*, 13-15; Sylvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 2001), 46-49.

¹⁹ Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, 47; According to the art critic Aimé Azar, Kamal was prompted to found an art school when the Turkish painter 'Khalil Sélim' won a medal at the 'Exposition de Paris.' (Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte*, 15). Naef identifies the Turkish painter in question as the impressionist Halil Pasha (1857-1939) who won a bronze medal at the Salon des Artistes Français in 1900 (Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, 49).

²⁰ On the later organization of the school, see Kamal Al Sarrag, 'The College of Fine Arts,' *Arts and the Islamic World*, v.4, n.1 (Summer 1986): 69-72.

²¹ For more on the founding of the university, see Donald M. Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²² Guillaume Laplagne, 'Des aptitudes artistiques des Egyptiens d'après les résultats obtenus à l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts,' *L'Egypte contemporaine*, v. 1, n.3 (May 1910), cited in Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*, 50.

The account written by Ragheb ‘Ayyad on the occasion of the School’s fiftieth anniversary is typical of the way the event is portrayed in the historiography:

The sudden news [of the founding of an art school] provoked a tremendous reaction in student circles and spread rapidly among them, and groups of them from all over came forward, erupting like an impetuous torrent around the newly emerging institution, and it was only a matter of days before the number of registered students reached 400.²³

Yet this supposedly major event is absent from the contemporaneous Arabic language press, and it seems highly unlikely that the School of Fine Arts attracted 400 students at its opening, as the Cairo University, founded the same year, and which received a great deal more coverage in the press, attracted under 500 students in its first year.²⁴ Similarly, an exhibition showcasing the work of the School’s first graduates at the Cairo Automobile Club in January 1911, which Al-Gabakhangī portrays as a momentous event, received no mention in the press other than an entry in the classified section of the daily *Al-Jarida* announcing its opening the day before the event.²⁵ Other early developments in the fine arts that are cited in the historiography as important landmarks, events such as the first Cairo Salon in 1919 or the founding of the *Société des Amis de l’Art* in 1923 (fig.11), are equally absent from the press. In fact, there is virtually no mention of the visual arts in the Arabic press for the first two decades of the century, and poetry, the theatre, and the cinema dominated coverage of the cultural scene.²⁶

²³ ‘Ayyad, *Ahadith fi l-funun al-jamila*, 9.

²⁴ Reid, *Cairo University*, 45.

²⁵ Al-Gabakhangī, *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya*, 16-17; *Al-Jarida*, January 12, 1911, 4. The exhibition opened 13 January 1911.

²⁶ For the years 1908-1911, I surveyed the following publications: *Al-muqtataf* (vol. 23-28), *Al-hilal* (vol. 18-20), and *Al-Jarida*.

The public presence of Mukhtar's sculpture was the first step towards an increasing interest in the fine arts more generally. From 1920, his public monument to the Egyptian nation, *Nahdat Misr* (*Egypt's Awakening*; fig.6), which I will return to in some detail in Chapter 1, received extensive coverage.²⁷ From that date, events that Mukhtar took part in began to receive attention from the press. The weekly *Al-Musawwar* featured an article on an exhibition organized by the artistic society *La Chimère* (*Gama'at al-khayal*) in late 1927 that featured not only sculpture but painting too.²⁸ The central figure of this short-lived artistic society, based in downtown Cairo, was Mukhtar.²⁹ While the monthly journal *Al-Muqtataf*, one of the most serious vehicles for science and culture in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, continued to show almost no interest in the visual arts throughout the 1930s, an illustrated page in *Al-Hilal* in 1930 was devoted to an exhibition also organized by 'La Chimère', featuring work by Mukhtar.³⁰ Likewise, the only references to the visual arts in the daily *Al-Ahram* for 1930 were two short front-page articles on Mukhtar.³¹ Thus, an overview of the Arabic Egyptian press from 1910 to the mid-1930s shows that, next to coverage of Mukhtar's work, and contrary to some of

²⁷ For a compilation of this coverage, see Badr Al-Din Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar* (Cairo: Ad-Dar al-qawmiyya li t-tiba'a wa an-nashr, 1964). For an overview in English, see Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation: collective memory, public commemoration, and national identity in twentieth-century Egypt* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2004).

²⁸ The illustrated weekly *Al-Musawwar* was published from 1924. For more, see Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 89-91. The Catalogue for the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art gives 1928, and Al-Gabakhang, 1929, as a founding date for *La Chimère*, but coverage of an exhibition organized by the Society appeared in *Al-Musawwar* at the end of 1927. Members other than Mukhtar included Mahmud Sa'id, Muhammad Nagi, Muhammad Hassan, and Ahmad Sabri (*Museum of Egyptian Modern Art*, 252-253; Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya*, 48; 'Gama'at al-khayal,' *Al-Musawwar*, December 16, 1927, 32.)

²⁹ *Al-Musawwar*, December 17, 1926, 2; *Al-Musawwar*, January 7, 1927, 11; *Al-Musawwar*, January 14, 1927, 1.

³⁰ 'Ma'rad al-khayal,' *Al-Hilal*, January 1930, 264.

³¹ On Mukhtar's exhibition in Paris in 1930, see 'Salon Mukhtar bi baris,' *Al-Ahram*, March 19, 1930; on the decision of the French government to buy Mukhtar's sculpture 'Arus al-nil,' see 'Timthal misri tashtarihi hukumat fransa,' *Al-Ahram*, March 31, 1930.

the claims made in the historiography, modern art in Egypt only slowly began to acquire an audience and a place, and still a small one, in the public eye.

Where art did gain some exposure was in the abundant francophone press. The annual Salons that had been taking place in Cairo since 1919 were reviewed alongside other exhibitions, at least from 1927 onwards.³² In 1935, a French critic residing in Egypt wrote: 'Each year, the Salon of the *Société des Amis de l'Art* [or Cairo Salon] is progressing: submissions are not only more numerous, they are also better ... The number of those who visit the Exhibitions is rising from year to year, and artists are finally finding buyers.'³³ What emerges from these reviews is a picture of the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the twentieth century that is quite different from the one that is presented in state museums and publications of the second half of the twentieth century. Rather than a handful of Egyptians working alone, at the vanguard of an art practice that embodied the aspirations of the Egyptian nation, we catch a glimpse of a highly diverse and cosmopolitan art scene composed not only of Egyptians, but also of foreigners of

³²An incomplete list of publications from the Egyptian francophone press drawn up by the Centre d'études alexandrines in Alexandria is comprised of two hundred one titles in French since the first press was imported in the 1820s. Of these, sixty-six appeared between 1882 and 1917, and sixty-seven between 1918 and 1941. The number of Arabic language periodicals in Cairo for the year 1937 was two hundred, and sixty-five in foreign languages, of which forty-five were in French. For Alexandria, the numbers given are of twenty French titles out of thirty-one foreign ones. Thus, of a total of over three hundred periodicals, about sixty-five were written in French. (Jean-Yves Empereur, 'Deux cents ans de presse francophone d'Égypte', March 2008, Centre d'études alexandrines, http://www.cealex.org/sitecealex/navigation/FENETR_NAVressources_F.htm)

I have relied on the Centre's online resources for access to this body of material. The digitalization of the Egyptian francophone press is an ongoing initiative, and their collections are not complete. There is little relevant material available from before 1927. *La semaine égyptienne*, the periodical that shows the greatest interest in the fine arts, was not published until 1927. For examples of Salon reviews in the francophone press, see: Jeanne Marquès, 'Salon 1927,' *L'Égyptienne*, April 1927, 19-21 and '7ème Salon égyptien au Palais Tigrane. Dix ans d'histoire de l'Égypte,' *La semaine égyptienne*, March 1927, 26; Robert Blum, 'Promenade à travers le Salon du Caire,' *Ma revue*, February, 1930, 35-37; 'Le XXVème Salon du Caire,' *Images*, March 25, 1945, n.p..

³³ Morik Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l'Égypte contemporaine* (Cairo: Les amis de la culture française en Égypte, 1935), 14.

various nationalities and religions: Jews, Armenians, Greeks and Italians born in Egypt, French Orientalists passing through, and Europeans of other origins settled in the country. A reviewer wrapped up her article on the 1927 Salon with the following lines: ‘I conclude by pointing out with pleasure that artists of all nationalities have taken part in this Salon: Britons, Armenians, Egyptians, French, Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Russians, Tcheco-Slovaks, Turks, Yougoslavs, Swiss, Swedes.’³⁴

A review of the 1930 Cairo Salon in the francophone journal *Ma revue* mentions a total of sixty-three of artists, thirty-eight of whom have foreign names and twenty-five of whom have Arabic names. Of those twenty-five, not all are necessarily Egyptian.³⁵ The reviewer, Robert Blum, made no distinction between Egyptians and foreigners in his enumeration.³⁶ Morik Brin’s 1935 book, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l’Egypte contemporaine*, includes a general survey of artists in Egypt and a review of the 1935 Salon.³⁷ In the general survey, written between February 1933 and January 1935, some of the artists that he considered to be the best in the country were not of Egyptian origin. Among them are Amy Nimr (fig.12), the half British daughter of the pro-British Syrian press magnate, Faris Nimr,³⁸ as well as the Armenian caricaturist Alexandre Saroukhan

³⁴ Jeanne Marquès, ‘Salon 1927,’ *L’Egyptienne*, April 1927, 21.

³⁵ For example, Egypt had a sizeable community of Syrian intellectuals who, from the end of the nineteenth century, came to Egypt to benefit from the less restrictive political and intellectual climate.

³⁶ Robert Blum, ‘Promenade à travers le Salon du Caire,’ *Ma revue*, February 1930, 35-37.

³⁷ Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l’Egypte contemporaine*; there exists another work with the same title by a certain Philippe d’Arschot, published in Belgium in 1933, but I have not been able to locate a copy.

³⁸ Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs*, 24; for more on both Faris and Amy Nimr, see Fayza Hassan, ‘In Search of Amy,’ *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, March 30- April 5, 2006, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/788/bo10.htm>; Michael Haag, *Alexandria, City of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 134; the artist is also mentioned as a friend of the Franco-Egyptian artist Margo Veillon in Bruno Ronfard, Jill M. Edwards, and John Rodenbeck, *Margot Veillon: Witness of a Century* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 26.

(1898-1977; fig.13).³⁹ Of the one hundred twenty artists cited by the author, only sixty-two have Arabic names. Brin was struck by the high number of Egyptians exhibiting in 1935 compared with previous years (he counts ninety-six Egyptian names).⁴⁰ Next to the Egyptians, he also salutes the contribution made to art in Egypt by foreigners: 'the 1935 Salon has also allowed us to appreciate the important part played by Europeans in the artistic development of this country.'⁴¹

In Alexandria, the presence of foreigners on the art scene was even more marked than in Cairo: the catalogue for the Salon organized by the Alexandria Atelier in 1944 lists thirty-eight painters, only eight of whom have Arabic names;⁴² for 1945, the catalogue lists thirty-seven painters, a mere six of whom have Arabic names;⁴³ for 1946, fifty-one painters, seven of whom have Arabic names,⁴⁴ and for 1948, sixty painters, thirteen of whom have Arabic names.⁴⁵ The catalogue of the *Exposition de la vie artistique à Alexandrie pendant la première moitié du XX^{ème} siècle* organized in 1973 by the

³⁹ Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs*, 39; Saroukhan was best known as the caricaturist for the magazine *Ruz al-Yusif* between 1928 and 1934, then for *Akhir Sa'a* from 1934 to 1946. He was the creator of *Al-masri effendi*, or 'Mr. Egyptian,' who can be seen here crowning Farouq; for more on Saroukhan, see Fayza Hassan, 'Alexandre Saroukhan,' *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, May 120-26, 1999, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/430/ar2.htm>; Armenian artists occupied an important place in the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the twentieth century. Aimé Azar devotes a whole section to them in his *La peinture moderne en Egypte* (Cairo, 1961); a special edition of *La semaine égyptienne* was devoted to a exhibition that showcased Armenian painters in Egypt inaugurated on 25 March 1945 (*Exposition des peintres arméniens d'Egypte: La semaine égyptienne, édition spéciale* (Cairo, n.d.)).

⁴⁰ Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs*, 55-56.

⁴¹ Ibid., 65.

⁴² *Exposition de l'Atelier, Salon 1944* (Alexandria: Atelier d'Alexandrie, 1944).

⁴³ *Exposition de l'Atelier, Salon 1945* (Alexandria: Atelier d'Alexandrie, 1945).

⁴⁴ *Exposition de l'Atelier, Salon 1946* (Alexandria: Atelier d'Alexandrie, 1946).

⁴⁵ *Exposition de l'Atelier, Salon 1948*, (Alexandria: Atelier d'Alexandrie, 1948).

Alexandria Governorate lists thirty-six painters, only ten of whom are Egyptian, and twelve sculptors, only two of whom are Egyptian.⁴⁶

There was, then, more writing on art in French in Egypt than there was in Arabic, and it is clear from the numbers presented above and from a quick survey of the press that the question of the national identity of artists was not the primary concern for most of those involved in the Egyptian art scene in the early decades of the century, not least because many of its artists did not fit clearly into one national category, and certainly not into an *Egyptian* one (we will see that even for the artists treated in this dissertation, all of whom are deemed by the historiography to be ‘authentic’ Egyptians, identification with the Egyptian nation was not always a simple matter).

A concern with the issue of national identity in writing on art began to emerge in the press by the end of the 1930s, roughly around the same time as the emergence of a more sustained interest in the fine arts in the Arabic language press. An article in *Al-Risala* from 1937 relates the distress of artists regarding the fact that ‘the government does not grant them encouragement and support. Meanwhile, it spares nothing in its encouragement and support of foreign artists who come to Egypt.’⁴⁷ By the 1950s, even the Francophone critic Aimé Azar was dividing the history of modern Egyptian art into ‘national’ categories: chapters I through V of his book *La peinture moderne en Egypte* cover Egyptian art proper, while chapters VI and VII are devoted to Armenian and

⁴⁶ *Exposition de la vie artistique à Alexandrie pendant la première moitié du XXème siècle* (Alexandria Atelier d’Alexandrie, January 30- February 21, 1973); of the 26 foreign painters cited in the catalogue, nine were born abroad, four were born in Alexandria, and the exact origins of the other twelve are unknown to me.

⁴⁷ ‘Al-fann al-misri fi haja ila ri‘aya,’ *Al-Risala*, May, 17, 1937, 833.

‘foreign’ painters respectively.⁴⁸ His work might be seen as a transition between a vision of the art world in Egypt faithful to its cosmopolitan nature in the first half of the century, and the later twentieth-century view wherein only art produced by those deemed to be ‘authentic’ Egyptians was taken into account. This can be seen in his chapter on the generation that he calls the ‘aînés’ (or elders): in it, he included, alongside the omnipresent Nagi, ‘Ayyad, and Sa‘id (Mukhtar, not being a painter, was excluded), the painters Yusif Kamil, Ahmad Sabri, Amy Nimr, Georges Sabbagh (1877-1951; fig.14), and Hussein Yussif Amin (1904-1984; fig.15).⁴⁹ Amin, Kamil, and Sabri are passed over briefly: Amin was important as a teacher of the next generation, but not for his own production;⁵⁰ Kamil and Sabri are deemed worthy of mention for being among the first painters in Egypt, but otherwise, of little interest.⁵¹ Of Amy Nimr, the author writes ‘[she is] the only modern oriental painter whose work bears the profound imprint of the angst-ridden sensuality marked by a fierce and threatening pessimism that is at the core of the Syrian temperament.’⁵² Thus, while Nimr is included in the chapter on the elders rather than among the foreign painters, she is nonetheless marked as Syrian. Yet Nimr, while not on a par with ‘Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa‘id, had been cited as one of Egypt’s noteworthy painters in the press from the 1930s.⁵³ In Azar’s work, she makes a final appearance

⁴⁸ Aimé Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte*. The book was published as a whole in 1961. However, parts of it had appeared as separate works in the course of the 1950s, including the section on foreign painters.

⁴⁹ Georges Sabbagh was a Franco-Egyptian painter. Born in Alexandria, he studied in France with Paul Sérusier, Félix Vallotton, and Maurice Denis. For more on this painter, see Jean Sabbagh and Pierre Sabbagh, *Georges Sabbagh* (Paris: Editions du Panama, 2006).

⁵⁰ Hussein Yussif Amin, born in 1904, was in Europe and South America until 1930. His activity as a painter is not counted as an important contribution to the art of the ‘pioneers:’ upon his return to Egypt, his activity was mainly in the area of teaching, and his contribution to the development of Egyptian art can be seen mostly through the younger generation that was taught by him (Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte*, 43-45). For more on Amin, see Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe*, 92-93.

⁵¹ Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte*, 20.

⁵² Ibid., 36.

⁵³ See for example: Nasrallah Susa, *Al-Risala*, May 9, 1938, 787.

before disappearing from the literature almost completely.⁵⁴ The Franco-Egyptian painter Georges Sabbagh met with the same fate: he too appeared as an important painter in Salon criticism and literature of the first half of the century and then virtually disappeared.

Azar's survey of modern Egyptian art still bears the trace of the rich cosmopolitanism of the first half of the twentieth century, but the process of writing out 'foreign' artists had already been launched. In subsequent accounts, foreign artists all but disappeared, making only the briefest appearances as the teachers of Egyptian artists. In these accounts, Mukhtar, Nagi, 'Ayyad, and Sa'id, the Egyptian 'pioneers,' valiantly fight for the cause of art and the nation, simultaneously taking on European influence in the arts to gain control of the fledgling institutions of the Egyptian art world, and British political domination to achieve independence from the foreign occupier.

3. The Historical Background

Thus, after surveying the literature and the press, two major issues emerge with regard to the historiography of the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the twentieth century: its initial cosmopolitanism and the subsequent rewriting of its history to exclude the important 'foreign' element; and the purportedly important role played by artists in the first half of the twentieth century in relation to the development of Egyptian nationalist sentiment. These two issues are interrelated, and to understand why the story of modern Egyptian art has been written the way that it has, we must look to the history of modern

⁵⁴ Nimr is not mentioned in Abu Ghazi, *Gil min ar-ruwwad* (1975), Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al- Haraka al-Faniyya* (1986), or Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian art, 1910-2003* (2005).

Egypt, with special reference to the development of the idea of the nation and to the place of foreigners within Egyptian society.

Napoleon invaded the Ottoman province of Egypt in 1798. The French stay in the country was short-lived, but it launched a long-lasting cultural relationship between France and the Egyptian elites. Muhammad Ali (1769-1849), the Albanian-born Ottoman general who defeated the French, established a degree of autonomy for Egypt, despite the fact that the country officially remained part of the Ottoman Empire until the First World War, and founded a dynasty that ruled Egypt until the monarchy was abolished in 1953. One member of this dynasty, the Khedive Ismail (1830-1895), who ruled from 1863 to 1879, was an avid reformer.⁵⁵ Among other things, he oversaw the building of the Suez Canal. With this and other ambitious projects, including a costly war in Ethiopia, and the notably extravagant lifestyle led by himself and his entourage, Ismail sunk the country deep into debt. The interests of his European creditors increased European influence and presence in Egypt.

In the late 1870s, agitation in the ranks of the Egyptian military against the Turco-Circassian elites who occupied its upper echelons led to increasing tension. An officer of Egyptian origin by the name of Ahmed Urabi (1841-1911) took the head of a movement against the foreign ruling elites in Egypt.⁵⁶ Urabi and his allies briefly seized control of

⁵⁵ Khedive was the hereditary title granted to Ismail by the Ottoman Sultan to mark Egypt's special status as a semi-autonomous Ottoman province. For a history of Ismail's reign, see F. Robert Hunter, *Egypt under the Khedives, 1805-1879: from household government to modern bureaucracy* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999).

⁵⁶ For an account of the revolt, see Donald M. Reid, 'The 'Urabi Revolution and the British Conquest, 1879-1882' in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Volume Two: Modern Egypt from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 217-238.

the army and of Cairo at the end of 1881, demanding the dismissal of Turco-Circassian officers and an elected government. The country was in political turmoil throughout the beginning of 1882, and the British seized the opportunity to invade Egypt in September of that year, defending the Khedive and the power of the Ottoman Empire. The invasion marked the beginning of an occupation that, in its various forms, was to last until the final withdrawal of British troops in 1956. The Urabi episode is often considered to be the first manifestation of Egyptian nationalist sentiment.⁵⁷

Throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, the idea of Egypt as a nation that could aspire to full independence emerged with increasing force in Egyptian intellectual circles. Egyptians were in search of an appropriate form for these aspirations.⁵⁸ The situation of Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century with regard to its national definition was, and would remain, complex: it was officially part of the Ottoman Empire, had been governed independently for most of the nineteenth century, and had been under British occupation since 1882, officially becoming a protectorate at the start of the First World War.⁵⁹ Several ways of envisioning, or imagining, the national community were open to Egyptians. Egypt was an Arab, predominantly Muslim country. It was also an entity that had its own Pharaonic history that set it apart from its Arab neighbours, a history that was increasingly coming

⁵⁷ See for example Jamal Mohammad Ahmad, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 24-26.

⁵⁸ I have based my account of the development of nationalism in Egypt largely on Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs: the Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Redefining the Egyptian Nation: 1930-1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵⁹ Officially removing Egypt from the Ottoman Empire, which was allied with the Central Powers, became necessary for the British at the start of the First World War.

to light with archaeological discoveries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁰

The questions posed by intellectuals trying to determine the form that Egyptian nationalism would take had to take into account all these factors. How would Egyptians go about imagining their community? Would Egypt be Ottoman and Islamic and reject European influence? Would it be Arab and reject both Turkish and European influence? Would it be primarily Egyptian and reject the heritage it shared with the other Arab territories and with its fellow Muslims?

According to Gershoni and Jankowski's interpretation of the development of Egyptian nationalism, the dominant framework for identification shifted between these different possibilities in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, although we will see that, while it is useful to have in mind an idea about the general trends in nationalist discourse, the different parameters of Egyptian identity coexisted and continued to be mobilized in various ways throughout the period under discussion.⁶¹ Until the First World War, Egyptian nationalist thought identified predominantly with the Ottoman-Islamic Empire. The first nationalist party, Mustafa Kamil's *Hizb al-Watani* (or Nationalist Party), based its conception of Egyptian identity on its affiliation with Islam, the political presence of which was represented by the Ottoman Empire. Kamil (1874-1908), a prominent lawyer, was virulently anti-British, advocating collaboration with the Ottoman Porte and with the French to achieve independence.⁶² Indeed, the French were seen as a

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the complex nationalist issues at stake in the rediscovery of ancient Egypt, see Donald M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, museums and Egyptian national identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶¹ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs and Redefining the Egyptian Nation: 1930-1945*.

⁶² Ahmed, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism*, 59-84.

counterweight to the British in the global political arena, and some members of the Egyptian intelligentsia, with its long-standing affiliation to French language and culture, felt that their political and cultural goals would be best served by an alliance with France.⁶³ The opposition to Kamil's party, the *Hizb al-Umma* ('umma' means community or sometimes nation), founded in 1907 and whose key figure was the prominent lawyer and intellectual, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963),⁶⁴ adopted what they saw as a more pragmatic stance: despite the fact that the party was composed of many Francophones and Francophiles, they advocated collaboration with the British, in the hope that this would lead to their progressive withdrawal. Lutfi al-Sayyid and his circle represented a nascent secular nationalism, downplaying the importance of Islam and the Ottoman link.

After the First World War, this secular brand of nationalism became dominant with the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the *Wafd*, or delegation, party by Sa'd Zaghlul. In the context of the Paris Peace Conference's efforts to create new nations where previously empires had been, and of the United States' President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, Zaghlul formed a delegation in 1919 to represent Egypt's claims to independence. The brand of nationalism that became dominant in the 1920s was based on a discourse that traced Egyptian history back to the Pharaohs, and had a heavy rural component to its symbolism. According to this ideology, the Nile gave Egyptians

⁶³ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs*, 13.

⁶⁴ Lutfi al-Sayyid, sometimes referred to as the 'teacher of the generation,' (*ustadh al-jil*) was a pivotal intellectual figure in early twentieth-century Egypt. He was one of the central figures in the development of early Egyptian nationalism, instrumental in the founding of Cairo University, and a key figure in two successive political parties, the *Hizb al-Umma* and the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, founded in 1922.

their specific national character and had done so for thousands of years. The Egyptian peasant, unchanged throughout the ages, was the repository of this national character.⁶⁵

Zaghlul and his companions were exiled to Malta after presenting their demands to the British High Commissioner in Egypt; their exile resulted in an eruption of protests against the British in March 1919. In 1922, the Protectorate was nominally put to an end through a unilateral declaration of independence made by the British. The declaration defined the terms under which British influence would be maintained in four points: the security of Imperial connections in Egypt; the defence of Egypt against foreign aggression; the security of minorities residing in Egypt; and the Sudan. Concretely, this meant that while Egypt had become a constitutional monarchy, Britain maintained military control.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930, the British, the royal Palace, and Zaghlul's Wafd party vied for control over Egyptian politics. Political instability plagued Egypt from the late 1920s until the beginning of the Second World War.⁶⁶ The power play and behind-the-scene negotiations between the British, the Palace, and the Wafd, as well as other political parties and interest groups such as the Muslim religious institutions of Al-Azhar, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Liberal Constitutionalist party, founded in 1922 as a foil to the increasing power of the Wafd, resulted in frequent changes of government

⁶⁵ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs*, 207.

⁶⁶ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 1-34.

throughout the 1930s.⁶⁷ In 1936, an Anglo-Egyptian treaty officially put an end to the military occupation of the country, but with the threat of war it was in the interest of both parties to maintain British presence in Egypt. With yet another failed attempt at complete independence came increasing disillusionment with the form the new state had taken.

It was in this context that the 1930s saw the development of new supra-Egyptian forms of nationalism.⁶⁸ Gershoni and Jankowski explain this turn away from Egyptian territorial nationalism by three factors: first, the political and economic turmoil that plagued Egypt from the Depression until the Second World War and caused profound disillusionment with previous nationalist discourse; second, the changing social composition of the literate urban population, which, due to the development of Egyptian educational institutions, was larger and less Westernized than that of an earlier generation, and thus more interested in commonalities with Egypt's Arab and Muslim neighbours; and third, increased contact of various kinds between Egyptians and other Arabs, which would lead to the Arab nationalism that would become predominant in Egypt under Nasser.⁶⁹ Among the causes of the social unrest that plagued the country in the mid-1930s were the dim job prospects for university graduates. As the private sector was heavily populated with employees from Egypt's foreign minorities, this contributed to the often anti-European tenor of much of supra-Egyptian nationalist discourse that emerged in that decade.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ On the subject of the Liberal Constitutionalist battles with the Wafd, see for example Charles D. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt: a biography of Muhammad Husayn Haykal* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1983), 71-88.

⁶⁸ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 1-34.

⁶⁹ For an account of Nasser's nationalism, see James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 27-40.

⁷⁰ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 18.

Cairo, and Alexandria even more so, had large communities of foreign nationals at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Cairo, the following numbers have been advanced: in 1927, for 988,394 Egyptians there was a total of 76,173 foreigners, 20,115 of whom were Greek, 18,575, Italian, 11,221 British, and 9,549, French. For Alexandria, the numbers for the same year are, for 473,458 Egyptians, 99,605 foreigners, of whom 37,106 were Greek, 24,280, Italian, 14,394 British, and 9,429 French.⁷¹ This means that for the second city, close to a sixth of the population was composed of foreign nationals. In addition to these, there were others with an intermediary status, people of foreign origin with Egyptian citizenship, or Jews, Armenians, and Syrians, who sometimes held Egyptian citizenship but had their own community organizations.⁷² As we will see, this cosmopolitanism had a profound impact on the life and work of Egyptian artists, especially those from Alexandria.⁷³

Foreigners had long been granted special status in Egypt. The Capitulations, agreements signed first between the Ottoman Empire, then Egypt, and foreign powers granting the right to citizens of some countries residing in Egypt to be judged according to the law of their country of origin, were designed to facilitate trade. In Egypt, the institution of the Mixed Courts, which handled disputes between foreigners and Egyptians and between foreigners of different origins, was founded in 1875 to facilitate the implementation of the Capitulations (I will discuss the Mixed Courts, where Mahmud Sa'ïd spent his career

⁷¹ Alexander Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt 1919-1937: Ethnicity and Class* (London: Ithaca Press, 1989), 21. Kitroeff takes these numbers from the *Annuaire Statistique*.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁷³ For an account of cosmopolitan Alexandria in the first half of the twentieth century seen from the perspective of foreign intellectuals, see Haag, *Alexandria, City of Memory* and the complementary volume by the same author, Haag, *Vintage Alexandria: Photographs of the City 1860-1960* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

as a judge, in more depth in Chapter 4). The Capitulations were abolished in 1937, leaving the protection of minorities in the hands of the British occupation.⁷⁴

From the late 1930s, the position of foreigners in Egypt became increasingly difficult. In the years leading up to the Second World War, Italians, who constituted the second largest group of foreign nationals, and Germans, a considerably smaller group, were forced to leave Egypt as they found themselves on the opposite side of the mounting conflict from the British. With the emergence of the conflict over Palestine, the situation of the large Egyptian Jewish community became increasingly difficult.⁷⁵ This culminated during the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 when, after the Tripartite aggression of Egypt by France, Britain, and Israel following Nasser's announcement of his decision to nationalize the Suez Canal, Jews were arrested en masse and their businesses seized. Many left Egypt. Furthermore, all English and French citizens were expelled in the aftermath of this event. The nationalization of private companies from 1956 meant that the assets of foreigners were often seized. By the late 1950s, the foreign population of Egypt, so large in the first half of the century, had considerably dwindled. The art world followed a similar pattern: the large foreign contingent among practicing artists had mostly left Egypt by the late 1950s, and acknowledgment of their erstwhile presence has been kept to a bare minimum. What we are left with is a nationalized picture of modern Egyptian art in the first half of the twentieth century that reflects political circumstances at mid-century.

⁷⁴ For a history of the abolition of the Capitulations, see Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt*, 37-47.

⁷⁵ Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 107.

II. Theoretical perspectives

4. Non-Western Modern Art

It is clear from what precedes, and will become clearer in the chapters that follow, that during the first half of the twentieth century, art in Egypt was always imbricated on some level with a European context, be it through the heavy presence of Europeans in Egypt and their participation in the art world, or through the European training received by Egyptian artists. Indeed, one of the central paradoxes of modernism in Egypt, as in other parts of the non-Western world, is the fact that, in exploring the potential of art as a means of expressing individual and collective identities, artists were often compelled to turn to forms and visual sources borrowed from Europe. The question of how to reconcile the specificity of particular instances of modern art with the non-nativeness of their forms, and the related question of ‘belatedness,’ are thus always present in analyses of the phenomenon: understanding modernism as eternal newness is problematic when it comes to understanding art production in the modern world outside of the geographical zone ordained as the point at which formal innovation originates.

The question of how to approach visual modernism in the non-West has received much attention in recent years. Some scholars have suggested that the solution lies in the creation of broader theoretical perspectives to integrate previously understudied areas into single art historical narratives. The most ambitious and wide-ranging instance of this kind of approach, broadly termed ‘world’ or ‘global’ art history,⁷⁶ is David Summers’

⁷⁶ Hans Belting, in his essay ‘Contemporary Art as Global Art,’ in *The global art world: audiences, markets, and museums*, ed. Hans Belting et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 1-27, distinguishes between world art and global art. The first, he says, pertains to a heritage from all times and from around the world. Belting sums up its project in the following words: ‘World art history claims competence as being a method

Real Spaces (2003), and as such, the book demonstrates some of its problems.⁷⁷ The goal of broader inclusiveness pursued by Summers results in an all-encompassing narrative that masks the particularities of specific instances of art under the assumption that the human experience of objects in space can be understood independently of geographical and historical difference.⁷⁸ Summers' phenomenological approach, based on the assumption of the 'authenticity' of pre-modern human experience, establishes a binary between the 'real spaces' of authentic art and their implied Other, the 'false' spaces of Western modernism, thus relegating both Euro-America and the rest of the world to an eternal identification with their respective fixed essences, eternally modern in the case of the West, eternally pre-modern in the case of the rest.

suitable for discussing art regardless of its age or provenance.' The second, global art, usually pertains to contemporary art in the international arena. While in some contexts, this is a very useful distinction, in this context, I do not find it pertinent here, especially as what is *not* included in either definition (the roots of the contemporary in the modern) is part of what I suggest is needed.

⁷⁷ David Summers, *Real Spaces* (London: Phaidon, 2003) constitutes an attempt to create a framework within which to read all art objects or artifacts regardless of their origins in space and time. To this end, Summers adopts a phenomenological approach that takes as the fundamental parameter of human experience what he terms *real space*, the shared social space within which we encounter each other and objects. It is through this lens that we might understand art as that which 'records the many ways in which the world at hand has been acknowledged in being shaped by us human beings' (19). With Western modernism, he tells us, we run the risk of losing this spatial relationship, as it is tributary to a different kind of space. While primordial spaces were 'qualitative, continuous and unified,' *places* rather than spaces, modern Western space is homogenous, divisible, and infinite (21). In Summers' view, Western modern art no longer depends on the embodied experience of *place*, and thus lacks the ritualistic potency of earlier expressions of human encounters with the world.

Summers' project of establishing an all-encompassing narrative for the history of art, or even a single interpretative framework that can be applied to different bodies of production, can only be attributed to what Craig Clunas refers to as 'a residual hankering ... for the notional perfect textbook' (Craig Clunas, 'The toolkit and the textbook,' in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 281).

⁷⁸ Other works that address the question of establishing a global narrative for art history include James Elkins' *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007), David Carrier's *A World Art History and its Objects* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), and Whitney Davis' *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

David Carrier, for example, writes that 'until we can place the arts of China, India, and Islam in relation to Europe's, our picture of world visual culture will be merely fragmentary' (David Carrier, *A World Art History and its Objects*, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press: 2008), xxiii). While the goal of plotting the connections between different contexts that were previously studied separately is a laudable one, I am deeply suspicious of a project that implies, as Carrier's does, that a body of knowledge can ever be anything but fragmentary.

Efforts like Summers' prove to be disappointing because they rely on the assumption that a set of criteria that define art and its mode of participation in human society are there for the finding. These criteria would allow us to situate the entire history and geography of human creativity on a single map and timeline, which, while claiming to be global, are in fact based on our well-established euro-centric art historical tradition and its empirical data. Indeed, Summers explicitly denies the importance of conducting new primary research to expand the field of art history, claiming instead that the practice of art history should now be a matter of reinterpreting what we already know.⁷⁹ However, what we already know is itself the result of well-established historical biases.

The approach adopted by Summers implicitly assumes that such a thing as art (or modernism) exists outside of the details of its particular circumstances, and that there is such a thing as a history of art independent from the practices of writing, exhibiting, promoting, politicking, and propagandizing.⁸⁰ I suggest instead that to account for instances of modern art in the non-Western world, in the present case, in Egypt, we must imagine what a history of modernism that does not presuppose the existence of an entity called 'modernism' independent from the details of its practice, might look like.

⁷⁹ Summers states that much of art history's archival work of 'setting its objects in spatial and temporal order, and relating them to appropriate documents and archaeological evidence has been accomplished.' (*Real Spaces*, 15) Art historians are thus freed for the work of bringing it all together in single narratives or sweeping theories. When faced with a research topic like modernism in Egypt where the work of locating and exploiting relevant sources is what is demanded, an approach such as that advocated by Summers is at best irrelevant.

⁸⁰ This assumption allows Elkins, for example, to speak unselfconsciously from his position as arbiter of a naturalized art history when he writes that 'what counts as "art history" in many countries is newspaper criticism,' (*Is Art History Global?*, 5) followed ten pages later by the statement that 'the distinction between art history and art criticism still holds.' (*Ibid.*, 15)

A blueprint for this kind of history of modernism can be found in studies of specific instances of modern art outside of the West. These present a diametrically opposed approach to that of Summers: rather than condensing material into ever broader narratives and perspectives, they hone in on the details of a given context, thereby granting full attention to the specificities of the practice and meanings of art in previously understudied areas. Partha Mitter's studies of modern Indian art are exemplary in this respect.⁸¹

Mitter's most recent book, *The Triumph of Modernism: Indian Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* (2007), traces the rise of modern art in India. Mitter's stated goal and his achievement are to have written a history of Indian modernism on its own terms, by looking at how the adoption of modern art forms made sense in India for a small group of artists in the quarter century between 1922 and 1947. In place of the notion of influence, which removes agency from the artist, and is often equivalent to imitation or derivativeness in the context of non-Western modernism, Mitter proposes that of a 'paradigm change,' telling us that

the adoption of the new language of modernism by Indian artists was necessitated by the changes in artistic imperatives in a rapidly globalizing world, which prompted them to discard the previous artistic paradigm.⁸²

We might also find a useful model in Mitter's understanding of Indian artists' interactions with the West and the rest of the world: in addition to an in-depth treatment of the Indian art scene, Mitter integrates his subject into a broader discourse on modernity

⁸¹ Mitter's publications include *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and *The Triumph of Modernism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

⁸² Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 9.

and modernism by emphasizing the interaction of the local and the global in what he terms ‘hybrid cosmopolises,’ the urban space of the intelligentsia who held the power to speak for the nation. Mitter’s understanding of these cosmopolises relies on the idea that cultural exchange is not a unilateral phenomenon. Indeed, he writes that

the strongest cultures have often developed through constant cross-fertilizations and crossing of cultural frontiers, though the original forms and ideas necessarily acquire a new meaning in the new environment.⁸³

The idea that new forms acquire new meanings in a new environment is central to any attempt to deliver a serious account of the adoption of the forms of modernism outside of their birthplace in Europe. John Clark, in his introductory essay to the edited volume *Modernity in Asian Art* (1993), develops a compelling way of approaching some of the most vexed questions faced by scholars interested in non-Western modernism, those of imitation, influence, and derivativeness.⁸⁴ Clark argues that when forms or techniques move from one cultural context to another, they are used in ways that are often irrelevant, or even unrecognizable, within the interpretative parameters of the culture of origin.⁸⁵ Recognizing this means that we can approach as relevant and valuable a broad range of works of art from different contexts;⁸⁶ it also allows us to see forms functioning as modern, without having to judge them against the ‘Euramerican modernist code’;⁸⁷ finally, ‘we are positioned to recognize and understand cultural transfer, but also for our

⁸³ Ibid., 9-10.

⁸⁴ John Clark, ‘Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art,’ in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 6.

interpretation not to be dominated by the codes of what is transferred.’⁸⁸ If we define modernity ‘as the ability to discriminate and mobilize new knowledge, [and] since “newness” is often equivalent to “other,”’⁸⁹ adopting forms or techniques that originate in otherness is a way of claiming modernity. Similarly, Sylvia Naef, in her essay ‘Peindre pour être moderne,’⁹⁰ has argued that painting was adopted in the Arab world as a way of being modern, as the form was in itself novel. Thus, while the adoption of painting in Egypt might be seen as derivative from a European vantage point, to Egyptians, it was seen as a way of mobilizing the newness of ‘otherness’ in the service of modernity.

The perspectives put forth by Clark and Mitter suggest that visual modernism lies in the details of making, exhibiting, discussing, viewing, and teaching art in the modern world, not in an *a priori* structure, a platonic notion of ‘authentic modernism’ that can be located only in Europe, or worse, cannot be located at all despite its implicit location in the West, to be exported and ‘applied’ elsewhere. Thus, to understand both modernism’s ubiquity and the particularities of its iterations, we must plot the details of its practice, for it is in them that we might locate visual modernism. If we approach modern art in Egypt in this way, addressing the historically contingent processes of making meaning through art, the idea that Egyptian modernism is simply a poorer imitation of European modernism becomes untenable.

5. The Nation

⁸⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁰ Sylvia Naef, ‘Peindre pour être moderne,’ in *La multiplication d’images en terre d’Islam*, ed. Bernard Heyberger and Sylvia Naef, (Würzburg: Ergon, 2003).

The subject of this dissertation is not only modern Egyptian art, but also its relationship to nationalism: according to the canonical account of the emergence of the fine arts in Egypt outlined above, the agency for the series of events that marked the establishment of an art movement in Egypt lies emphatically with a naturalized entity called the ‘nation’ that inspired artists to create artworks in its image. Indeed, as is clear from the outline of historical events presented above, the practice of modern art in Egypt emerged in tandem with the idea of Egypt as a nation, and we will see that artists participated in this discourse. Yet defining and locating this entity, both in its general characteristics and in its particular iterations (Egypt in this instance), has long posed a challenge to theorists.

Defining the nation presents particular challenges when it comes to postcolonial states, and here too, the question of belatedness, or derivativeness, rears its head. There is some consensus that nations are modern phenomena despite frequent claims by nationalists that they extend their roots back into the furthest recesses of time;⁹¹ yet how might we read nations comparatively as closely tied to the spread of modernity and imperialism without seeing them as derivative iterations of a European model? How do we understand a global phenomenon such as nationalism in all the richness of its local particularities?

I will begin this discussion of the modern nation with Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which has served as a touchstone in discussions about nations and nationalism since its publication in 1983.⁹² As a historian of South-East Asia, Anderson

⁹¹ See for example the classic studies of the nation and nationalism, Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 2006). I will discuss the latter in more detail shortly.

⁹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

has been central to debates about the nation and its manifestations in the postcolonial world. After outlining Anderson's theory, highlighting the ways in which it will prove useful for our purposes, I will address some of his most important critics in the field of postcolonial studies who bring our attention to the problematic aspects of thinking in terms of the nation as a global phenomenon. In particular, Partha Chatterjee, one of Anderson's most stringent critics, provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of collective identity formation, and will also inform our understanding of the nation. Finally, I will turn to the historian of Egypt, Timothy Mitchell, whose work, I suggest, provides a way out of the impasse of how to account for the nation and modernity as global phenomena in postcolonial contexts while retaining all of the local particularities of their specific iterations.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson proposes an answer to the thorny question of how to approach modernity and the nation from a comparative perspective, and it is precisely the possibility of comparing iterations of these phenomena in different parts of the world that makes Anderson's approach both powerful and problematic. In Anderson's definition, the nation must be understood as a broad cultural framework, a way of *thinking* identity, that emerged in the context of specific historical and material circumstances and with the help of specific technologies, rather than as a self-conscious political ideology. This framework is *imagined* 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.'⁹³ It is imagined as a *community* because, 'regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is

⁹³ Ibid., 6.

always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.’⁹⁴ The possibility for imagining this kind of community emerged, Anderson argues, with the advent of print which changed our way of viewing time: rather than the pre-modern time of our ancestors, which folded in and back on itself, allowing for past, present, and future to coexist in myth, symbol, and prefiguration, the possibility of shared time emerged, and time came to be collectively experienced as homogeneous and empty, ‘measured by clock and calendar.’⁹⁵ The modern idea of time must be understood by referring to two modern forms of imagining: the novel and the newspaper, which bind events together within a single timeline.⁹⁶

Anderson’s model has been shown to have some explanatory power with regard to the Egyptian nationalism that was advocated and internalized by artists and intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, not least in his emphasis on the *imagined* nature of the solidarity that binds the national community, masking real inequality and exploitation. Bearing this in mind will prove useful in addressing the attitude of middle and upper class artists towards the peasants and women who often appear in their work as symbols for the nation.⁹⁷ In addition to this, a number of authors have emphasized the role played by the printed press in the development of Egyptian nationalism.⁹⁸ Most importantly for our purposes, we will see that Mukhtar’s monument to the nation, *Egypt’s Awakening* (1920-28), was widely debated and reproduced in the country’s newspapers

⁹⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁸ See for example the afore-mentioned Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs* and *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*; Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

and magazines throughout the 1920s and beyond, and provides a compelling case study for the dynamics of collective identity formation through mass readership discussed by Anderson.

However, in the present case, and putting aside for the moment the special case presented by Mukhtar's public monuments, the object of study is not the press, but the visual arts, forms whose modes of consumption are vastly different from those that enter into play in *Imagined Communities*. In Egypt, the public for painting and small-scale sculpture was very limited during the first half of the twentieth century, and these art forms were consumed by small, elite, and often foreign audiences in the context of galleries, salons, or artists' studios. Given their low visibility, it is clear that painting and small-scale sculpture did not play a significant role in the formation of a collective Egyptian identity, and the mass consumption of media that lies at the heart of Anderson's theory tells us little about art's participation in national discourse. Indeed, the goal of this dissertation is not to address how the works of these artists contributed to a shared sense of national identity (even, as we will see, for Mukhtar's public monuments, although the question of their consumption will be raised where appropriate), but rather to look at what the context of an emerging national consciousness tells us about the practice and meaning of the fine arts in Egypt, and in turn, what visual art tells us about the kind of nation that was being imagined.

Anderson's model has been criticized for its claims to universal applicability and seen as the (well-intentioned) work of a Western scholar speaking from a place of cultural

authority unavailable to those outside the West.⁹⁹ Partha Chatterjee primarily takes issue with the presumed universalism of Anderson's model, especially the claim that the nation's creation 'was the spontaneous distillation of a complex "crossing" of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became "modular," capable of being transplanted.'¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Chatterjee argues that national identities in the postcolonial world, far from being modular, have been the site for the realization of cultural difference. Anti-colonial nationalists forged authentic national identities through a division of social practices in two realms: the material, or outside realm, and the spiritual, or inside realm. They asserted their dominion over the spiritual realm, 'an 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity.'¹⁰¹

Thus, while Anderson's theory puts a finger on some of the most important circumstances for the emergence of the nation, the idea that these are modular has its limits in the present case, as modularity implies the impossibility of the realization of difference. Following Chatterjee, I suggest instead that every iteration of modern art is different, both in its practice and in its meanings, and we will see that the process of imagining the Egyptian nation was indeed deeply entrenched in specific local circumstances and drew on a specifically Egyptian cultural heritage and history.

⁹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, 'Anderson's Utopia,' in *Grounds of Comparison: Around the work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Jonathan D. Culler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 128-135; see also Homi Bhabha's critique of the homogenous, empty time of Anderson's nation in 'DissemiNation,' *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 199-244.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-13.

While Chatterjee's emphasis on the particularity of instances of nationalism in different parts of the world contributes an essential piece of the puzzle in our understanding of representations of the nation in modern Egyptian art, his approach also poses problems. As Harry Harootunian has aptly explained, by separating colonial and postcolonial societies into two domains and attempting to create an alternative modernity to that of the West, Chatterjee, entrenches 'the very binary that current postcolonial discourse seeks to overcome,'¹⁰² that between the West, always imagined as modern, and the 'non-West,' always imagined as pre-modern. He thus fails to account for the constructed nature of these categories, and for the dynamic connections between the two.

Indeed, what Chatterjee disavows is the necessity of a comparative method for the study of modern history: as Harootunian has noted, imperialism and the spread of capitalism have forced 'the peoples of the world outside of Euro-America (...) to live lives *comparatively*.'¹⁰³ Indeed, the title of this dissertation, *Nationalism and the Birth of Modern Art in Egypt*, posits the possibility, even the necessity, of comparison across cultural boundaries: nationalism implies an affiliation to the nation as an entity recognizable to us because we have encountered it elsewhere; the 'birth of modern art' implies, on one hand, the recognition of the category 'modern art,' also encountered elsewhere, and on the other hand, a point of origin in a specific place: indeed, while

¹⁰² Harootunian further notes that 'the world envisaged by postcolonial discourse, inhabiting a moment that is chronologically after colonialism, seems committed to preserving a prior time by trying to rescue "imagination" and the claims of an inner, spiritual life that were exempted from the corrosive effects of (colonially inspired) nationalism and modern capitalism. This strategy, as a result, seems bent on escaping the performative present for an authentic and indeterminate past.' Harry Harootunian, 'Ghostly Comparisons,' in *Grounds of Comparison: Around the work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Jonathan D. Culler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 141-142.

¹⁰³ Harry Harootunian, 'Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem,' *Boundary 2*, 32:2 (2005): 26. This point is also argued by Benedict Anderson in *The Specter of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

‘modern art’ as such was not born in Egypt, I suggest that a specific instance of art that can be read as fully modern, and recognizable to those creating and looking at it as such, did in fact emerge in the Egyptian context.

Thus, by using global categories such as ‘nationalism’ and ‘modern art’ to address the production of sculpture and easel painting in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, I am indeed suggesting that these practices must be understood, at least in part, within a framework that extends beyond Egypt. This is the case for a number of reasons that are in part the concrete historical manifestations of the global spread of modernity: first, Egyptian artists and intellectuals understood themselves as part of the wider world. They were the inhabitants of what Partha Mitter has termed, in the Indian context, ‘hybrid cosmopolises.’ They were well traveled and well read, and frequently turned to outside sources for inspiration in thinking about the issues facing Egypt in the twentieth century, including the definition of Egyptian national identity; second, the institutions that inaugurated the practice of the fine arts in Egypt were based on European models, and staffed by European teachers; and last, Egyptian artists were heavily involved in the twin projects of modernization and nationalization, and saw the adoption of a European-inspired practice of the fine arts as part of these processes.¹⁰⁴ Thus, that the vocation of this dissertation is necessarily in part that of comparability is clear.

However, beyond the question of comparability, and the modularity and/or difference between nations, lies the question of difference within the nation itself. Indeed,

¹⁰⁴ This point is convincingly argued by Naef in her afore-mentioned article, ‘Peindre pour être moderne,’ in *La multiplication d’images en terre d’Islam*, (2003).

Chatterjee's alternative modernities, intent as they are on emphasizing difference *between* nations, fail to adequately address the question of difference *within* the nation. This question is touched on in Anderson's assertion that the nation is an *imagined* community, i.e., that the cohesiveness that it promises exists only in the imagination of its members. However, the process of imagining in Anderson's view is a potent one that fundamentally changes the way that the individual relates to the collectivity, and the imagined community, as the defining framework with which its members identify, goes a long way towards glossing over difference within its ranks.

I suggest that a compelling alternative to Anderson's modularity and to Chatterjee's alternative modernities is to be found in Timothy Mitchell's *Rule of Experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (2002), which seeks to locate the workings of modernity in Egypt in its concrete details, and in doing so, provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the nation imagined as a cohesive and homogenous whole, and the existence of difference within its borders.¹⁰⁵

The essay 'Heritage and Violence' explores the complexities of dealing with otherness in the process of making the nation: the preservation of an 'authentic' heritage and the invention of tradition that allow for the nation to be imagined as an ancient, homogenous

¹⁰⁵ This collection of essays addresses 'how one might understand the working of [modernity, science, and technology] in a way that avoids lending to any one of them a logic, energy, and coherence it did not have (...), without attributing to them an internal rationality, an element of sameness, or an inherent power that is then given credit for what happened.' Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 14. Indeed, Mitchell's most powerful contributions to an understanding of modernity lie in his rich evocation of the details of the everyday in essays such as his 'Can the Mosquito Speak?' in which he traces the non-human agency of the malaria-bearing gambiae mosquito in Egypt during the Second World War in developments in war, disease, and agriculture. (Ibid., 18-51).

entity are always confronted with the otherness, or difference, that is present within the nation's borders.¹⁰⁶ An apt illustration of this can be found in the series of events that surrounded the New Gurna project in the 1940s. In 1945, the architect Hassan Fathy was commissioned by the Antiquities Department of the Egyptian government to design a village in which to relocate the inhabitants of the village of Gurna whose presence in the Theban Necropolis was seen as detrimental to that heritage.¹⁰⁷ The commission revolved around two parallel process of inventing a heritage for the nation. First, the Theban necropolis was imagined as an authentic and pure remnant of an ancient time, untouched by more recent history. To present it as such, the peasants, who had long occupied the site, had to be removed. Second, the new village of Gurna, dreamed up by Fathy, was to be an example of a new, yet 'authentic,' Egyptian vernacular architecture that would allow the peasants both to live as the repository of the nation's 'authenticity,' and to realize their full potential as unproblematic modern subjects.¹⁰⁸

New Gurna was intended to become a prototype for the development of an Egyptian style of architecture and public housing. However, due to resistance on the part of the villagers, the project ultimately failed: in 1948, with only a fifth of the village built, it was abandoned after men from families from old Gurna cut the dike that protected the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 177-206.

¹⁰⁷ The story of Hassan Fathy's model village is recounted in great detail in Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 177-206.

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, Fathy was unable to find a model for this 'authentic' style anywhere. As Mitchell has observed, the architect came to the conclusion that 'the idyllic countryside of his imagination existed nowhere.' (192). He finally settled on the Nubian village of Gharb Aswan, a choice whose irony Mitchell points out: Fathy's supposedly authentic and traditional Egyptian vernacular architecture took as a model that of a population who did not share a language or culture with most Egyptians (193). Fathy's project was based on a pre-conceived idea of what constituted 'authentic' peasant life, one that was compatible with the goals of heritage preservation pursued by the authorities who had hired him, and with his own ideal of a practical vernacular architecture.

new village from irrigation water. Fathy had not counted on resistance to his project on the part of villagers who had no desire to be relocated. Here, in a project aimed simultaneously at preserving the Theban Necropolis and at creating a vernacular style of rural architecture, two processes whose goal was to create a heritage for the Egyptian nation, the architect and the authorities ran up against the incommensurability of the villagers' lived reality with the unproblematic nation that they had imagined.

In the story of New Gurna, two kinds of narrative of the nation are in play: the first is the story of its cohesiveness, which takes into account the nation's symbols, its representations, and the emergence of a national consciousness, in the case described above, the ancient history of Egypt as found in the Theban Necropolis, and the architect's ideal of rural life embodied in the plans for the new village; the second is the story of the sometimes violent confrontation with difference inherent in the process of creating an image of a coherent nation.

To distinguish between the two levels described above, Mitchell borrows terms coined by Homi Bhabha. In Bhabha's definition, the *pedagogical* is the shared knowledge and history of the community; the *performative*, which must be understood here in the sense of process rather than in the sense of enactment, is the site of the agency of the people as they participate in defining the nation.¹⁰⁹ Bhabha challenges Anderson's definition of the temporality of modernity, using the term *narration* rather than *imagination* to emphasize the idea of *process* in the making of the nation, and in doing so, strives to retrieve the

¹⁰⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 199-244.

lived time of the people against Anderson's imagined time.¹¹⁰ According to him, the modularity of explanatory models for the nation put forth by Anderson and other theoreticians of modernity fails to account for 'the representation of the nation as a temporal process.'¹¹¹ The idea of process as central to an understanding of national identity is very useful here: identity and difference do not have to be understood as static to be taken seriously into account.¹¹² Indeed, Bhabha locates national identity in the iterative quality of the constant definition and redefinition of the community, thereby bypassing the problem of perceived modularity, as iterations are always new and always different.

Mitchell redefines Bhabha's performativity as 'the political process... [of] making the nation,'¹¹³ and the pedagogical as 'the history of nationalism, as it is conventionally written.'¹¹⁴ What is particularly important for our purposes is that while 'both pedagogy and performance involve the making of meaning (...), what is different about making the nation is that it always involves the question of otherness.'¹¹⁵ In other words, as explained above, while the pedagogical narrative of the nation presents it as a homogenous entity,

¹¹⁰ The issues with post-colonialist theory described by Harootunian are also present in Bhabha's essay. Indeed, despite the author's claim to retrieve a temporal dimension in the process of nation formation, 'DissemiNation' is temporally indeterminate and purposefully vague on the matter of the historical specificities of the emergence of the nation. It seems clear that the purpose of this indeterminacy is to avoid placing the nation within the all too familiar teleological structure of the development of modernity. However, Harootunian has argued that Bhabha, by refusing to fully acknowledge the particular historical processes at work in each specific iteration of the nation, and thus fixing non-Western societies in an eternal present, fails to undermine the very binary that the teleological structure he condemns is based on. (Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 50-51.)

¹¹¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 204.

¹¹² Indeed, it is the static nature of Chatterjee 'alternative modernities' that poses problem here.

¹¹³ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 182.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 182.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 183.

the performative refers to the process of constituting a national identity through the negotiation of *difference* within the nation.

The distinction between the performative and the pedagogical perfectly maps the two levels on which the story of the nation in Egyptian art is traced throughout this dissertation: we might think of the pedagogical as the canon of modern Egyptian art as it was established throughout the twentieth century, as that which is available to us through the historiography and museums in the twenty-first century; the performative refers to events, historical and art historical, as they played out in real time. These events are unattainable in all of their complexity, but being aware of the received pedagogy of modern Egyptian art, and thinking about its historical conditions and the reasons for its emergence, allows us to begin to grasp something of the processes of making the nation and making art in early twentieth century Egypt.

Furthermore, distinguishing between these two levels of narration will enable us, for example, to understand why the Egyptian peasant was often depicted as a symbol for the nation, when in fact, as demonstrated above in relation to Hassan Fathy's New Gurna project, the peasant's otherness was a frequent obstacle in the process of making the nation. We might also understand the heavy presence of foreigners in the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the twentieth century and their subsequent writing out of the story in these terms: the received pedagogy negates the lack of homogeneity and cohesiveness that was an important part of the emergence of the fine arts in Egypt.

Thus, understanding the constitution of a national narrative as a double movement comprised of the pedagogical and the performative allows us to account for, and benefit from, the existence of an available canon, rather than dismissing it as a ‘false’ account of history. Indeed, an analysis of the meaning implicit in the pedagogical version of events at a particular juncture in history tells us much, both about events as they played out, and about the moment of writing. In other words, looking closely at what is being said often reveals something of what is being left out.

In following Mitchell’s detailed analysis of the historical process of making the nation, I attempt to retrieve a history of the emergence of modern art in Egypt and its relationship to national identity that is different from the standard account, which has tended to see in artists’ work the unequivocal expression of a unified nationalist discourse. In the canonical story of modern Egyptian art enshrined in the museum and the historiography, the relationship between art and artists, on one hand, and nationalism, on the other, has made defining, representing, and celebrating the Egyptian nation the sole *raison d’être* for the visual arts in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century. The nation defined through this narrative, and discernable in instances of visual art, is one that relies heavily on Pharaonicism, the peasant, and Woman as symbols for an ancient, authentic, and virtuous nation. As we shall see, the ingredients that went into ‘modern’ ‘Egyptian’ art were in fact far more varied and complex: alongside the Pharaonic, the presence of the modern European; alongside the ‘timeless’ peasant, a changing social landscape determined by historical, economic, and political factors; alongside the virtuous Woman, changing customs and family structures. Throughout this dissertation, my goal has been

to retrieve these more complex aspects of the nation's narration, using as a starting point the received pedagogy of the national narrative.

III. Method and Outline of Chapters

It should be clear by now that my goal in structuring this dissertation around the work and lives of the four most important artists of the canon of early modern Egyptian art is to revise the received pedagogy and to retrieve something of the processes involved in the emergence of modern art in Egypt, using as a starting point its history as it is available now, in the twenty-first century. My project is thus a revisionist one: by looking in depth at these four artists, I begin the work of complicating our reading of them and re-contextualizing them, so as to open up what has thus far been a narrow field of vision.

This choice is in part a methodological one: the presence of Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa'id in the historiography provides a starting point to begin to untangle the complicated picture of the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the twentieth century. Of all the artists operating during that period, theirs are the traces that are still possible to pick up at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many of the artists who were mentioned in the scarce press coverage from the first half of the twentieth century have since disappeared from the literature.

Mukhtar, as a sculptor, is the clear outlier here. However, following the logic laid out above, his inclusion becomes self-evident: the Egyptian historiography and state museums that I consulted in determining what constitutes the canon of modern Egyptian art make no fundamental distinction between Mukhtar and his painter colleagues. They

are all equal members of the ‘pioneer’ generation. In addition to this, as I have mentioned earlier, Mukhtar’s work, because of its high-profile public nature, brought the practice of the fine arts into the public eye. Any revision of the canon of early modern Egyptian art would be incomplete without a discussion of his life and work.

In addition to this, the iconography that Mukhtar embraced to represent the Egyptian nation can easily be read alongside that embraced by ‘Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa‘id. These artists’ works were consumed in very different ways: Mukhtar’s could be seen in public spaces surrounded by crowds, and reproduced in the press, while the painters’ were viewed in small galleries or in private studios for an elite public comprised of other artists and collectors. But despite the differences in how they were put on view, the four artists all engaged with the idea of the nation at specific moments in history, and it is how they did this, and how their works embodied conflicting notions of the larger polity of Egypt (whether or not this polity was aware of the existence of their work or saw it), that will be my main focus.

The material upon which this argument is based has been unearthed during a series of extended research trips to Egypt, as well as shorter stays in Paris and Cyprus. The collections of artists, collectors, and gallery owners have yielded a large amount of artworks, papers, and rarely available secondary material, as well as insights into the operation of the Egyptian art world, such as it was, in the first half of the twentieth century. The sources yielded by this process have enriched each of the four chapters that follow. For Chapters 1 and 3, respectively on Mukhtar and Nagi, I was generously given

access to rich collections of personal papers: for the first, photographic material belonging to Emad Abu Ghazi of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture; for Chapter 3, an archive made up of personal writings, letters, and photographs, belonging to the artist ‘Esmat Daoustashi in Alexandria and inherited from Muhammad Nagi’s sister, ‘Effat; and a collection of material from Nagi’s life in Cyprus from about 1940 until his death in 1956 collected by Valentinos Charamboulos in Limassol, Cyprus. For chapters 2 and 4 respectively on ‘Ayyad and Sa‘id, primary sources were harder to come by, but a number of important secondary sources, both in Arabic and in French, together with a wealth of contextual material drawn from studies of Egyptian history, politics, as well as contemporaneous literature, allow us to reconstruct the initial significance of various phases of each artist’s work.

Throughout, I have used the press from the period wherever possible. As we have seen, the coverage of the fine arts in the press was limited, a fact that is, in itself, significant. However, a survey of publications available to me in both Arabic and French has yielded significant results. For the Arabic press, I have relied on the collections available at the University of Oxford’s Middle East Centre, as well as on the collection generously put at my disposal by Walter Armbrust and Lucie Ryzova in Cairo. For the French press, I have relied on the collection put together by the Centre d’études alexandrines available online.¹¹⁶ The Francophone press has been particularly useful with regard to Sa‘id and his Alexandrian contemporaries.

¹¹⁶ Centre d’études alexandrines,
http://www.cealex.org/sitecealex/navigation/FENETR_NAVressources_F.htm

In addition to the press, I have found it useful at times to refer to contemporaneous works of Egyptian literature. The artists who constitute the subject of this dissertation did not live and work in isolation: they were part of a wider society, and the issues and themes addressed in their work were the object of widespread debate among Egyptian intellectuals. In looking at the ways in which individuals marked by class, gender, religion, language, and geography grapple with the idea of the Egyptian nation, comparisons with literature often prove to be enlightening. I am not suggesting, of course, that a novel and an oil painting, for example, are comparable in every way, as they differ significantly, particularly in terms of their potential audience and the question of how they might relate to the idea of a national community. But we will have much to learn, I argue, from a consideration of the shared interest of artists and writers in the nation and its embodiment in the figures of the peasant, the woman, and references to ancient Egypt.

Each of the four major figures of early modern Egyptian art, Mukhtar, ‘Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa‘id, is treated in depth in a full chapter. Through the use of primary sources wherever possible, and in depth analysis of their works, I highlight the complicated positions occupied by these artists in relation to the development of the modern nation. I show the extent to which national identity and modernity are complex and fluctuating structures within which no simple position is possible, and that this is as true for these artists whose work has been enshrined by nationalist historiography as it is for other artists, be they European or Egyptian, who worked side by side with them in Egypt. I argue throughout that while the work and lives of the ‘pioneers’ have most often been understood in terms

of a certain received idea – a pedagogy in Bhabha’s terms - of the Egyptian nation, a richer and more nuanced picture emerges if we attempt to retrieve something of the processes of making the nation and making art as they took place.

As gendered and classed individuals, each of the four artists to whom I have devoted a chapter had his own way of imagining, narrating, and performing the nation and his relationship to it. In Chapter 1, I look at the work of the sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar, often seen as the most unequivocally nationalist artist of the first generation of Egyptian artists. While his work was, in many ways, in line with the secular nationalism of the 1920s, using the Pharaonic, the rural, and the woman as symbols for the nation, I argue that his sculptures, in particular his monuments to the nation, are also revelatory of the complex political and social circumstances in which they were created. In particular, Mukhtar’s depictions of women must be understood within the context of changing gender roles.

In Chapter 2, I look at another early graduate from the School of Fine Arts, Ragheb ‘Ayyad. I argue that his commitment to depicting the nation must be understood in light of his own delicate relationship, as a member of the Coptic Christian community, to the nation. His work must be understood within the context of the changing relationship of the Coptic minority to the Muslim majority and to the idea of the nation between 1930 and the revolution of 1952. Indeed, throughout his career, he used images of the peasant, one of the nation’s most prominent and problematic others, to emphasize the unity of the nation, or at times, the difference within it other than his own, in order to firmly align himself with the nation.

In Chapter 3, I turn away from the context of Cairo, where the two first artists were based, and towards the more cosmopolitan Alexandria. The painter Muhammad Nagi, who spent time in Egypt, France, Brazil, Ethiopia, and Cyprus, and was the son of a rural landowner, further complicates the picture. As a member of a landowning family, Nagi had to deal with the peasantry in concrete ways, and this had an impact on his representation of them. While ‘Ayyad used depictions of the peasant to create images of an unproblematic collectivity, Nagi’s depictions of the peasants reveal the hierarchy that structured his relationship with them. I argue that Nagi’s complicated relationship to parameters of individual and collective identity is woven into the very fabric of his paintings.

In Chapter 4, I delve more deeply into the cosmopolitanism of early twentieth century Alexandria, as I look at the work of the painter Mahmud Sa‘id. I argue that Sa‘id’s careful and slow elaboration of compositions in oil, and the monumental, timeless, and mystical sheen that he gave his depictions of the Egyptian nation can be understood only within the context of his aristocratic and cosmopolitan Alexandrian milieu. Indeed, Sa‘id’s Egypt is very different from that of ‘Ayyad, for example, and I suggest that a desire to capture something permanent and universal is present in Sa‘id’s painting.

Looking first at the cases of the Cairenes Mukhtar and ‘Ayyad, then at those of the Alexandrians Nagi and Sa‘id, allows us to begin to explore the complexity inherent in definitions of the nation and of nationalism. The first two seem to present fairly

straightforward cases of Egyptian identity, yet we will see that the images they created functioned in more complex ways than is often assumed. The latter two were embedded in cosmopolitan milieus that impacted their negotiation of national identity. When we look closely at the work of these four very different artists, the simplistic reading according to which they are the perfect representatives of a generation that pioneered not only modern visual arts in Egypt, but also representations of the nation, begins to fall apart.

Chapter 1: Mahmud Mukhtar (1891-1934)

The occasion of the unveiling in 1928 of Mahmud Mukhtar's public monument, *Nahdat Misr* (*Egypt's Awakening*; fig.6 and 16), was described in the Egyptian press as a grand affair:

At half past six in the evening last Sunday, May 20, 1928, thousands upon thousands of people gathered in front of the Cairo train station, invited there by the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works, some of these thousands coming from all corners of Egypt to watch together as the veil was lifted from the statue Egypt's Awakening (...) and there, people were not simply individuals, for all their souls gathered together as one soul, the eternal, immortal soul of Egypt, and these thousands had not several hearts, but one single heart, the heart of Egypt beating proudly with the glory of the past and faith in the greatness of the future.¹¹⁷

Crowds gathered from all over Egypt, watching with bated breath as the curtain was lifted, bursting into applause as the statue was revealed: a peasant woman (*fallaha*), standing tall and proud, gazing into the future, her right hand resting on the head of the sphinx that lies by her side, lifting the veil from her face as the sphinx, an allegory for ancient Egyptian civilisation, lifts its head and torso, awakening from a long slumber. As the crowds gazed at this grand allegory that tied modern and ancient Egypt together in the hope of one great future, 'all their souls gathered together as one soul, the eternal, immortal soul of Egypt.'

It is a superb image: Egyptians from the North and South, old and young, rich and poor, male and female, their souls melting into one as the first public monument sculpted by an Egyptian, illustrating Egypt coming back to life after a long slumber, is unveiled in one

¹¹⁷ Anon., *As-siyasa al-usbu'iyya*, May 22, 1928, reprinted in Badr ad-Din Abu Ghazi, *Al-Maththal Mukhtar* (Cairo: Ad-Dar al-qawmiyya li t-tiba'a wa an-nashr, 1964), 105. According to Abu Ghazi, the piece was known to have been written by the important intellectual, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, the author of the novel *Zainab* which will be discussed later in this chapter. A compilation of articles from the press and poems that exemplify the rhetoric surrounding the event can be found in Abu Ghazi, 105-139.

of Cairo's main squares. The event was hailed in the press, and continues to be hailed in the historiography, as a manifestation of the unity of the Egyptian nation, a unity that was embodied in the statue itself.¹¹⁸

Yet while we know little about the social and geographical composition of the crowd present at the unveiling, we do know that women were barred from attending, with the exception of a few female members of the press.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, while coverage was mostly positive, the press was not entirely unanimous in its support of the monument, and the double allegorical figure caused some confusion as to its actual meaning for a public unused to public statuary in the urban space, leaving some wondering which of the two figures was meant to be Egypt.¹²⁰ In addition to this, from the time that the idea of turning Mukhtar's design into a public monument emerged in 1920 until its unveiling in 1928, the road had been long: the statue's erection had cost a great deal of public money, its construction had been halted several times for financial and political reasons, and the reading public had been made aware through the printed press of the debates and conflicts surrounding the project.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

¹¹⁹ Daisy Griggs Philips, 'The Awakening of Egypt's Womanhood,' *The Muslim World*, October 1928, 402-408. The author of this article tells us that it was in accordance with the wishes of King Fu'ad that there were no women at the ceremony; an account of the unveiling ceremony opens Beth Baron's *Egypt as a Woman : Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1-2. Baron explores the reasons for which women came to be the dominant symbol for the Egyptian nation in the course of the first decades of the twentieth century, and the relationship of this symbolism to the politics of women nationalists. She shows how nationalism mobilized familial rhetoric to create a sense of solidarity. This rhetoric insists on women's role as mothers, producing the nation and embodying its honour.

¹²⁰ Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 227-233.

For the most part, descriptions in the press, such as the one cited above, insisted on the national significance of the monument and of events surrounding its inception. While their words might seem simplistic, it is not enough simply to dismiss them as nationalist rhetoric. There were complex issues at play in the event and in its narration, and the rhetoric surrounding them stemmed from these. As explained in the Introduction, the image of a cohesive nation often reveals something of the divisions inherent in the process of the making of the nation, and we will see that these divisions appear in events surrounding the statue, as well as in the structure of the monument itself.

Before examining these issues further, it will be useful to consider the conventional account of Mukhtar's career, an account that tends to highlight the sculptor's nationalist credentials. Mukhtar was the son of the *'umda*, or village chief, of Tanbara, a town in the Western Egyptian Delta.¹²¹ He was born in 1891 of his father's second wife, and his parents separated when he was still a child. When Mukhtar was eleven, he went to live in Cairo with his mother and sisters, where he would attend the newly founded Cairo School of Fine Arts from 1908. The story goes that upon hearing about the founding of the School, the young Mukhtar marched right up to the first person he found there, who turned out to be its founder and first sculpture teacher, the Frenchman Guillaume Laplagne, asking to be admitted.¹²² Whether or not there is any truth in this story, it establishes the basis for the inextricable link that unites Mukhtar to the School in the historiography, a link that is one of the founding myths of modern Egyptian art.

¹²¹ Emad Abu Ghazi, *Min arshif Mukhtar*, an unpublished summary of the content of the Mukhtar archive, courtesy of the author.

¹²² Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 15. See also Muhammad Sidqi Al-Gabakhangī's account of the founding of the school in *Tarikh al- Haraka al-Faniyya fi Misr ila 'am 1945* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1986), 11-14.

Nationalist historiography of the second half of the twentieth century has made of Mukhtar a quintessentially Egyptian artist whose gift flowered spontaneously in his natural village surroundings, nurtured by his Egyptian environment, then burst forth on the national and international scene.¹²³ This image was partly of his own making: he referred to himself as a 'simple, unknown peasant's son,'¹²⁴ and in the press at the time, he was called a *fallah*, or peasant.¹²⁵ Here is one recent version of the myth in the words of the author Liliane Karnouk:

(Mukhtar) was a precocious child who displayed an early talent for modelling forms out of mud imbued with Nile water, or clay, dried in the hot sun, and baked in bread ovens. The forms he created enacted ancient folk tales. They were named after heroes like Antar and Diaz, and Abu Zayd al-Hilali, whose epics were sung by the village storytellers (...). The idealism and the earlier love for the heroic epics of Egyptian-Arab folklore were welded together by the torch of political nationalism (...). Mukhtar's life work reflected Egypt, and the Egyptian people identified a collective destiny in Mukhtar's sculptures.¹²⁶

In this passage, Karnouk portrays an authentically Egyptian sculptor who hails from the countryside and who, taking the natural goodness of the land - and specifically, the water of the Nile - turns it into something more. The inspiration provided by the nation enabled him to fulfil his promise. He is a great man, in whom the masses recognize their identity, seeing in him an embodiment of their 'collective destiny'.

¹²³ See for example, Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*; Abu Ghazi, *Al-Maththal Mukhtar*; Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al-Haraka al-Fanniyya fi Misr*.

¹²⁴ Badr ad-Din Abu Ghazi, *Mukhtar* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab 1988), 33 ; Kirsten Scheid in her article 'What We Do Not Know. Questions for a Study of Contemporary Arab Art' in *ISIM Review: Arts, Culture, Place* (Autumn 2008), 14, warns us about the danger of taking such narratives at face-value: 'An inclination to promote oneself as distinctive ("the first artist") or to relate to validating models (the tortured, the misunderstood, or the visionary artist), is easily and often taken to represent actual conditions of production in the past rather than previous strategies for laying claim to institutional support and social influence.'

¹²⁵ Ramsis Wissa Wassef, 'Mahmud Mukhtar wa al-nahda al-fanniyya fi misr,' *Al-Akhbar*, May 2, 1920. reprinted in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 96.

¹²⁶ Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 15.

Another example of a story about Mukhtar's early days as a sculptor is that told by the author Al-Gabakhangī: on the occasion of the funeral of the Egyptian Nationalist leader, Mustafa Kamil, the students from the School of Fine Arts descended into the street alongside people from all walks of life to commemorate the leader. The crowd carried a bust of Kamil sculpted by Mukhtar.¹²⁷ The fact that Kamil died on 10 January 1908, and that the School did not open its doors until 13 May of the same year, does not seem to dampen the author's enthusiasm.¹²⁸ In addition to this, Al-Gabakhangī sees no problem in the idea that Mukhtar could have sculpted a bust before ever having had access to lessons. It is of course conceivable that the sculptor was taught privately, as were his Alexandrian compatriots the painters Muhammad Nagi and Mahmud Sa'id, but the nationalist narrative, which places the School at the centre of the development of modern art, does not factor in this possibility. Al-Gabakhangī's tale foreshadows Karnouk's 'collective destiny' embodied in Mukhtar: people from all social classes gather together behind the representation of one great man by another. By associating the art school with the great national event that was Kamil's funeral procession, Al-Gabakhangī confers a nationalist cachet on the School.

Cracks quickly begin to appear in the nationalist story when we look more closely at Mukhtar's career. Not least, the image of him as the quintessential Egyptian artist must be examined in light of his close ties to France. After graduating from the Cairo School

¹²⁷ Al-Gabakhangī, *Tarikh al-Haraka al-Fanniyya fi Misr*, 17.

¹²⁸ On the importance of Mustafa Kamil's funeral as a site for national commemoration, see Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2004), 'Part II : Death and Memory Commemorating the National Heroes Mustafa Kamil and Muhammad Farid.'

of Fine Arts in 1911, Mukhtar was sent to Paris on a private scholarship from the founder of the school, the Prince Yusuf Kamal. There, he studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts under Jules-Félix Coutan (1848-1939).¹²⁹ Mukhtar himself told of how he was inducted into the Beaux-Arts by his fellow students who stripped him of his clothes and carried him on a throne from the school to the Café Bonaparte bearing a sign that read 'Ramses II.'¹³⁰ Shortly after Mukhtar finished his studies in Paris in the summer of 1914, the First World War broke out. He spent the war years in Paris, eking out a meagre living in a munitions factory until taking over from his erstwhile teacher Guillaume Laplagne as the head sculptor at the Grévin wax museum in 1918.¹³¹

Mukhtar's career was made in 1920 when a small version of what would become the monumental *Egypt's Awakening* attracted the attention of the French press and, more importantly, of Egyptian expatriates residing in Paris. From them, word of the statue reached the press in Egypt. Both the Egyptian and French press (although, as we will see, his presence was significantly less marked in the latter) rapidly cast Mukhtar in the role

¹²⁹ Mahmud Mukhtar, 'Wusul al-maththal,' printed in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 47.

¹³⁰ Mukhtar, 'Talib al-funun al-gamila,' printed in Abu Ghazi, 50-51. The story Mukhtar told of the hazing ceremony he underwent at the Beaux-Arts in Paris is also recounted in Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian art*, 18 and cited in Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 225. It is the translation found in the latter that I cite here: 'I had to go through the experience of being a new student at the Beaux-Arts. I was stripped stark naked and tied to a chair. I was crowned with a pharaoh's crown made of paper and given the title of Rameses II. I was then carried all around the streets of Paris until we reached the Café Bonaparte while the passers-by just looked at us and smiled. They deposited me on a sofa, still naked as ever, and called for food and drink.' Colla astutely points out that 'Pharaonicism was literally thrust upon him almost as soon as he arrived in Paris.'

¹³¹ Musée Grévin, Paris, *Délibérations du conseil d'administration, 1907-1931*, v.3, entry from 13 December 1918: 'Aux ateliers, Mr Mouktar, sculpteur remplace M. Laplagne appelé à diriger une mission cinématographique en Syrie. Le travail se poursuit aux mêmes conditions que précédemment, c'est-à-dire à raison de 300 frs ou 450 Frs pour le modelage de chaque figure suivant la difficulté du travail. C'est ainsi que l'effigie du Président Wilson qui était très critiquée a été refaite par M. Mouktar et qu'il est en train de refaire celle de Clémenceau.'

of national sculptor, and from that moment, every story told about him acquired an aura of ‘national destiny.’

We can sense here one of the central issues of the emergence of modern Egyptian art as a means for defining the nation: Mukhtar was to become one of the most prominent figures in the national canon of modern art, yet he spent a large part of his career in France. In addition to this, as we shall see when we come to look at his work in more depth, his sculptures are indebted to the French context within which he studied, worked, and exhibited. I will return shortly to look at some of the possible sources for *Egypt’s Awakening*.

Despite the importance of French sources for Mukhtar’s work, we would miss much of its meaning if we stopped there. As Partha Mitter and John Clark have argued in relation to modern art in India and East Asia respectively, while the forms and techniques used by modern artists in other parts of the world often found their sources in Europe, they acquired radically different meanings in their new contexts. Indeed, the very fact of the newness of European forms in the Egyptian context embodied the modernity to which Egyptian nationalists aspired. With *Egypt’s Awakening* for example, Mukhtar rooted this modernity in an ancient local history, producing new and complex meanings. In addition to this, the symbolism he used reveals something of the specific challenges faced by Egypt in the process of imagining a cohesive nation.

To fully understand what is at stake in Mukhtar's representations of the nation, and how the divisions and difference in Egyptian society were masked in his definitions of national unity, I will focus on sculptures produced at three moments in his career, beginning with his graduation from the Cairo School of Fine Arts in 1911, followed by a more in depth look at the 1920s and the context in which he created *Egypt's Awakening* and other works embracing female and rural symbolism, and finishing with his monuments to the leader of the Wafd, Sa'd Zaghlul, in the 1930s. For 1911, I will show that while it is tempting to read the sculpture he created at his graduation, *Ibn al-Balad* (fig. 17a-17b), in terms of national definitions, it has more to do with issues of social hierarchy than national identity. For the 1920s, I will show that while *Egypt's Awakening* was heralded as an image of a unified nation, the disjunction that marks its inception is registered in the structure of the statue itself. For the third moment, I will turn to Mukhtar's final project in the 1930s, two monuments to Sa'd Zaghlul (fig. 7-8). I will show that the story of the statues created in honour of the leader of the Wafd, as well as the statues themselves, display something the lack of consensus surrounding the party in the 1930s, as well as some of the social issues at stake in the events of 1919 that they celebrate.

At the first exhibition by graduates of the Cairo School of Fine Arts in January 1911, Mukhtar exhibited a piece titled *Ibn al-Balad* (literally, 'son of the town' or 'son of the country,' fig. 17a and 17b). In keeping with an interpretation of events surrounding the founding of the School of Fine Arts as closely related to national sentiment, the figure has

been interpreted in the historiography as the sign of a nascent nationalism.¹³² Indeed, it has been noted that the idiom of the *ibn al-balad*, characterized by his loyalty, his sarcastic sense of humour, his popular wisdom, his simplicity, and his honesty, has long occupied a special place in the Egyptian imagination and often appears in fiction, art, and film, both as the butt of jokes and the object of a certain fondness.¹³³

However, the term *ibn al-balad* has a long history, and its meaning has shifted over time with changes in the social composition and distribution of power in Egyptian cities.¹³⁴ In Egypt, contact with foreigners, especially the Turks, the British, and members of other large European minorities, played out in urban settings, and the idea of Egyptian national identity was brought into relief through contact with non-Egyptians. Sawsan El-Messiri shows that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term *ibn al-balad* referred to urban Egyptians as opposed to the Turkish ruling class, and included Egyptians in positions of power, such as the *'ulama*, or religious scholars. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, due to the increased power of Europeans in Egyptian society, and to the emergence of an Egyptian class of bureaucrats, the *effendiyya*, who aspired to modernization and Westernization, the term *awlad al-balad* (the plural form) came to encompass only the most disempowered urban Egyptians, the 'local traditional

¹³² Al-Gabakhangī, *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya fi Misr*, 16-17.

¹³³ We will come across the *Ibn al-balad*'s female counterpart, the *bint al-balad*, in the work of the painter Mahmud Sa'īd in Chapter 4. For descriptions of various instances of this idiom in popular culture, see Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). *Ibn al-balad* is also one of the central concepts in Marilyn Booth's *Bayram al-Tunisi's Egypt: Social Criticism and Narrative Strategies* (Oxford: Middle East Centre, 1990). Other publications that address the concept of the *awlad al-balad* take it at face-value as a sociological category. See for example, Evelyn A. Early, *Baladi Women of Cairo: Playing with an egg and a Stone* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), or Gary S. Gregg, *The Middle East: a Cultural Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 202-203. This type of approach is not relevant for my purposes here.

¹³⁴ For a history of the term, see Sawsan El-Messiri, *Ibn al-Balad: a concept of Egyptian identity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 9-36.

merchants, craftsmen and the masses of the Cairene lower classes,¹³⁵ as opposed to the *effendiyya*.¹³⁶ The term *ibn al-balad* thus acquired negative connotations as it came to refer to those at the bottom of Egypt's social ladder.

The term, then, could mean two rather different things at the time that Mukhtar created his statuette: either the Egyptian, as opposed to the 'foreign' identities of the Turks and Europeans, or the disempowered (this was its more recent meaning), as opposed to the upwardly mobile, often European educated, *effendiyya*.¹³⁷ Looking at the statuette, it seems likely that Mukhtar had the latter in mind when he created his *Ibn al-Balad*. Indeed, the caricature is hardly flattering. The small bronze figure standing on a series of four steps, measuring a mere 59 centimetres in height, presents an infantilized caricature of a grown man. The figure sports the traditional *galabiyya* (a long robe), on his feet he wears slippers whose long and pointed toes curl upwards, and the outfit is completed by a cap.¹³⁸ His position, with his hands clasped behind his back and his head cocked to one side, emphasizes his inordinately long neck and the shape of his pot-belly which can be seen through his *galabiyya*. The figure's small stature, his disproportionately large head, his protruding ears, his cross and perplexed facial expression seem to indicate that this *ibn al-balad* was the embodiment of an elite's perceptions of the foibles of a lower social stratum.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁶ For a full explanation of what is included in the term *effendiyya*, and the historical circumstances in which it emerged, see Lucie Ryzova, 'Efendification: the Rise of Middle Class Culture in Modern Egypt' (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2008).

¹³⁷ El-Messiri, *Ibn al-balad*, 1.

¹³⁸ Al-Gabakhanghi identifies the figure as a young servant boy (*Tarikh al- haraka al-faniyya fi Misr*, 16).

What we know of the social context in which the statuette was exhibited adds credence to this interpretation. We are meant to understand from the later tale of *Ibn al-balad*'s success, written in the second half of the twentieth century, that its appeal lay in the fact that the subject was instantly recognizable to the Egyptian viewer, and that the specifically Egyptian subject-matter gave Mukhtar's art an inherently Egyptian quality. Indeed, the statuette was apparently popular with visitors to the exhibition, with no less than eight copies in plaster commissioned and sold for two gold pounds each.¹³⁹ However, photographs of the exhibition show no indication that representing the nation was central to the School's concerns. Certainly there were no traces of the Pharaonicism or of the rural symbolism that would mark later nationalist representations (fig. 18-19). However, while the elite public composed of wealthy Egyptians and expatriates, art students, their European teachers, and the public figures who funded the School must have been pleasantly surprised to see something more than reproductions of classical busts, of which there were many, and portraits of society ladies, also in no short supply, this in itself is not an indication of their predominantly nationalist concerns. A more likely explanation is that the statuette allowed an Egyptian and foreign elite to poke fun at a disempowered faction of the population.

It is unclear what Mukhtar's visual sources for the figure might have been as most newspapers and journals from the early twentieth century were very sparsely illustrated, if at all. After the introduction of cartoons in Ya'qub Sanu'a's satirical weekly *Abu Naddara Zarqa* (1877-1912), they disappeared from the Egyptian press almost entirely

¹³⁹ Egyptian Ministry of Culture, Sector of Fine Arts, Mahmud Mukhtar Museum, <http://www.mmukhta.gov.eg/collection>, site last checked 18 February 2009; since January 2011, the site seems to be out of order; see also Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al- haraka al-fanniyya fi Misr*, 16.

until the First World War.¹⁴⁰ I have come across no visual references to the figure of Ibn al-balad for such an early date, although it has been noted that Sanu'a depicted the figure of *ibn al-balad* on occasion as a personification of Egypt.¹⁴¹ *Ibn al-balad*'s best known visual expression is the much later caricature created by the cartoonist Muhammad Rakha in the mid-1940s for the illustrated magazine *Al-Ithnayn*, along with a number of other stock Egyptian characters (fig.20), and the figure bears some resemblance to that portrayed by Mukhtar several decades earlier.¹⁴²

I have suggested that Mukhtar's *Ibn al-Balad* is better understood as a gently mocking image of Egypt's disempowered city-dwellers than as an image of the Egyptian nation. Thus, in 1911, Mukhtar was doing something quite different from what we will see him doing later with *Egypt's Awakening*. Far from masking the divisions in Egyptian society to create an image of a cohesive national identity, as, I argue, he would later attempt to do, Mukhtar highlighted these divisions, using them to shore up another form of collective identity, that of an elite composed of both Egyptians and foreigners.

With *Egypt's Awakening* (1920-28; fig.6), Mukhtar turned fully to the representation of the Egyptian nation, using as symbols ancient Egypt, the peasant, and the woman. The monument has been much discussed in academic secondary literature on the history of Egypt in the Interwar period, always in relation to Egypt's growing nationalist

¹⁴⁰ Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 61.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 59; I have surveyed *Al-Muqtataf*, *Al-Hilal*, and *Al-Jarida* for the years 1906-1910 in search of images comparable to Mukhtar's sculpture, and found nothing.

¹⁴² Walter Armbrust, 'Manly Men on a National Stage (and the Women Who Make Them Stars),' in *Histories of the Modern Middle East: New directions*, eds. Israel Gershoni, Hakan Erdem, and Ursula Wokock (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 249.

movement. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski devote several in-depth historical chapters to *Egypt's Awakening* in *Commemorating the Nation* (2004).¹⁴³ Their account offers a wealth of historical insight into the complexities of the political process by which the project came to fruition, and I will base my account of these largely on theirs. Beth Baron, in *Egypt as a Woman* (2005), looks at *Egypt's Awakening* in the context of the development of the iconography of the Egyptian nation as a woman.¹⁴⁴ She traces the lineage of this symbolism through images in the press, photography, 'high' art, and ephemera such as postage stamps to highlight the different factors that contributed to making female symbolism a potent image of the nation. These factors included European precedents, national discourse that conflated the fertility and honour of the land with those of the woman, social changes in the structure of the Egyptian family, and changing gender roles. I will return in more depth to Baron's reading of national female symbolism later in this chapter. Elliott Colla, in *Conflicted Antiquities* (2007), gives an account of reactions to the monument in the Egyptian press.¹⁴⁵ While he tells us that coverage was mostly positive, he also highlights the lack of consensus, both political and aesthetic, surrounding the reception of the statue after its unveiling. These accounts address *Egypt's Awakening's* relationship to Egyptian nationalist discourse, and to the power politics at play in the erection of a public monument to the glory of the nation.

In addition to this Egyptian context, the monument owes much to the Parisian context in which it was sculpted. To begin with, Paris was a city full of public statuary, a fact that

¹⁴³ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*. I have based the story of the political struggle surrounding the statue largely on the work of these authors, indicating wherever I have added something to their narrative.

¹⁴⁴ Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 57-81.

¹⁴⁵ Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 227-228.

did not escape Mukhtar's attention when he arrived from Cairo in 1912.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, the French use of women to represent the nation likely provided much of the inspiration for Mukhtar's *fallaha*.¹⁴⁷ In particular, the main figure in Jules Dalou's *Triomphe de la République* (fig. 21; 1899) on Paris' Place de la Nation is a likely source for Mukhtar's peasant woman, and I will return shortly to the relationship between the two monuments when I address the gender issues that entered into the composition of *Egypt's Awakening*.

Paris also offered a large number of Egyptian motifs, and indeed, France's longstanding love affair with Egyptian architecture, dating back at least to the eighteenth century, has been well documented.¹⁴⁸ While Mukhtar's decision to include Pharaonic imagery in his representation of the nation must be addressed primarily for its significance in the Egyptian context, which we will come to shortly, the visual archive that was available to the sculptor in Paris was comprised of the city's multiple images of the sphinx. In particular, Gershoni and Jankowski note Mukhtar's likely familiarity with a sphinx that was part of a relief in the entrance hall of the Académie des Beaux-Arts where he studied, and with the Sphinx of the Crypt in the Egyptian collections at the Louvre, who, like Mukhtar's sculpture, was sculpted in pink granite (fig. 22).¹⁴⁹

However, I suggest that, despite the undeniable impact of French sources on the composition of *Egypt's Awakening*, to fully understand it, we must turn to the Egyptian

¹⁴⁶ Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 112. In particular, Mukhtar professed to have been impressed by the female figures who graced the Arc de Triomphe, sculpted by François Rude. In addition to this, Beth Baron highlights the importance of European female national allegories as an inspiration for the emergence of the trend of depicting Egypt as a woman in *Egypt as a Woman*, 57-8.

¹⁴⁷ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ See for example Jean-Marcel Humbert, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler, *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art, 1730-1930* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1994).

¹⁴⁹ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 44.

context within which it would acquire its fullest meaning. Furthermore, the statue must be understood primarily as the result of well-documented intra-Egyptian conflicts, rather than as an iteration of official nationalist discourse. Thus, in what follows, I propose to explore the history and composition of the statue, not in light of the unity that it embodies, but rather in light of the divisions that it reveals.

From the time it came into the Egyptian public eye, *Egypt's Awakening* was discussed in terms that emphasized the unifying potential of its symbolism. On 29 April 1920, the Egyptian Wafdist newspaper *Al-Akhbar* printed a letter from Dr. Hafez 'Afifi, a prominent member of the Wafd party, stating that the author and others among his friends had seen a sculpture called *Egypt's Awakening* in Paris the previous summer while visiting the artist in his studio (fig.23). The article tells us that the statue 'by our brilliant compatriot' was going to be exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français opening in the French capital within the next few days.¹⁵⁰ 'Afifi urged the newspaper to start a campaign in the press so that the public might donate money for the statue to be bought for Egypt. In the days that followed, a number of articles in the same newspaper expounded the view that Mukhtar's work must be purchased by Egypt, and expressed great national pride that it had been selected to be exhibited in France.¹⁵¹ These articles, some of the only ones on art to be published in this, or indeed any, paper in Egypt, amounted to a campaign to gain subscriptions from the public to purchase the statue. They put pressure on readers to contribute money to the project, in one instance telling them that if the

¹⁵⁰ Hafez 'Afifi, 'Nahdat Misr,' *Al-akhbar*, April 29, 1920, reprinted in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 92.

¹⁵¹ Reprinted in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 93-100 : Ahmad Al-Rafi'i, April 30, 1920; Ramsis Wissa Wassef, 'Mahmud Mukhtar wa al-nahda al-faniyya fi misr,' May 2, 1920; W. Butrus Ghali, 'Wajibna nahwa Mukhtar,' May 3, 1920; Ahmad Al-Rafi'i, 'Al-umma wa nahdat misr,' July 28, 1920.

Sphinx were never to rise again, the fault would lie with those who refused to participate, or who contributed only small amounts despite having the means to give more.¹⁵²

Some of the contributors to the campaign were featured in *Al-Akhbar*. They were of various social and geographical origins, genders, and professions. Their diversity highlighted the supposed unanimity of the project's appeal. One article tells how a young girl from Alexandria, whose father's financial incapacity to participate in the national endeavour led him to tears, borrowed money from the mother of a friend of hers, to be repaid when her poor father had managed to save enough.¹⁵³ In a letter to the newspaper, a poor railway worker from the provincial town of Zagazig in Lower Egypt related how, after reading about the call for subscriptions and telling his wife about it, the couple collected money from relatives to heed the call.¹⁵⁴ A woman donor who gave her name as the 'wife of Hassan al-Sharif' accompanied her gift with a letter on the importance of the participation of women in the project, which would prove the equality of men and women in the fulfilment of their duty to the nation.¹⁵⁵ In another letter, a student from a primary school, a certain Mustafa Kamal al-Tamimi, wrote that he had decided to donate half of what he owned as his first step towards participation in public life.¹⁵⁶ A group of poor villagers wrote to the newspaper that they had pooled their funds to make a collective donation.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Hafez 'Afifi, 'Da'wa ila al-umma bi munasaba hudur al-nabigha mukhtar fi misr,' July 26, 1920 (Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 99).

¹⁵³ Al-Rafi'i, 'Al-umma wa nahdat misr,' (Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 100).

¹⁵⁴ Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 75.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 76.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 76.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 77.

It is clear from the stories published in *Al-Akhbar* that, from this early date, the import of *Egypt's Awakening* went well beyond the statue itself. It was advertised in the press as a project around which to rally different segments of the population in a public forum. In the stories of contributors related above, whether real, fictional, or, as is likely, a combination of both, we have a prime example of the central position occupied by the press in the process of imagining a nation as a 'deep horizontal comradeship,' as described by Anderson: divisions between regions, between genders, between social strata are acknowledged only to be ironed out as all members of the nation rally to support the project.

Egypt's Awakening also made its mark in France, as evidenced by the appearance of an article on the front page of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in May 1920 titled 'Le "Réveil de l'Egypte,"' which appeared side by side with important news of political events, such as the upcoming Spa conference that followed Versailles, and railway worker strikes.¹⁵⁸ The article does not address, as one might expect from the title and the prominent place it occupies in the newspaper, the political aspirations of the soon-to-be independent Egyptian nation, but rather the sculpture by Mukhtar, or Mouktar, as his name was spelt. The interest sparked by the sculpture was not primarily aesthetic: there are no images accompanying the article, and the author of the review, a certain G. Davenay, writes that 'however great the obvious talent of the person who sculpted it may be – and the work is very beautiful – it seems that it has an even broader significance: it has all the value of a symbol and a manifesto combined.'¹⁵⁹ France's cultural ties to

¹⁵⁸ G. Davenay, 'Le Réveil de l'Egypte,' *Le Figaro*, May 7, 1920, 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

Egypt, the egyptomania that swept Europe from the eighteenth century, sparked in large part by Napoleon's expedition of 1798-99, and France and Britain's ongoing rivalry for cultural influence in Egypt explain the prominent place given to the statue in the French newspaper.

In both the Egyptian and the French press, the main thrust in discussions of the statue was what it meant for Egypt as a nation, and for its art in the process of rebirth. To a French, as to an Egyptian, audience, the statue was a symbol of the unity of Egypt. However, there is an important difference between coverage in the two countries. Despite its focus on unity, the monument's prominent coverage in the Egyptian press gives us a sense of the complexity of creating a unified vision of the nation: differences between factions of the population are highlighted, then disavowed as meaningless in the face of the powerful unifying project of building a monument to the nation. By contrast, from the distance of Paris, and from the perspective of a French author, it was possible to see the statue as representative of unproblematic national unity and rebirth.

As we have heard, Mukhtar spent most of the decade leading up to 1920 in Paris. While in 1910, as a student in Cairo, we have seen him placing greater emphasis on social status than on national identity, this changed with *Egypt's Awakening*. The emergence of the *Egypt's Awakening* project, and its difference from the earlier *Ibn al-Balad*, had much to do with the fact that, from the distance of Paris, it became easier for Mukhtar to imagine the nation as a unified whole, masking the social differences that we have seen manifested in *Ibn al-Balad*.

In addition to this, the project of creating a monument to the glory of the nation was conceived in the wake of the uprisings that had taken place in Egypt in March 1919.¹⁶⁰ In 1919, vast portions of the population were mobilized under the banner of the national struggle for liberation against the British, but numerous other issues also contributed to the unrest.¹⁶¹ Indeed, while the events of 1919 are often presented as a spontaneous national reaction stemming from a shared desire for indigenous rule, the willingness of the masses to revolt after the First World War can better be explained by taking into account a number of other factors.¹⁶² At the start of the war, Egypt had been officially declared a British protectorate after having been under occupation for three decades. The First World War had seen a great deal of pressure placed on the Egyptian peasants, who were recruited for armed service through their village elders. Growing rural exodus, increasing overpopulation, and the subsistence needs of the British army, which diminished the proportion of land dedicated to the lucrative cotton crop, made Egyptian society ripe for revolt, and Sa'd Zaghlul, the leader of the Wafd, and his men channelled the frustrations of the masses into the idea of a revolution against the foreign occupier.

The Paris Peace Conference opened in January 1919, and most of the major decisions were made within the first six months.¹⁶³ As sculptor for the Grévin museum, Mukhtar attended some of the proceedings and created a wax likeness of the American President

¹⁶⁰ Mukhtar was involved in the Egyptian expatriate community in Paris, and the uprisings were likely part of their conversation. Emad Abu Ghazi, *Min Arshif Mukhtar* (Courtesy of the author), n.p.

¹⁶¹ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs*, 40.

¹⁶² Elie Kedourie, *The Chatham House Version and Other Middle Eastern Studies* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 98.

¹⁶³ Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919 : Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), xxv.

Woodrow Wilson, and one of the French Prime Minister Georges Clémenceau.¹⁶⁴ Zaghlul, and his delegation did not make it to Paris until April 1919.¹⁶⁵ Hafez ‘Afifi, the author of the afore-mentioned letter to *Al-Akhbar*, along with other members of the Wafd, possibly including Zaghlul himself, met Mukhtar in Paris in the summer of 1919, when ‘Afifi claimed to have seen Mukhtar’s model for *Egypt’s Awakening*. An early model of the work shows a completely different project from the one that Mukhtar showed at the Salon des Artistes Français in the spring of 1920, and perhaps it was this early version, bearing much more resemblance to the French Marianne than to an Egyptian peasant woman, and devoid of Pharaonic reference, that the members of the Wafd saw in the summer of 1919 (fig. 24).

It is conceivable under the circumstances that members of the Wafd encouraged, or maybe even commissioned, Mukhtar to design a monument to the glory of the events of 1919, for if they had seen a completed model in Paris in the summer of that year, would they not have started the campaign in the press to turn it into a large-scale monument earlier, especially since the success that Mukhtar’s work garnered in the French press, and that is often cited as a catalyst for Egyptian interest in the work, would not come until after the Salon opened, and after ‘Afifi called for the work’s acquisition?

¹⁶⁴ Musée Grévin, Paris, *Délibérations du conseil d’administration, 1907-1931*, v.3, entry from 13 December 1918; the account of Mukhtar having been to the Peace Conferences and sketched likenesses of political leaders there cannot be confirmed by the museum archives. However, a letter from the museum that purports to be a press pass was issued in Mukhtar’s name on 1 February 1919 with the accord of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of the Peace Conference (reproduced in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, n.p.)

¹⁶⁵ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 47.

We might wonder why the urge to commemorate the 1919 revolution apparently felt by the young sculptor, one of the first graduates of the School of Fine Arts, the protégé of the Prince Yusuf Kamal and the first recipient of a scholarship to study art abroad, coincided so remarkably well with the emergence of the idea of erecting a public monument to the glory of that same revolution. Mukhtar was certainly aware of the 1919 uprisings, and of the difficulties Egypt had met with in trying to gain audience at the Paris Peace Conference, and was possibly inspired by the ideals governing the negotiations and the hope they represented in the fight for independence being waged against the British in Egypt. Whether this was sufficient motivation for him to sketch his idea for a monument purely of his own initiative is an open question. Bringing the *Egypt's Awakening* project to fruition was largely a Wafdist enterprise. It would seal Mukhtar's reputation as the official sculptor not only of the 1919 revolution, but also of the Wafd party. The perfect fit between the party's ideology and the sculptor's inspiration could hardly be coincidental, and while we will never know, as no documentation survives, it seems possible that the Wafd commissioned it.

Despite this, the iconography of *Egypt's Awakening* was by no means strictly Wafdist, and the project of erecting the monument was also supported by other political parties, the most important of which was the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, founded in 1922 with the goal of mitigating the Wafd's power.¹⁶⁶ However, the project was promoted and sustained most energetically by the Wafd. For this reason, any setback for Zaghlul's party

¹⁶⁶ For more on the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, see James Whidden, 'The Generation of 1919' in *Reenvisioning Egypt, 1919-1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson, and Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 25-29; see also Abdeslam M. Maghroui, *Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and citizenship in Egypt, 1922-1936* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 128-129.

was a setback for *Egypt's Awakening*, and forces opposing the Wafd, most importantly, circles close to the Royal Palace, including at times the Liberal Constitutionalists, and other anti-Wafd politicians, made efforts to hinder its completion.

After the initial public enthusiasm for the project, political partisanship dragged the process out for years. Support was first granted in June 1921 by a ministry led by Adli Yakan, a representative of the conservative opposition to Zaghlul who would go on to become one of the founders of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party. Next to the 6500 pounds raised through the previously mentioned campaign in the press carried out by the Committee for the Erection of Egypt's Awakening, the government allocated 3000 pounds to the project. The total sum quickly revealed itself to be insufficient, causing work on the statue to be halted for a year. After the Wafd came to power in 1924, with Zaghlul as prime minister, the budget for *Egypt's Awakening* was increased and under the supervision of the Ministry of Works, work resumed. After the assassination of Lee Stack, Governor-General of the Sudan, in November 1924, Zaghlul was forced to resign. The royalist governments that succeeded the Wafdist one interfered wherever possible with Mukhtar's work, more for the purpose of boycotting the Wafd than because of objections to the statue and its iconography.¹⁶⁷ The Ministry, claiming not to have at its disposal sufficient funds to bring the statue to completion, decided to form a committee to reconsider the project on the grounds that the volume of traffic on the square in front of the train station might not allow for a monument to be placed there. Work at the site was again halted in early 1926, to be resumed in the summer after the Wafd won a majority in parliament. Additional funds were allocated to the project, and from then on,

¹⁶⁷ Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhar*, 81.

it moved smoothly towards completion. As we have seen, the statue was finally unveiled in May 1928.

For the most part, the press celebrated *Egypt's Awakening*: the non-partisan *Al-Ahram* featured an article by Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, one of the earliest exponents of secular nationalism, and the Liberal Constitutionalist *Al-Siyasa* and *Al-Siyasa al-usbu'iyya* mostly praised the monument.¹⁶⁸ It has been noted that the discourse in the Wafdist press differed slightly from the rest, in that it highlighted on one hand the popular nature of the event, and on the other, the importance of Zaghlul in the nation's revival.¹⁶⁹

Nonetheless, coverage was not unanimous. A detailed critique of the statue was published in *Al-Siyasa al-usbu'iyya* a short time after the unveiling.¹⁷⁰ The author Ibrahim 'Abd al-Qadir Al-Mazini's commentary is divided into two parts, one in the form of a satirical conversation between the author and a local youngster, and the other consisting of a more conventional journalistic critique. The author questions the young man about the meaning of the sculpture, only to reveal an underlying confusion about how the allegory functions: since it is composed of two figures, we might wonder, which one is Egypt? How is the viewer meant to understand the allegory? The author thus demonstrates that, given the newness of the medium of public sculpture, the Egyptian population could not be

¹⁶⁸ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 73-78 ; the full text of the article from *Al-siyasa al-usbu'iyya*, May 26, 1928, known to have been by Muhammad Husayn Haykal, is reprinted in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 105-108.

¹⁶⁹ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 77.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 82-84; Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 227-228. The full text of al-Mazini's article, 'Abu al-hul wa timthal nahdat misr,' from *Al-Siyasa al-usbu'iyya*, June 9, 1928, is reprinted in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 112-119.

expected to grasp its meaning.¹⁷¹ In al-Mazini's critique, we catch a glimpse of the intra-Egyptian conflict that marked the statue's inception, and indeed, of the ways in which the divisions that structured Egyptian society, are registered in the statue itself, as Al-Mazini notes that Mukhtar failed to bring together all of the symbolic components of a unified nation in a single figure.

Thus, the statue is meant to celebrate the unity of all the factions of the Egyptian population that came together in 1919, but on closer examination, it quickly becomes apparent that this unity does not lie where it promises. *Egypt's Awakening* brings together a modern peasant woman and a symbol of ancient Egyptian, but the urban elite are absent from this representation. As noted by al-Mazini, there is a disjunction within the very structure of *Egypt's Awakening*, as the two figures, placed side by side, and meant to represent a single entity, nonetheless remain separate.

Egypt's Awakening must be understood not only as part of a developing rural and Pharaonic symbolism, but also, and perhaps primarily, within the context of the changing role of women in Egyptian society and the gendered aspects of the nationalist discourse. There are a number of reasons why Egypt, in the first decades of the twentieth century, came to be portrayed as a woman. These include historical precedent, most notably in France with the figure of the *Marianne*; the mobilization of family rhetoric for the purposes of nation-building and women's redefined role within the new family structures; the idea that national honour, like female honour, needed to be defended; connotations of

¹⁷¹ Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 233.

fertility with the land, especially potent in an agricultural economy such as Egypt's; and the suppression of women's active political role in favour of female symbols.¹⁷²

In particular, Mukhtar's depiction of Egypt as a *fallaha* must be understood within the context of debates over the question of veiling, and the modern connotations of unveiling. The first publication featuring cartoons in Egypt, Ya'qub Sanu'a's satirical weekly *Abu Naddara Zarqa*, founded in 1877, experimented with images of Egypt as a woman. However, this experimentation was tentative, as the social convention of full facial veiling among elite women was an obstacle to using contemporary women as a symbol for the nation.¹⁷³ One way around this was to represent Egypt as a veiled woman; another was to represent Egypt as a Pharaonic woman. Sanu'a attempted both of these solutions, depicting Egypt twice as a Pharaonic queen in 1883 and 1884 (fig. 25), and once as a woman with a full face veil in 1894 (fig. 26). As the debate surrounding the question of veiling progressed, unveiling became a sign as modernity. Debates about 'New Egyptian Woman' had begun to emerge in the women's press in the late nineteenth century, but until about 1914, the issue of veiling was visually avoided in the largely un-illustrated press.¹⁷⁴ Advertisements increasingly represented contemporary women as unveiled from the 1920s.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 57-81 and 3-8.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 60.

¹⁷⁴ Mona L. Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 59-60.

¹⁷⁵ The emergence of the 'New Egyptian Woman' in the women's press and in advertising from the end of the nineteenth century is fully explored by Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman*.

Unveiling was consistent with the Wafd's modernizing agenda. In 1923, the feminist activist and president of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee, Huda Sha'rawi, who was also married to 'Ali Sha'rawi, a prominent member of the Wafd, famously removed her face veil at the Cairo train station upon her return from an international women's conference in Europe.¹⁷⁶ It was in the context of the Wafd's support of unveiling, that Mukhtar's depiction of a peasant woman lifting the veil from her face took on its full modern, and Wafdist, significance.

To understand how Mukhtar, with the help of French and Egyptian sources, engaged with the question of unveiling as a sign of Egyptian modernity, I will consider two of his possible visual sources: first, the representation of Egypt as a woman with a full-face veil in *Abu Naddara* (fig.26); and second, Dalou's previously mentioned *Marianne* who constitutes the main figure in the *Triomphe de la République* on the Place de la Nation in Paris (fig.21).

In the first image, a fully veiled Egypt, backed by Russia and France, confronts England. In the text that accompanies the image, France and Russia stand behind Egypt's demands for British withdrawal from the Nile Valley.¹⁷⁷ The robes worn by Egypt in *Abu Naddara*

¹⁷⁶ For a translation of Huda Shaarawi's memoirs, see Margot Badran, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986). The episode at the train station is recounted by Badran in the Introduction, 7. For an overview of feminist activism and its relationship to the Wafd, see Joel Beinin, 'Society and Economy, 1923-1952,' in *The Cambridge History of Egypt Volume Two: Modern Egypt from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, ed. M.W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 314-316. It is important to note that the Wafd's support for unveiling did not extend to everyone: its male members vetoed the participation of Safiyya Zaghlul in Huda Sha'rawi's action, as it was deemed too provocative for the wife of the nation's leader.

¹⁷⁷ Ya'qub Sanu'a, 'Illusion détruite,' *Abu Naddara*, December 5, 1894, 1. We must be careful not to read this image anachronistically, as debates about veiling were in their infancy when it was published. While

fall straight to the ground, revealing little movement, and no feminine curves. This can be contrasted with images of European nations, both those that stand next to Egypt in the *Abu Naddara* image, and that of Dalou's Marianne. Mukhtar's figure sits somewhere between these two extremes: her straight robe is similar to that of the figure in *Abu Naddara*, but the peasant woman, as she lifts her veil, not only reveals her face, but also the outline of her breasts. In addition to this, a Pharaonic diadem with a scarab is also revealed gracing her forehead. In this way, the gesture of unveiling reveals both her ancient identity as a Pharaonic woman, and her modernity.

The figure's modernity is highlighted not only by the visibility of her face and the contours of the body, but also by her aquiline features. Indeed, the face of Mukhtar's *fallaha* is remarkably similar to that of Dalou's *Marianne*, and as she lifts her veil, her European features are revealed. This similarity might be thought of in terms of the French context in which the first model for the statue was exhibited: look, it seems to be saying, underneath this veil, I am not so different from you. To get a visual sense of the richness and complexity of the symbolism that Mukhtar deployed in *Egypt's Awakening*, it is useful to look at these images together and think of the way that Mukhtar's monument looks in terms of the process of unveiling. We might imagine Mukhtar thinking in terms of a timeline that moves from *Abu Naddara*, through his own monument, to the *Triomphe de la République*. Lifting the veil is the step that is needed for the nation to take its place

Egypt's full covering in contrast to the light clothing worn by the other nations would soon acquire anti-modern connotations in elite Egyptian circles, the text gives no indication that this was part of its concern, as Egypt contributes to the discourse in as sophisticated a manner as the other participants.

among modern nations, and this allows for its true and ancient identity, dormant for centuries, to be revealed.

The multiple small-scale figures of elegant female peasants that Mukhtar created in various materials in the 1920s, averaging between 50 and 100 centimetres in height, must also be understood as lying at the intersection between the French visual sources to which Mukhtar had access in Paris, and changing gender and social dynamics in Egypt (fig.27-29). Much of what has been said about *Egypt's Awakening* is also true here. However, these small pieces were designed to be looked at in an intimate gallery setting, or even in the home of collectors, and apart from their size, they occupy space in a radically different way from the much larger monument, as their fluidity contrasts sharply with *Egypt's Awakening's* hieratic frontality.

In the position of the stretching woman's body, *Nahwa ma' an-Nil* (*Towards the Water of the Nile*; fig.27) seems to be quoting Auguste Rodin's *La toilette de Vénus* (ca. 1886; fig. 28). Rodin's piece presents a highly polished female figure emerging from a roughly hewn bloc of marble (there are other versions of the piece that exist in bronze). The Egyptian figure, unlike the French model, is fully clothed. However, the outline of the *fallaha's* body is visible through the cloth, and the contours present a sensuality that certainly rivals that of Rodin's figure.

'Ala difaf an-Nil (*On the Banks of the Nile*; fig.29) also presents an image of a young woman fetching water from the river. We might begin to sense here the ways in which

Mukhtar mastered French forms, such as Rodin's sculpture mentioned above, and used them in pieces that only acquired their full meaning in an Egyptian context. The base of the figure in *On the Banks of the Nile* mimics the step-shaped bases on which statues of royals in ancient Egypt sit. That the fluid figure of a young peasant woman rests, or perhaps even emerges from, this ancient Egyptian base echoes the duality of the treatment of marble in French sculpture, such as that seen in *La toilette de Vénus*, or in others, such as Alfred Boucher's series *Volubilis* (1896; fig.30). Furthermore, there is much potential symbolism in the juxtaposition of a supple modern figure with a static ancient base. Despite its intimate size, might this be another image of Egypt coming back to life?

Next to the French sources proposed above, Mukhtar's peasant women seem to owe much to descriptions of the title character in Muhammad Husayn Haykal's novel *Zainab*, published in 1914, but, significantly, written in Europe between 1910-1911 (we might think here of Mukhtar depicting the nation from the distance of in Paris). Considered to be the first modern Egyptian novel, *Zainab* is one of the founding texts of Egyptian secular nationalism, and a discussion of Mukhtar's peasant women would not be complete without an acknowledgement of his debt to Haykal.¹⁷⁸ In addition to this, Haykal's novel points us towards some of the issues at stake in Mukhtar's statuettes, which only take on their full meaning once we go beyond their French sources to the Egyptian context.

¹⁷⁸ Charles D. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt: a biography of Muhammad Husayn Haykal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 48.

The novel has two plots that unfold in parallel, unified by the novel's setting in the Egyptian countryside.¹⁷⁹ The son of a landowner, Hamid, spends his summers on his family estate, wandering among the fields, seeking out the company of the peasants, musing on love and life. He believes that he is destined to love and marry his cousin, 'Aziza, whom he has known since childhood. She lives in the city and the two young people rarely meet. After an exchange of letters, they finally manage to be alone together, but the situation is awkward. 'Aziza is stiff and unable to express any emotion. After the meeting, she writes Hamid a letter asking him to forget her, for seclusion has made her unfit for love. Hamid realizes that his dream was but a fantasy and goes off in search of true love, resolving in a letter to his parents not to return until he has found what he is looking for.

The other plot of the novel is that revolving around Zainab, a peasant girl who works on Hamid's father's plantation. Zainab, like Hamid, lives for her ideal of romantic love. She finds it in Ibrahim, but is then forced to marry Hasan, the husband chosen for her by her parents. Ibrahim is drafted and sent to the Sudan. The arranged marriage has disastrous consequences for Zainab's health, and she dies clutching her beloved's handkerchief, which he has left her as a token of his affection.

The two plots intersect in brief but powerful exchanges between Zainab and Hamid. While they are attracted to each other and briefly indulge a flirtation, Hamid even going so far as to steal a kiss, never is it suggested that they might find the love they both seek

¹⁷⁹ Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Mohammed Hussain Haikal's Zainab : the first Egyptian novel*, trans. J.M. Grinstead (London: Darf, 1989).

in each other, for the distance that separates them is too great. Their relationship is based on what are presented as natural precepts. After all, ‘isn’t it natural for a boy to kiss a girl whose beauty pleases him?’¹⁸⁰

The female figure in *On the Banks of the Nile* (fig. 29) echoes the description of Zainab as she first appears in its pages:

Zainab was at an age when nature smiled on her like a lover and she would lower her gaze accordingly, out of deference, raising her eyelids cautiously to see to what extent she could flirt with this mysterious love (...) Her beauty mingled with the beauty around her so that existence itself seemed to admire her and she in turn became even more enamoured with her love for the world. At moments like this the beauty of nature touched the depths of Zainab’s soul and the image remained imprinted on her heart.¹⁸¹

(...) Zainab’s simple nature revealed a spiritual beauty no less appealing than her physical charms so that whenever [Hamid] looked at her wide eyes, protected by her pretty lashes, he felt as though he were gazing into another world, full of love and desire. As she strode along with firm footsteps, her dress seemed to indicate the luxuriousness of her body and this fancy was strengthened by the softness he noticed in her hands, even though she worked with them.¹⁸²

The combination of Zainab’s innocence and her sensuality is echoed in Mukhtar’s depictions of young peasant women. Sculpted from white marble, Mukhtar’s figure is the very image of purity, achieved through the use of white marble and the gentle spiral that structures the figure. The fluid lines of her body can be glimpsed through her clothing as she bends down to fetch water from the Nile. Far from showing the strain of physical labour, she performs her tasks with easy industriousness.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 7

¹⁸² Ibid., 15-16.

The traits shared by Zainab and Mukhtar's peasant women are not coincidental. Indeed, they must be understood at the intersection of changing gender roles in Egypt and perceptions of the peasant and the rural world. The debates about veiling described above applied for the most part to urban women, as women in the countryside, because of the demands of agricultural work, did not wear a strict veil. Rather, they pulled a loose headscarf around their face to cover it when the situation called for it.¹⁸³ Indeed, modernization was often equated with the unveiling of women, and rural women, represented as spontaneously unveiling, provided the ideal symbol for a nation looking for its future in its roots. Showing rural women who model the behaviour advocated for the 'modern woman' was a powerful way of tying the modern nation to its ancient roots: becoming modern in this context comes to mean rediscovering the natural self.

A wax likeness of the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (1898-1975) that Mukhtar created for the Grévin wax Museum in Paris in 1926 (fig.31 and 32) once again seems to point us to the relationship between gender and nation. However, the sculpture serves as a reminder that we must not jump to facile conclusions regarding Mukhtar's national incentives. Indeed, to see Umm Kulthum as an embodiment of the nation in 1926 would be anachronistic.

Umm Kulthum, who died in 1975, is an Egyptian national, and Arab cultural, icon.¹⁸⁴ Her Thursday night radio broadcasts, which lasted from 1934 until her retirement in 1973,

¹⁸³ Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 35-36.

¹⁸⁴ On the subject of Umm Kulthum's later fame, including the myth that continued to flourish posthumously, see Laura Lohman, *Umm Kulthum: Artistic agency and the shaping of an Arab legend, 1967-2007* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

brought all other activity in the Arab world to a halt. She is especially well known for her close ties to Nasser's nationalism. In light of this, it would be easy to understand her depiction by Mukhtar as another instance of the sculptor's well-documented interest in finding a visual expression for the Egyptian nation. However, in 1926, while Umm Kulthum was beginning to acquire a solid reputation in Egypt, and in Cairo in particular, she was just one among several important female Egyptian singers, and was far from the level of fame that would later make of her a quasi embodiment of the nation.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, given the context, if Mukhtar was concerned with the idea of the nation as he created this wax likeness, it was for the benefit of a French and international public, who would not have been familiar with the singer, rather than for an Egyptian one. In light of all this, might Mukhtar's motivation in depicting the singer still be understood in national terms? What might we make of the fact that, given free reign at the museum, Mukhtar decided to depict an Egyptian female entertainer?¹⁸⁶

Mukhtar was evidently familiar with Umm Kulthum and her work, whether through recordings or through personal acquaintance. In the mid-1920s, Umm Kulthum's work was undergoing significant changes, and these were documented in the press. In 1923 she moved from her home in the Egyptian Delta to Cairo to further her career. In 1926, she replaced the vocal accompaniment provided by male members of her family with a *takht*, an instrumental orchestra. The move not only marked a significant change in Umm

¹⁸⁵ Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song and Egyptian society in the twentieth century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 46-49.

¹⁸⁶ The archives of the Grévin museum seem to imply that Mukhtar made the statue of his own initiative: 'A likeness of Miss Umm Koulioum [sic], a very famous singer in Egypt and especially in Cairo, was graciously executed by M. Moukhtar [sic], sculptor, and placed in the 'salle des colonnes' on 23 February.' Musée Grévin, Paris, *Délibérations du conseil d'administration, 1907-1931*, v.3, entry from 19 February 1926. There is also some confusion regarding the date, as can be seen here.

Kulthum's musical style and repertoire, but also signalled her definitive entry into the world of professional musicians competing on the Egyptian stage.¹⁸⁷ However, the events of 1926 could not have provided the incentive for Mukhtar to create a likeness of the singer, as the sculpture, created at the beginning of 1926, predates them by a few months. What we might be sure of is that Mukhtar was aware of Umm Kulthum's increasing prominence in the years between her move to Cairo and the time he created the sculpture. We might also speculate that he was aware of similarities between them: Umm Kulthum, like Mukhtar, was a talented individual from the Egyptian Delta who made her name in Cairo. Thus, when he decided to depict a talented, but as yet young and relatively unknown, Umm Kulthum, it seems likely that he did so with a view to promoting the singer abroad, just as he himself had received the opportunity to shine in Paris. Whether this was out of cultural pride, a sense of shared background, or a personal relationship of which we know nothing, is an open question.

Whether or not Mukhtar had the representation of the nation in mind as he created the sculpture, it serves as a reminder that, despite the fact that Mukhtar and his work have often been conflated with nationalism and its iconography in the historiography, a national interpretation of his work is not always a given. Mukhtar was responding to more complex cultural imperatives than simply the creation of national symbols. Thus, while it is tempting here to read Mukhtar's work as expression of national identity, seeing it as such would be anachronistic.

¹⁸⁷ Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt*, 62.

As is becoming increasingly clear, the specific meanings of Mukhtar's sculptures have much to do with the complex and fast-changing social situation in Egypt. As we have seen, this was not always apparent to those viewing Egypt from beyond its borders: they were more likely to see a unified nationalist sentiment, unaware of the internal divisions. Certainly this was the case when, in 1930, Mukhtar's solo exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in Paris was reviewed in the French journal *L'art Vivant*. The importance of the sculptor for nationalism in Egypt, and the supposed unanimity of public sentiment surrounding it, was highlighted:

Mukhtar is as popular in his own country as he is famous abroad. A bit more than a year ago, on one of the main squares in Cairo, his monumental *Egypt's Awakening*, made of pink granite, was inaugurated, in front of which, and this is praise indeed, Mr Georges Grappe [director of the Rodin Museum] who saw it, was reminded of the sphinx of Amenhait III of the Cairo museum. Thus, through Mukhtar, and under the pressure of events, Egyptian sculpture has begun a new heroic age, is rebecoming an art at full steam, an art of the crowds, buttressed by the force of public sentiment, which it embodies and exalts.¹⁸⁸

What the French reviewer was seemingly unaware of was that 1930 was a very different time for the sculptor, and for Egypt and Egyptian nationalism, than 1920. The situation was rapidly evolving. A few months after the death of the Wafdist leader Sa'd Zaghlul in 1927, Mukhtar was approached by the government to create two statues of Zaghlul, one for Cairo, and one for Alexandria. However, the project met with resistance: as scholars have noted, the idea of creating statues to the glory of the leader of the Wafd was 'inherently more politicized than *Nahdat Misr* [*Egypt's Awakening*] had been.'¹⁸⁹ While the project of *Egypt's Awakening* had been contested for political reasons, it had nonetheless been able to garner support from other parties because of the abstract quality

¹⁸⁸ Maurice Gauthier, 'Le sculpteur Moukhtar,' *L'art vivant*, April 1, 1930, 294.

¹⁸⁹ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 87-88.

of the symbolism it used. By contrast, the figure of Zaghlul was anything but abstract, anchored as it was in the party politics of its time. In addition to this, by the late 1920s, the monopoly of Pharaonicism and the Wafd on nationalist discourse was in decline. Thus, by the early 1930s, the partisan move of building monuments of such proportions to Zaghlul was hotly contested.

The process from the time the Zaghlul monuments were conceived to their unveiling was, as with *Egypt's Awakening*, drawn out by political rivalries and frequent changes in government.¹⁹⁰ The coalition government that initiated the idea after Zaghlul's death was followed by a Liberal Constitutionalist one, and the idea was temporarily put aside (it is worth recalling here the support received from Liberal Constitutionalists for *Egypt's Awakening*). The contract for the statues was not signed until March 1930, when the Wafd returned to power. The Wafdist government fell after just a few months, and a government led by the authoritarian Isma'il Sidqi took over. Sidqi, who was allied with the Egyptian monarchy in the struggle to wrest power from the Wafd, claimed that the Zaghlul statues were inappropriate because their size exceeded that of the equestrian statue of the founder of the royal family, Muhammad 'Ali, in Alexandria. The Sidqi ministry placed frequent obstacles in the way of Mukhtar's work.¹⁹¹ This resulted in the contract between Mukhtar and the Ministry being cancelled. Mukhtar sued the Egyptian government and the project was halted entirely. The question was still unresolved when Sidqi's government was succeeded by another government close to the monarchy, and

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹¹ Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 61.

remained unresolved when Mukhtar died in 1934. The erection of the statues would resume only with the return of the Wafd to power in 1936.¹⁹²

The two bronze statues with their elaborate bases and decorative panels would be Mukhtar's last significant works before his untimely death in 1934, yet they were met with far less enthusiasm than his public monument of ten years earlier. It would take until 1938, several years after Mukhtar's death, for the statues to be unveiled, even though he had finished most of the work, which he carried out in his Paris studio, much earlier, and the parts of the sculptures and the panels had been shipped to Egypt as early as 1932.¹⁹³

The Cairo Zaghlul is about five meters tall, and stands on a pedestal that measures sixteen meters, his right hand raised as if to bless the people (fig.33). He wears the *tarbush* and the characteristically European dress of the *efendiyya*.¹⁹⁴ The pedestal on which he stands is composed of four pink granite columns made to imitate those at the Karnak temple in Luxor. Between these are wedged four allegorical panels in the form of peasant women, clockwise from the West : *Al-'adl*, (*Justice*; fig.34), *The Nation Salutes the Leader*, and

¹⁹² The story is recounted in Abu Ghazi, *Al-maththal Mukhtar*, 59-65 and in Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 94-97.

¹⁹³ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 90.

¹⁹⁴ The social group that has been termed the *efendiyya* has been defined by Lucie Ryzova, 'Efendification,' 1-2: 'the efendi is understood as an Egyptian who actively claims to be modern, regardless of the degree and kind of education received (...) In the specific Egyptian context, the efendis (Ar. pl. efendiyya) also came to signify a status group defined by either an institutional association with or ideological investment in the state's modernising project, and often both. In their majority, they would be bureaucrats or professionals employed by the state or in the private sector; they could be teachers or journalists, but also students on their way to enter one of these professions. Due to their western and secular education obtained, typically, in modern schools or sometimes abroad, these men played the role of "executors" (or "popularisers") of Egypt's modernisation policies that characterised the period (...) They would typically originate in families located in the middle sections of Egyptian society—nominally neither poor nor elite, and crucially diverse in terms of their position relative to the emerging national culture (...) Families that produced efendis were of different occupations and income levels, and thus the efendis' social origin was, in this regard, vague or fragmented.'

Al-umma masdar al-sulta (*The Nation is the Source of Power*; fig.34), and *Al-irada* (*The Will*; fig.35). The columns stand on a round base, which in turn stands on a square platform. The square platform is decorated with horizontally unfolding panels portraying scenes of figures dressed in Pharaonic clothing, for example four men carrying what looks like an anvil (fig.36). The platform rests on yet another square base, each side of which has a short staircase in the middle leading up to the horizontal panels. A shallow three-tiered octogonal podium carries the whole.

The Alexandria monument features a Zaghlul who is about the same height as his Cairene counterpart striding purposefully forward with his arms at his side. In this version too Zaghlul wears the characteristic dress of the *efendiyya*. The base of the statue, made of pink granite, measures twelve meters. The front and back of the pedestal feature bronze reliefs of female allegories for Lower and Upper Egypt respectively (fig.37). On the sides, two bas-reliefs, also made of bronze, illustrate events surrounding the 1919 uprisings and Zaghlul's role in them: the panel on the right side features Zaghlul being lifted in the air by a crowd during the uprisings (fig.38) ; the left side features the meeting of 13 November 1918 when Zaghlul and his companions, 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi and 'Ali Sha'rawi, paid a visit to Sir Reginald Wingate, then British High Commissioner, asking him for permission to travel to London to open negotiations for Egypt's independence (fig.39).¹⁹⁵

Despite their strong similarities, and the fact that they were commissioned and executed at the same time, the differences between the Cairo Zaghlul and the Alexandria Zaghlul

¹⁹⁵ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Commemorating the Nation*, 92.

are worth noting : while the base of the Cairo monument presents what might be expected of the author of *Egypt's Awakening*, with scenes from peasant life and allegorical female figures, the base of the Alexandria monument is more surprising. Throughout Mukhtar's career, he and his social stratum are almost completely absent from his work. Suddenly here, after two decades of depicting peasant women, Mukhtar turns to a group much closer to home.

The relief showing Zaghlul being lifted by a crowd composed of members of the *efendiyya* (fig.38) presents an affiliation with a tradition of depicting revolution and crowd scenes in European art. There are strong echoes in this composition of Jacques-Louis David's *Oath on the Tennis Court* (1791; fig. 40).¹⁹⁶ In addition to this, it shares some of the tropes of an iconography of labour that Mukhtar would have been familiar with from the French illustrated press: the massiveness of the figures' arms and legs, the way that the bottoms of the men's trousers falls on the tops of their heavy shoes, the way that the leader is carried and positioned, the arms of the members of the crowd all reaching in one direction, embodying a sense of unity. These are the elements of an iconography of twentieth century popular movements. Whatever Mukhtar's direct visual sources may have been, there can be no doubt that the formal choices he made were designed to cast the events of 1919 in a revolutionary light.

¹⁹⁶ Jacques-Louis David's *Oath on the Tennis Court* (fig. 31) is a depiction of one of the early events of the French Revolution : the Third Estate, comprised of those who were neither clergymen nor nobles, most notably the urban bourgeoisie, finding themselves locked out of the hall where the recently formed National Assembly was to meet, gathered in an indoor tennis court and vowed to remain united until a constitution was established for the kingdom.

Yet Mukhtar combined these traces of revolutionary iconography with the *tarbush* that is the characteristic of the upwardly mobile Egyptian *efendiyya*, and the crowd is composed almost exclusively of members of this group: there is one token worker, the figure to the left of Zaghlul, and one token peasant, the man in the *galabiyya* (long robe), also on the left side of the composition. The representation of the *efendiyya* with the heavy limbs and workers' shoes of a revolutionary class strikes a slightly dissonant note. The *efendiyya* were Zaghlul's most adamant supporters, and they were in large part behind the 1919 uprisings. More than any other segment of the population, they led the fight for independence and modernization. They were the students, teachers, journalists, and government employees of modern Egypt, but a revolutionary class in the twentieth century sense of the term, they were not. The uprisings that were praised in nationalist discourse as a spontaneous popular movement on the part of the whole nation are represented here, more accurately, as being the purview of a particular social and political class, despite Mukhtar's half-hearted attempt to make the relief look inclusive by including a representative from two other social groups. It is needless to point out that there is not a single woman included in this image of the supposedly unanimous and spontaneous national uprisings of 1919.

The overall effect of the crowd in this image is one of relative containment, of an organized and homogenous following, not of a spontaneous and chaotic popular uprising. This is revealing of the complex position occupied by the 1919 revolution in narratives of Egyptian nationalism and in Egyptian history. Something of the uneasy position of the urban Egyptian intellectual of the time is present in this crowd scene. More than ten years

after the uprisings, Mukhtar is positioning the revolution as a popular movement, aligning it with other revolutions through the use of a set of representational conventions, all the while imagining the nation as being comprised mostly of those like himself. In doing so, he reveals the tension between the nation imagined as inclusive and cohesive, and the reality of the nation as divided.

Mukhtar made the rural friezes on the base of the Cairo monument using the technique of sunken relief, often associated with ancient Egypt, and these reliefs have a markedly Pharaonic look. However, there are no traces of Pharaonicism on the reliefs featuring Zaghlul, and the technique used is low relief, which contrasts strongly with the sunken relief of the other monument. It is also no coincidence that the Pharaonic is associated with the rural and the female, while the modern is associated with the urban and the male, for the Pharaonic comes from the distant past, and with distance comes the possibility of idealisation. Keeping the other at an arm's length, Mukhtar casts the rural and the female in allegorical roles. They are everything that he is not.

It is clear by now that Mukhtar kept separate his representations of the nation as an idealized, distant, and ancient rural entity and those of the nation as composed of men from his social milieu, placing the first on the base of his Cairo monument and the second on the base of the Alexandria monument. I have also offered some explanation for this fact: the delicate task of delivering a unified and unproblematic image of a nation that was in reality profoundly divided along lines of social status, geographical space, gender, and politics, required the differences within the nation to be left out, or cast as symbols.

Representing the members of the *efendiyya* within the same space as the peasants could not be done without marring the unified image. However, what we will never know is why Mukhtar chose to grace Cairo with the presence of rural symbolism, while Alexandria received images of historical events led by the *efendiyya*.

Mukhtar belongs to the canon of modern Egyptian art; indeed, the version of his life and work that appears in the historiography is one that removes him from the messiness of historical contingency, flattening the complex ensemble of motivations, interests, circumstances and events that he responded to in shaping his life and career into the all-encompassing élan of national inspiration. He himself participated in the creation of this myth, both by spreading stories about his childhood and his bohemian years in Paris, and by the nationalistic iconography and style that he used in his better-known works.

While the images that Mukhtar produced are easily understood as representations of national harmony, I have argued that they reveal something of the political and social context within which they were produced. He did not have the luxury of historical hindsight as he was in the thick of history, imagining the nation through trial and error at a time when the very idea was constantly contested. By looking closely at works that have generally been seen, both in Egypt and beyond, as embodying a perfectly unified national narrative, we have been able to unearth the complications and doubts that are the evidence of this process of trial and error. What has emerged is a more complex - and interesting - picture of the always internally divided nature of nationalist discourse.

Chapter 2: Ragheb 'Ayyad (1892-1982)

If there is one thing that strikes the viewer about the work of Ragheb 'Ayyad, it is the ubiquity of the figure of the peasant and of scenes from popular Egyptian life in his paintings and drawings. *Az-zira'a* (*Agriculture*, 1958; fig. 41), a late work of 'Ayyad's, which he painted six years after Nasser's military coup of 1952, is a case in point: the subject of the painting is Egypt, presented as a rural landscape. Beast, man, and machine are hard at work irrigating the land along the Nile, all presenting the same angularity of form and combining to form one single efficient system, their bodies part of the agricultural apparatus. The peasants' bodies, clothed in ancient Egyptian garb, are light and lithe, unmarked by the hardship of agricultural work. Egypt is deployed within a vertical rectangular format, and the succession of events makes the painting both a map and a timeline. With the characteristic houses of Upper Egypt in the top section, and the involved irrigation practices of the Delta in the bottom portion, the painting charts the space of the nation; but the Upper Egyptian portion can equally be read as the ancient past while the Delta displays more modern technology, making this also an image of the time of the nation. Regional and chronological differences are thus registered, but they do not deter from the overall sense that this is a vision of a unified Egypt, laid out along the Nile, from Upper Egypt at the top to the Delta at the bottom.

'Ayyad drew from different visual sources, both Egyptian and European, in creating this tribute to national unity. The painting relies heavily on one hand on ancient Egyptian reliefs of slaves at work, and on the other, on early nineteenth century European

representations of Egypt, notably the wealth of visual material provided by the survey put together on Napoleon's orders after his invasion of the country in 1798, the *Description de l'Égypte*.¹⁹⁷

The frontispiece of the *Description* shows a layout similar to that of *Agriculture*, with the Nile running through the composition and the characteristic features of Egypt laid out along it like a map (fig. 42). 'Ayyad combined this European linear perspective with compositional elements from ancient Egyptian reliefs, as for example this third dynasty relief from Saqqara (fig. 43). In *Agriculture*, the horizontally deployed registers of ancient Egypt are tied together by the snaking line of the Nile that moves through the painting, guiding the viewer's eye into the distance.

The references to ancient Egypt do not end there. 'Ayyad dressed these Egyptian peasants in Pharaonic clothing, and positioned their bodies according to Pharaonic spatial conventions, their shoulders parallel to the picture plane. They occasionally break their hieratic frontality as they begin to rotate three-dimensionally in deeper space – for example the figure at bottom right, whose body is turned diagonally to the picture plane. Furthermore, the beasts of labour, like the peasants, obey ancient representational conventions, as those seen on the relief at Saqqara (fig. 43): their bodies are depicted in profile, from their most characteristic view point, sacrificing depth of space for clarity of

¹⁹⁷ The *Description de l'Égypte*, whose full title was *Description de l'Égypte ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française*, was published in several installments between 1809 and 1829. It was the compilation of research by 160 scholars on a broad range of subjects including the customs of the Egyptian people, ancient ruins, the flora and fauna of Egypt, and Islamic architecture. Numerous editions of the *Description* exist, often only in partial form. For a full edition, see for example Gilles Néret, *Description de l'Égypte* (Cologne: Taschen, 1994).

form. The parallel repetition of their outline marks the presence of another animal behind them.

The use of previously existing material as visual sources for rural life in Egypt is in direct contrast to what ‘Ayyad claimed about his painting. According to his writings from the 1950s, the only ones we have of his, his images were the fruit of close observation of the popular classes of Egypt, and his goal, and in his view that of any authentic artist, was to visually preserve the traditions of these popular classes, their weddings, their feast days, their markets, and their rituals.¹⁹⁸ How then do these two seemingly contradictory aspects of ‘Ayyad’s work function together? How might we understand the strategy of compiling older images of life in Egypt to deliver supposedly faithful representations of the modern Egyptian peasant?

In this chapter, I argue that the ubiquity of the popular classes in ‘Ayyad’s work, as well as the strategy that consists of compiling visual sources to deliver supposedly faithful observations of traditional popular life, must be understood in light of three interconnected factors: first, we must read them in the context of changing social and economic circumstances in Egypt during the artist’s lifetime, especially the emergence of a sustained discourse among intellectuals and policy makers on the necessity of reforming the Egyptian peasantry; second, they must be understood as part of ‘Ayyad’s relationship to the idea of the Egyptian nation as it appears in his paintings and writings, in which, using images of the people of Egypt, he emphasized at various times the nation’s unity or the differences within it; and third, the variations in his depictions of the

¹⁹⁸ Ragheb ‘Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila fi nisf qarn 1908-1958* (Cairo, n.d).

nation and its people must in turn be understood as owing much to the fact that, as a Coptic Christian, ‘Ayyad’s own identification with the predominantly Muslim Egyptian nation was variously complex at different times in his career. I suggest that differences in ‘Ayyad’s painting throughout his career, from an idealized view of a homogenous nation in 1930 to a view highlighting the otherness of popular life as the decade progressed, from the Coptic scenes of the 1940s to renewed attempts at depicting a unified rural nation after the change of regime in 1952, must be understood in light of ‘Ayyad’s relationship, as a Copt, to the changing idea of Egypt as a nation.

Before going any further, we should get a fuller sense of who ‘Ayyad was.¹⁹⁹ Born into a Coptic Christian family in Al-Faggala, a middle-class area of Cairo, in March 1892, he attended the French Catholic Frères School. His foreign education was not only typical for Coptic Christians, it was also a mark, if not of his family’s social standing, than at least of their aspirations towards upward social mobility.²⁰⁰ He was one of the first students to enter the Cairo School of Fine Arts at its founding in 1908, graduating in 1910 alongside Mukhtar,²⁰¹ and was fairly typical of that first generation in belonging to the emerging middle strata of society that has been termed the *effendiyya*.²⁰² ‘Ayyad

¹⁹⁹ Biographical information concerning Ragheb ‘Ayyad is compiled from Badr al-Din Abu Ghazi, *Ragheb ‘Ayyad*, (Cairo, Al-Hay’a al-‘amma li l-isti‘amat, n.d.), Sobhi Al-Sharuni, *A Museum in a Book: the Collection of Dr. Mohamed Saiid al-Farsy* (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 1998), 86, and *Qita’ al-funun al-tashkiliyya*, <http://www.fineart.gov.eg/arb/cv/CV.asp?IDS=1852>

²⁰⁰ Sana Hassan, *Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: the century-long struggle for Coptic equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20.

²⁰¹ Al-Sharuni, *A Museum in a Book*, 86; while it seems to be the general consensus in the literature that ‘Ayyad was among the first to graduate from the School, in a biographical annex Aimé Azar gives his graduation date as 1914 (Aimé Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte*, n.p.).

²⁰² To get an idea of the kind of social milieu in which ‘Ayyad was embedded, I refer the reader back to Ryzova’s definition of the *efendiyya*, Lucie Ryzova, ‘Efendification: the Rise of Middle Class Culture in Modern Egypt’ (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2008), 1-2, cited in full in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

himself referred to the students of the School as ‘middle-class,’²⁰³ and their social profile can be contrasted with that of some of the privately trained artists who entered the canon as members of the *ruwwad*, or pioneer, generation, painters such as Muhammad Nagi and Mahmud Sa‘id who were both from privileged Alexandrian backgrounds (we will see in further chapters how their rather different social standing played out in their depictions of the nation).

After graduating from the School of Fine Arts, ‘Ayyad taught drawing at the Higher Coptic School. A series of pedagogical cards that he created in collaboration with the painter Yusif Kamil, titled *Namadhij ar-rasm an-nadhari* (*Designs for freehand drawing*), bear witness to his involvement in teaching basic drawing (fig. 44).²⁰⁴ The designs, which come in a numbered series, each belong to one of five categories: Arab designs, Egyptian designs, European designs, natural designs, and stylised natural designs (literally: ‘natural design with a decorative aspect’). They thus provide evidence of an early interest in indigenous – in the form of Egyptian and Arab –, as well as European, design, an interest that would later develop more fully in the attempt to find a local and modern vernacular vocabulary for his paintings.

²⁰³ ‘Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 15.

²⁰⁴ Yusif Kamil and Ragheb ‘Ayyad, *Namadhij al-rasm al-nadhiri*, n.d. ; courtesy of Raja Adal. The cards list the authors’ names and functions: Yusif Kamil, drawing teacher at the Preparatory Secondary School, and Ragheb ‘Ayyad, drawing teacher at the Higher Coptic School. They are undated. In the centre of each card is the design, with a smaller diagram illustrating the ‘method of drawing.’ Until the late 1940s, art education in schools in Egypt was geared towards training students in symmetrical and geometrical designs that would enable them to put their art to use in industrial design and ornamentation. For more on this subject, see Raja Adal, ‘Aestheticizing the Nation’ (PhD Dissertation, University of Harvard, 2009), 51. The cards produced by ‘Ayyad and Kamil are an instance of the kind of art education that students had access to before embarking on a more advanced course. Much of ‘Ayyad’s career was spent training students in the kind of drawing that had practical applications, and from the photographs we have of the first exhibition of the graduates of the Cairo School of Fine Arts (fig.15 and 16), we might assume that it was drawing with a similarly practical and decorative bent that was taught there, at least at the beginning, and that this was likely the orientation of ‘Ayyad’s early training.

After a first trip to Italy in 1923, ‘Ayyad received a scholarship from the state and was thus able to return to Italy in 1924 or 1925.²⁰⁵ In Rome, he studied painting, decorative arts, and stage design at what is referred to in the literature as the *ma‘had al-funun al-gamila al-‘ali*, or literally the Higher Institute for the Fine Arts, probably the Rome Academy of Fine Arts.²⁰⁶ He exhibited paintings on rural themes in the city in 1928 or 1929 and was granted knighthood by the Italian state in 1936.²⁰⁷ I will return shortly to his time in Italy to explore its implications for his work.

After his return to Egypt in 1930, he was appointed head of the Decorative Arts Department at the School of Applied Arts in Cairo, a position he held until 1937. While an involvement with the decorative and applied arts seems to have been an important part of ‘Ayyad’s career, there are few traces of this part of his practice. Two matching pink enamel vases from 1941 that carry his signature are all that I have been able to locate (fig. 45).²⁰⁸ In 1937, he became a teacher at the School of Fine Arts and head of its ‘free’ department, which organized classes for those not registered as full-time students.

In addition to teaching, ‘Ayyad also became involved in the fledgling museum sector in Egypt. He became the administrator of the Coptic Museum in 1941, a position that, as we will see, had a strong impact on his choice of subject matter throughout the 1940s. In

²⁰⁵ The exact dates of ‘Ayyad’s stays in Italy are unknown. While the consensus in the secondary literature is that he stayed there from 1925 to 1930, a letter that he wrote to the Egyptian ambassador to Italy, dated June 1924 was written from Rome (‘Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 21-23).

²⁰⁶ Al-Sharuni, *A Museum in a Book*, 86 and *Qita’ al-funun al-tashkiliyya*, <http://www.fineart.gov.eg/arb/cv/CV.asp?IDS=1852>

²⁰⁷ Al-Sharuni, *A Museum in a Book*, 86; 1928 is the date given in Abu-Ghazi, *Ragheb ‘Ayyad* for the exhibition.

²⁰⁸ I owe the photographs of these vases to the courtesy of Amgad Naguib in Cairo.

1950, he was appointed director of the Museum of Modern Art (the founding of which was approved by Parliament in 1927, and which opened its doors in 1931), a position he held until 1955. During this time, he was also responsible for the project of creating a museum to host the sculptures of Mahmud Mukhtar, although the Mukhtar museum would not open its doors until 1962. He was also a frequent participator in the Cairo Salon organized by the Association of the Friends of the Fine Arts. He produced a large body of work after the 1952 revolution, such as *Agriculture* (fig. 41), with which we began (even though the focus is generally on his relationship to early nationalism and its discourse), and his status as one of the fathers of Egyptian modernism was confirmed when he was awarded a state prize and medal for his contribution to the fine arts in 1964, under Nasser.

Beyond these biographical details compiled from secondary sources, we know little about ‘Ayyad’s life and its relationship to his work. He published an article in the journal *Sawt al-fannan* in 1950, and a collection of writings about art in 1958, and from these, to which I will return in more detail shortly, we can glean something of his ideas about art. However, these writings from the 1950s constitute an already simplified and nationalized version of the events that marked the emergence of a practice of the fine arts in Egypt.

In what follows we will examine the tension between the apparently seamless national narrative associated with ‘Ayyad’s work and life, and the complicated issues involved in the process of imagining the nation through the practice of visual art. This tension might best be understood, I will suggest, in terms of what have been defined by Homi Bhabha,

and redefined by Mitchell, as the pedagogical and performative aspects of narrating the nation. The pedagogical, as we heard in the Introduction, refers to the official story of the nation as a homogenous and unproblematic entity - in the present case, the story of 'Ayyad's work and life that appears in the historiography, as well as the view of the nation that is – at least to some degree -- to be found in his painting and in his writings from the 1950s. The performative refers to the messy process of making the nation that always involves a confrontation with the otherness that poses an obstacle to the image of a unified community – in the present case, on one hand, the Egyptian peasant, on the other, 'Ayyad's own Coptic identity.

Before looking closely at some of 'Ayyad's paintings and the specific historical moments in which they were produced, it will be useful to gain an idea of the material with which 'Ayyad worked to define the nation, i.e., elite perceptions of the peasant, on one hand, and of the context in which his definitions of the nation took form, i.e., the relationship of the Coptic minority to the Muslim majority, on the other hand.

In the first half of the twentieth century, and with increasing urgency in the late 1930s and early 1940s, there was much debate among the Egyptian elite about what they perceived to be the 'peasant problem.'²⁰⁹ the inhabitants of rural Egypt, often illiterate and poor, and seen by the elite as pre-modern, posed an obstacle to the country's modernization. The 'peasant problem' was addressed in tandem with debates surrounding Egyptian national identity, and the Egyptian peasant occupied a paradoxical position at the heart of the process of making the nation: on one hand, the rural population's

²⁰⁹ Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 132.

closeness to the land and their way of life perceived to be unchanging and traditional made of them a powerful repository for an 'authentic' Egyptian identity; on the other, they were perceived to be an obstacle to modernization.

From the 1930s, the peasants were seen increasingly as a social problem. A desire to increase productivity and by doing so, to free the country from the yoke of foreign economic domination, had prompted intellectuals and policy makers to start thinking in new ways about the peasantry and how to improve their productivity in a largely agricultural economy.²¹⁰ The agricultural crisis brought on by the Great Depression prompted broad interest in the plight of the peasant and wide-spread support for rural reform.²¹¹ In 1938 alone, three important studies of the 'peasant problem' were published, including the previously mentioned *The Egyptian Peasant* by Henri Ayrout, Mirrit Butrus Ghali's *Siyasat al-ghad* (Policy of Tomorrow, 1938), and Hafiz Afifi's *'Ala Hamish al-siyasa* (Notes on Politics, 1938).²¹² These were followed shortly by Mustafa Mahmud Fahmi *The Social Situation in Egypt* (1940), and Ahmad Sadiq Saad's *The Problem of the Fallah* (1945). In addition to this, a new Agricultural Museum, which opened its doors in 1938, was to serve as a basis for agrarian reform, and, through explanations of ancient Egyptian techniques, pictures of modern peasant 'types,' and exhibits of idealized rural life, expounded the glories of Egyptian agriculture.²¹³

²¹⁰ Michael Gasper, *The Power of Representation: Publics, peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4.

²¹¹ Amy J. Johnson, *Reconstructing Rural Egypt* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 29; Mitchell locates the historical origins of the related Western interest in peasants from different parts of the world to the late 1930s: 'the emergence of peasant studies as a new field of expertise more than half a century ago can be located quite precisely in the widespread rebellions that rural populations were able to organize against occupying European powers during the interwar years (Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 124).

²¹² Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 132.

²¹³ *Guide to the Agricultural Museum* (Cairo: Ministry of Agriculture, 1971?), 7.

Working the land was still the occupation of most of the Egyptian population, and the peasants were seen to constitute a major obstacle to the process of industrialization well into the second half of the twentieth century.²¹⁴ The concern with rural regeneration continued and increased after Nasser's military coup in September 1952.²¹⁵ Land reforms followed directly, addressing the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a very few. Among other things, these reforms limited possession to 200 feddans, one feddan being roughly equivalent to an acre, and created a minimum wage for agricultural workers.²¹⁶

As I have shown in the Introduction, a compelling analysis of the paradoxical position occupied by the peasant is to be found in Timothy Mitchell's essay 'Heritage and Violence.'²¹⁷ Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the architect Hassan Fathy's plans for the village of New Gurna, making the nation always involves confrontations with otherness. In Egypt, this problem was particularly acutely felt around the figure of the peasant, and the question of what the countryside might properly look like, as Mitchell's example makes strikingly clear. It is this kind of internal friction, this kind of struggle over what the peasant might be and how an image of the countryside – whether in the architecture of its villages or in the bodies of its peasants – might be formulated, that

²¹⁴ Charles Issawi, 'Population and Wealth in Egypt,' *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, v. 27, no. 1 (1949): 102; 112-113

²¹⁵ For an in depth analysis of one such project, the Rural Social Centres set up by the German trained agricultural specialist Ahmed Hussein, and for which two pilot programmes were set up in villages in 1938, see Johnson, *Reconstructing Rural Egypt*.

²¹⁶ The agrarian reforms carried out under Nasser have been the object of political propaganda. See for example the illustrations of the peasant before and after the revolution in the *Guide to the Agricultural Museum* (Cairo: Ministry of Agriculture, 1971?), 56-57.

²¹⁷ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 177-206.

provides much of the material with which ‘Ayyad worked. Beneath the apparently unified paintings we sense the constant, and constantly disavowed, otherness that always underlies and undermines narratives of a unified nation.²¹⁸

If, in the 1930s, the peasant constituted the main figure in representations of the nation but also, paradoxically, its most prominent other, there is another form of otherness that underlies ‘Ayyad’s images of the nation. As a member of the Coptic minority, ‘Ayyad was faced throughout his life with the changing attitudes of Egyptian Muslims towards Egyptian Christians, and I will suggest that ‘Ayyad’s frequent reiteration of the figure of the peasant, must be understood in light of his own difference within the nation.

The position of the Coptic community in Egypt had long been, and continues to be, problematic. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries their position was precarious, despite the fact that they had achieved increased social mobility since the era of Muhammad Ali. The Ottoman governor’s programme of modernization and reform had provided new opportunities for minorities, and the Copts were no exception: due to their skills in accounting and surveying, tasks towards which Muslims tended to be reticent, they were able to advance economically and begin to organize politically.²¹⁹

A new and short-lived era of Coptic integration in the national project began in the 1910s, at the time when ‘Ayyad was starting his career. The secular nationalist movement for Egyptian independence that culminated in the 1919 uprisings courted Coptic cooperation,

²¹⁸ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 182-3.

²¹⁹ Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, 33.

and Zaghlul's Wafd party was able to rally more support from the Coptic minority than any other mainstream political party in Egypt ever had, or would since. In addition to this, the Coptic community carried some symbolic weight, as their presence in Egypt predated that of Islam.²²⁰ This 'Muslim-Christian honeymoon'²²¹ did not last in the tense economic and social conditions of the 1930s that saw the Egyptian population's disillusionment with the Wafd and with Egypt's failed political system, and we will see that this had an impact on 'Ayyad's painting, as he turned to emphasize other forms of difference within the nation, as if to deflect from his own. The 1952 revolution, while in theory secular, further isolated Egypt's Coptic community from the political process, and we will see that this too had an impact on 'Ayyad's work.

Thus, 'Ayyad's images of the people of Egypt were inflected differently at different times throughout his life according to his own changing, but always self-conscious, relationship to the nation. From the distance of Italy, where he spent five years between 1925 and 1930, it was possible for him to imagine the peasant as an unproblematic symbol. At this time, Copts were seen as an integral part of the national cause, albeit self-consciously so, and in 1930, we see 'Ayyad embracing a unified image of the nation. His confrontation with the discourse surrounding the peasants in the 1930s after his return to Egypt would change his depiction of them. After 1952, as he returned to creating representations of the nation after a decade dedicated to Coptic subjects, 'Ayyad's writings and images register the changes that had taken place in the Coptic situation, especially with the revolution of

²²⁰ The circumstances in which this interpretation of Coptic history emerged are recounted in a full chapter on the founding of the Coptic Museum titled 'Modern Sons of the Pharaohs?' in *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 258-286.

²²¹ Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims*, 38.

1952. At this time, the task of depicting a unified nation became more urgent: in the case of *Agriculture*, which I will return to at the end of this chapter, I will argue that it was precisely this urgency that prompted ‘Ayyad to create his most seamless image of the nation, proving his alliance to Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser’s reformed rural Egypt.

In 1930, the year of his return to Egypt from Italy, ‘Ayyad painted *Manthar Rifi* (Rural Scene, 1930; fig. 46). In this image, one of his earliest extant paintings, the peasants are rendered as idealized beings, characterized by a mix of Pharaonic clothing and timeless nudity. The faces of the human figures are devoid of features, making it clear that this painting is not about their individual identity, but about an ideal of rural life. The gentle colour scheme composed of complementary blues and oranges that bathes the scene subsumes the different figures, animal and human, as well as the landscape, into a unified whole. The figures in the painting are blurred, and their bodies, undifferentiated from those of the animals that they variously lead, follow, and ride. In particular, the unity between man and beast is manifested in the naked figure riding a water buffalo, their bodies marked by the same dark lines that emphasize, on one hand, the man’s pectorals, and on the other, the animal’s ribs.

The unity between man and beast finds an echo in the novel *‘Awdat al-ruh* (*The Return of the Spirit*, 1933) by the playwright and novelist Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987), which offers significant insight into the kind of rural discourse of the nation that emerged in

tandem with debates surrounding the peasant problem outlined above.²²² The novel, like Mukhtar's previously discussed *Egypt's Awakening*, was created as a monument to the events of 1919. The action takes place in the months leading up to the 1919 revolution, and the setting alternates between Cairo and a rural estate in the Egyptian Delta. A young man, Muhsin, whose parents are rich landowners, lives in Cairo with his two uncles, Hanafi and 'Abdu, their cousin Salim, their spinster sister Zanuba and their friend and honorary servant, Mabruk. The family jokingly calls itself *al-sha'b*, or 'the people'. Next door lives Dr Hilmi with his wife and his daughter Saniyya who is the object of the affections of all the men from 'the people.' Muhsin himself is her most ardent and sincere admirer. Dashing all his hopes, the girl falls in love with another neighbour, Mustafa, upon whom Zanuba has her sights set. 'The people' find consolation from their thwarted love affairs in the 1919 revolution, which puts an abrupt end to the story and announces the awakening of the nation.

The passages of the novel where the young hero Muhsin is in the countryside allow the author to indulge in an idealizing and distancing gaze. While wandering around his parents' plantation, Muhsin

...saw an open door. He poked his head inside but found no one. He realized that its occupants were out to pasture, so to speak. He went inside instantly and started to look around. He saw a small courtyard, half of which was roofed with dry cotton and corn stalks, and then a small chamber. Its door was open as well. Muhsin looked in. He observed something he would never forget. He saw that this chamber was where the occupants slept. (...) he also saw in one corner a cow. In front of it was a load of clover, and between its back legs was a beautiful suckling calf reaching for a teat. But what astonished Muhsin was to see beside that suckling calf a suckling child,

²²² Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *'Awdat al-ruh* (Cairo: Maktabat al-adab, 1964). For an English translation, see William M. Hutchins, *Return of the Spirit : Tawfiq al-Hakim's Classic Novel of the 1919 Revolution* (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1990).

presumably the son of the occupants. He was crowding against the calf and pushing him away from the cow's udder. The cow remained calm and still, not interfering with either one of them, as though she did not favour one over the other. The calf and the child both seemed to be her children. What a beautiful picture! What a striking concept!

Muhsin looked at the nursing calf in its purity and its innocence. It was making a sound that showed it was content and full. Then he looked at the nursing child who let out a cry of pleasure and contentment in its purity and innocence. It seemed to him that the two of them understood each other, as though they did not perceive at all the difference between them. (...) The scene reminded him suddenly (...) that the ancient Egyptians worshipped animals or at least the one God with images of different animals... Why? Muhsin was not able to know the exact reason. (...) did not the ancient Egyptians know that unity of existence and that overall union between the different groups of creatures? If their symbol for god was half man and half animal, was it not a sign of their perception that existence is nothing but a unity? They did not scorn animals any more than this child would scorn the calf. So if they made god in a man's form, they also represented him in the form of animals, birds, and insects... (...) The feeling of being merged with existence, that is, of being merged in God, that was the feeling of that child and calf suckling together. It was the feeling of that ancient, deeply rooted Egyptian people.

Even now, the farmers of Egypt had a heartfelt respect for animals. They did not disdain to live with them in the same house or to sleep together in a single room.²²³

In this passage, the author insists on the idea of unity. Yet the unity that he describes is not that between members of the nation, it is that between peasant and beast. A slippage thus occurs between two different kinds of unity: the novel is supposedly about the unifying power of the national spirit that encompasses all the inhabitants of the nation, yet when we look closely, the unity never lies where it promises to lie. In this passage, Muhsin, as the son of the landowner and a city-dweller, provides the gaze capable of defining the unity that he observes as an outsider. In doing so, he distances himself completely from the peasants and the animals.

I suggest that the lack of an implied embodied viewer in *Rural Scene* points to a similar slippage: indeed, there is no continuity between the space of the urban artist and that of

²²³ Hutchins, *Return of the Spirit*, 168-169.

the peasants and their animals, as they have been endowed with little volume and no gaze. This separation of space allows for a depiction of unity that does not acknowledge the problematic position of the urban elite.

Thus, it seems that from the distance of Italy, and perhaps even in the months following his return, ‘Ayyad was easily able to imagine an unproblematic nation in the form of an idyllic rural life. Furthermore, as a Copt, he had an interest in doing so, and we might further speculate that ‘Ayyad was caught up in the nationalist enthusiasm of the 1920s. Indeed, the secular nationalists of the 1919 era were eager to create a broad consensus against the British occupier, and, as we have seen, the 1920s saw an unprecedented participation of the Egyptian Coptic community in politics, as they rallied behind the cause for national independence.²²⁴

However, despite the various ways in which the painting strives to present itself as a unified, coherent image of the nation, it is necessarily marked by disjunction. Consider, for example, the fact that the very idea of presenting the nation via such images was something that ‘Ayyad picked up in part on his European travels. Indeed, his depictions of the popular classes must be understood in light of ideas about the relationship between the preservation of the diversity of the rural world and the emergence of a unified national identity in vogue in Italy during the time he spent there, from 1925 to 1930.

²²⁴ Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims*, 41; see also Rachel M. Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 40.

It is difficult to get an accurate idea of ‘Ayyad’s experience and of his artistic interests in Rome, as little is known of his stay and no paintings or drawings of his that appear in public collections and publications are dated earlier than 1930.²²⁵ He arrived in Italy in 1924 or 1925, in the midst of profound upheaval: 1925 was the year Mussolini declared his dictatorship over the country, an event that also marked the beginning of efforts to ‘create an infrastructure that would support the development of a fascist culture.’²²⁶ In theory, the cultural policy of Mussolini’s regime was one of openness, and indeed, despite frequent persecution of artists and intellectuals, there never was an official art of the regime. Following a speech by Mussolini at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia on 7 October 1926, in which he called for the creation of an art for the new fascist era, the

²²⁵ Mona Abaza has him studying under Ferruccio Ferrazzi at Accademia di Belle Arti: Mona Abaza, *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 15. However, according to Grove Art Online, Ferrazzi did not become a professor at the school until 1929, four or five years into ‘Ayyad’s stay (M. Gale, ‘Ferrazzi, Ferruccio,’ *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, May 2, 2012 <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T028036>).

I have not been able to locate the curriculum for the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome where ‘Ayyad most likely studied. We might glean something of the kind of education he received in Italy from other sources. In 1923, Italian school curricula were revised by Giovanni Gentile, the philosopher of the fascist regime. The curricular changes stemmed from a philosophical treatise on education titled *The Reform of Education* in which Gentile reiterated fascism’s claim to address the needs of the whole man. This led for example to a stance against the division of knowledge into disciplines (Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education* (Project Gutenberg, 2011), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36762>).

From a Unesco document, *Seminar on the Teaching of Visual Arts in General Education: Art Education in Italy* (Paris: Unesco, 1951), we know that after the 1923 reform, Italian secondary school programmes in the arts showed a strong emphasis on the applied arts: the *Scuole d’arte* prepared students for careers in ‘the traditional arts and crafts, related to the particular industries and raw materials of the locality.’ The *Institute d’arte*, which taught ‘drawing, modeling, applied painting, and domestic architecture’ qualified students to become teachers in these secondary schools, while the *Licei Artistici* prepared students for entrance into the Academies. Their curricula included theatre design and architecture alongside painting and sculpture. While there is clearly a progression from the applied arts to painting and sculpture, nonetheless, the applied and decorative arts were an integral part of these programmes, and it seems plausible in light of this that ‘Ayyad did in fact study painting, decorative arts, and stage design, as is claimed in the historiography, at the Academy in Rome.

‘Ayyad seems to have taken a more active interest in the country’s ancient art than in what was going on in the art scene at the time he was there, as he later published articles on the mosaics of Ravenna and on Raphael and Michelangelo, but was silent on the subject of the contemporary art scene.

However, he showed some interest in the cultural policy of Italy as it affected him and his fellow Egyptian artists. In a letter to the Egyptian ambassador in Rome dated 1924, ‘Ayyad suggested the creation of an Egyptian academy in Rome, the ‘city of the arts,’ such as those that other countries had to support their young artists. He wrote that Italy, ‘the capital of the fine arts,’ was extending a helping hand, and Mussolini was granting fee exemptions to foreign art students. ‘Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 22.

²²⁶ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 21.

question of what constituted fascist art was hotly debated in the journal *Critica Fascista*.²²⁷ All were in agreement that fascist art should be Italian in essence, but opinion diverged as to what that actually meant.

Italy had been until its unification a collection of very diverse rural states, and creating a unified, yet 'authentic,' Italian identity out of these regions was a central preoccupation for intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century. In this context, 'geographers, ethnographers, historians, and linguists studied and analyzed the living conditions and art forms of the agrarian peasant class and its relationship to the agrarian landscape.'²²⁸ While the peasant and rural life as sources of 'authentic' national identity are tropes that can be found in modern art and national discourse throughout the world, they were inflected in different ways according to specific historical and geographical circumstances. In France, for example, the focus of Interwar regionalism was on recovering, or reinventing, regional rural identities perceived to have been lost in the process of national centralization, dating back at least to the French Revolution.²²⁹ In Italy, still in the midst of the difficult process of centralizing disparate regions, the emphasis was on the preservation of the diverse forms of rural life, which was still the lived reality of a majority of Italians, rather than on its recovery.²³⁰

²²⁷ For translations of some of the texts drawn from these debates, see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *A Primer of Italian Fascism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 207-41.

²²⁸ Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 29. The process of unifying the diverse states that constituted what is now Italy, called the *Risorgimento*, or resurgence, took place throughout the nineteenth century, between 1815 with the end of the Napoleonic wars and 1871, the end of the Franco-Prussian war.

²²⁹ On the subject of French regionalism, see Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 23-60.

²³⁰ This focus on preservation is highlighted in Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty*, 25-56.

Thus, the peasant was a central figure in Italian art and thought throughout the 1920s. Indeed, Italian Divisionists had been depicting an idyllic Italian countryside for decades, and painters of cultural movements with close ties to Fascism such as the *Novecento*, founded in Milan in 1922, whose artists focused on Italy's Renaissance heritage as a source of cultural pride, or the *Strapaese*, founded in 1926, more concerned with issues of regionalism, featured peasants as a subject in their work.²³¹ However, the impact of the Italian cultural and political scene on 'Ayyad's work is not to be found in the *look* of his paintings. The greatest impact is to be found, instead, on one hand in his belief that the nation can be imaged by depicting popular traditions in a style that can lay claim to being 'local' (Renaissance painting for Italians, Pharaonic art for Egyptians), and on the other hand, in his belief in the role of the artist as that of preserving the diversity of rural traditions at the service of a unified nation.

Next to painting, 'Ayyad studied decorative arts in Rome, and the ideas in vogue among Italian practitioners of design and architecture in the 1920s were likely influential to his thinking about art.²³² 'Peasant art' in the Italian peninsula emerged as a subject of interest and source of inspiration in the first decades of the twentieth century, and was publicized

²³¹ For the divisionists, see for example the work of Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo (1868-1907), Giovanni Segantini (1858-99), Gaetano Previati (1852-1920), and Angelo Morbelli (1853-1919); among the *Novecentists*, the work of Anselmo Bucci (1887-1955) in particular prominently featured rural life. The most emblematic painter of the *Strapaese*, Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), was better known for his still-lives.

²³² 'Ayyad made frequent assertions about the economic and social functions of art, stating for example, in an essay first published in 1954, that 'it is part of the artist's mission to work towards supporting tourism by painting advertisements with popular tourist subjects.' ('Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 33). In 1958, he expressed his delight at the fact that 'we now see some graduates [from the School of Fine Arts] turning their activity towards journalism, providing it with drawings and advertisements and caricatures, and whatever else the newspapers and magazines need.' ('Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 12).

through exhibitions and publications.²³³ Important exhibitions included the pivotal *Mostra di etnografia* (Exhibition of Ethnography) of 1911, and the *Mostra di arte rustica* (Exhibition of Rustic Art) mounted in 1921 whose goal was to explore the ‘new possibilities that “rustic art” could offer to contemporary designers.’²³⁴ The most influential publication was the *Circolare n. 13: Raccolta di elementi decorative italiani di arte paesana* (Circular n. 13: Collection of Decorative Elements of Italian Peasants Art) of 1920 written by Arduino Colasanti (1877-1935). The author, who had recently been named general director of the Department of Antiquity and Fine Arts, advocated the collection of peasant art to avoid its disappearance.²³⁵ The publication was widely read and debated in Italy throughout the 1920s, and constituted an important part of the discourse regarding the preservation of regional rural traditions and art. These ideas were further expounded by a group that included the artist and architect Adolfo De Carolis (1874-1928) and the writer Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863-1938), gathered around the right-wing journal *La Fionda*. From the early 1920s, De Carolis advocated the preservation of the values inherent in what he called *arte popolare*, through the work of modern Italian artists.²³⁶

By the mid-1950s, ‘Ayyad would have much to say on the importance of a national artist depicting and preserving the life of the popular classes who were the object of so much poetry and policy, and his words offer confirmation that he was indebted to the Italian context of the 1920s for his ideas about the relationship between artist, nation, and

²³³ Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty*, 25-56.

²³⁴ Ibid., 57.

²³⁵ Ibid., 54.

²³⁶ Adolfo De Carolis, ‘L’Arte Popolare,’ *La Fionda*, August 1920, 13-21.

peasant. In a speech given at the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art in January 1954, the title of which, *Al-fann ash-sha'bi*, is the precise equivalent of the Italian *arte popolare*, 'Ayyad enthusiastically proclaimed that he drew inspiration for his depictions of the popular classes from direct observation, celebrating all aspects of popular life, from agriculture to fishing, from markets to saints' days, from weddings to impromptu musical performances in cafés, from horse dances to sword dances.'²³⁷ The phrase 'popular art,' the most obvious meaning of which would be art produced by the popular classes, is used here, and in the Italian context, to refer to the preservation of popular traditions, visual or otherwise, through the work of modern artists. Indeed, 'Ayyad, echoing the aforementioned Italian artist and architect Adolfo De Carolis, defined the role of the artist as that of preserving the diverse customs and traditions of the people of Egypt.'²³⁸ Still echoing De Carolis, 'Ayyad exalted the diversity of these manifestations, writing for example that wedding celebrations 'vary from region to region.'²³⁹

Some of the contradictions that underlie 'Ayyad's work can be sensed here. His statement that 'authentic art is that which draws its inspiration from its land and its environment,'²⁴⁰ for example, contains its own refutation when we know that much of his idea about the relationship between depictions of the peasant and images of the nation was formed during the period that he spent in Italy in the late 1920s. Likewise, there is a

²³⁷ The speech is reproduced in 'Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 29-34.

²³⁸ 'Ayyad wrote for example that 'with our paintbrush, we help [the peasant and the worker] to preserve these beautiful popular traditions' (Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 33); and that 'the life of the people and the popular artist [a title 'Ayyad seems to attribute to himself here] are inextricable from each other.' (30)

²³⁹ Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 32. In his article published in *La Fionda* in 1920, De Carolis goes into detail about the variety of regional wedding customs in Italy. Interestingly, 'Ayyad is not specific in his inventory, mentioning only that they vary.

²⁴⁰ Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, p. 29.

profound contradiction in the fact that, while he states that in countries where people have continued to live ‘according to nature,’²⁴¹ art has remained spontaneous, he also considers that the modern artist must do the job of preserving popular culture which is at risk of disappearing. Finally, ‘Ayyad declared that it was at the time when he left the School of Fine Arts in Cairo and ‘joined the school of nature, or the school of the people,’²⁴² delving into the study of the life of the people in all its richness, that he found freedom and ‘the beginning of a new life.’²⁴³ Yet we know that it was in Italy, far from home, that he began to imagine himself as the painter of the people of Egypt.

For the moment, we will leave aside thoughts of ‘Ayyad in the 1950s to return to our discussion of his early career. As should be clear by now, the ideas in vogue in Italy in the 1920s were an important part of the ideological background to ‘Ayyad’s conceptions of the relationship between nation, peasant, and artist. These ideas can be discerned in *Al-marh al-sha’bi* (*The Joy of the People*; fig. 47) from 1930, which consists of an inventory of various aspects of Egyptian folk traditions: the scene, at the centre of which is a horse dancer, similar to the one that can be seen in the distance at the upper left-hand corner of *Agriculture*, takes place against the background of an Islamic city, with its minarets and domes. Behind the dancing horse, a man sits atop a camel, while to the right of the composition, two men engage in a traditional stick fight. Behind them, stands a reed player, and two more musicians can be seen accompanying the action on the lower left-hand corner of the composition. A group consisting of a woman carrying a baby and a young girl completes the inventory of all things popular and Egyptian. In addition to

²⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

²⁴² Ibid., 30.

²⁴³ Ibid., 30.

this, the dancing horse, who constitutes the central figure of the painting, is the result of ‘Ayyad’s familiarity with several Egyptian sources, the accumulation of which offers a multi-layered meaning with regard to definitions of national identity.

Most strikingly, the horse and its rider are strongly reminiscent of folk images of the pre-Islamic poet, Antara Ibn Shaddad, and the slave girl to whom he devoted much of his poetry, Abla Bint Miriam. The lovers are usually represented on horseback, as in this nineteenth century Egyptian tattoo pattern from the Egyptian Ethnographical Museum (established in 1885 under the auspices of Khedive Ismail; fig. 48). It is likely that ‘Ayyad would have seen the pattern at the Museum, but even if he did not, similar images were in no short supply. Other examples of the theme include paintings on glass by the prominent Syrian artist Abou Subhi al-Tinawi (1883–1973) whose work was reproduced on postcards that circulated in the Arab world (fig. 49).²⁴⁴ Here we see ‘Ayyad drawing on images from a pre-Islamic Arab heritage, a choice that is, on one level, a strange one, as the Copts did not consider themselves to be Arabs, as their presence in Egypt predated the arrival of the Muslims. However, this image also predates Islam, making it an acceptable reference to the Arab part of Egyptian culture for a Christian. Furthermore, its direct source was likely a particular visual iteration of the story of Antara and Abla presented in a museum as a piece of Egyptian folklore.

The wall paintings and icons of saints on horseback that decorate the walls of the Coptic churches of Egypt constitute a second likely source - for example, this icon of Saint

²⁴⁴ Akram Qansu, *Al-taswir al-sha‘bi al-‘arabi* (Kuwait: Al-majlis al-watani lil-thaqafa wa l-funun wa l-adab, 1995), 232-236.

Mercurius from the church of the same name in old Coptic Cairo (fig. 50). In particular, the placement of the rider's body, his shoulders turned parallel to the picture plane, is reminiscent of the Coptic images. We might see in this reference a claim about the national 'authenticity' of the Copts, and perhaps even a statement the potential of Christian religious images as a source for 'popular' art (in the sense defined by 'Ayyad in 1954).

A third possible source for the image consists of the paintings with which Muslim Egyptians sometimes decorate the outside walls of their homes to celebrate the participation of a family member in the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. There are records of paintings such as these going back at least to Napoleon's invasion, and while we cannot point to instances that are contemporaneous with 'Ayyad and *Joy of the City*, as these images tend to fade or to be painted over in time, we might get an idea of some of the recurring motifs from instances of *hajj* painting that are visible today.²⁴⁵

Methods of transportation are a common theme, and horses figure regularly, carrying the pilgrim on their backs, as is the case in this painting from Silwa Bahari, near Aswan (fig. 51).²⁴⁶ While turning to the *hajj* paintings as a visual source might seem like a strange move for a Coptic Egyptian, the practice, while Muslim in theory, is in fact more regional than religious, as it is limited mostly to Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Furthermore, in Egypt, these kinds of paintings are seen mostly in Upper Egypt, in the Fayyoub, and

²⁴⁵ For an account of reactions to these paintings, see Juan E. Campo, 'Shrines and Talismans: Domestic Islam in the Pilgrimage Paintings of Egypt,' *American Academy of Religion* (Summer 1987), 289.

²⁴⁶ For a broad sample of images of these paintings, see Ann Parker and Avon Neal, *Hajj Paintings: Folk Art of the Great Pilgrimage* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

in the Oases, and predominantly on the abodes of the poorer factions of the population. It seems likely, then, that ‘Ayyad saw in it an example of ‘authentic’ Egyptian rural folklore rather than an expression of religiosity.

Thus, in this image, ‘Ayyad created a horse and rider that could be recognized as a reference to any of three sources, one Arab, one Coptic, one Muslim, all of which would have been familiar to him. In doing so, he seems to have been emphasizing the *Egyptian* nature of all three rather than their extra-Egyptian, or only partially Egyptian, connotations. Here, in the ease with which he combined Arab, Islamic, and Coptic sources to create a timeless image of the Egyptian people, the image not only brings these different sources of collective identity together as a single, Egyptian one, but also emphasizes the fundamental similarity between the three. Here, we have a prime example of ‘Ayyad dipping into various pre-existing sources to depict the people of Egypt.

Thus, both *Rural Scene* and *Joy of the People* are idealized composites of pre-conceived ideas and previously existing images ranging from ancient Egyptian to modern European sources, rather than the fruit of ‘Ayyad’s observation of the people of Egypt, as he would claim in 1954. In this ‘Ayyad was very much of his time. Consider, for example, the 1938 book published in French by the Egyptian Jesuit, Henry Ayrout, *The Egyptian Peasant*.²⁴⁷ Crucially, Ayrout’s book was written while the author was pursuing doctoral

²⁴⁷ The French original, *Moeurs et coutûmes des fellahs* (Paris: Payot, 1938) was later translated into English with the title *The Egyptian Peasant* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). As Timothy Mitchell has shown in his remarkable essay, ‘The Invention and Reinvention of the Egyptian Peasant,’ the reflections found in Ayrout continued later to be reflected, as in the well-known and well-respected account of life in rural Egypt, the American author Richard Critchfield’s *Shahhat: an Egyptian Peasant* (1978). Mitchell shows without a doubt that Critchfield’s book is based heavily on Ayrout’s, and demonstrates ‘[Critchfield’s] “real peasant” to be something constructed out of earlier representations, as a collage of familiar Orientalist

studies in France, and we might be reminded here of Mukhtar creating *Egypt's Awakening* in France, or 'Ayyad's depicting the Egyptian peasant in Italy. Ayrout's book was not based on close observation of rural life, as he claimed, but rather, held up 'a mirror reflecting not some original peasant reality but a series of other mirrors, ranging from the French *Description d'Egypte* and the writings of nineteenth-century European travellers to the exhibits in the Egyptian museum.'²⁴⁸ Ayrout claimed to be delivering an 'authentic' image of the 'Egyptian peasant,' while in reality, his 'authentic' peasant is nothing more than a collage of various pre-existing accounts of the Egyptian peasant.

No single fact brings this more powerfully to the fore than the almost total absence of the supposed observer from accounts of the places and events to which he bears witness: Ayrout, who bases his supposed thorough knowledge of rural Egypt on the time he spent observing and interacting with the peasants, never appears in his own descriptions. Similarly, in *Rural Scene* and *Joy of the People*, the embodied point of view of the artist is not registered, and the figures in the painting, laid out flatly, occupy a space that is in no way continuous with that of the viewer.

'Ayyad's visual relationship to the popular classes changed after his return to Egypt in 1930. As we have seen, the 1930s were a tumultuous time in the history of Egypt, and they were especially difficult for the Copts. An emphasis on Islam in the nationalist discourse of the 1930s went hand in hand with an increase in persecution against the

images juxtaposed with clippings taken (...) from earlier writings, in particular from the previous popular study in a similar genre, *The Egyptian Peasant* by Henry Ayrout (...). Thus Critchfield's village turns out to be the exotic kind of place we have somehow always visited before, in museums, Arabian nights, and guidebooks, but above all in studies of the Egyptian peasant.' (Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 123- 129)

²⁴⁸ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 133.

Christians. Throughout the decade, as the parliamentary system lost any semblance of legitimacy, groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Young Egypt organized vehement political protest, and political violence became commonplace. While in 1936, Copts had sided with Muslims to revoke the British right to protect the minorities of Egypt, against the mandate defined in one of the reserved points in the 1922 declaration of independence, by 1946, the Coptic community, feeling threatened in the new political climate, once more called for foreign protection.²⁴⁹ I suggest that in the midst of the growing marginalization of the Coptic Christians within Egypt throughout the 1930s, ‘Ayyad was compelled to emphasize forms of difference other than his own.

This included, but was not limited to, the figure of the peasant. The two paintings that we will look at here, *A Café in Aswan* from 1933 (fig. 52), and *The Sudanese Dance* from 1937 (fig. 53), are both demonstrations of difference that set the artist and viewer apart from the figures in the paintings. While they maintain a rural component, as images of inhabitants of villages rather than of Cairo or Alexandria, they are, more importantly, images of regions far from the sieges of power, and far from the urban identity associated with national modernity.

As the title *A Café in Aswan* (1933; fig. 52) tells us, the scene is set in a café in a town across the river from the Nubian village where the architect Hassan Fathy found his model ‘Egyptian’ village, in Upper Egypt, a region of the country that has been termed

²⁴⁹ Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims*, 53.

Egypt's 'internal other'.²⁵⁰ Indeed, because of its distance from the centres of power, its inhabitants were frequently the object of mockery in popular culture, at least from the 1920s.²⁵¹ (We will see in the following chapter that, because of the predominantly rural lifestyle of the region's inhabitants, and their proximity to some of the most important ancient Egyptian ruins, including those at Luxor and Thebes, Upper Egyptians were also at times portrayed as sources of 'authentic' national identity.)

In the painting, the patrons of the café are scattered, sitting around tables alone or in groups, while two musicians sit on a podium at the back. The space of the café has depth, and the gaze of the viewer, who participates in the painting's space, emanates from the bottom centre of the scene. A woman smoking a *sheesha*, sitting slightly to the right of the middle in a yellow dress and red head scarf stares vacantly out at the viewer, while the man at the bottom middle of the composition returns the viewer's curious stare.

We might find traces of a number of European sources here. Giuseppe Signorini's *An Arab Cafe* (n.d.; fig. 54), which 'Ayyad might have seen in Rome, is an instance of the trope of Arab cafés in European Orientalist painting, while Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Almées jouant aux échecs* (ca. 1870; fig. 55) is another likely source, as the woman smoking a *sheesha* who constitutes the central figure in *A Café in Aswan* seems to be in part a composite of Gérôme's two females figures, adopting the yellow clothing of the woman on the left, and the half-turned position of the woman on the right. That 'Ayyad referred

²⁵⁰ Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the modern nation through popular culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 8.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

to images of the Orient painted by Europeans seems to confirm that this painting is about emphasizing the difference that separates him from the figures within it.

In addition to this, there are echoes in this image of European café scenes, for example Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *At the Moulin Rouge* (1892), in particular in the viewer's relationship to the space of the painting, as we can sense the artist's embodied presence in a space continuous with that of the picture. That the Cairene artist and the Upper Egyptians occupy the same space here highlights the difference between them, as idealization becomes more difficult. The interplay of gazes crosses the boundary of the canvas, as the figures address the viewer directly, making him feel like an outsider intruding in a village café frequented only by locals.

That in the 1930s 'Ayyad was highlighting difference within the nation other than his own is perhaps even more evident in the 1937 painting *Raqsa sudaniyya* (*A Sudanese Dance*, 1937; fig. 53). The painting is set in the Sudan, which Egyptian nationalists had long claimed was an organic part of Egypt.²⁵² Officially, the Sudan had been under joint Egyptian British rule since the Condominium agreement of 1899, but the Egyptian military had left after the assassination the Governor-General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Lee Stack, in 1924.²⁵³ In 1936, after Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, the British and the Egyptians, organized into a front uniting politicians and the Palace, entered into renewed negotiations over the question of Egypt's incomplete independence. A treaty was signed in January 1937 that left many Egyptian nationalists dissatisfied as it

²⁵² Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs*, 53-54.

²⁵³ Robert O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33.

maintained British military presence in the country, and left the question of the status of the Sudan unresolved.

‘Ayyad thus painted *A Sudanese Dance* at a point in Egyptian history where the question of the Sudan was at the forefront of discussions about Egyptian national identity, positioned as both a part of, yet different from, Egypt itself. The painting presents two African women dancing, as two musicians, a man and a woman, sit at the back providing accompaniment. The difference between the figures within the painting in one hand, and the painter and his audience on the other, is highlighted throughout: the figures’ skin is very dark, and their African features are emphasized. In addition to this, the main figures are women, a fact that further distances them from ‘Ayyad. The movements performed by the women contrast sharply with, for example, the movement of the horse dancer in *Joy of the People*. Here, the women dramatically throw their hands up and their heads back. Furthermore, the musical accompaniment consists only of percussion, as the man plays a drum while the woman claps along, unlike what we have seen for *Joy of the People* (fig. 47) and *A Café in Aswan* (fig. 52). In depicting the Sudan in 1936, ‘Ayyad brought the region into the realm of Egyptian imagery, all the while emphasizing the otherness of its inhabitants. Here, again, he seems to be aligning himself with the nation by highlighting forms of otherness that were not his own.

In 1941, ‘Ayyad was appointed as administrator of the Coptic Museum, and in 1947, oversaw the inauguration of the institution’s new wing.²⁵⁴ The little that we know of his

²⁵⁴ *The Coptic Museum* (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, Egyptian Antiquities Organization, 1990), 15. The catalogue also provides an outline of the Museum’s collections in English, French, and Arabic. For a more

work during the decade that followed was devoted to the depiction of Coptic subjects. During that time, he created images of Coptic monks and religious ceremonies that might be understood as part of his chronicles of Egyptian traditional life. His presence in the heart of Cairo's old Coptic quarter, amidst the churches and monasteries, as well as his official role as keeper of Coptic culture, provided the material for his depictions of the rites of the community.

Ad-Dayr (The Monastery, 1946; fig. 56) is a peaceful rendition of a religious ritual. The inside of the monastery is peopled with monks dressed in religious robes in the middle of mass, one of them turning his back to the congregation as he faces the altar. The image presents an idealized view: indeed, it shows an exclusive interest in the religious aspect of Coptic life, excluding daily life and the community's frequently problematic relationship to the Muslim majority.

Indeed, as we look at this image, and at others from the same period (for example *Ad-dayr min al-kharij*, or *The Monastery from the outside*; fig. 57), we must bear in mind that the situation of the Copts in Egypt was increasingly difficult throughout the 1940s, as resentment and violence against the community escalated.²⁵⁵ In this context, the idealization of the Copts by omission is telling. It seems likely that 'Ayyad, who, as we have seen, exhibited in the Cairo Salon and other venues where Muslims, Coptic

complete catalogue, but one that predates 'Ayyad's arrival at the institution, see Marcus H. Simaika, *Guide sommaire du Musée Copte* (Cairo: Publications de Musée Copte, 1937). On the early history of the Coptic Museum, and its implications for Egyptian national identity, see Donald M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 258-286.

²⁵⁵ Hasan, *Christians Versus Muslims*, 43-56.

Christians, and foreigners mixed freely, was thinking precisely of his Muslim audience as he depicted these peaceful and unthreatening monks. Showing them allowed ‘Ayyad to promote a particular kind of non-threatening image of his own religious community, in particular at a time, when, as administrator of the Coptic Museum, he held an important role in the representation of Coptic culture to the outside.

In 1950, ‘Ayyad left his position as administrator of the Coptic Museum to become director of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art. An abrupt change can also be discerned in his painting, as he abandoned the Coptic subjects that had marked his work in the 1940s to embrace once again the depiction of the Egyptian peasant as a symbol of the nation. As we have seen, the 1952 revolution further isolated the Coptic community from power. ‘Ayyad’s Coptic identity was already in play in his earlier work: in his emphasis on an unproblematic nation finding its essence in a pre-Islamic past in 1930; in his depiction of other forms of difference within the nation in the later 1930s; and in the 1940s, as he depicted Coptic subjects and promoted Coptic culture. However, by the 1950s, ‘Ayyad’s position within the nation had become more problematic, and in this decade, the idealization that was so central to his depictions of the nation in 1930 reappeared, but with renewed urgency. Indeed, as we look at two paintings from 1953, we get a sense of ‘Ayyad straining to represent the nation, and tensions can be sensed within the images in a way that could not in 1930.

Herd of Camels in a Sand Storm (1953; fig. 58) is a timeless image of a collectivity. As was the case in ‘Ayyad’s early images from 1930, the figures are subsumed within the

movement of the composition, their faces invisible. While the camel herders are dressed in the *galabiyat* (long robes) of modern Egyptians, these are lifted to knee level by the movement and the wind, falling in a triangular shape that seems to allude to ancient Egyptian dress.

However, despite the elements described above that suggest timelessness and unity, there is tension underlying the image, a tension that was absent from *Rural Scene*. Like the earlier painting, *Herd of Camels* depicts rural Egyptians herding animals. However, while in *Rural Scene*, the scene is orderly as the figures walk across the canvas, in perfect harmony with their beasts of labour, in *Herd of Camels*, the men struggle to gain control over the camels. The feeling of tension is enhanced by the black and blue rays that pierce the space, making visible the current that infuses the bodies of the figures and sweeps them into a movement beyond their control. The struggling men, dwarfed by the sheer size of the unwieldy camels, who outnumber them, bend and strain against the wind and the power of the large beasts. Their swaying bodies are echoed in the row of palm trees in the background, emphasizing the strength of the wind that runs through the composition. The uncontrollable weather inserts just enough of a threat to make the viewer nervous, as what should be an image of a traditional local task performed by timeless peasants begins to spin out of the artist's control.

The ink and watercolour drawing on paper titled *Women Selling Oranges Near a Camel Market* from the same year (1953; fig. 59) takes the process of the disintegration of unity visible in *Herd of Camels* one step further. Much of this is due to the fact that, as we have

seen was the case in *A Café in Aswan*, the figures here are endowed with a gaze, and the power of interaction: the two women sitting on the bottom right exchange a glance with a small girl holding the hand of the man looming above the crouching orange seller in the bottom left. The man and woman seem to be involved in an altercation, as he towers above her grimacing. The sneers on the faces of the camels, whose disproportionately large bodies tower over the scene, embody the animality that threatens to irrupt throughout the composition.

Yet the presence of a naked man on the back of one of the camels also points to the kind of rural symbolism that we saw in *Rural Scene* and in Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Return of the Spirit*. Furthermore, while the main figures are in contemporary Egyptian dress, those sketched vaguely in the background behind the camels seem to be in Pharaonic dress, pointing once again to the kind of timelessness that we have seen before. Finally, while the bodies of the figures have a certain weight, the blue lines that cross the image bring us back to the flatness of the paper on which it is drawn, negating the bodily presence of the figures. There is a sense in this painting that 'Ayyad, in 1953, shortly after the revolution, could not quite manage to pull together a coherent image of the people of Egypt. While the drawing, with its disparate components and split space, is certainly not the fruit of observation, it also fails to provide an adequate idealization of its subjects. Thus, in *Women Selling Oranges*, unity and division seem to coexist uneasily.

We have seen that the situation of the Copts after the revolution of 1952 made 'Ayyad's task of imagining the nation more difficult. I will come shortly to 1958, the year in which

‘Ayyad painted *Agriculture* to look at how the seamless image of a rural nation that appears within it relates to the context of Nasser’s Egypt. However, first it will be useful to contrast ‘Ayyad’s writings about art from 1950 with those from 1958 to get a clearer idea of what changed in 1952.

In 1950, the year he had been appointed to the position of director of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, ‘Ayyad published an article in the monthly journal *Sawt al-Fannan* (*The Voice of the Artist*) called ‘The Art Problem.’²⁵⁶ The new journal, which appeared in May of that year, was the first of its kind in Egypt, and marked the emergence of a field of visual arts and the consolidation of art as a profession. *Sawt al-fannan* featured articles covering everything to do with the arts, with a focus on the visual arts. Subjects treated ranged from the techniques of oil painting and drawing, to the history of decorative and ancient Egyptian art, and from art policy to recent exhibitions by young Egyptian painters. It placed articles about interior decorating and women’s fashion side by side with articles praising the role of major figures in the development of art institutions in Egypt, giving the reader the impression of art as an important contributor to the social and economic development of the nation.²⁵⁷

‘Ayyad’s article praised the new publication for the important role it would play in solving the biggest problem facing Egyptian art: the lack of unity and consensus within its ranks. *Sawt al-fannan* was what artists in Egypt ‘had been awaiting impatiently for

²⁵⁶ Ragheb ‘Ayyad, ‘Al-Mushkila al-fanniyya,’ *Sawt al-fannan* 5 and 6, September/October 1950, 16 and 69.

²⁵⁷ For example, the first ever edition of the magazine, *Sawt al-fannan* 1, May 1950, includes an article on how to make oil paintings (‘Kayfa tusna‘ sura zaytiyya,’ 39), a page devoted to fashion (‘Al-azya,’ 19), and a homage to the founder of the School of Fine Arts (‘Tahyat al-fannan ila al-amir Yusuf Kamal,’ 8).

decades to carry the message of art and diffuse it among the members of the noble Egyptian people,²⁵⁸ and most importantly, to be a forum for the unification of the field of Egyptian art. He wrote that unity is what is needed, and ‘cooperation is necessary to unify the discourse and to gather our ideas together.’²⁵⁹

The argument that ‘Ayyad made in his 1950 article, whereby the cooperation and unity provided by *Sawt al-Fannan* had been long in coming to the Egyptian art scene, suggests that Egyptian art suffered from a lack of consensus prior to that date. This account does not fit with his account of the early days of Egyptian modern art, published just a few years later in 1958, after the revolution, in which he portrayed an Egyptian art scene united since its inception, mapping the history of the Cairo School of Fine Arts and of art in Egypt closely onto the development of Egyptian modernity and nationalism.²⁶⁰ It seems that in 1950, ‘Ayyad, having just been appointed as director of the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, and hopeful that the difficult period that the Coptic community had lived through in the 1940s was coming to an end, was celebrating the possibility of a future that looked brighter than the past. At that date, and in the forum of *Sawt al-fannan*, he was able to remark on the lack of unity in the first half of the twentieth century.

The forward-looking stance adopted by ‘Ayyad in 1950 contrasts with the celebratory narrative of the past that appears in his account of the early events of Egyptian modern art, published in 1958 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the School of Fine

²⁵⁸ Ayyad, ‘Al-Mushkila al-fanniyya,’ 16.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 16: ‘Al-taktil wajib li tawhid al-kalima wa jam‘ al-afkar’

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 6-13.

Arts.²⁶¹ The publication bears witness to the progressive emergence of a pedagogical narrative of modern Egyptian art that ties its development inextricably to the to awakening of a national consciousness, as I have described in the Introduction. As we have seen, by 1956, most of the foreigners who had been part of the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the century were gone, and it is in this context that we must understand the nationalized version of the story of modern Egyptian art that appears in ‘Ayyad’s writings.

In ‘Ayyad’s version of events, all of those involved in the founding of the School of Fine Arts in 1908 were engaged in a common project, that constituting a school of modern art in Cairo. From the front-page illustration for the publication from 1958 (fig. 60), the reader is informed of the students’ modernity, as they are shown pouring out from the School’s doors in 1908 wearing European dress and the *tarbush* on their heads. That modernity was the School’s central project is confirmed by ‘Ayyad’s account of the events surrounding its founding. The story begins when Guillaume Laplagne, the first sculpture teacher and director of the School, was sent by a member of the Egyptian aristocracy (‘Ayyad doesn’t name him, but we know the reference is to the founder of the School, Prince Yusuf Kamal) to investigate the interest of influential people, both Egyptian and foreign, in the idea of founding an art school in Egypt. However, the project met with some resistance, as Laplagne, ‘Ayyad tells us, was rebuffed and mocked by the ‘reactionaries’ among the elite who claimed that ‘it is impossible that there would ever be art or artists in Egypt.’²⁶² The Prince was not deterred and went ahead with the

²⁶¹ Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila* (1958).

²⁶² Ibid., 8.

founding of the School, proving the more conservative members of Egyptian high society wrong.

Thus, in the first instance, ‘Ayyad’s narrative marks the art world as a united front with a common goal by pitting the forward-thinking individuals involved in the School’s founding, whether they were European or Egyptian, against society’s reactionaries. In this way, he includes someone like Laplagne, a foreigner, within the united front, and displaces the question of unity from the nation to the idea of modernization. However, as ‘Ayyad moves on to an account of later events, the line between insiders and outsiders has shifted. In the story of how the School came to be liberated in 1937 from foreign domination, its foreign teachers, some of whom were among the insiders in the story of the School’s founding, have become the outsiders, with only *Egyptian* artists left on the inside.

To establish the momentous nature of the events of 1937, ‘Ayyad projects the issues involved back onto the events of 1908, bemoaning the previous state of affairs wherein the linguistic barrier between the European teachers and the Arabic-speaking students was an obstacle for many.²⁶³ Indeed, he tells us that of the first four teachers, three were French and one was Italian, and most of the classes were delivered in French, and only some in ‘weak Arabic.’²⁶⁴ These linguistic conflicts are absent in the account of events in 1908, and only appear as they find their resolution in 1937.

²⁶³ Ibid., 10.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 10. The expression is ‘*arabiyya rakika*’.

In ‘Ayyad’s account, the process of liberating the fine arts from foreign domination began when Egyptian art students sent to study abroad began to come back to Egypt in 1928. There, they were met with animosity by the foreign artists with their ‘imperialist mentalities,’ and were barred from jobs that the foreigners preferred to keep for themselves.²⁶⁵ In reaction, Egyptian artists mounted a campaign, which led to their victory in the form of an ‘Egyptianization’ of the administration of art institutions in 1937, as the first generation of Egyptian artists fought for, and won, a place in the art world.²⁶⁶

Thus, at each juncture, ‘Ayyad defines unity within the art world in opposition to those on the outside, and the barrier between inside and outside shifts. Here, it is useful to think once again in terms of the relationship between the pedagogical and the performative as defined above. ‘Ayyad’s narration of the events of 1937 sheds some light on the events of 1908: indeed, the fact that there was such a desperate need to Egyptianize the art world in 1937 implies that the state of affairs described for 1908 wherein Laplagne and the other foreign teachers, Kamal and other rich backers, and the School’s students were united in a single unproblematic process was not as simple as it seems. The complexities inherent in making the nation and national art are thus present in ‘Ayyad’s text, but they are always smoothed over by a pattern that keeps the opposition on the outside, while a united front of insiders emerge victorious. In other words, disagreements and conflicting interests on the inside are only recognized in the narration of later events in which they

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶⁶ The campaign for *tamsir*, or ‘Egyptianization,’ is referred to in an article already mentioned in the Introduction, ‘Al-fann al-misri fi haja ila ri‘aya,’ *Al-Risala*, May 1, 1937, 833.

find some resolution. In this way, the pedagogical narrative, which emphasizes unity, reveals something of the confrontation with otherness that marks the performative.

The relationship between the nation imagined as a cohesive entity on one hand, and the divisions and difference within its ranks, on the other, finds a telling expression in the preface to ‘Ayyad’s 1958 collection of writings. In it, a story is told that highlights the cooperation between Coptic and Muslim in the nationalist struggle of the 1910s and 1920s. The author Taha Fawzi, in celebrating the unity between the two communities, reveals more about the problematic nature of their relationship in the 1950s than about their earlier cooperation.

The story tells us that after their graduation from the School of Fine Arts, Yusif Kamil and ‘Ayyad were employed as teachers in different schools and had an agreement whereby each in turn would go to Europe to study while the other took over his teaching responsibilities in Egypt (we have seen that the two artists did in fact collaborate, as evidenced by the series of pedagogical cards that they co-created; fig. 44). In this way, they could continue to train as artists despite the lack of public funds dedicated to this purpose.²⁶⁷ They continued to collaborate until, in 1924, scholarships were created to send Egyptian artists abroad. The story was reportedly told in the press, making ‘Ayyad

²⁶⁷ In a later version of the same story, the two artists are commended by Sa‘d Zaghlul, the leader of the Wafd, who met Kamil while he was on a trip to Switzerland for his health. The great leader praised them for their service to the nation, hailing their collaboration as a symbol of the unity between Coptic and Muslim. Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al- Haraka al-Fanniyya fi Misr ila ‘am 1945*, 21-22.

and Kamil into national heroes who sacrificed their own financial comfort to the glory of the nation.²⁶⁸

Thus, in the collection of ‘Ayyad’s writings published in 1958, his stories of art and the nation are framed by our knowledge, acquired from the preface, that his career-long devotion to the unity of the nation is particularly significant because he is a Copt.²⁶⁹ In its over-determined narration of the Coptic and Muslim unity of the 1910s and 1920s, designed to mask the contentious and sometimes violent relationship between the communities in the 1950s - and likely, to an extent, in the 1920s as well - the story points to the tension that underlies ‘Ayyad’s apparently seamless celebration of national unity.

In 1958, ‘Ayyad painted *Agriculture* (fig. 41), the image with which I began this discussion of his life and work. By this date, as we have seen, the establishment of a narrative of modern Egyptian art as inextricably linked to the emergence of national sentiment was already well underway. However, before we turn back to *Agriculture* and look at the implications of the image of the nation that it presents within its specific historical moment, it will be useful to get an idea of the national discourse in vogue under Nasser, as this had changed considerably in the course of the half century that preceded the revolution.

Despite the Arab slant of Nasser’s later nationalism, in the early days of the new regime, when his relationship to Arab nationalism had not yet been articulated, his loyalties lay

²⁶⁸ I was unable to find a trace of this exchange in the press.

²⁶⁹ Taha Fawzi, Preface to *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila* by Ragheb ‘Ayyad, 3-5.

first and foremost with Egypt and the Egyptians.²⁷⁰ Nasser and the other Free Officers had been initiated into politics in the fiercely nationalist 1930s, and Nasser himself participated in student demonstrations and was a member of Young Egypt.²⁷¹ When the Free Officers took power through a military coup in 1952, they did not base their actions on a specific political ideology, but rather focused on the need for complete independence from the British, and on the moral bankruptcy of the *ancien régime*. However, having come of age in the specific nationalist environment of the 1930s, they were in direct ideological continuity with the regime they were overthrowing.²⁷²

If the start of Nasser's regime was not marked by the kind of Arab nationalism that would later come to be associated with him, by the time of the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956, his rhetoric had taken on an emphatically pan-Arabist tone,²⁷³ and by January 1958, with the founding of the United Arab Republic, a union between Egypt and Syria that would last until 1961, the regime's pact with Arab nationalism was sealed.

Arab nationalism left the Coptic community in the lurch: as pre-Islamic Egyptians, they did not consider themselves to be Arabs.²⁷⁴ In addition to this, it has been noted that, while in theory secular, Nasser's regime relied heavily on Islamic symbolism.²⁷⁵ Under the new regime, religious courts were shut down, permits to build churches met with

²⁷⁰ James Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 28-29.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁷³ Jankowski attributes this in large part to advances from Syria pushing for economic and military integration of the two countries (Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt*, 101).

²⁷⁴ Pieter van Doorn-Haarder, 'Copts: Fully Egyptian but for a Tattoo?', *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 26.

²⁷⁵ Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt*, 27-40.

excessive bureaucratic delays, and in 1958, the study of Islam became a compulsory part of the school curriculum, even in Christian schools.²⁷⁶

Most importantly for our purposes, the Coptic elites and the Church itself were hard hit by Nasser's 1952 agrarian reforms as they saw much of their land confiscated, and it is in this context that *Agriculture* must be understood. *Agriculture* is perhaps 'Ayyad's most complete and ambitious definition of Egypt as a timeless nation finding its roots in a pre-Islamic, Pharaonic past, yet the symbolism that it embraced does not fit with the national discourse of the times. This poses the question of how 'Ayyad, as a Copt, related to the new regime and to its mobilization of collective identities for the purpose of national definition.

We have seen that 'Ayyad retained his position as director of the Museum of Modern Art after the revolution, that he published his account of early Egyptian nationalism in 1958, and that he was granted a state prize under Nasser in 1964, all of which seems to indicate that his relationship with the regime was, at the very least, functional. Yet *Agriculture*, as a Pharaonicist image of national unity, is out of step with the kind of nationalism that was dominant at the time it was painted. Indeed, while at the beginning of the Nasser era, it continued to make sense for 'Ayyad to depict the nation in Pharaonic terms, as Pharaonicism and the peasant, both symbols that tied Egypt to an ancient, pre-Islamic

²⁷⁶ Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam*, 42; see also Milad Iskander, 'The Coptic Struggle After the Revolution of 1952,' *Copts in Egypt: a Christian minority under siege*, eds. Martyn Thoman, Adly A. Youssef, et al. (Zurich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 40.

past, minimized the cleavage between religious communities, by the mid-1950s, we might wonder how this positioned him in relation to the regime.²⁷⁷

As a Copt, the task of juggling definitions of nationalism was a tricky one. It is interesting here to look at the nationalist rhetoric embraced by another Coptic Christian, Boutros Boutris Ghali, who, long before becoming secretary-general of the United Nations in 1991, was a prominent academic in the field of law under Nasser. In 1963, Boutros Ghali asserted that there were four components to Egyptian national identity in the following order: Egypt was African, Mediterranean, Islamic, and Arab, and it has been noted that ‘by emphasizing the pre-Islamic, pre-Arab roots of Egypt’s identity, Boutris-Ghali [sic] remained loyal to the Pharaonicism of the liberal interwar period.’²⁷⁸ The African emphasis in Boutros Ghali’s definition of Egyptian identity was based on the idea that it was the Nile that, more than anything else, defined Egypt.

The statement brings to light the degree to which the pedagogical narrative of the nation, in this case Nasser’s pan-Arab nationalism, is always contested from within, and it is in this context that we must understand ‘Ayyad’s Pharaonicist definition of Egyptian national identity in 1958. Like Boutros Ghali, ‘Ayyad was compelled, due to his religious identity, to depict the nation in a way that did not exclude him. As a Copt who was close

²⁷⁷ Donald M. Reid, in ‘Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past: Egypt 1922-1952,’ *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, eds. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 141, notes the prevalence of Copts in the field of Egyptology: while only between 6 and 10 percent of the population belonged to the Christian minority, 40 percent of those who graduated from university between 1928 and 1950 in the field were Copts. Furthermore, Reid notes that ‘Copts latched on to the Western belief, often couched in the racialist idiom of the day, that they were the truest descendents of the ancient Egyptians.’

²⁷⁸ Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 196-197.

to the regime and employed in government institutions, he had an obligation to that regime. The challenge was thus to depict the nation in a way that worked both for himself, and for the regime.

If *Agriculture* is in line with a Pharaonicist definition of the nation, it is also predominantly a rural scene. As we have seen, rural reforms were one of the keystones of Nasser's early domestic policy, and the situation that he took over from the old regime was one in which land distribution was vastly uneven. In addition to this, we have seen that wealthy Copts and the Coptic Church had been particularly hard-hit by these reforms. Thus, by depicting a rural Egypt unified by the life-giving force of the Nile, and whose land was farmed by the collaborative efforts of its timeless people, 'Ayyad was not only showing an Egypt of which he, as a Copt, was an integral part, but also demonstrating that his allegiance was first and foremost to the regime rather than to the Coptic elite and the Church who had suffered under the new rural order put in place by Nasser.

In this chapter, I have attempted to tease out the complex issues underlying the pedagogical narrative of the nation that surrounds 'Ayyad and his work, to gain access to another narrative, one that takes into account not only the paradoxical attitude of the Egyptian elite towards the peasantry in the decades between the two world wars, but also, more importantly, 'Ayyad's changing, often difficult, position as a member of the Coptic minority during these decades and the one following the revolution of 1952. That 'Ayyad himself was a member of a minority made his relationship to the nation a self-conscious

one, prompting him at various times to emphasize unity or otherness within the nation, always as a way of marking his own alignment with the imagined community.

Chapter 3: Muhammad Nagi (1888-1956)

Definitions of national and individual identity were not a simple matter for the painter Muhammad Nagi: educated in French language schools in Alexandria and abroad in France and Italy, embedded in the highly cosmopolitan early twentieth century Alexandrian society, having spent time in Brazil and Ethiopia, with close personal ties to Cyprus, Nagi's identification with the Egyptian nation was far from unambiguous. In addition to this, he was the son of a rural landowner. Thus, for Nagi, the peasant was not an abstract figure standing in for an idea of the nation, as it was for 'Ayyad. For Nagi the landowner, the 'peasant problem,' described in the previous chapter, played out very close to home.²⁷⁹

In this chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which Nagi grappled with his own identity as a landowner and as an artist, as a French speaker and as an Arab, as a Muslim Egyptian and as the husband of a Christian Greek Cypriot, and how this in-between identity conditioned his depiction of the Egyptian nation. I will argue that the question of

²⁷⁹ Robin Ostle notes that Nagi's vision of the Egyptian nation, as that of other Egyptian intellectuals, owed much to the cosmopolitan nature of Alexandria, and that 'this Mediterranean cosmopolitan vision of the new nation state was not without its strains and contradictions: the vast majority of the Egyptian population lived in the countryside and their lives were conditioned by very different cultural and economic imperatives. In a significant number of Nagi's paintings and drawings, one can see him trying to come to terms with these contradictions.' Robin Ostle, 'Alexandria' in *Modernity and Culture : from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, eds. Leila Tawazi Fawaz, C. A. Bayly, and Robert Ilbert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 315.

difference within the nation versus the assumption of a unified whole is often visible in his painting.

Nagi was born in 1888 in Alexandria, where his father had made his fortune working for the Customs Office in the later part of the nineteenth century.²⁸⁰ He received an education befitting his social status, attending the Swiss school of Alexandria. As we heard in the Introduction to the thesis, Alexandria was extremely cosmopolitan at the time, with a community of resident European artists, and there was ample opportunity for Nagi to study art privately. To comply with his father's wishes, Nagi went to Lyon to study law in 1906, receiving a Licence in 1910. There and in Paris, he came into contact with modern European painting. From 1910 to 1914 he studied art in Italy, at the *Scuola Libera del Nudo* at the Florence Academy of Fine Arts. He returned to Egypt at the start of the war, but left for another extended stay in Europe as soon as the war ended in 1918. There, he visited Monet in Giverny, a fact that has been used as the clinching argument for a reading of his work as Impressionist, not to mention as a great source of prestige in the historiography.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ The details of Nagi's biography are compiled from Effat Naghi, Christine Roussillon, et al., *Mohamed Naghi, un impressioniste égyptien* (Cairo : Les Cahiers de Chambramant, n.d.); Esmat Daoustashi, and Yusir al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi kama lam yu'raf min qabla. Hayatihi al-shakhsiyya wa al-fanniyya* (Alexandria: published by the authors, 2009); N. Farag, *Al-Dhikra al-mi'awiyya lil-fannan Muhammad Nagi (1888-1956)* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1989).

²⁸¹ See for example Naghi, Roussillon, et al., *Mohamed Naghi*, which takes Impressionism as the defining stylistic referent of Nagi's work; see also Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 79-84.

Taking account of his son's penchant for travel, Nagi's father pulled strings to get him into the developing Egyptian diplomatic core.²⁸² In 1924, he was appointed to the newly founded Egyptian delegation in Rio de Janeiro, and in 1926, after the Rio delegation closed its doors, he was relocated to Paris. At the Congress for Popular Arts held in Prague in 1928, Nagi, who was part of the Egyptian delegation, clashed with his French superior over the question of popular arts in Egypt. I will return to this event and to its implications in more detail later in this chapter.²⁸³ In 1931, he was appointed for a mission by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to go to Ethiopia and paint the Emperor and other officials.

From the time of his return to Egypt in 1932, Nagi's contribution to the institutional development of modern art in Egypt was considerable.²⁸⁴ In 1935, he co-founded the Atelier of Alexandria, an artistic institution grouping writers and artists living in the city.²⁸⁵ He painted a series of panels for the Egyptian pavilion at the Paris World's Fair in 1937 and went to Venice the same year as a member of Egypt's contingent at the Biennale. He was appointed Director of the School of Fine Arts for a short period in the same year, then Director of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, a job he would keep until 1947. From 1947 until 1950, he was Director of the Egyptian Academy in Rome

²⁸² Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 100-104.

²⁸³ For the full text of Nagi's Prague speech in an Arabic translation from the original French, see N. Farag, *Al-Dhikra al-mi'awiyya*, 167-172.

²⁸⁴ Nagi expressed an interest in the functions of a painter beyond the act of painting. See for example ED, Muhammad Nagi, Letter to his father, London, December 23, 1930: 'My function is not just artistic, but also political.'

²⁸⁵ For a discussion of the importance of the Atelier in the creation of a cohesive Alexandrian art scene, see Aimé Azar, *La peinture moderne en Egypte* (Cairo: Editions nouvelles, 1961), 311.

For more information on this institution, see the compilation of material from its archives published by Esmat Daoustashi, *Tarikh al-atelier al-Iskandariyya, gama'a al-fannanin wa al-kuttab, 1934-2004*, (Alexandria: L'Atelier, 2005).

and Cultural Advisor to the Egyptian Embassy. In 1952, he founded the Cairo Atelier, modelled after its Alexandrian counterpart. He died in 1956 in his Giza studio, a building that was, as we heard in the Introduction, subsequently inaugurated as a museum in 1968.

Clearly, then, by the time of his death Nagi had become a leading player in the world of modern Egyptian art. However, as I suggested above, his relationship to the idea of modern Egypt was complicated, to say the least. The painting *Usrat al-fannan fi ar-rif* (*The artist's family in the countryside*, 1940; fig. 61), is a good place to begin to unpick the ways in which this complex relationship marks Nagi's painting.²⁸⁶ In it, he and his family are portrayed in the countryside among the peasants. At first glance, the painting seems to be in keeping with a certain rhetoric of Egyptian nationalism: it can be read as a portrayal of a nationalist rural idyll. The rural world of the Egyptian Delta might be seen here as a space where classes and genders meet in harmony, and one might suggest that the inclusiveness of the Egyptian nation is what this painting is about. While in the work of Mukhtar and 'Ayyad, peasants and intellectuals were never portrayed side by side, here, peasants and landowners share one space. That it is possible to read the painting in

²⁸⁶ There is some confusion as to the date and title of this painting, and based on the different dimensions and images in different publications, there seem to be at least three versions of the same composition. Both Daoustashi (*Muhammad Nagi*, 241), who calls the painting *The Artist's Family in Abu Hummus*, and the catalogue of the Nagi museum (Nagib, I., *Muhammad Nagi 1888-1956* (Cairo: Wizarat ath-Thaqafa, n.d.), 72) in which it is called *The Artist's Family in the Countryside*, date the version belonging to the Nagi museum to the period following Nagi's appointment as director of the museum of modern art in 1939. The title *Al-Qarya*, or *The Village* appears for a nearly identical composition in Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art*, 30, with 1928 as the date. However, it is unclear where she gets this date from. The dimensions in the painting reproduced in Karnouk are given as 300 x 200 cm. Mention is made of a bigger oil painting measuring 5 x 3 metres titled *La famille au village* in the list of Nagi's works compiled by Naghi, Roussillon, et al. with the date of 1937 (*Mohamed Naghi*, 63). They do not give a location for the painting, and I have never come across it. If it is indeed a larger version of the same composition, the smaller painting should in all likelihood be redated to around the same time or shortly before.

this way explains in part how Nagi became as successful as he did: there are aspects of his work that were open to being incorporated into the story that placed modern Egyptian art in lock-step with a generic nationalist sentiment.

This interpretation is further suggested by the strong echoes in the painting of the rural idylls of the French painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898), whose work Nagi would have been familiar with from his murals at the Beaux-Arts Museum of Lyon. A painting more closely resembling the one under discussion in its treatment of colour and form, its frieze-like format, and its subject, is Puvis de Chavannes' *Cider* (ca. 1864; fig. 62).²⁸⁷ Yet, unlike Puvis de Chavannes' painting, *The Artist's Family* is also a family portrait, situated in time through the modern dress of some of its protagonists, and in space, on the family estate. To see the painting as a straightforward idealization of a rural community is thus to oversimplify the vision of the countryside and its inhabitants that we are here offered. I would suggest that, rather than a rural idyll, this is a depiction of hierarchical social division between landowner and peasant.

We will have more to say about how this works in the painting below, but we should begin by looking closely at the circumstances surrounding the painting's inception, as this will help to shed some light on these issues. In 1940, Nagi was 52 years old. The illness, and subsequent death, of his father, who had been his main source of income well into his adult life, left Nagi and his sister with the responsibility for the family

²⁸⁷ I owe the insight that Nagi's painting resembles works by Puvis de Chavannes to Natalie Adamson. For a discussion of Puvis de Chavannes at the Lyon museum, see *Puvis de Chavannes au musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon* (Lyon: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1998).

estate and all the peasants who lived and worked there.²⁸⁸ This marked a change in Nagi's relationship to the peasants who had always occupied an important place in his work. In early paintings such as *Ash-sheikh 'Abd al-Rasul* (*The Sheikh 'Abd al-Rasul*, 1912-1914; fig. 63) and *Ar-ra'i bil-uqsur* (*The Shepherd in Luxor*, 1912; fig. 64), to which I will return in more detail shortly, Nagi stayed firmly on the active side of the canvas, casting his subjects as static and timeless symbols. Until then, they had been an abstract concept to him, available at will to provide him with sources of national 'authenticity.' Increased contact changed his attitude toward them and affected his representation of them.

Nagi's stress over the situation and the distaste he began to feel towards the peasants once he became responsible for their subsistence and welfare is palpable in letters from this period. Here is a letter to 'Effat from 1940, shortly after the death of their father:²⁸⁹

Dear 'Effat,

I want to change the way we organize our affairs, which have suffered from being in serious disarray. The frank presumptions of some people put me in a state of consternation, and this presumptuous youngster [Mahmud] who, in our credulity, we've trusted with our affairs, even though he doesn't know the first thing about carrying out a harvest, finds himself in a situation of plenty.

And he [Mahmud] says that we're facing financial difficulties and makes the following suggestion:

'You have to leave the actual management of the land aside, and rent out the fields [to us] under the same conditions that regulate your dealings with other farmers.'

The whole management of our property seems to be a golden opportunity to support parasites like this Mahmud.

²⁸⁸ The contract defining the terms of the division of the property between Muhammad and 'Effat Nagi are reproduced in Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 251-252.

²⁸⁹ An Arabic translation of the letter from Cairo dated 1 June 1940, originally in French, is reproduced in Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 243.

For this reason, I would like to avoid all these speculations and get rid of all those among [these people] who are not honourable, instead of offering them money and protection. The flattery of these people and their infiltration into noble families causes dissidence and problems.

It is clear from the tone Nagi used in talking about the peasants on his family estate that he had little patience in his dealings with them, and that their increased presence in his life bothered him to no small degree. Words like ‘parasite’ and ‘beast’ crop up in his descriptions.²⁹⁰ It is this shift that can be discerned in *The Artist’s Family in the Countryside*. While the peasants in Nagi’s early work stayed politely within the frame, adopting a frontal pose for the viewer, now they walk, sit, run without paying the least bit of attention to the landowner and his family who sit among them. The painter himself is pushed to the left side and squeezed by the picture’s edge, while his father sits on a chair on the right side, with ‘Effat standing behind him. The members of Nagi’s immediate family are clearly marked off from the peasants by their defined facial features, as is one other person, the man sitting cross-legged on the ground staring at the viewer, who is likely Nagi’s cousin, Husayn Nagi, who managed the estate in his absence.²⁹¹ The static faces of these four serve as focal points in an indistinct, out-of-focus mass, while the peasants, painted with muted colours, and wide, flat brush strokes, are in motion, difficult to seize.

²⁹⁰ See letters from Nagi to ‘Effat Nagi, translated into Arabic in Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 243-249. The Arabic words are *hashra* (beast; 245), *tufayliyyun* (parasites; 243), and *dassas*, (snakes; 246).

²⁹¹ See for example a letter from Nagi to Husayn Nagi from Rome dated 26 October 1947 in which the painter thanks his cousin for all this help with the estate and discusses details of its running, reproduced in Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 258.

The members of the Nagi clan are further distinguished from their rural counterparts by their European dress, which marks them as modern, urban, and Westernized: Nagi's sister, 'Effat, wears a light white dress that comes just below her knees and her hair is uncovered, while his father wears a suit. A naked child, whose presence echoes similar figures in the Puvis de Chavannes painting mentioned above, seems to have escaped from another painting to irrupt here, and one almost feels as if the peasants and their animals have stormed into the middle of the canvas, disrupting an orderly family portrait.

That it is a mistake to see Nagi as straightforwardly using his work as a way of visually holding together the changing social landscape of rural Egypt and his position in it becomes clear when we look at this painting as a point at which this strategy begins to fall apart. The strict division of space between the world of the peasantry and that of the painter – a division that was always implicit in paintings of peasants such as those by 'Ayyad, or indeed, in Nagi's early work, in which the painter himself never appears - can be seen to disintegrate before our very eyes as the landowner comes into contact with the inhabitants of the rural world. Here, he and his family occupy the same pictorial space as the peasants, and the hierarchy that underlies the painting seems to be crumbling.

As we have heard, after he finished studying law in 1910, Nagi began his training as a painter. At the time he painted the *Sheikh Abd ar-Rasul* (fig. 63), between 1912-1914, he was studying art in Florence, but spending extended periods of time in Egypt as well.

The *Sheikh* could have been painted in either place, and we might once again be reminded here of Mukhtar creating a monument to the nation from the distance of Paris, or of ‘Ayyad’s depictions of Egyptian popular life in the period immediately following his return to Egypt from Italy.²⁹²

The painting is a portrait of a specific individual, a local dignitary whose acquaintance Nagi had made on his frequent trips to Thebes and Luxor during which he would study ancient Egyptian temples and draw and photograph the people of the region.²⁹³ It has its origin in a photograph taken by Nagi himself (fig. 65), but although the basic components – sheikh, chair, woman – are the same, the painting has altered its source in significant ways. The horizontal photographic format has been changed to a vertical one in which the Sheikh’s presence becomes more staid and imposing: in the painting, he dominates the frame and looks out with an air of authority. His hands have been emphasized and his gaze intensified. He is pressed up and flattened against the picture plane, and the space in which he sits is shallow. He is sitting upright and looks taller than in the photograph, and in his right hand, he carries a key, either the key to the village of which he was the *‘umda*, an indication of his status as keeper of an ancient civilization

²⁹² 1912-14 are the dates given in Nagib, *Muhammad Nagi 1888-1956*. Another painting titled *La famille du Sheikh Abd El-Rassoul* painted in 1914 appears in the list compiled by Naghi, Roussillon, et. al, *Mohamed Naghi*, 60, but these are clearly two different paintings, as the one under discussion here measures 80 x 100 cm, while the *Famille* is 81 x 44 cm. Furthermore, both paintings are mentioned in Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 77.

²⁹³ Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 64-67.

that Nagi came into contact with through him, a symbol of continuity since Pharaonic times.²⁹⁴

The setting within which the *Sheikh* is located has also been altered. The buildings seen in the background of the photograph have been removed or at the very least coloured in such a way that they blend almost imperceptibly into the landscape, so that the scene no longer seems to be located in any precise way in time and space. In fact, the landscape itself has been flattened and pushed towards the picture plane, doing away with the realistic space of the photograph. What physical weight the *sheikh* does have is achieved by pushing him up against the picture plane, making him stand out against the backdrop.

If the *Sheikh* has been transformed from the historically specific individual in the photograph to a symbol of timeless Egyptian identity, so too has the woman standing behind him to his right. The young Upper Egyptian of the photograph, holding her veil in the air with her right hand as she bashfully lifts her left hand to her mouth, has been rendered immobile. While it is difficult to perceive the details of her face and clothes, it is evident that the painter has turned the living, breathing girl of the photograph into a statuesque presence. The designs on her clothes do not refer to any specific Egyptian patterns, but in the X-shaped cross on her chest, we might see an echo of the crossed arms on the coffins of ancient Egyptian mummies. Her staid presence adds to the painting's iconic feeling.

²⁹⁴ An '*umda* was the chief of an Egyptian village, often a large landowner who had gained political power through his economic prestige.

There are echoes in this painting of European depictions of the primitive, in particular in the naked boys who sit at the *Sheikh*'s feet, dwarfed by the imposing central figure. For example, a comparison with a number of Picasso's early works, including *Boy Leading a Horse* (1905-6; fig. 66) springs to mind. However, I suggest that, despite the painting's European sources, it is best understood in terms of definitions of Egyptian identity. Here, we must take into account the special place occupied in the Egyptian imaginary by Upper Egypt and its inhabitants. Indeed, the region, because of its distance from the centres of power, its predominantly rural lifestyle, and its ancient ruins, was frequently seen as a source of 'authenticity', and the trend of going to Upper Egypt in search of national identity has been noted for the 1920s.²⁹⁵ Nagi's expeditions predate these by a few years, suggesting that the fashion began earlier than has been recorded. In light of this, rather than locating the nakedness of the two boys within a European discourse of primitivism, we must regard them as a sign of the timelessness and authenticity of Upper Egypt.

Another of Nagi's early paintings, *Shepherd in Luxor* of 1912 (fig. 64) provides further evidence of the ways in which Nagi modified his initial perception of his models to give them a symbolic weight that went beyond their individual identity. In a preliminary

²⁹⁵ Gershoni and Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs*, 172-175. That Nagi did this in the early 1910s is perfectly conceivable: indeed, the Pharaonic was already a trope in expressions of national identity in 1913, as can be seen for example in Muhammad Husayn Haykal's novel *Zaynab*, discussed in chapter 1 in relation to the work of Mukhtar. Furthermore, as Gershoni and Jankowski themselves point out, the Pharaonic is present in the speeches of the nationalist leader Mustafa Kamil as early as 1902 (12-13). In the kind of paradox that is becoming familiar by now, Ziad Fahmy also notes that the *Sa'idi* has long served as an internal 'other' to the educated Cairene or Alexandrian, and that the Upper Egyptians regional accent was frequently mocked in the press as early as the 1920s. It is this side of their depiction that we saw in Chapter 2 in 'Ayyad's *Café in Aswan*.

sketch for the *Shepherd* (fig. 67), the artist can be seen searching for the space that seems to elude him in the finished painting; indeed, some elements are more successfully rendered in the sketch. For example, in the painting the shepherd's right thumb seems to be placed in front of the lamb's leg against the rest of the hand rather than holding it from behind, a problem that is absent from the sketch. More significantly, in the sketch, the shepherd takes possession of the three-dimensional space that surrounds him. He seems ready to take a step forward, his shoulders ever so slightly rotating, his head bent with the intention of movement, and his eyes cast down. In the final painting, Nagi rectified this by turning him in a fully frontal pose, staring straight ahead, and cropping out the lower part of his torso, thus flattening the space of the picture. As was the case with the *Sheikh*, the result is a portrait that relinquishes its connection to the individual portrayed, thus gaining in symbolic potency.

If Nagi was attuned to the ways in which the depiction of space and the use of line and colour could lend meaning to his images of rural Egyptians, he was equally aware of how he might make appropriate use of the vast repertoire of styles available to him through his contact with European, Pharaonic, Islamic, and folk art. There has been a tendency in the literature to divide his production into periods according to which of these various styles he was using.²⁹⁶ However, Nagi only very loosely followed particular styles at particular times in his life.

²⁹⁶ Christine Roussillon, 'Naghi : un parcours esthétique,' in *Mohamed Naghi*, eds. Naghi, Roussillon, et al., 27-30.

Compare *The Shepherd*, for example, with an image from the same period of a European acquaintance of Nagi's, *Monsieur Piatolli* (fig. 68). The latter is painted in a 'European' style, i.e., one that implies that the portrait is *of* a European, whereas the shepherd is drawn with a thick black outline and colour planes composed of long strokes reminiscent of depictions of the primitive in European art, although this time, through the lens of the work of Paul Gauguin rather than that of Picasso. Here again, we must be careful to understand the painting within its own context, that of an intellectual from the Delta's perception of Upper Egyptians as timeless sources of 'authentic' identity. The choice of colouring in these two paintings is another strong marker of the distance that separates them. The earthy browns, yellows and greens, colours close to the earth, are the mark of the timeless peasant, while the blended hues of pink and blue point towards the modern European.

There are other telling differences between the two portraits. *Monsieur Piatolli* is set against a neutral backdrop, thus emerging as an independent person, not someone who depends on his context for his identity, while the *Shepherd* is set against a landscape of which he seems to be an integral part. The light that falls on *Monsieur Piatolli*'s left side gives him volume and weight, and there is room and air to breathe in this portrait, while the *Shepherd*, like the *Sheikh*, is flatter than his European counterpart, though not completely flat, but confined to the image nonetheless. There is little effect of light and shadow to bring him into relief. Imagine a peasant painted in the same style and in the same colours as those of Nagi's class, or vice versa, and the effect would be very different. When placed side-by-side, style is the factor that most markedly separates these

portraits from each other. We might sense here one of the ways in which Nagi's work provides evidence that the nation is never as cohesive as it might seem, and that it is inflected by a host of other collective forms of identity: it is clear when we look at Nagi's portraits of Upper Egyptians on one hand, and at his portrait of a European on the other, that he identified more fully with the latter, a fact that has to do with the sitter's social status and geographical proximity to Nagi.

In the Introduction, I echoed the point made by John Clark in relation to modern Asian art when I asserted that the question of the belatedness of modern Egyptian art becomes irrelevant once we address the fine arts in Egypt not as a poorer imitation of European art, but as a practice that had complex and specific meanings in the Egyptian context, meanings that become unrecognizable if we try to read them within a European context. In Nagi's case, these complex and specific meanings included an awareness of his position as an Egyptian on the periphery of modern art. This was not the case to the same extent for 'Ayyad who, while he bemoaned the French and Italian nationalities of the first professors at the Cairo School of Fine Arts, expressed no problem with the forms and techniques that they taught, and happily discussed instances of European art as great examples from the past.²⁹⁷ Likewise, Mukhtar never disavowed his European training, but rather, it was a source of pride for him.²⁹⁸ By contrast, Nagi expressed full awareness of the marginal position of Egyptian modern art in comparison to the centrality of Paris, and he posed the questions of national identity and of art's place in it in complex terms marked by this awareness.

²⁹⁷ For example, an article on Michelangelo and Raphael appears in 'Ayyad, *Ahadith fi al-funun al-jamila*, 40-5.

²⁹⁸ See for example Abu Ghazi, *Al-Maththal Mukhtar*, 50-51.

This is seen, for example, in his self-conscious meditation on what it meant for him, after having spent the First World War in Egypt, to have hurried to return to Europe and, after a brief stay in Paris, to have gone to Giverny, as did many other artists of his generation, to glean some wisdom from the aging Monet (fig. 69).²⁹⁹ Coming into close contact with the work of the Parisian avant-garde and with Impressionism, which by then had become part of the establishment, prompted Nagi to reflect deeply on the subject of his own calling. Of particular concern to him was how, as an Egyptian, he might achieve authenticity through painting. This was a moment in his career where he was attracted to the novelty of modernism, but torn lest its practice should wrest from him his Egyptian identity.

In 1918, he wrote:

I rushed to Giverny where the great Monet is living out his days, in a hurry to leave the tumultuous atmosphere of Paris where the constant din of artistic theories drives me mad. As I was tasting the colours of works of art from the past in the museums and galleries of the capital, I became convinced that the most audacious and excessive modern works, despite my inability to comprehend them at this point, depended on new references. And I hesitate as whether to conform to them, to keep myself at a distance from them, or to return to the traditional approaches to art that I was taught in Florence and that a great number of artists continue to follow.

I then started to wonder about my own path: will I find it by establishing myself in Paris, by integrating one of the flourishing groups of the pictorial movement whose example I would then follow? It scares me to cut myself off from the heritage of my own country. I'm afraid of getting caught in the current of pictorial manifestations that were thus far unfamiliar to me, but that fascinate me now by their very audacity. I am afraid of getting stuck in their orbit and moving progressively farther and farther away from Egypt and its arts, to which I am bound by ties that I feel to be strong.

²⁹⁹ Giverny was an artists' colony in the first decades of the twentieth century, and Monet had many art students visit him there from France and from abroad. See for example Katherine M. Bourguignon, Nina Lubben, et al., *Impressionist Giverny: a Colony of Artists, 1885-1915* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

There is not a day that goes by when, going over the modern tendencies of European arts, I do not think about the arts of our country (...) How to undertake the search for harmony, for a marriage between the arts of ancient Egypt, the Arab arts, and those whose spectacle is unfolding before my very eyes day by day? Maybe my vision of the Egyptian heritage needs some adjustment that I might see what common traits tie it to the modern European arts, unless my search for harmony is a vain pursuit because the link between the two is actually nonexistent...³⁰⁰

In this text, all of the complexity of Nagi's position as a painter trained in European academies in the classical tradition, as an Egyptian, and, on an international level, as a member of the generation of Picasso, and thus tied to the project of modern art, is registered. Nagi's awareness of, and anxiety over, the central position of Paris and modern European art is fully registered in his assertion that he is 'afraid of getting stuck in their orbit' and thus loosing his ties to Egypt. While he hoped to find a common ground between his Islamic and Egyptian heritage on one hand, and modern European art on the other, he was wary of being misled and losing his Egyptian identity. In this case, the question of belatedness becomes relevant, as Nagi himself was concerned with it. The anxiety than can be sensed here is part of the makeup of his definition of Egyptian identity.

In the late 1920s, Nagi was given the opportunity to assert his Egyptian-ness in an international forum, and I suggest that it is the anxiety described above that accounts for the vehemence with which he did so. While stationed in Paris, Nagi was appointed to the Egyptian delegation for the International Congress of Popular Arts to be held in Prague in October 1928.³⁰¹ The delegation was led by the prominent French art historian and

³⁰⁰ Muhammad Nagi, cited by Sa'd El-Khadem in Naghi, Roussillon, et al., *Mohamed Naghi*, 18.

³⁰¹ That Nagi went to Prague is reported in Farag, *Al-dhikra al-mi'awiyya* 167-172; Daoustashi and Al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 149-150. For more on the Congress, see *Art populaire, travaux artistiques et*

curator Louis Hautecoeur who had been appointed Inspector of the Fine Arts in Egypt in 1927, a position he would keep until 1931, during which time he was also professor of art history at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and director of the Musée du Luxembourg.³⁰² That Hautecoeur was given this influential position indicates the degree to which the Egyptian art world of the 1920s continued to be dominated by foreigners, in particular, by the French.³⁰³

At the conference, Nagi gave a speech, the original French version of which has been lost, but for which an Arabic translation exists.³⁰⁴ It should be noted here that the definition of popular arts that appears in Nagi's speech is similar to 'Ayyad's, which we have seen in the previous chapter: the popular arts encompass efforts by modern artists to preserve the traditions of the people by turning to them for inspiration. Indeed, in the speech, Nagi bemoaned the disappearance of the popular arts in Egypt, addressing what he saw to be the current situation of three potential sources, the Pharaonic, the Coptic, and the Islamic.

scientifiques du premier congrès des arts populaires, Prague MDCCCXXVIII (Paris: Editions Duchartre, 1931). See also *Congrès international des arts populaires, Prague, 1928* (Paris: Les presses universitaires de France, 1928).

³⁰² For a basic biography of Hautecoeur, see Antonio Brucculeri, 'Louis Hautecoeur : repères biographiques' in *Louis Hautecoeur et la tradition classique* (Paris: INHA, 2008). <http://inha.revues.org/2933>

While there is nothing in the literature on Louis Hautecoeur's role in Egypt, his role as arts administrator and art historian in France, especially under Vichy, is well documented. See for example Antonio Brucculeri, *Du dessein historique à l'action publique: Louis Hautecoeur et l'architecture classique en France* (Paris: Picard, 2007); Caroline Poulain, 'L'action de Louis Hautecoeur au secrétariat général des Beaux-arts (1940-1944): La permanence des beaux-arts dans la fracture de Vichy' (PhD Diss, Ecole nationale des Chartes, 2001).

³⁰³ Indeed, Hautecoeur would be succeeded by another Frenchman, Georges Rémond. Donald M. Reid traces the influence of the French on Egyptian cultural institutions for the nineteenth century until the First World War in *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁰⁴ Farag, *Al-dhikra al-mi'awiyya*, 167-172.

The Pharaonic, Nagi tells us, still exerts a positive influence on the peasants of Upper Egypt, as ‘it seems that the people of the Sa‘id [Upper Egypt] continue to be influenced to a great extent by the relics (...); and if [the peasant] tries to copy [the statues], considerable ability and dexterity become evident.’³⁰⁵ This opening remark is an expression of the attitude that governed Nagi’s earlier depictions of Upper Egyptians, such as the *Sheikh* and the *Shepherd* discussed above: indeed, that he saw the inhabitants of Upper Egypt as being in direct continuity with ancient Egyptians is confirmed here.

However, in Nagi’s view, the use made of Pharaonic relics when they fall into hands other than those of the Upper Egyptian peasants is another question altogether. In Nagi’s words:

in the town centres, Egyptian art is suffering agony as a result of the lack of a standard of art, and the decline of dexterity and knowledge; for they are choking this great art in their hands, and it has reached an undeniable level of disfiguration. Likewise, the hawkers of relics who mock unsuspecting tourists and abuse some of their more naïve compatriots, lower this art to a deplorable level of weakness and impotence.

It is difficult not to hear in this statement a foreshadowing of the attitude that governed the previously discussed efforts in the 1940s to remove the inhabitants of the village of Gurna from the Theban Necropolis. Indeed, while Nagi was able to imagine an inherent affinity of the Upper Egyptian peasants with the forms and concepts of ancient Egypt, when it came to addressing the complex relationship between Upper Egyptians, ancient

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 167.

sites and objects, on one hand, and tourism on the other, he was unable to see it as anything other than a corruption of the ancient Egyptian heritage. Here the paradox inherent in making the nation is embodied in the figure of the *sa'idi* (or Upper Egyptian), who, on one hand, serves as an idealized image of an ancient, timeless, and pure Egypt, and on the other, constitutes, in the mind of the artist, the agent for the corruption of that very heritage.

Unsurprisingly, in Nagi's view, the source for popular Egyptian art was definitely not to be found in Coptic art. Indeed, as a Muslim Egyptian, he stood to gain nothing from emphasizing it. Indeed, he was particularly scathing on its subject, considering it, at the point in time at which he was writing, to be weak and tired. In particular, he mourned its superficiality and rigidity. Here are his words:

Despite the fact that this art has been influenced by Byzantine art, its sources are purely local, and drawing its inspiration from Egyptian Christianity has made it more rigid. It is thus closer to an intellectual product than to a sentimental one. It stops short of life, and hesitates between permanence and obsolescence, and it is as if it senses its imminent death.³⁰⁶

In Nagi's view, a more promising source for Egyptian popular art was Islamic art. In particular, he emphasized the authenticity of Islamic art, writing that 'our relationship to it begins when we cross the threshold of Arab life.'³⁰⁷ In Nagi's view, Islamic art had found refuge against the onslaught of modernity in the ancient neighbourhoods, the clothes, the jewellery, the rites and rituals, the cafés and markets of the inhabitants of Egypt. In addition to this, Nagi alluded to the Mediterranean component of Egyptian

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 168.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 169.

identity in the statement that ‘the Egyptian knows how to laugh; in this respect he is the same as the people from the coasts of the Mediterranean, East and West.’³⁰⁸

The text of the Prague speech brings to our attention the fact that for Nagi, there was no simple way of defining the nation. Indeed, as should be increasingly clear by now, he was not an exception in this: different forms of collective identity coexisted in Egypt and the definition of the nation was always a multi-layered and fluctuating negotiation of these. Thus, in 1928, the year of the unveiling of Mukhtar’s *Egypt’s Awakening*, when Pharaonicism was at its high point, we see Nagi pointing to the Arab and the Mediterranean as the way of the future, while Pharaonic art was, at best, an underlying and spontaneous source of authenticity, available only to those who were unaware of it.

Next to the complicated, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of the nation that provide the subtext for Nagi’s speech, its content was also in part directed at the foreigners, and at what Nagi perceived to be foreign-influenced elements, who held much of the power in the Egyptian art world:

I would like to express my hope and prayer that our popular art will return to its previous vitality and activity, especially after it has met with difficulties because of the arrogance of some of our compatriots who are disdainful of all things popular and prefer foreign art (...).

I hope that a place will be made for this [popular] art in the study of the fine arts, that we may gain from the vital reaction that it causes within us, a capacity to resist the dangers of the academy, and [that it may] rekindle within us the spirit of creativity and innovation.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 170.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 171-172.

That Nagi should perceive some of his compatriots to be excessively enamoured with foreign art is interesting in light of what we know about his own strong ties to France and Italy, and the undeniable traces of his time there on his work. Yet, as is apparent in the previously mentioned text of 1918, he was conflicted about these ties and about what they meant for him as an Egyptian artist. The ambivalence with which Nagi approached the question of his artistic identity in the earlier text contrasts with the accusations that he leveled at some of his compatriots in 1928, and it seems that this very ambivalence, at the heart of which lay a fear of being insufficiently Egyptian, led him to make such sweeping statements in the public international forum of the Prague Congress.

The speech in Prague caused a conflict with Nagi's superior, Hautecoeur, although the details of the run-in are unclear.³¹⁰ His barely veiled attacks on what he deemed to be the excessive influence of foreigners in Egyptian art, and on their academicism as opposed to the spontaneity of art inspired by the popular, would have been enough to anger Hautecoeur. In addition to this, his pronouncements that Pharaonic art was all but dead, and that Coptic art had only ever barely been alive, might have been cause for some alarm on the part of Hautecoeur, given the French infatuation with ancient Egypt. Finally, the text of Nagi's speech reveals at several points divisions within Egyptian

³¹⁰ This conflict is reported in several sources, but they avoid the specifics. See for example Naghi, Roussillon, et al., *Mohamed Naghi*, 54 ; Caroline Williams, 'Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art : the Pioneers, 1920-1952' in *Re-envisioning Egypt : 1919-1952*, eds. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson, and Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 432. Nagi's sister 'Effat gave her version of events in a speech delivered on the occasion of the opening of the Muhammad Nagi Museum in 1979. She said that after Hautecoeur gave a speech in which he claimed there was no such thing as popular art in Egypt, Nagi responded, claiming that not only were there forms of popular art in Egypt, but that their importance extended beyond the confines of the Egyptian context, to the world. 'Effat Nagi's speech is quoted in Daoustashi and Al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 149-150. However, without Hautecoeur's original speech, we have no way to confirm that Nagi was responding to him.

society, between foreigners and Egyptians, between Copts and Muslims, between peasants and city-dwellers, and between Upper Egyptians and Lower Egyptians. Perhaps it was for this reason that the speech was considered inappropriate in an international forum, and indeed, we will see that in panels that Nagi created in 1937 to be shown in another international context, the Paris World's Fair, these divisions were repressed.

At the end of 1931, Nagi was sent to Ethiopia as a cultural attaché to paint the portrait of the Emperor Haile Selassie.³¹¹ In 1930, Selassie II, who had held *de facto* power as regent since 1916, was crowned Emperor, an event that marked the arrival of a prestigious Egyptian delegation in Ethiopia.³¹² In addition to this, Hautecoeur, who, as we have seen, Nagi offended in 1928 in Prague, finished his term as Inspector of the Fine Arts in Egypt in 1931, presumably clearing the path for Nagi to be reintegrated into the diplomatic service in an artistic capacity.

This was a prolific time for him, one during which he is often considered to have reached artistic maturity. It was indeed a period of intense artistic development:³¹³ for the first time, Nagi explored group 'shots', high vantage points (fig. 70), women as a primary subject rather than in a supporting role (as in the *Sheikh*; fig. 71), and a more

³¹¹ That he was there from the end of 1931 is confirmed in ED, 'Adis-Abeba,' Letter to 'Effat Nagi, June 4, 1932. It is unclear exactly what Nagi's mandate in Ethiopia was, and who he answered to, although it does seem that he was attached to the Egyptian Consulate in Addis Ababa in some capacity. See for example his journal entry of 21 May 1932: 'Notre consul est venu ce matin s'assurer du progrès de l'entreprise artistique où le prestige égyptien est engagé.' (ED)

³¹² Hagai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 99.

³¹³ On 5 June 1932, Nagi wrote in his notebook, in a draft of a letter probably addressed to Gabriel Biessy and his wife: 'J'ai travaillé beaucoup ... Fini avec le tâtonnement. J'obtiens ce que je veux en art.' (ED, 'Adis-Abeba,' Letter addressed to 'Mes Chers Amis,' June 5, 1932).

varied colour scheme than in his earlier Egyptian work (fig. 72). In his notes from the time, he emphasized the importance of Ethiopia in his development as a painter, referring to the country as ‘un vrai pays de peintre.’³¹⁴ However, despite Nagi’s emphasis on the importance of his Ethiopian period for his painting, I suggest that national politics continued to have a strong imprint on his work. They explain not only his presence there, but also the changes that took place in his painting, which must be understood in light of Egyptian perceptions of Ethiopia, in the years immediately preceding 1932.

Consider for example *The Musicians* (1932; fig. 72), one of Nagi’s biggest and most complex compositions of this period. The painting features a group of Ethiopian musicians, and the three figures sitting on the floor in front are playing traditional instruments: the woman, who has been closely derived from a photograph, plays the harp-like *begena*, associated with royalty and the upper classes, the man to her right holds a *krar*, a five or six stringed Ethiopian lyre, while the third figure, whose instrument is not as clearly visible, seems to be playing a *masingo*, an instrument with one string played with a bow.³¹⁵ They are surrounded by a circle of colourfully dressed men and women, but it is unclear where the circle of players stops: the two men sitting on a podium at the back seem to be participating in the music-making, perhaps providing sung accompaniment, as their instruments cannot be discerned.

³¹⁴ ED, Muhammad Nagi, ‘Adis-Abeba,’ letter addressed to the art critic Ahmed Rassim, May 21, 1932.

³¹⁵ Reidulf K. Molvaer, *Socialization and Social Control in Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1995), 111.

That Nagi was concerned here with the laying of paint on canvas is clear, and the painterly quality of this Ethiopian painting, in which the brushstrokes are made visible as he alternates between warm tones and white highlights, subtly molding background and foreground in an uninterrupted sequence, stands out when compared to the previously discussed *Sheikh* or the *Shepherd*. In particular Nagi's experimentation with colour contrasts with the earthy palette of his earlier works, in which blocks of white, brown, and ochre were juxtaposed. Even in *Monsieur Piatolli*, with its subtle shading of impressionistic colour, the figure was clearly demarcated from the background. In *The Musicians*, we see Nagi's work increasingly taking on a surface decorative quality.

Yet there is more to this scene of Ethiopian musicians than Nagi's experimentation with paint. The emphasis on colour over line, the warm palette, and the visibility of the brushstrokes are reminiscent of the painting of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). In addition to this, the two male musicians in the front, as well as the two figures on the podium at the back, echo a trope of European Orientalism, an instance of which can be found for example in Delacroix's *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* (1875; fig. 73), while the triangular composition, crowned at the top by a swath of red cloth, seems to owe something to Delacroix's *Les convulsionnaires de Tanger* (1838; fig. 74).

It seems from the 1918 text cited above that Nagi was very self-conscious about referencing European sources, and we might assume that if he did so, it was with a precise view of what he wanted to accomplish. Indeed, that Nagi was thinking of Ethiopia through a romantic lens is expressed in no uncertain terms in his notebook in which, for

example, he writes of Haile Selassie that ‘he is vaguely reminiscent of a dark-skinned Musset.’³¹⁶ Furthermore, the words ‘sumptuous’ and ‘gracious’ are also used to describe the Emperor’s appearance and demeanor,³¹⁷ and in a letter to a friend, he refers to ‘romantic Abyssinia as it appeared to me.’³¹⁸ What, then, does it mean that, as an Egyptian painter, he turned to European Romantic Orientalist painting for visual sources to depict the people of Ethiopia in 1932?

To address this question, it is necessary to look at public opinion on the subject of Ethiopia in Egypt at the time Nagi was sent there. In 1924, Ras Tafari, as Haile Selassie was known before his coronation as Emperor, travelled to Europe and Egypt. His visit was amply covered in the Egyptian press, and sparked a renewed interest in the country. The terms in which Ethiopia was described strongly echoed a 1908 publication that was still highly influential by the time of Ras Tafari’s visit, *The Voyage to Ethiopia* by Sadiq al-Mu’ayyad al-‘Azm, a Syrian writer who had spent several months in the country in 1904 as an envoy of the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Hamid.³¹⁹ For the most part, the 1924 articles emphasized Ethiopia’s historical and geographical proximity to Egypt, with whom they shared the Nile, glossing over religious differences, and praised the country’s

³¹⁶ ED, Muhammad Nagi, ‘Adis-Abeba,’ undated, between 14 and 21 May 1932: ‘il y a une vague réminiscence d’un Musset au teint basané.’

³¹⁷ ‘Adis-Abeba,’ Letter to ‘Effat, April 1932 : ‘L’empereur apparaissait dans un jour somptueux.’ ; ‘SM [Sa Majesté] (...) posa gracieusement devant l’objectif.’

³¹⁸ ‘Adis-Abeba,’ Letter addressed to Ahmed, probably the critic Ahmed Rassim, undated, after 6 June 1932 : ‘Deux ou trois mois encore et vous aurez l’Abyssinie romantique telle qu’elle m’est apparue.’

³¹⁹ Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, 93-93. Attitudes towards Ethiopia would change and become more contentious in 1935 with Mussolini’s threats that would result in the invasion of the country in 1936, and the rise of political Islam in Egypt. However, as noted by Gershoni and Jankowski, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 170, reactions to the invasion in the Egyptian press remained largely favorable to the Ethiopians

strength in gaining victory over the Italians at the battle of Adowa in 1896.³²⁰ Indeed, Ethiopia exercised a deep fascination in the colonial world, and would continue to do so, as it maintained its independence except for a brief stint of Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941, when it was liberated by the British and its full sovereignty recognised in 1944.³²¹

The attitude of Egyptian intellectuals towards Ethiopia had much to do with perceptions of how the country fit into the various parameters that entered into play in definitions of Egypt as a nation. In particular, an emphasis on the Nile as Egypt's defining characteristic lent itself to sympathetic views of Ethiopia, as a fellow Nilotic land. In addition to this, Egyptian Coptic Christians had privileged ties to the Ethiopian church.³²² The romantic view of Ethiopia that can be seen in Nagi's paintings show him to be very much in line with contemporary public opinion on the question of Ethiopia, showing admiration for the independent nation and its leader.

That the version of Ethiopia that appears in Nagi's paintings is a heavily romanticized one is brought more fully into view if we look at events in Ethiopia during Nagi's stay there. In 1932, Haile Selassie was fighting to bring different factions firmly under his rule. His programme of modernization met with resistance on the part of the more

³²⁰ Nagi expressed his fascination with the idea that Ethiopia was the country where the Nile found its source. 'Adis-Abeba,' undated entry, after February 16, 1932.

³²¹ See for example Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 73.

³²² These ties were at times contentious and had a role to play in relations between the two countries at the time under discussion. However, they are not directly related to Nagi's view of the nation, and thus fall outside of the scope of this study. For a history of relations between the Egyptian and Ethiopian Churches, see Erlich, *The Cross and the River*. This book also covers the question of the Nile, which constitutes the other major issue that links Egypt and Ethiopia.

conservative members of the Ethiopian religious establishment, requiring him to consolidate his own power over the Church to stem resistance from within.³²³ An episode that was part of Selassie's efforts to bring the country fully under autocratic rule is alluded to in Nagi's notebook.³²⁴ After the coronation in November 1930, the Emperor retained the governor of the North-Western province of Gojam, Ras Hailu. In a number of cases brought against him, he was divested of part of his province. In 1932, Hailu hatched a plan to free Lidj Yasu, the previous heir to the throne, deposed in 1916 and imprisoned in 1921, then turn him in to the Emperor and thus gain back the entirety of his province in recognition. Lidj Yasu was freed, but Hailu's plot was discovered by the Emperor and he was thrown in prison.³²⁵ I have recounted this episode here only to show that despite the peaceful view of Ethiopia that can be discerned in Nagi's paintings, not only was the country undergoing turbulent times, but Nagi was fully aware of these events. We must then conclude that the romanticized view of Ethiopia that we see here was the result of very deliberate omissions.

I am not the first to address the question of how the view of Ethiopia that appears in Nagi's paintings relates to concepts of Egyptian national identity. Patrick Kane has argued for a strongly political, and anti-colonialist, content in Nagi's Ethiopian work. For example, he analyzes Nagi's painting of Addis-Ababa's *Menelik Square* (1932; fig. 70), in terms of the artist's presumed thorough knowledge of Ethiopian history, treating it as a monument to the battle of Adowa won by the emperor Menelik II against Italy in

³²³ Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, 99.

³²⁴ Lidj Yasu's escape is mentioned by Nagi: 'Adis-Abeba,' undated entry, after May 21, 1932.

³²⁵ Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 135-136.

1896, a date that was heavy with meaning for anti-colonialists.³²⁶ This much is true: the monuments that surround the square and that frame the composition are tributes to this battle, and the choice of subject likely carried some weight. Indeed, the statue of Menelik II was unveiled in 1930, the year of the coronation, thus mobilizing the old Emperor's anti-colonialist credentials at the service of the reign of the new Emperor. When Nagi arrived the following year, he would have been well aware of its anti-colonial significance, and this does indeed seem to be what the painting is in large part about.

Where Kane is wrong is in asserting that Nagi's Ethiopian experience initiated a 'rediscovery' of an African component to his identity, with the colouristic innovations of his Ethiopian paintings signalling a turning away from the Mediterranean towards Africa in search of his roots.³²⁷ There is no reason to assume that Nagi felt that he shared an African identity with the Ethiopians. In fact, there is every reason to assume that his cultural sympathies went to the Mediterranean side of Egyptian culture, as he had close ties to Greek, French, and Italian circles in Alexandria and Cairo, which would be expressed in no uncertain terms later in his career.

Kane's assertions that Nagi's treatment of colour referred to an African identity find some resonance in the painting *An Ethiopian Lady Sewing* (1932; fig. 71) which seems to find its visual roots in a generic European fauvism. Nagi would have been aware of

³²⁶ Patrick Kane, 'Politics, Discontent and the Everyday in Egyptian Arts, 1938-1966 (Ph.D. Diss, University of New York at Binghamton., 2005), 72-74.

³²⁷ Ibid., 72.

the primitivist connotations of this style of painting. However, it seems unlikely that he saw himself in this image of an Ethiopian woman. Rather, here, African-ness serves as a sign of Nagi's *difference* from the Ethiopians. Indeed, that Nagi referenced Orientalist painting in his Ethiopian work also marks his difference from the Ethiopians.

There can be little doubt, then, that Ethiopia's proud and exceptional status as the only African country to escape Western colonization was forefront in Nagi's mind as he painted, and that his stylistic struggle was with how to show the extent of the Ethiopians' civilized nature and social organization, without neglecting the all-important fact that they were not European.³²⁸ The romantic, orientalist image of Ethiopia that Nagi's paintings leave us with is one of a refined, organized state, an idealized rendition of a proud and independent non-Western nation, with perhaps a trace of exoticism referring to its African identity. For a Western-educated anti-colonialist like Nagi, this civilized, free, and 'authentic' Ethiopia was something of an ideal.

In 1932 or 1933, Nagi exhibited his Ethiopian paintings in Cairo.³²⁹ Given the striking similarities in composition between *The Musicians* (fig. 72) and Ayyad's 1933 painting, *A Café in Aswan* (fig. 52), discussed in the previous chapter, it seems likely that the earlier painting served as a model for the later one. Nagi's romanticized view of a fellow

³²⁸ An exhibition consisting mainly of Nagi's Ethiopian work took place in London at the Beaux Arts Gallery in 1936. *An Exhibition of Paintings of Egypt and Abyssinia by M. Naghi*, foreword by J.B. Manson, Jan. 27-Feb. 8, 1936, Beaux Arts Gallery. A painting titled *Religious Procession in Addis Ababa* was acquired by the Tate in 1936. Tate Records, TG4/2/764/1 (Tate Collections: Acquisitions: Naghi Bey, Mohammad, 1936).

³²⁹ Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al-haraka al-fanniyya*, 57

Nilotic independent country seen through the lens of European romanticism was transformed by 'Ayyad into a café scene set in Upper Egypt seen through the lens of European modernism (as we have seen in the previous chapter, the structure of the space resembles that of French café scenes such as Toulouse-Lautrec's *At the Moulin Rouge*). A foreign scene becomes an Egyptian one, and a noble one, perhaps even set in the Ethiopia court, is transformed into a popular café, as the shape of the chair in 'Ayyad's painting echoes that of the royal *begena* played by the woman in Nagi's. Furthermore, the main female figure in *The Musicians* finds her counterpart in the woman smoking a *sheesha* in 'Ayyad's work. What we know of 'Ayyad seems to indicate that he was turning Nagi's noble foreign scene on its head with the goal of highlighting his own Egyptian-ness and closeness to the people.

The paintings that we have been looking at were likely seen mostly by a small circle of artists and patrons in Egypt, and can be seen as reflecting certain views of the Egyptian peasantry and of Ethiopia – views determined both by Nagi's social position (landowner) and by his francophone Alexandrian upbringing. Upon his return to Egypt, however, he was soon called upon to make the most public of pictorial statements, when he was commissioned to create murals for the Egyptian pavilion for the Paris World's Fair in 1937. The 'Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne' was the first international exhibition in which Egypt was to participate, and presented an opportunity for Nagi to show himself to be the painter of the Egyptian nation. For the World's Fair, Nagi was presenting Egypt to a foreign audience, a very different kind of endeavor from the one he had undertaken in Ethiopia. Depicting Egypt for an audience abroad in large-scale panels in a setting like the World's Fair required

that he visually define Egypt as a nation, and the elements he used to do so are easily recognizable in terms of both style and content: the way the panels are laid out in a horizontal format and the subjects he chose refer to Pharaonic frescoes, while the flat colour planes, pure dark contours, and narrative structure also bear some resemblance to Islamic miniatures (fig. 75 and 76); furthermore, the subject of the murals is that of the familiar peasant and popular life.

It has been shown the extent to which the international exhibitions of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries were closely linked to an expanding imperial world order; indeed, that they served to reinforce this order for colonial and colonized nations alike.³³⁰ In the nineteenth century, the expansion of colonial domination across the globe demanded that colonized cultures be presented in ‘knowable’ form,³³¹ and Timothy Mitchell has emphasized the importance of the binary logic of capitalist modernity that distinguishes between physical reality and its representation, thus allowing the world, notably the non-European cultures that were in the process of being subjugated with the advance of colonialism, to be served up in exhibition form.³³² The role of the fairs as a celebration of Western culture and progress has also been noted,³³³ as has their didactic

³³⁰ Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

³³¹ Zeynep Celik, *Displaying the Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1.

³³² Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For other studies of the pivotal role of these exhibitions in establishing and maintaining a colonial world order, see John P. Burris, *Exhibiting Religion: Colonialism and Spectacle at International Expositions, 1851-1893* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001) and Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³³³ See for example Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

and pedagogical role.³³⁴ In addition to this, the fairs played an important part in the development and spread of new technologies.³³⁵

By 1937, while the logic that had underscored the fairs in the nineteenth century continued to hold true in part, the focus has shifted, reflecting the tense ideological and economic conditions of the times.³³⁶ The world was in the midst of the deepest and most widespread economic downturn it had ever known, and the threat of war loomed over Europe, which was still recovering from the recent world conflict. The Exhibition of 1937 has been described as a ‘huge stage for the anxieties of a world on the edge of conflict (...), the increasingly desperate expressions of republican virtue and collective hope.’³³⁷ With Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union competing for influence and prestige, their outsized pavilions facing each other in a prime location at the Trocadéro, the fair served as a forum for national and ideological propaganda. While these totalitarian regimes had the apparatus in place to present a unified national image abroad, the political scene in France was intensely polarized.³³⁸ The idea of presenting a

³³⁴ See for example Pieter Van Wesemael, *Architecture of Instruction and Delight: a Socio-historical Analysis of World Exhibitions as a Didactic Phenomenon (1798-1851-1970)* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2001).

³³⁵ See for example Göran Ahlström, *Technological Development and Industrial Expositions, 1850-1914* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1996). In particular, electric lighting at the fairs has received the attention of a number of scholars, for example, John A. Jakle, *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) and David E. Nye, *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³³⁶ For an in depth study of the French political context within which the fair was conceived, see Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World's Fair* (Albany: State University of New York Pree, 1998). James D. Herbert provides another kind of contextualization in his study of the 1937 exhibition in tandem with other exhibitions taking place in Paris in 1937 and 1938. He shows the tension that lies between the arrogance of claiming to exhibit the world in its totality and the fact that representation always falls short of this goal. James D. Herbert, *Paris 1937: Worlds on Exhibition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

³³⁷ Christopher Green, *Art in France 1900-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.

³³⁸ Peer, *France on Display*, 21-22.

unified front to the outside world was a central concern in 1937, and ‘the nation itself as a collectivity, rather than its products, would become the primary register of comparison.’³³⁹

The 1937 Paris World’s Fair attracted an unprecedented number of participants: 44 foreign nations answered France’s invitation, and unlike previous international exhibitions, it was made up in large part of national pavilions, each promoting its own country’s resources and ideology. The Egyptian pavilion of 1937, for example, contrasted sharply with the Egyptian exhibition at the Paris World’s Fair of 1889 described so vividly by Mitchell in *Colonizing Egypt*.³⁴⁰ While the 1889 exhibition had been built by the French as an imitation of a winding Cairo street, in 1937, Egypt was represented by Egyptians, although, as we will see, they represented only one faction in the divided Egyptian political scene. Despite the fact that the pavilion was designed by a Frenchman, the architect Roger Lardat, an employee of the city of Paris,³⁴¹ the exhibition was curated by an Egyptian, the landowner, industrialist, and politician Muhammad Mahmud Khalil (1877-1953), co-founder of the Egyptian Association for the Friends of the Fine Arts.³⁴² Furthermore, the contents of the pavilion, including Nagi’s wall panels, as well as a bust of Sa’d Zaghlul designed by Mukhtar, were Egyptian.

³³⁹ Ibid., 7. This idea is also noted in Kate Kangaslahti, ‘Absence/Presence: the Efficacy of Text, Image, and Space at the 1937 Exposition Internationale,’ *Word and Image Interactions* 7 (2011), 201.

³⁴⁰ Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, 1-35.

³⁴¹ Jacques Gréber and Henri Martin, *Exposition de Paris 1937*, v.II, Sections étrangères (Paris: Editions art et architecture, 1937).

³⁴² Daoustashi and al-Quwaydi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 204. Khalil and his French wife were avid collectors, mostly of European art, and their mansion in Cairo is now a museum housing their impressive collection. For more on Khalil, see Muhammad Salmawi, *Muhammad Mahmud Khalil: al-rajul wa l-mathaf* (Cairo: Mathaf Mahmud Khalil, 1995).

Situating the pavilion within the realm of Egyptian politics is not difficult. A photograph of the inside of the pavilion that appeared in the weekly *Al-Hilal* in 1937 shows us that Nagi's murals were arranged around a central staircase that divided into two side staircases (fig. 77).³⁴³ On the landing, right in front of Nagi's central vertical panel, was placed one of Mukhtar's models for the head of Zaghlul, highlighted the privileged position of the Wafd in the organization of the pavilion. Indeed, by 1937, the year before the unveiling of Mukhtar's monuments, the Wafd was once again in power with Zaghlul's successor Mustafa al-Nahhas (1879-1965) as Prime Minister. The aforementioned Muhammad Mahmud Khalil, who was in charge of the pavilion, was a member of the Wafd until he resigned in 1938.³⁴⁴ We have seen in Chapter 1 the criticism that Mukhtar's statues of Zaghlul met with as the project developed in the midst of the conflict that marked the Egyptian political scene in the 1930s. However, despite its internal divisions, Egypt was represented as a unified entity abroad, under the sign of the Wafd.

Situating the pavilion more generally on the stage of world politics is more difficult. The influence of Fascist ideas and practices in Egypt between the two world wars is an issue that often comes up in the historiography. Kane says of the curator Mahmud Khalil that he was a Fascist sympathizer, a statement for which I can find no basis.³⁴⁵ According to Gershoni and Jankowski, the fascist sympathies of interwar Egyptian intellectuals have

³⁴³ 'Ma'rad Baris,' *Al-Hilal*, v.45, July 1937, 1009.

³⁴⁴ Jacques Berque, *Egypt : Imperialism and Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 561.

³⁴⁵ Kane, 'Politics, Discontent and the Everyday in Egyptian Arts,' 80.

been grossly exaggerated by the post-revolutionary narrative that insists on the anti-British anti-imperialist credentials of the Free Officers by relating a brief episode during the Second World War where the leaders of the 1952 revolution allied themselves to the Axis powers. They examine the question through the pre-revolutionary press in an attempt to gauge Egyptian reactions to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in real time, concluding that public opinion was mostly opposed to them. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia was widely criticized in the Egyptian press.³⁴⁶ Gilbert Achcar also argues that Arab Fascist sympathies have been grossly exaggerated, though he attributes this phenomenon to a later assimilation of anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism.³⁴⁷ It is unlikely that Nagi, with his experience in Ethiopia, and his ties to Egyptian intellectual circles, would have sympathized with the regime that waged war on Ethiopia, or more broadly, with Fascist ideology.

That there were Fascist sympathizers in Egypt in the 1930s is certain. Ahmad Hussein's Young Egypt adopted European Fascism's accoutrements, organizing paramilitary activities and the 'greenshirts' modeled on the Italian 'blackshirts' and German 'blackshirts'.³⁴⁸ However, this movement was by no means dominant. There was a proliferation of political parties, as well as social and militant organisations in Egypt in the 1930s. Egypt also had a growing, albeit still weak, communist party.³⁴⁹ However,

³⁴⁶ Israel Gershoni, 'Beyond Anti-Semitism: Egyptian Responses to German Nazism and Italian Fascism in the 1930s,' (EUI Working Papers, 2001), 11-12.

³⁴⁷ Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: the Arab-Israeli war of narratives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 82.

³⁴⁸ For more on this movement, see James Jankowski, *Egypt's Young Rebels: "Young Egypt," 1933-1952* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

³⁴⁹ Tareq Y. Ismael and Rif'at Sa'īd, *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 32.

neither the fascist trend nor the communist one was as strong in Egypt in the late 1930s as the Muslim brotherhood, an Islamist social reform movement founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949).³⁵⁰ The movement was the main force for the Wafd-Palace-British power triangle to contend with. In 1936, the death of king Fu'ad (1868-1936) and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia prompted Egyptians to present a united front to negotiate another unsatisfactory treaty with the British out of a fear of being invaded. Whatever the sympathies of certain sections of the population, and whatever public opinion before that date, in 1937, Egyptians were more afraid of Fascist imperialism than they were of their long-term occupier.

With the broader political context sketched out, we should now return to Nagi's contribution in order to locate them within this context. Nagi created a series of horizontal wooden panels for the World's Fair pavilion depicting various aspects of traditional life in Egypt, as well as a larger vertical one called *Dumu' Isis (The Tears of Isis)*, which shows the goddess Isis mourning her brother and husband Osiris (fig. 78). Osiris, the story goes, was tricked into climbing into his own coffin by the lord of evil, Seth, then cut into fourteen pieces, and his remains scattered. Isis searched for his remains that she might bring him back to life. In this depiction of Isis, her humanity is emphasized over her godliness. She seems to be modeled on a wooden bust from the Louvre that, like Nagi's version, has none of Isis' godly attributes, and is identified as a mourner who might be the goddess (fig. 79).

³⁵⁰ For a history of the early years of the Muslim brotherhood, see R.P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Lia Brynjar, *The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood: the rise of an Islamic mass movement 1928-1942* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998).

The Isis panel is key to understanding the World's Fair series: the mourning goddess gathered the pieces of her slaughtered husband in order to bring them back to life. Read as a whole, the series reiterates the trope of Egypt's resurrection, as well as that of its unity. The other panels in the series represent every day activities in Egypt, separating them clearly into female and male spheres: *An-naddabat* (*The Mourners*) has only women, *Al-mizmar* (*The Flute*), only men (fig. 75 and 76). In addition to this, on each panel, Nagi has depicted Egyptians with different skin tones, ranging from the very light to the very dark. Could it be that Isis, standing proudly, mourning the body of the nation torn apart by differences of race and gender, is preparing to reunite and revive it?

The World's Fair Pavilion presented an image of one nation, one discourse, one party to the outside viewer unfamiliar with Egyptian politics in the last 1930s. The unitary discourse is that of the Wafd's secular nationalism with a heavy Pharaonicist component. The World's Fair panels are in line with the Egyptian nationalist discourse of the 1920s and early 1930s, expounding a nationalism that grapples with the profound divisions in Egyptian society, imagining it as united through its representations. In the figure of Isis, Nagi recognizes these divisions and makes sense of them. The panels and the pavilion do not show a particular alignment with either Fascist or Communist ideology. However, the pavilion is a manifestation of Wafdist ideology, a fact that is, in itself, significant at a time when the Wafd had lost any semblance of ideological hegemony in Egypt. The context of the World's Fair, especially that of 1937, which served as a forum for nations to advertize themselves on the world stage, explains the broad and unified view of the

nation that Nagi created. In this context, we see Nagi, and others involved in the creation of the pavilion, repressing their own sense of division within the nation.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, it was not only the death of his father that caused Nagi's world to shift. This was a complex and difficult time for Egypt. The Montreux Convention in 1937 abolished the Capitulations, trade agreements between Egyptian and European countries facilitating the presence of foreign nationals in the country. This began a process of Egyptianization (the Arabic word is *tamsir*), mentioned in the previous chapter, that had long been desired in nationalist and Islamic circles, in which foreign officials were to be replaced progressively by Egyptian officials.³⁵¹ Until then, cultural institutions had been dominated by the French: the head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service had always been French, the French artist and journalist Georges Rémond (1877-1965) succeeded the aforementioned Louis Hautecoeur as Inspector General of the Fine Arts, and Nagi, who was the first Egyptian director of the School of Fine Arts, did not assume that function until 1937.³⁵² In the art world, the issue of 'Egyptianization,' was pressing. In the weekly *Al-Risala*, an article appearing on 17 May 1937 voiced the discontent of Egyptian artists about the lack of support coming from the government, which, according to the article, generously supported foreign artists.³⁵³ The

³⁵¹ Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 205 ; Afaf Lutfi Sayyid Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 97.

³⁵² Sobhi Al Sharouny, *A Museum in a Book* (Cairo: Dar al Shorouk, 1998), 46 ; Daoustashi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 211. A somewhat hagiographic interpretation of the philosophical project underlying Nagi's running of the School is given in Nicolas Harraz, *Le rôle culturel de Naghi en Egypte et à l'étranger* (Cairo: Librairie franco-égyptienne, 1983), 42-45.

³⁵³ 'Al-fann al-misri fi haja ila ri'aya,' *Al-risala*, v. 5, n. 202, May 17, 1937, 833. Of *Al-risala*, Gershoni and Jankowski write : 'Of all the Egyptian periodicals of the period, the new weekly *Al-risala* played the leading role in the intellectual formulation as well as the popular spread of the Islamic orientation (...). The general thrust of most of the contributions to *Al-Risala* differed from the sweeping admiration for Western

move towards Egyptianization was perceived to be a crucial moment in the development of modern Egyptian art.³⁵⁴

According to Nagi's biographer, Daoustashi, in the summer of 1939 while Nagi was away on an extended vacation in Europe, Muhammad Hassan, assistant inspector for the Fine Arts, and a graduate of the School of Fine Arts of the same year as Mukhtar and 'Ayyad, launched an investigation about allegations related to the way that Nagi was running the School. Hassan's hostility towards Nagi was due to tensions in the late 1930s between graduates from the School and artists educated abroad, who were perceived as outsiders.³⁵⁵ Given the political climate of the late 1930s, this seems like a plausible scenario. That Nagi perceived Hassan to be his enemy is confirmed by a letter written by Nagi's wife Lilika in 1952 in which she says: 'since Mohamed Hassan no longer exists to sabotage all your projects, you can accomplish a lot now.'³⁵⁶ Nagi was removed from his position as director of the School and appointed head of the Museum of Modern Art. These tensions – being seen, and seeing himself, as insufficiently Egyptian during this period during which Egypt's cosmopolitan character were coming under increasing attack – undoubtedly impacted upon his view of the nation, leading to doubt and cynicism. This is reflected in the collapse of unity in his painting. Combined with the circumstances addressed at the opening of this chapter, the death of his father

culture which had been characteristic of the contents of such journals as *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Siyasa al-Usbu'iyya* in the 1920s.' *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 63.

³⁵⁴ Al-Gabakhang, *Tarikh al-Haraka al-Fanniyya*, 26; Daoustashi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 227-228; 'Ayyad, *Al-hawadith fil-funun al-gamila*, 11.

³⁵⁵ Daoustashi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 228.

³⁵⁶ ED, Letter from Lilika Tavernaris to Muhammad Nagi, Rome, November 23, 1952.

and his new responsibilities as landowner, this collapse was expressed in paintings such as *The Artist's Family in the Countryside* (fig. 61).

We have seen the extent to which Nagi's proximity to the peasants on his father's estate was difficult for him. *Ghida' Rifi* (*Dinner in the Countryside*, 1940s; fig. 80), further illustrates the ways in which this difficulty was manifested visually.³⁵⁷ The painting shows a group of women gathered in a modest peasant abode, making bread. The table on which the women are preparing their meal is turned almost parallel to the picture plane, as if the painter was attempting to press it up against the picture plane in the way he did with images of peasants when he was younger, but somehow the subject now refuses to be flattened in this way, and the women maintain a strong three-dimensionality, resisting the landowner's reductive gaze by the weight of their physical being.

Dinner in the Countryside is a far cry from the nobility of Nagi's earlier representations of Egyptian peasants such as the *Sheikh* or the *Shepherd*. Next to the changes that occurred in Nagi's life in the 1930s, it is interesting to note that the subject depicted here is no longer the distant and easily idealized Upper Egyptians, but the peasants of the Delta with whom, as we have seen, he dealt with on his family's estate. This in itself is sufficient explanation for the profoundly different tone. That Nagi inhabited the same space as the peasant women here can be sensed in the embodied position of the viewer,

³⁵⁷ A painting called *Les faiseuses de pain à Abou Hommos*, probably the same one, is dated 1929 or 1934 in Naghi, Roussillon, et al. *Mohamed Naghi*, 61. However, this painting is dated to the 1940s in the museum catalogue, Nagib, *Muhammad Nagi 1888-1956*.

as he stands above them looking down. Furthermore, the woman on the left side of the composition stares out, marking the continuity between the world inside the painting and the world outside it.

By the time Nagi's painted *An-Nil al-ahmar* (*The Red Nile*, 1940s?; fig. 81), the hierarchies that we saw beginning to disintegrate in *The Artist's Family in the Countryside*, had all but disappeared. The painting shows the Nile overflowing, and what emerges from it is a mass of people of different social classes, functions, and genders, although women are a minority, and from different times, in an allegory of the life-giving power of the great river. Similarities with the earlier painting can be discerned: among the crowd of people, only a few have distinct facial features, in this case, the three men who frame the lower half of the composition stare out at the viewer as if they were the ones thinking the painting, focal points with which the viewer can identify. The space is dream-like, confused, like voices heard or faces seen in a crowd.

The Red Nile, which has the kind of all-overness associated with decorative arts and especially Islamic art, could be read in terms of a collage aesthetic: flatness, side-by-side-ness of the different elements used in the composition, and equal importance attributed to all (they are all on the same flat picture plane), different textures, clearly delimited contours and hard edges that are reminiscent of something cut out. It looks like a mass of citations, an eclectic inventory of the different components of the Egyptian nation rather than a synthesis that amounts to a whole. Nagi himself, as is often the case

in his paintings, can be seen floating around in the mass of figures, on the lower right hand side. While in *The Artist's Family in the Countryside*, despite the intrusion of the peasants, a hierarchical order could still be discerned, in *The Red Nile*, this hierarchy has all but disappeared, leaving a pictorial space in which all persons, animals, and objects are placed on the same plane.

After the World's Fair, at which Nagi managed for a brief moment to suppress his sense of difference within Egypt to produce a unified image, and around the time that he painted *The Artist's Family in the Countryside*, in which, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, those differences returned to haunt his painting, Nagi's personal life took a turn that would further distance him from any sense of pure Egyptian identity. Sometime around 1940, he married the wealthy Greek Cypriot divorcee Lilika Tavernaris who had two teenage sons.³⁵⁸ From the time of his marriage until his death in 1956, Nagi would spend his summers in Cyprus, in the town of Platres, where the couple owned a house.³⁵⁹ Not only was Nagi connected to Cyprus through his wife, he was also close friends with the Greek Cypriot writer and painter Nicos Nicolaidis who had lived and worked in Egypt for many years.³⁶⁰ Nagi's ties to Cyprus are important for our understanding of his work in the last fifteen years of his life: once again, Nagi's relationship to questions of

³⁵⁸ A letter from Muhammad Nagi to his sister Effat dated 2 January 1939 shows that he had made the decision to get married (Daoustashi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 225). One of Lilika's sons, Jani Christou (1926-1960), was to become a renowned classical composer in Greece.

³⁵⁹ The house, which now stands empty, was within short driving distance from the Forest Park Hotel, a popular vacationing place for members of the Egyptian upper classes, including the royal family. The young Egyptian King Farouq (1920-1965) was especially fond of the place.

³⁶⁰ For details of the life of Nicolaidis and reproductions of his paintings, see Helene S. Niketa, *Nicos Nicolaidis, 1884-1956* (Nicosia : Politistiko Kentro Homilu Laïkēs, 2002). For his work as a writer, see Maria Roussou, *Nicos Nicolaidis, the Cypriot, 1884-1956: anthology* (London: Diaspora Books, 1998).

national identity was inflected through his profound involvement with a place outside of Egypt.

From the mid-1940s until 1952, much of the artist's energy was occupied with his monumental *Madrasat al-Iskandariyya* (*School of Alexandria*; fig. 82). The painting, which measures eight meters by three, in which he presents famous Alexandrians and Egyptians past and present, now hangs in the principal meeting hall of the Governorate of Alexandria.³⁶¹ The painting is a large-scale tribute to Nagi's city of origin as a meeting place for civilizations and cultures. In it, he combined past and present, giving the Egyptian nation an ancient and glorious history. The painting marks a turn towards a Mediterranean emphasis in his definition of the nation.

The monumental painting is centered around an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great. In front of him stands a group consisting of a Jewish woman (identified in the above-mentioned newspaper article) standing between Archimedes on the right, who is

³⁶¹ Robin Ostle, 'Modern Egyptian Renaissance Man,' in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, v. 57, n. 1 (1994): 188. While most accounts claim that he started work on the painting in 1939 and completed it in 1952, a large reproduction and commentary in *Al-Musawwar* in 1952 dates the commission of the work by the city of Alexandria to 1944. A copy of the article cut out from *Al-Musawwar* was found in Nagi and Lilika's house in Platres, Cyprus by Valentinos Charamboulos, who was the first to take an interest in Nagi's life in Cyprus, around 2006. The house has stood empty at least since Lilika's death and at the time Charamboulos visited it for the first time, it still contained a number of the family's possessions. The article in question is probably the same one that Daoustashi mentions, published in *Al-Musawwar* in 1952 when the painting was exhibited at the Venice Biennale (Daoustashi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 374).

Nagi's wife Lilika was likely referring to this painting when she wrote to him in 1953 that, as she suspected, only the Greek Colony was interested in buying the 'panneau d'Alexandrie.' (Letter from Lilika Tavernaris to Muhammad Nagi, January 6, 1953, ED) This would imply that the painting was never commissioned, or that the commission was canceled, leaving Nagi to find another buyer. Guidelines pertaining to the purchase of the work, the text of which is reproduced in Nagi's biography, were sent from the Ministry of Regional Affairs (*Wizarat al-shu'un al-baladiyya wa al-qarawiyya*) to the administration of the Governorate of Alexandria on 5 May 1955. The text is reproduced in Daoustashi, *Muhammad Nagi*, 374.

handing a scroll to Ibn Rushd on the left. This central group structures the painting, as it is divided between the Greek contributors to Alexandria's history and culture on the right, and the Arab ones on the left. On the Arab side, the usual representatives of the *nahda* (or Modern Egyptian Renaissance) are featured. On the Greek side, industrialists feature heavily. The second figure from the left holding a book in one arm is Nagi's close friend, Nicos Nicolaidis.³⁶² That Nagi included a Cypriot figure on the Greek side might be an indication of his well-documented sympathy for the Cypriot cause of *Enosis*, or union with Greece.³⁶³

Nagi was not alone in turning to a Mediterranean definition of Egypt. The author Taha Hussein's *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa fi Misr (The Future of Culture in Egypt)*, published in 1938, defined Egypt as part of Europe and advocated the adoption of certain European modes of being for Egyptians. The Francophile Hussein (1889-1973), like Nagi, emphasised the Greek component to Alexandrian culture:

Alexandria became a major Greek capital, in the strictest sense of the word, and perhaps the most potent outlet of Greek culture for the ancient world. It is an indisputable fact that [Greek] culture in all its ramifications sought and found a safe shelter in Egypt where it flowered and spread even more than when it was centred in Athens.³⁶⁴

³⁶² That the figure is Nicolaidis was pointed out to me by Marina Pieridi and Valentinos Charamboulos, who generously showed me a copy of the book that he holds in the painting, a limited edition artist's book with a characteristic cross shape on the cover.

³⁶³ In 1955, Nagi painted *Al-wahda al-wataniyya*, or *Enosis*. The painting shows Nagi's support for the cause of *enosis*. Indeed, after Nagi's death in April 1956, a Cypriot newspaper paid tribute to him and quoted him describing his relationship to Cyprus in the following terms: 'I consider myself a painter of historical events. This is one of the reasons of my passage to Cyprus, searching to be inspired by the historical struggle of its people. It is there that I painted 'Enosis.' It is mainly the outcome of my absolute belief in the fairness of the struggle of the people of Cyprus, and my certainty that it will prevail. If we accept the fact that art may compensate for our transient passage through life and our anxious efforts to achieve fame, then it is also true that art will always be on the side of those who strive for their rights regardless of country or race.' ('M. Naghi, a prominent figure in Egyptian painting' in *Kenourghia Epochi (New Era)*, Spring 1956, Translation from the Greek courtesy of Marina Pieridi).

³⁶⁴ Taha Hussein, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, trans. Sidney Clazer (London: Octagon Books, 1975), 6.

In this view, Egypt was part of European culture. Modernization was thus not a slavish imitation of the West, but rather a way of reclaiming what belonged to Egypt by right. It has been noted that Hussein's book was in part a reaction to the Islamic resurgence of the 1930s, which 'threatened the secularizing hopes of the previous decade.'³⁶⁵

Nagi's *School of Alexandria*, like Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, must thus be understood within a certain concept of Egyptian identity, one that sought to justify the strong cultural ties that bound the Egyptian elites to Europe by demonstrating the historical legitimacy of those ties.³⁶⁶ Indeed, in the last years of his life, it was in this Mediterranean definition of Egypt that Nagi was able to reconcile the aspects of his own identity.

Nagi's life and work were thus shaped by conflicting notions of personal and collective identity. While 'Ayyad was driven all the more forcefully to contribute to the definition of a cohesive nation by the difficult position in which he, as a Copt, found himself, Nagi's attempts at representing the nation were frequently disrupted by his own ambivalence. This ambivalence extended to his relationship, and that of Egyptian painting, to Europe (as we saw, for example, in the 1918 text), to the parameters of Egyptian national identity (as we saw in his speech in Prague), and to the rural symbolism that was so frequently used to depict the nation (as is visible in *The Artist's Family in the Countryside* and *Dinner in the Countryside*).

³⁶⁵ Charles D. Smith, *Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 152 ; see also John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 93.

³⁶⁶ For a discussion of Nagi's work and other expressions of the Egyptian nation seen through the lens of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, see Ostle, 'Alexandria,' 317-318.

Nagi's ambivalent relationship to some of the major ingredients that went into the constitution of modern Egyptian art would seem to make him an unlikely candidate for the kind of nationalized canon of which he became part after his death. However, as I have shown, despite the complexity inherent in it, much of his work, with its rural and Pharaonicist content, is able to fit into this canon. Therein lies the paradox: images of a cohesive nation are always marked by the difference that has been masked in the process of imagining the nation. Indeed, we have seen this to be the case, in various ways, and to varying degrees, in the work of Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, and Nagi. We will now move on to yet another instance of difference within the representation of the nation as we turn to the life and work of the Alexandrian painter, Mahmud Sa'id.

Chapter 4: Mahmud Sa'id (1897-1964)

In a review of the 1938 Cairo Salon, a critic for *Al-Risala* used the painter Mahmud Sa'id as the ultimate example of what he believed art was, and should be:

The fundamentals of life are the same in all times and places. Environment and era are two factors without which art would not be complete, but the essence of art is one in any time or place (...) It is clear that professor Mahmud Bey Sa'id is the most excellent of all those exhibiting their work [at the Salon], and the one with the most depth of poetry and of feeling.³⁶⁷

The review, which I will return to in more detail later in this chapter, touches on something central to Sa'id's painting, the idea that art has an essence that transcends history and geography. His particular relationship to light, achieved through the use of European Renaissance oil painting techniques, the sculptural, hieratic quality of his figures, and the strange, almost disconcerting, compositions that are the result of the marriage of ancient and modern Egyptian subject-matter, all point to a desire for the universal. Yet, Sa'id's painting, much like that of his compatriots whose work we have looked at in previous chapters, was very much anchored in a specific time and place: I suggest that, despite his status as one of the pioneers of modern Egyptian art, the desire for universality expressed in his painting owes as much to his place among the cosmopolitan elite of early twentieth century Alexandria as it does to discourses of Egyptian nationalism.

³⁶⁷ Nasri 'Atallah Susa, *Al-Risala*, v. 6, n. 1, May 9, 1938, 787.

I will come shortly to look in depth at Sa‘id’s paintings, highlighting the different strategies he used to create the kind of universal and permanent image of the nation that appears in his work. First, however, it will be useful to get an idea of who he was. Sa‘id was born in 1897 into an aristocratic Alexandrian family. His father was prime minister of Egypt from 1910 to 1914, then again briefly in 1919, and his niece, Safinaz Zulficar, was to become the first wife of King Farouq under the name of Farida. Sa‘id attended the well-known Victoria College and the Pères Jésuites school in Alexandria.³⁶⁸ In Egypt, he studied drawing with the Italian Impressionist Amelia Casonato Daformo (1878-1969) and in the studio of Antonio Zanieri (dates unknown). After receiving a Licence in French law from the Ecole Française du Droit in Cairo in 1918, he spent a year studying drawing in the ‘free’ department at the Grande Chaumière in Paris. This private academy, like the Académie Julian where Sa‘id also spent some weeks studying in July 1920, and again in July 1921, was an alternative to the official Beaux-Arts and attracted foreigners eager to study in Paris.³⁶⁹

After his return to Egypt, Sa‘id began his career in law as a Deputy District Prosecutor in the Mansoura District court in the Mixed Courts in 1921.³⁷⁰ The Mixed Courts were an institution peculiar to Egypt. Founded in 1875, before the Native Courts that were modeled on them, their role was to settle disputes between Egyptians and non-Egyptians, and between foreign nationals residing in Egypt. Their existence was made necessary by the capitulations, agreements protecting and granting privileges to foreign nationals doing

³⁶⁸ Jean Moscatelli, ‘...avec Mahmoud Said,’ *La semaine égyptienne: Cahiers des peintres et sculpteurs de l’Egypte moderne no. 1: Mahmoud Said*, January 31, 1936, 1. For a history of the Victoria School, see Sahar Hamouda and Colin Clement, *Victoria College. A History Revealed* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002).

³⁶⁹ Archives Nationales de France, 63 AS 7 (Fonds de l’Académie Julian), 172. It is clear from the registers that the majority of students at this Académie were foreign.

³⁷⁰ Moscatelli, ‘...avec Mahmoud Said,’ 1.

trade in the Ottoman Empire. Egypt, from the second half of the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, had a large population of foreigners, due in part to these agreements.³⁷¹ Sa'īd was later appointed judge in the Court of Appeals in Alexandria. Tenure as judge was for life, and he would devote himself to painting full-time only after he retired in 1947 at the age of fifty. Sa'īd traveled extensively throughout his life. He died in 1964.

By the 1930s, Sa'īd had fully developed the signature style that is the mark of his painting. Take for instance *As-salat (The Prayer)*, 1934; fig.83). The figures and space are suspended in a moment outside of time; the sculptural forms of the praying men's backs and of the pillars repeat and echo each other, creating a peaceful, harmonious space. The scene is bathed in a light that seems both to shine from within the figures and to fall diagonally on the backs of the prostrated men from a source of natural light above them. The light that falls on the figures unifies them in a deep stillness and highlights their hieratic, sculptural quality.

The treatment of light plays an important role in Sa'īd's painting, not only for the way it looks, but also in terms of its meaning. Here is an extract from a letter he wrote to the French painter Pierre Beppi-Martin (1869-1964) in 1937:

What I am looking for is radiance rather than light. What I want is internal light, not surface light, that blazing and deep light of some of the Limoge [sic] enamel work that can be found in the Cluny museum, or in the stain-glass windows of the Chartres cathedral, or the one in Barcelona. Surface light pleases for a minute or an

³⁷¹ For an in depth study of the Mixed Courts of Egypt, see Jasper Yeates Brinton, *The Mixed Courts of Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930).

hour, while internal light captivates slowly, but once it appears, it imprisons us, it possesses us.³⁷²

Sa'id thus expressed his attachment to internal radiance as opposed to surface light as a commitment to creating deep, long-lasting beauty as opposed to ephemeral pleasure. Indeed, in 1932, a critic noted the artist's use of light as a means of achieving this out-of-time quality, describing it as 'a surreal light, ideal, and outside of the time of the clock.'³⁷³

Dhata al-jada'il adh-dhahabiyya (*The Girl with the Golden Locks*, 1933; fig. 84) presents a sculptural quality and internal luminescence similar to what we have seen in *The Prayer*. However, there is also something different going on here. The figure stands in front of a body of water that is clearly marked as Egyptian by the white sail of the felucca, and by the presence of minarets and Islamic architecture visible in the background. The woman herself is strange and difficult to situate: her hair is too light to be Egyptian, her eyes are a deep green, and she is wearing a dress that immodestly uncovers her shoulders and upper chest. If the figure is suspended in a moment of stillness like those in *The Prayer*, she is also placed outside of defined time and space by the incongruousness of her physique and attire.

³⁷² SS, Mahmud Sa'id, Letter to Pierre Beppi-Martin, San Stefano, Ramleh, Alexandria, December 16, 1927. 'Ce que je cherche c'est l'éclat, ce n'est pas la lumière. Ce que je cherche c'est la lumière intérieure et non celle de surface. Cette lumière ardente et profonde de certains émaux de Limoge [sic] au musée de Cluny, de certains vitraux dans la cathédrale de Chartres ou dans celle de Barcelone. La lumière de surface plait une minute ou une heure, la lumière intérieure ne capte que lentement mais une fois à nous parue elle nous enchaîne, elle nous possède.'

³⁷³ Henri Bergasse in *L'Orient Musical*, June 1, 1932, cited in *La semaine égyptienne: Cahiers des peintres et sculpteurs de l'Égypte moderne no. 1: Mahmoud Said*, January 31, 1936, 27.

It could easily be to *The Girl with the Golden Curls* that contemporaneous critics were referring when they discerned something strange and mysterious in Sa‘id’s painting. The Egyptian critic Ahmed Rassim refers to the ‘sad, caricatural fierceness’ of his work, writing that ‘if you don’t love it, you hate it.’³⁷⁴ Another critic wrote: ‘The first contact with Mahmoud Said’s painting usually results in a feeling of unease. There is something there that is too violent, too brutal that makes one uncomfortable.’³⁷⁵ Another critic saw Mahmud Sa‘id’s work as tempestuous and verging on the disturbing, and contrasted it strongly with Sa‘id the man, who was an acquaintance of hers: ‘All you need to do is to look at the painter for the anxieties revealed by his paintings to fade away and to be replaced by a comfortable feeling of serenity.’³⁷⁶ The spiritual (‘But it is from this very excess of materiality, if I may, that the spirituality of the work of Mahmoud Said emanates’³⁷⁷), the magical (‘The magic of his art manages to give his dark landscapes, made of real earth, his men and his shy and slightly stiff, but noble and authentically local women, an irresistible *character*’³⁷⁸), the surreal or hallucinatory (‘There is something hallucinatory [in his work]’³⁷⁹) are often flagged up in writings grappling with Sa‘id’s paintings.

As is often the case in Sa‘id’s work, the relationship between the figure in *The Girl with the Golden Curls* and the landscape that he or she occupies is very similar to that in

³⁷⁴ Ahmed Rassim, ‘Mahmoud Said,’ *La semaine égyptienne: Cahiers des peintres et sculpteurs de l’Egypte moderne no. 1: Mahmoud Said*, January 31, 1936, 19 and 21.

³⁷⁵ Maurice Aghion, ‘La peinture de Mahmoud Said,’ *La semaine égyptienne*, 25.

³⁷⁶ Marie Cavadia, ‘L’homme et sa peinture,’ *La semaine égyptienne*, 4.

³⁷⁷ Aghion, *La peinture de Mahmoud Said*, 25.

³⁷⁸ Morik Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l’Egypte contemporaine* (Cairo: Les amis de la culture française en Egypte, 1935), 30.

³⁷⁹ Robert Blum in *Images*, November 4, 1933, cited in *La semaine égyptienne*, 28.

Renaissance painting. Here, the *Mona Lisa* in particular comes to mind, not only because of the way the female figure sits in front of the distant landscape in which she is separated from land by a body of water, but also because of the woman's mysterious smile. She is a rougher version of the very civilized *Mona Lisa*, too thick-limbed and exaggeratedly sensual to hold for long the mystery she seems at first to promise.

The mystery that is almost sucked from the *The Girl with the Golden Locks* (fig. 84) by the woman's overly, almost crudely, seductive gaze is reinstated by the strangeness of the whole: the Renaissance composition combined with the Egyptian scenery; the mix of African, Arab, and European traits that make up the woman; the cold metallic colour scheme that somehow stops just short of becoming warm flesh. The mystery lies in the tension between the thick-limbed, almost caricatural, and thoroughly modern aspect of the woman, and the palpable, sculptural quality of the finish that gives the painting an eternal iconic quality. The viewer is pulled back and forth between an impression of mystery, and one of banal weirdness. The visual result walks a fine line between kitsch, and a powerful and monumental expression of human mysticism.

A discussion of Sa'id's sources might help us to understand the various tensions between the cosmopolitan and the national, the sad and the caricatural, the modern and the ancient, and the ways in which these tensions produce meaning. In the afore-mentioned letter to Pierre Beppi-Martin in 1927, Sa'id not only expressed his admiration for Carpaccio and Giovanni Bellini, he also expressed a desire to imitate the techniques used

by Memling, Van Eyck and da Messina.³⁸⁰ By the time he wrote this letter, Sa'id had already travelled extensively in Europe. He might have seen the work of Van Eyck and Memling in Paris when he was studying there in 1920.³⁸¹ He mentions a trip to Italy, the location of much of the art from which he drew, and it was in Venice, Florence, Naples, and Milan that he saw the works of Bellini and Carpaccio whom he held in particular esteem.³⁸² The technical nature of his debt to these artists indicates the profound impact that seeing their paintings in the flesh had on his practice.

The strange temporality of Sa'id's paintings owes much to his frequent reference to Renaissance painting, not least in the way in which he painted. The layered oil technique that enabled him to achieve the effect of an internal luminescence that was so central to his painting was inspired by a technique whose discovery legend has traditionally credited to the Flemish painter Jan Van Eyck and whose development took place in the early Italian and Flemish Renaissance.³⁸³ This consisted in building up thin layers of heavily diluted oil paint over a white base tone so that the white base would continue to shine through. This technique not only gives Sa'id's paintings their deep glow, it is also responsible for the highly sculptural quality of the artist's work, a quality enhanced by

³⁸⁰ SS, Mahmud Sa'id, Letter to Pierre Beppi-Martin, December 16, 1927 : 'J'ai constaté que le blanc, s'il n'est traité comme fond pour un glacis transparent, ne sert qu'à ternir la couleur. Il me faut autant que possible l'employer que comme Memling, Van Eyck et Antonelli da Messina.' Sa'id also acknowledged his colossal debt to the Flemish Renaissance in an interview that he gave in 1962. M. Suwayf, 'Dirasat nafsiyya fi l-fann. Hadith bayn al-bahith wa al-fannan Mahmud Sa'id,' *Al-Hiwar*, 1962, reprinted in E. Daoustashi, *Mahmud Sa'id* (Cairo: Sanduq al-tanmiyya al-thaqafiyya, 2009), 166.

³⁸¹ Sa'id's name appears in the registers of the Academie Julian for three weeks in July 1920 (Archives Nationales de France, 63 AS 7 (Fonds de l'Académie Julian), 172.)

³⁸² SS, Sa'id, Letter to Beppi-Martin : 'Vous vs êtes tout de suite aperçu que j'aimais les primitifs et vs m'avez parlé de Carpaccio pour lequel je professais tant d'admiration et d'amour lors de mes passages à Venise. C'est lui surtout et Giovanni Bellini que je retrouvais plus tard à Florence, à Naples et à Milan qui surent capter toute mon attention par leur vision candide et sereine des choses, le charme inoubliable de leurs paysages ou l'œil se perd dans un enchantement sans fin, le rythme vibrant de leur sol, de leur ciel, de leurs architectures fur pour moi le sujet de longues rêveries.'

³⁸³ For more on the place of this legend in the history of art, see Jenny Graham, *Inventing van Eyck : the Remaking of an Artist for the Modern Age* (New York: Berg, 2007), 9-11.

surface highlights that Sa'id used to complement the light shining from within the figures in his paintings.

Sa'id also echoed Renaissance painting in his painting procedures. Each of his works is the result of a meticulous process that began long before the application of paint on canvas, involving much planning and numerous preparatory sketches. His preoccupation with volume is evident from the very beginning of his career in his sketches (fig. 85).³⁸⁴

Sa'id made highly detailed painted sketches in which he fully worked out composition and colouring before coming to the final version, as can be seen for example in the drawn and painted work he did in preparation for *Al- 'a'ila* (*The Family*, 1936; fig. 86-89), as well as in his preparatory painted sketches for his *Hafl iftitah qanat as-suways* (*Celebration for the Opening of the Suez Canal*; fig. 90) and for *The City* (fig. 91).

Sa'id's extensive use of preparatory studies and sketches distance his work from Impressionism, with which he had flirted briefly at the beginning of his career.³⁸⁵ His letter of 1927 expressed admiration for the painters of the Renaissance in terms that explicitly reject the 'plein-air' effects of Impressionism:

Their vision of things, the unforgettable charm of their landscapes where the eye loses itself in an unending enchantment, the vibrant rythm of the ground, of the sky, of the architecture, were for me the subject of long daydreams. (...) It is from that time that I directed my research towards that contained tone of colour. Garish lighting effects, so-called 'plein-air' effects left me cold. I found them rather dark and gray compared to the real luminosity of some of the landscapes of Cima de

³⁸⁴ Morik Brin noted Sa'id's preoccupation and tied it to a desire to paint only what was real and permanent : 'Mahmoud Said a autant horreur du plat, en effet, que du vide. Il aime le plein, le massif. Et, sans doute, il lui arrive, parfois, de sacrifier à la plénitude et à l'équilibre des masses le charme et la délicatesse des sujets. Mais, du moins, il ne fait que du solide, du vigoureux, du durable. Il néglige, volontairement, tout ce qui n'est qu'accessoire, fioriture, littérature, c'est-à-dire, trop souvent, travestissement et mensonge, pour essayer de peindre uniquement ce qui est profond, vrai, essentiel, aussi bien dans les types humains que dans la nature.' (Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l'Egypte contemporaine*, 29-30.) Copies of Sa'id's sketchbooks were generously provided by Hussam Rashwan in Alexandria.

³⁸⁵ Etienne Mériel, 'Le peintre Mahmoud Said. Le chemin parcouru,' *La semaine égyptienne*, 7.

Conegliano or Giovanni Bellini, painted in their workshop with the science of sacrifice.³⁸⁶

Sa'id's relationship to the early Italian and Flemish Renaissance is evident not only at the level of technique and composition, as we have seen, but also in a number of almost direct quotations of the works that he admired. Much of his inspiration for cityscapes comes directly from paintings such as Gentile Bellini's *Procession of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco* (fig. 92) and Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, *Saint Marc Preaching in Alexandria* (fig. 93). In his *Hafl iftitah qanat al-suways* (*Celebration for the Opening of the Suez Canal*; fig. 94), it is clear that Sa'id is directly inspired by Carpaccio's *The Pilgrims meet the Pope* (1491-1493; fig. 95) kept at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, and in his 1927 letter to Beppi-Martin, Sa'id mentions having discussed Carpaccio with him and having professed love and admiration for the Italian painter.³⁸⁷ The city on a hill in the background of Sa'id's *Ar-rasul* (*The Prophet*; fig. 96) is an almost literal quote of the city in Carpaccio's *Apotheosis of St. Ursula* (1491, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice; fig. 97).

Sa'id frequently constructed space through the juxtaposition of a monumental foreground, often composed of just one figure, as was the case with the *Girl with the Golden Locks* (fig. 84), with a background filled with intricate detail. In the same way

³⁸⁶ SS, Sa'id, Letter to Beppi-Martin: 'Leur vision des choses, le charme inoubliable de leurs paysages où l'œil se perd dans un enchantement sans fin, le rythme vibrant de leur sol, de leur ciel, de leurs architectures fut pour moi le sujet de longues rêveries. (...) C'est de cette époque que mes recherches se dirigèrent vers cette sonorité contenue de la couleur. Les effets tapageurs de lumière, les soit-disant effets de plein-air me laissèrent froid. Je les trouvais plutôt sombres et gris à côté de la luminosité réelle de certains paysages de Cima de Conegliano ou de Giovanni Bellini, peints dans l'atelier avec la science des sacrifices.'

³⁸⁷ Ibid., n.p.

that the Van Eyck brothers gave the illusion of depth by creating pockets of space around every tree, every fold of cloth, every ornament (this is particularly evident in their *Adoration of the Lamb* polyptych; fig. 98), Sa'id painted small figures and objects each of which marks its own 'bubble' of space around it, adding up to create air around them. Women carrying jugs of water, their bodies draped in a long garment, the swollen white sails of feluccas on the Nile, white donkeys, and palm trees are some of the details that recur throughout his painting.

It seems that Sa'id started to paint like the painters of the Flemish and Italian Renaissance around 1922-1923. A self-portrait of the artist in his studio from 1919 shows all the characteristics of generic representational modernism: wide flat brush strokes, an attention to surface quality, reference to medium in the pictures hung on the wall behind him and in the paint on his palette which is thick, material paint both in real terms and in representational ones, the figure of the self-conscious artist (*Surat al-fannan fi marsamihi* or *Portrait of the Artist in his Studio*; fig. 99). *Sayyida Isbaniyya (A Spanish Lady)* from 1919 (fig. 100) shows an interest in the decorative aspects of Symbolism and Art Nouveau, and the choice of subject shows a possible engagement with Manet. The quality of the surface is reminiscent of Renoir.

A shift in Sa'id's work begins to emerge in paintings such as his portrait of the artist George al-Khouri in which depth and anatomy take precedence over surface facture. Even the gloves in the foreground, though they might be seen as being plastered onto the surface with broad strokes, call to mind not the modernist interest in self-declared

surface, but rather the device of objects placed near the picture plane – a device repeated endlessly in Renaissance portraiture (*Al-musawwar Jurj al-khuri* or *The Artist George Khouri*, 1921; fig. 101). By 1923, there can be no doubt that he was looking at paintings of the Italian renaissance. A portrait in profile of Na‘mat Hanim Riyad references Piero della Francesca’s portraits of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, down to the shape of the Egyptian woman’s nose and the body of water and rolling hills in the background. In case the viewer did not catch the reference to Renaissance Italy, the lady has been placed under a portico. The portico also appears in a portrait of Sa‘id’s wife dressed in a green shawl in which her pose, the flower lying in her lap, her hairstyle, her earrings and the shawl all imply that she is dressed up as a Spanish woman (*Qarinati bi sh-shal al-akhdar* or *My Wife with a Green Shawl*, 1924; fig. 102). The aforementioned *Prophet* of 1924 shows a propensity to depict the city in the manner of the Early Flemish and Italian Renaissance, a practice Sa‘id would maintain to varying degrees throughout his career.

When asked for his thoughts on modern artists in an interview published in 1936, Sa‘id’s answer was tentative: ‘Next to the giants of the past, whom I love with a passion, I might mention only Corot, Cézanne and Renoir.’³⁸⁸ In a later interview from 1962, he was only slightly more generous with his praise: among nineteenth century artists, next to Corot and Cézanne, he tips his hat to Van Gogh and Delacroix. While he says that not a single contemporary artist pleases him, he does mention Picasso, but rapidly dismisses him as

³⁸⁸ Moscatelli, ‘...avec Mahmoud Said,’ 2.

being too inconsistent: in his mind, Picasso foregoes authenticity by changing directions too rapidly.³⁸⁹

It is tempting to read Sa'id's rejection of modern art in the context of the Interwar 'rappel à l'ordre' in European art. After the First World War, artists throughout Europe were concerned with making sense of the chaos that they had lived through during the war. The pre-war faith in humanity's capacity for progress was shattered. Notions of abstraction and avant-garde were traded in for a neo-classicist leaning. Fascist art looked to the Italian Renaissance and to Antiquity for inspiration, painters in France sought to put back together the shattered space of cubism, and in Germany the *Neue Sachlichkeit* attempted to give literal, representational form to the traumatized society of the post-war era. The French magic realist Alfred Courmes, like Sa'id, was using Giovanni Bellini's work as a model for his backgrounds.³⁹⁰ Given his frequent travels and studies in Europe, it seems reasonable to assume that Sa'id frequented artists and theorists who were expounding neo-classicist ideas.

However, while Sa'id was certainly exchanging ideas with European artists, and mining the collections of European museums for visual sources, his goals were not the same as those of European artists, and to understand his painting, we must look at how he used these forms, techniques, and visual strategies to make sense of his particular context. We might once again think about his work in terms of Mitter's 'paradigm shift.' Sa'id had not

³⁸⁹ Suwayf, 'Dirasat nafsiyya fi l-fann. Hadith bayn al-bahith wa al-fannan Mahmud Sa'id,' 166.

³⁹⁰ For an overview Europe's return to classicism in the Interwar period, see the Guggenheim exhibition catalogue Kenneth E. Silver, *Chaos and Classicism : Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010).

experienced the First World War in Europe, and was trying to make sense of a different set of social and political circumstances. Like other Egyptian artists of his generation, he had been interested in representational art from the beginning of his career, never showing the least inclination towards abstraction. The motivations of Egyptian artists were different from those of European artists, and while sources might sometimes overlap, they are made to signify different things, and chosen for different reasons. In Egypt, artists were exploring various ways of visually representing collective identities, rather than visually trying to reconfigure the ideals of their society, as was the case in Europe. The ways in which Sa'īd and other modern Egyptian artists used their sources, be they European or Egyptian, ancient or modern, must be thought of in terms of their engagement with the specific conditions of Egyptian modernity, and in Sa'īd's case, these were inflected by his social milieu, in his profession as a judge, and in his work as an artist.

The title of Sa'īd's painting *Gamilat Bahari* (*Bahari Beauties*, 1935; fig. 103) refers to the Alexandrian neighborhood of Bahari (from the word *bahr*, the sea), 'considered by Alexandrians to be the origin of Alexandria's native local culture.'³⁹¹ In the 1930s, Bahari was a poor fishing area with cheap bars, sailors, and entertainers. The critic Etienne Mériel was likely referring to this painting among others when he numbered 'prostituées à la promenade' among the subjects depicted by Sa'īd.³⁹² In the 1996 novel *No One Sleeps in Alexandria* by the Egyptian writer Ibrahim Abdel Meguid, set in Alexandria during the Second World War, Bahari is referred to as the setting for 'stories

³⁹¹ A. Al-Sherif, 'Location and development: People, place and power in Alexandria's inner-city neighbourhoods' in *Tradition, Location, and Community: place-making and development*, eds. Adenrele A. Awotona and Necdet Teymur (Aldershot: Avebury, 1997), 125.

³⁹² Mériel, 'Le peintre Mahmoud Saïd,' 9.

that would make one's hair turn gray, about the women, the soldiers, and all the foreigners.'³⁹³ 'Rhakotis, which Alexander connected with Pharos, now called Bahari (...) was a dangerous area full of drugs and criminals.'³⁹⁴

Yet whether Sa'id intended these women to be read as prostitutes, as dancers, or simply as *banat al-balad* (neighbourhood girls), he invested them with a significance that goes beyond specific identities: the mysterious white cat that is a recurring feature in his paintings, the intensity of the women's gazes, the statuesque quality of their bodies highlighted by the light that strikes them make them appear to us as the embodiment of temptation and of the essence of Egyptian womanhood.

But there is something more at stake here than Egyptian-ness. This becomes clear when we look at another painting of Sa'id's, *Al-Madina (The City)*, 1937; fig. 4), whose central group, composed of three *banat al-balad*, closely resembles that of *Bahari Beauties*.³⁹⁵ *The City*, unlike *Bahari Beauties*, is not located in Alexandria. The Citadel of Muhammad 'Ali, which is in Cairo, appears in the background. However, the view of the Citadel from the Nile is improbable as in reality, there is a distance of approximately three kilometers between the two. In the painting, the hill on which the Citadel sits seems to flow almost all the way down to the riverbank, with very little indication of the city in-

³⁹³ Ibrahim Abdel Meguid, *No one Sleeps in Alexandria* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 180.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 174.

³⁹⁵ A third painting, *Banat Bahari* or *Girls of Bahari*, from 1948 presents the same central group. See Mona Abaza, *Modern Egyptian Art* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 46.

between. In fact, the city in the painting is not Cairo so much as an imaginary space that Sa'īd uses to explore the dilemmas of modern Egyptian existence.³⁹⁶

The space of the painting is divided in two by the group of three female figures in the centre. The left side of the painting represents the ancient, while the right side represents the modern. The figure on the right is a bearded and virile water-carrier, a traditional character straight from the modern city. The Citadel in the background stands for the modernisation of Egypt begun by Muhammad Ali. The water-carrier unabashedly casts his lascivious gaze on the central group as the spout of his water jug points diagonally upwards from hip level towards the women in a decidedly phallic thrust. In contrast, the figure on the left who resembles Tutankhamun holds a child on his knee, playing a nurturing role. He is gentle and serene, identified with Pharaonic times through his facial features and headdress, and with the peasant through his *galabiyya* and scarf. Furthermore, his association with the donkey and the child give the group a connotation of simplicity. The man's eyes are shut, and he is explicitly *not* eying the central group of women. The diagonals streaming from him, which echo the phallic spout of the water carrier's jug, are made up of rays of light.

Because Sa'īd first developed the configuration of a trio of women with reference to a neighbourhood of Alexandria, and the title *The City* avoids reference to specific place, it is tempting to read the painting not only as an imaginary cityscape that juxtaposes the ancient and virtuous to the modern and decadent, but also as a comparison between

³⁹⁶ It is tempting to see in the title of the painting a reference to a 1910 poem by the famous Greek-language Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933), *The City*. Cavafy's poetry is a powerful expression of the melancholic spirit of cosmopolitan Alexandria. However, the content of the poem does not seem to me to be related to that of Sa'īd's painting.

Alexandria and Cairo. To understand the ways in which Sa'ïd invested these urban landscapes with meaning, we must look at what implications his identity as an aristocratic Alexandrian had on his painting and on his idea of national identity. Indeed, as we have seen in previous chapters, defining the nation is always a process of negotiating the different parameters of collective and individual identity. While Sa'ïd has been integrated into a nationalized narrative of modern Egyptian art in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, his work and life are better understood in the context of the cosmopolitanism of early twentieth century Alexandria.

Sa'ïd was immersed in cosmopolitan society from a very young age. Like Nagi, he was as comfortable in French as he was in Arabic, if not more so, and spoke fluent English as well. However, unlike Nagi, Sa'ïd spent the entirety of his life living and working in Egypt. His Egyptian identity was thus not conflicted, but his Egypt was certainly a different one from the one the linguistically and ethnically defined one that took shape under Nasser.

The Victoria College, which Sa'ïd attended, was a private British school founded in Alexandria in 1901. The students came from Egypt, all over the Middle East, and beyond.³⁹⁷ The school 'attracted the children of royalty, dignitaries, diplomats, magnates, ministers, political refugees, landowners, and very ordinary people.'³⁹⁸ The Sephardic Jewish author André Aciman, who grew up in Egypt and attended Victoria College at a later date in the early 1960s, gives a vivid description of his experience there in his

³⁹⁷ Hamouda and Clement, *Victoria College*, 13.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

memoirs *Out of Egypt*. His account of the pidgin mixing elements of French, Arabic, and Italian spoken at the school is particularly amusing.³⁹⁹

Sa'id's friends and colleagues at the Mixed Courts where he made his career as a judge included Greeks, Italians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Jews, Syrians, Armenians, Swiss, Belgians, and Americans. The Mixed Courts were an international institution. Jasper Yeates Brinton (1878-1973), an American judge who made his career in Egypt (and who will come up again later in this chapter as the authority cited in the *New York Times* according to whom Sa'id was 'Egypt's leading painter'), gives us a breakdown of the lawyers' nationalities: 'Approximately half the bar are Egyptian subjects, but of these, only a small proportion are of the Egyptian race. The majority is composed of Syrians and Jews whose families have long been resident in Egypt.'⁴⁰⁰ As an Egyptian, Sa'id was an exception to this rule. 'The number of justices of the Court of Appeals was fixed originally at eleven (four Egyptians and seven foreigners) and the number of judges in each of the three District Courts at seven (three Egyptians and four foreigners).'⁴⁰¹ Brinton wrote: 'as Lord Cromer frequently observed, Egypt is and must remain a cosmopolitan country. This cosmopolitanism is specially marked in the field of law.'⁴⁰² In his work as a judge, Sa'id worked alongside at least as many foreigners as Egyptians.

As an artist in Alexandria, Sa'id's cohort was also made up of a majority of foreign nationals.⁴⁰³ As I have shown in the Introduction, a large proportion of the Egyptian art

³⁹⁹ André Aciman, *Out of Egypt* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 219-221.

⁴⁰⁰ Brinton, *The Mixed Courts of Egypt*, 257.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁰³ See for example, *Exposition de la vie artistique à Alexandrie pendant la première moitié du XXème siècle* (Alexandria, 30 January-21 February 1973) ; Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l'Egypte contemporaine* ; Azar, *Peintres étrangers d'Egypte*.

world in the first half of the century was composed of foreigners, and this proportion was even greater for Alexandria than for Cairo. In the chapter on foreign artists in his 1961 book *La peinture moderne en Egypte*, the critic Aimé Azar devoted a section to the artists of Cairo, and another to those of Alexandria. While in the Cairene case, these foreign artists are presented as isolated figures, the Alexandrian case is quite different.⁴⁰⁴

Azar saw two levels on which the Alexandrian art scene presents more coherence than the Cairene one. The first is the institution of the Alexandria Atelier, which provided a centre around which artists could gather (fig. 104). The founding of this 'Groupement d'artistes et d'écrivains' in 1935 is often credited to Muhammad Nagi, in a move that once again leaves out the contribution of foreigners to the development of modern art in Egypt.⁴⁰⁵ Nagi was indeed the Atelier's first president.⁴⁰⁶ However, he was not alone in the endeavour. Other participants included various artists of European origin: the painters Andrée Sasson and Giuseppe Sébasti (1900-1961), the sculptor Paul Richard, and the composer Enrico Terni (1879-1960).⁴⁰⁷ The Atelier offered painting lessons, given among others by the Greek painters Aristomenis Angelopoulos (1900-1990) and Aristide Papageorge (1899-1983). It also hosted a wide range of exhibitions, including between 1935 and 1955, exhibitions of Belgian art, the Orientalists, Marquet, Rumanian art, contemporary French sculpture, portraiture, modern Yugoslav painting, and Spanish painting.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ Azar, *Peinture moderne en Egypte*, 311.

⁴⁰⁵ See for example Al-Gabakhangī, *Tarikh al- Haraka al-Faniyya fi Misr*, 57. Al-Gabakhangī gives 1932 as the date of its founding.

⁴⁰⁶ Daoustashi, *Tarikh al-Atelier al-Iskandariyya*, 18.

⁴⁰⁷ Azar, *Peinture moderne en Egypte*, 342.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 342. The front page of the catalogue for the 'Exposition Belge,' 20 mars-5 avril 1936, is reproduced in Daoustashi, *Tarikh al-Atelier al-Iskandariyya*, 34.

Azar also discerned a unified Alexandrian style: a ‘transparence de la couleur et sa luminosité,’ he tells us, are prominent in the work of a number of Alexandrian painters and are characteristic of the art of that city.⁴⁰⁹ Azar only mentions Sa‘id in passing within this context, having already treated him in depth in his chapter devoted to the Egyptian ‘elders.’ However, there can be no doubt that Sa‘id fits into this stylistic grouping, and that he left some of the most developed examples of this Alexandrian style.⁴¹⁰

Similarities to Sa‘id’s work can be found in the work of painters such as Aristomenis Angelopoulos (fig. 105), Charles Boeglin (fig. 106; dates unknown), Cléa Badaro (1913-1968; fig. 107),⁴¹¹ and Jaro Hilbert (1897-1995 ; fig. 108-109). According to Azar, Sa‘id shared a studio with Angelopoulos for a time, although he does not specify when.⁴¹² According to another source, to paint the nudes that were such an important part of his production, Sa‘id had to go to the studios of his foreign artist friends, Angelopoulos and Papageorge, as it was not possible for him, as an Egyptian, to have models at home.⁴¹³ The proximity between some of Sa‘id’s cityscapes and Angelopoulos’s paintings, such as *Mykonos* (fig. 105), is striking, and I believe that Azar’s description of the similarity as due to the transparency of colour and light is apt. I have previously described Sa‘id’s relationship to light, and a similar approach can be found not only in the work of Angelopoulos, but also in certain landscapes by Charles Boeglin. Sa‘id explained that the

⁴⁰⁹ Azar, *Peinture moderne en Egypte*, 342.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 343; Angelopoulos was a Greek painter born in 1900 who spent most of his adult life in Alexandria (see Azar, *Peinture moderne en Egypte*, 370). Sa‘id painted a portrait of him that was exhibited in the 1935 Cairo Salon and that is mentioned under the title *Portrait du peintre Angelopoulos* in Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l’Egypte contemporaine*, 57.

⁴¹¹ Cléa Badaro’s sister published a short biography of her : Jeanne Engalytcheff-Badaro, *Cléa Badaro : Petit portrait de Cléa* (Alexandria: L’Atelier d’Alexandrie, 1974).

⁴¹² Azar, *Peinture moderne en Egypte*, 343.

⁴¹³ Papageorge and Angelopoulos were, along with Sa‘id, among those exhibiting works at the first exhibition of the Egyptian Surrealist group, L’Art indépendant. For more on this group, see Samir Gharied, *Le surréalisme en Egypte et les arts plastiques* (Cairo: Prisme, 1988).

intensity of colour in some of his paintings was impacted by the colour of the sea on the northern coast of Egypt, a colour that he had found nowhere else on earth.⁴¹⁴ These artists evidently looked to each other for ways to render the particular environment that they shared.

Cléa Badaro was the model for the title character of the fourth volume of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*.⁴¹⁵ While the formal resemblance of her work to that of Sa'id is less striking than that of Angelopoulos, there is nonetheless a similar underlying preoccupation: both painters painted strange and mysterious women with a gaze that holds some secret. In Badaro's painting too, the white cat is a recurring element. The resemblance of the Slovenian painter Jaro Hilbert's women with the women depicted by Sa'id needs little explanation, as does the sculptural quality of the landscapes within which these statuesque beauties sit.

Stylistically, Sa'id's work bears more resemblance to the work of these Alexandrian painters than to that of 'Ayyad or Nagi with whom he is so often grouped as a member of the 'pioneers.' This is due to the fact that the Alexandrians were members of his direct artistic circle. However, his work also differs from theirs and rejoins 'Ayyad's and Nagi's in one important respect: it shows a clear preoccupation with defining the Egyptian nation, and it is in part for this reason that Sa'id was able to be integrated into a pedagogical narrative of modern Egyptian art. The particularity of Sa'id's painting lies in the marriage of cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

⁴¹⁴ Suwayf, 'Dirasat nafsiyya fi l-fann. Hadith bayn al-bahith wa al-fannan Mahmud Sa'id,' 160.

⁴¹⁵ Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet – Clea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962); Haag, *Alexandria, City of Memory*, 5-6.

In 1938, *Al-Risala*, a weekly non-partisan magazine founded in 1933, published the aforementioned review of the Cairo Salon that took ‘Ayyad’s work as an example of all that was negative in contemporaneous Egyptian art production, and Sa‘id’s as an example of all that was positive. For reasons I have explained in the Introduction, the secular Egyptianist nationalism of the 1920s was in decline by the mid-1930s. *Al-Risala* was the most important Egyptian cultural publication of the 1930s, and it represented a developing Islamic orientation in Egyptian nationalism at the time.⁴¹⁶

The critic for *Al-Risala* wrote :

The artist, like the poet, is born not made. The schools teach them to master drawing and expression, but the expression of what ??... Most of those who are exhibiting that I talked to were preoccupied only with their drawing technique ... Everyone wants to be the leader of a school and to have their own style ... As for the artist embracing extravagance just for the sake of reknown and to differentiate himself from others, that will not satisfy the demands of art ... I do not know what compels professor Ragheb ‘Ayyad for example to limit his art to the study of markets and other such things from all areas of Egyptian life that time will soon erase. We are told that ‘Ayyad is fond of creating local art. This is a noble desire, without a doubt, but local art that dies immediately if it moves to another country is not worthy of the name of art.

National art fulfils two conditions: 1. Permanence and continuity; 2. Universality ... The fundamentals of life are the same in all times and places. Environment and era are two factors without which art would not be complete, but the essence of art is one in any time or place.’⁴¹⁷

It is principally the ephemerality and the local quality of ‘Ayyad’s work that bothers the critic: ‘Ayyad depicted aspects of Egyptian life that would soon disappear. The markets, peasants, religious feasts that were threatened by modernization were in the critic’s view

⁴¹⁶ It has been noted that the content of the journal was primarily religious, and that *Al-Risala* emphasized the Arab and Muslim aspect of Egyptian identity over an Egyptianist one. Gershoni and Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation*, 64.

⁴¹⁷ Nusri Atallah Susa, *Al-Risala*, v. 6, 1, May 9, 1938, 787-88.

too ephemeral to be the subject of real art. His dismissal of ‘Ayyad for being excessively ‘local’ can easily be understood as a critique of ‘Ayyad’s Egyptianist tendency. ‘Ayyad’s painting has, the critic tells us, none of the permanence and universality (the word *‘alamiyya* could also be translated as cosmopolitanism) that good nationalist painting should have. In the critic’s view, ‘Ayyad’s work is not worthy of the name of art. Rather, his work is a series of disposable, technically savvy, rapidly obsolete images of exclusively local importance.

Sa‘id is praised for possessing all the qualities that ‘Ayyad lacks : depth, force, vitality, and ‘harmony between the strong expression of emotions and the imitation of nature,’⁴¹⁸ which is, according to the critic, what defines art. It is not surprising in light of what we know about the magazine, with its religious bent, that the reviewer, Nasri ‘Atallah Susa, preferred Sa‘id’s work to ‘Ayyad’s, who, as we have seen, was a Coptic Christian. In addition to the insufficiently universal nature of ‘Ayyad’s subjects, the fact that *Al-Risala* was a serious cultural production, as opposed to popular magazines like *Al-Ithnayn* or *Al-Musawwar*, might also partially explain the critic’s scorn. What the critic perceived as depth of meaning in Sa‘id’s work was embodied in his elaborate, painstaking technique, which contrasts strongly with ‘Ayyad’s rapid touch and frequent use of disposable materials.

I have shown that stylistically, Sa‘id’s work makes more sense taken in the context of the Alexandrian art world than taken in that of the ‘pioneer’ generation. The cosmopolitan milieu in which Sa‘id spent his life was not one in which the Egyptianist nationalism of

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 788.

the 1920s and early 1930s made much sense, nor indeed was it consistent with an Islamic definition of the nation. However, perhaps paradoxically, the author of the review, published in a journal that was in line with an increasing emphasis on Islam as the most important component of Egyptian national identity in the 1930s, considered Sa'id to be the most important painter in Egypt. We might speculate that the yearning for the universal that we have seen in Sa'id's work appealed to a nationalist sentiment that claimed spirituality as one of its characteristics. Where Sa'id and the reviewer coincided was in their understanding of identity as something that went beyond the borders of Egypt, and beyond the timeline of modernity.

Thus, *The City* can be read as an expression of the spirituality of Alexandria versus the materiality of Cairo. In this way, Sa'id expressed his ambivalence towards the modernization that was so central to the nationalism of 'Ayyad and other members of Cairo's *efendiyya*. His was a search for deeper meaning, meaning that went beyond specific nationalities and historical moments to capture a deeper essence of mankind.

The painting *Da'wa ila as-safar* (*Invitation to the Voyage*, 1932; fig. 110) is an interesting case of the kind of deep meaning that Sa'id was in search of, and of its relationship to time and place. Sa'id had two solo exhibitions in New York in 1937. One of them was reviewed in the New York Times and the short article bears citing in full that we might relish the delicious perplexity and discomfort expressed by the critic:

Egypt must be a strange country. Jasper Yeats Brinton tells us that Mahmoud Said Bey is Egypt's leading painter.⁴¹⁹ We approach him with deference but soon become utterly dazzled and confounded by the fancy highlights and most

⁴¹⁹ Jasper Yeates Brinton, appears as one of the main characters in Chapters 4 and 5 of Haag's *Alexandria*, 119-195.

exceptional sometimes quite alarming native types, “Les belles de Bahari”, “Danseuse”, “La fille au voile”.

What is to be made of the hard, burnished surfaces of a “Nu aux rideaux gris” and of the young lady who lies asleep? And in Egypt, which sex customarily makes the first move? “L’invitation au voyage” leaves one altogether in the dark as to that.

Mahmoud Said Bey, who has shown work in New York before, is now exhibiting (until the end of the week) at the Studio Guild, 730 Fifth Avenue.

Egypt must be a strange country.⁴²⁰

The reviewer’s perplexity goes to all aspects of Sa‘id’s painting: the way in which Sa‘id painted (fancy highlights, hard, burnished surfaces), the content of his paintings, and the meaning expressed by this content. More than anything else, he seems to take offense at Sa‘id’s *Invitation to the Voyage* for the ambiguity it presents with regard to gender relations. This is a perplexing painting by any standards, and probably not what the reviewer, Edward Alden Jewell, expected of Egyptian painting.⁴²¹ *Invitation to the Voyage* is challenging, not least to our idea (or we might imagine, an American critic from the 1930s’ idea) of what Egyptian society might permit in terms of the representation of gender. It does not just present ambiguity in gender *relations*, as the critic seems to suggest, it goes so far as to present ambiguity in gender *identity*. The couple is a highly androgynous pair, their genders distinguished only by a string of pearls around the neck of the dominant figure.

Sa‘id expressed admiration for writers associated with European Symbolism, in particular Charles Baudelaire and Fyodor Dostoievsky.⁴²² In Europe, the hardening of society’s gender divide in the nineteenth century brought on by the rise of the modern bourgeois

⁴²⁰ Edward Alden Jewell, ‘Out of Egypt,’ *New York Times*, April 13, 1937, 28.

⁴²¹ ‘Edward Alden Jewell,’ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (6 Oct. 2010), <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1065356/Edward-Alden-Jewell>.

⁴²² See for example Suwayf, ‘Dirasat nafsiyya fi l-fann. Hadith bayn al-bahith wa al-fannan Mahmud Sa‘id,’ 164.

family structure led Symbolist artists to strategically blur the lines between male and female as a form of resistance.⁴²³ In *Symbolist Art in Context*, Facos finds that symbolists ‘challenged normative gender boundaries and explored hybrid possibilities: feminized men and androgynes.’⁴²⁴

Invitation to the Voyage seems to be pursuing a similar goal to the one defined above, that of blurring gender lines in search of a universal ideal. The title of the painting is taken from that of a poem by Baudelaire. The tone of the poem is one of profound longing, longing for a different place, the mythical Orient where ‘there’s only order, beauty : abundant, calm, voluptuous,’⁴²⁵ and ‘everything there would address our souls, privately, in their sweet native tongue.’⁴²⁶ While we might see in this painting an imitation of European views of an Oriental other, I suggest instead that it is the profound longing for an idealized place beyond the confines of gender, place, or time expressed by Baudelaire that Sa‘id found compelling here.

Sa‘id, echoing Baudelaire’s Orientalist sentiment, replaced the image of a mythical Orient with one tinted with Pharaonicism, transforming the longing for a different place into one for a different time. However, more importantly here, he combined and juxtaposed elements from different times and places in search of a universal : the lines between male and female, between modern and ancient, between East and West, between dream and reality, are blurred, and I suggest that the longing in Sa‘id’s painting is for the

⁴²³ See for example Sharon L. Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xv and 246.

⁴²⁴ Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 115.

⁴²⁵ Keith Waldrop, *The Flowers of Evil by Charles Baudelaire* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 71.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

universal. Thus, while the painter looked to European models to create this Orientalist and Symbolist expression of idealized otherness in the form of a distant past, the fact that he chose to do so must once again be understood in terms of his own Alexandrian context.

In *Invitation to the Voyage*, we might begin to sense some of the ways in which, despite the fact that Sa'id, like Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, and Nagi, embraced Pharaonicism in a number of paintings, his painting cannot be understood solely as an expression of Egyptian nationalism. Looking at the painting *Ash-shawadif* (1934; fig. 111) will enable us to explore this idea further. As we have seen in the work of other artists, the workers here sport ancient Egyptian headdress and loin clothes, and their chests are bare. The cubist-like arrangement of shapes and light forms a pyramid, and the forms of the figures, the landscape, and the machine are almost palpable, and almost immobile. The air around the figures is carved out of the same matter as the figures themselves, and there is something in the weight of matter in this painting that is akin to the heaviness of the stone of Abu Simbel for which Sa'id expressed profound admiration.⁴²⁷ The subject of the painting is similar to 'Ayyad's *Agriculture* discussed in the Chapter 2, yet something very different is at play here: the local quality and movement in 'Ayyad's painting contrasts sharply with the permanence and monumentality of Sa'id's.

While Mukhtar, 'Ayyad, and Nagi were all, in their own ways, forward-looking, even as they situated the origins of the nation in the distant past, there is a deep sense of nostalgia in Sa'id's work. Indeed, the Pharaonicism in *Ash-shawadif* seems to be about the inaccessibility of the glorious past rather than its continuity with the present, thus

⁴²⁷ Moscatelli, '... avec Mahmoud Said,' 2.

contributing to the tone of profound longing that permeates his paintings. His paintings seem to mourn the loss of meaning in the modern world, and the only way of reinvesting it with meaning was to step outside of time, collapsing past and present in a single, eternal moment that carried more profound, essential meaning than could ever be attributed to a single historical moment.

We have seen that Sa'īd achieved the peculiar outside-of-time quality in his paintings on one hand through the patient elaboration of figures and landscapes, which gives them their monumental stillness, and on the other hand, by a juxtaposition of elements from different times and places. This self-conscious juxtaposition is carefully smoothed over by the unity of Sa'īd's style: in every painting, background and foreground seem to be carved from the same stone. This unity suspends each image in a space that cannot be firmly anchored in a historical moment.

Where elements of modernity do appear in Sa'īd's painting, he gave them an iconic, eternal, mystical sheen that makes them into something more than what they appear to be. Take for instance the painting *Fi al-marqas* (*At the Dance Hall*, 1934; fig. 112). The overall impression is one of melancholy, and the painting is thick with nostalgia. The viewer imagines that the music being played is sad and sweet. The lighting seems to indicate the end of an evening, a crepuscular atmosphere that might be read as a metaphor for the end of an era. But more than the subject depicted or the lighting, there is something nostalgic in the very quality of the paint, the thickness of it, the way in which the bodies of the dancing couples seem to be moulded, almost tangible, like sculptures, yet if we reach out to grasp at them, they reveal themselves to be but a frozen image,

forever inaccessible, only just beyond our reach. A piece of a table cuts the right-hand bottom corner. On it sits a glass in which are placed three paintbrushes. The artist, hidden from view, is sitting at the table watching, removed from the scene yet preserving it for posterity. *At the Dance Hall* places the artist as an observer in an urban setting, much like Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur*. This painting is one of Sa'id's only works (apart from his portraits) that not only deals unambiguously with a modern subject, but also with movement. Yet despite the fact that the dancing couples are sporting modern dress and are lit with electric light, they seem to be suspended in a moment outside of time.

Perhaps the nostalgia in this painting is for the cosmopolitan aristocratic Alexandria of Sa'id's youth. Sa'id's social origin might also help us to understand his attraction to Symbolism: symbolists often adopted the posture of aristocracy to mark themselves off from the modern bourgeois, for the aristocracy stood to gain little from the development of the modern nation-state. Likewise, the world in which Sa'id lived was, from the 1930s to the 1950s, in the process of disappearing. In 1936, the abolition of the Capitulations, as we have seen, marked a major step in the redefinition of Egypt along ethnic and linguistic lines. Furthermore, we have already discussed the Egyptianization of the arts administration in 1937, an event that marked the beginning of the end of the cosmopolitan Egyptian art world.

Sa'id's work, and the context within which it was created, once again highlights the fact of difference within the nation. Indeed, in different paintings, we see him making use of the Pharaonic and the figure of the woman, symbols that might be taken as signs of a nationalist discourse. Indeed, it is clear that Sa'id, like the other artists discussed in this

dissertation, had the question of Egypt and its definition in mind throughout his career. Yet the signs of nationalism that are present in his paintings were interpreted in the course of the second half of the twentieth century as so many indications of his alliance to a generic idea of the Egyptian nation. What I suggest is that in the thick of the process of making the nation, there was no such thing as a generic idea of it. Sa'id's Egypt – his experience of it, his priorities, the parameters within which he identified with it – was very different from 'Ayyad's Egypt, for example. That their work has been placed side by side as evidence of 'Egyptian nationalism' has, as I have suggested, as much to do with the nationalization of the story of art in the course of the second half of the twentieth century as with these artists' negotiations of identity during the first half of the century.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return briefly to the publication of Ragheb 'Ayyad's article titled 'The Art Problem' in the journal *Sawt al-fannan* in 1950, referred to in Chapter 2.⁴²⁸ *Sawt al-fannan* was the first Egyptian magazine in Arabic devoted solely to the arts, and 'Ayyad's article is a good place to stop and take stock of where the field of visual arts in Egypt found itself at mid-century. As 'Ayyad rejoiced at the potential of *Sawt al-fannan* to provide a long awaited podium for a unified discourse surrounding art in Egypt, the Egyptian art world, and Egypt in general, were indeed becoming more homogenous: for reasons explained in the Introduction, most of the foreigners who had actively participated in the art scene prior to the Second World War had left, or would soon be leaving, the country. As I have shown in the Introduction, the mass exodus of foreigners from Egypt and its impact on the art world is one of the factors in the way in which the history of modern Egyptian art has been written. Indeed, this exodus accounts for the fact that, by mid-century, the process of writing out the foreign artists who were part of the Egyptian art scene in the first half of the twentieth century was well underway.

The absence of Egypt's foreign artists from the later historiography is but one of the ways in which accounts of the emergence of a tradition of modern art in Egypt fail to acknowledge the richness and complexity of events as they played out in the first half of the twentieth century. As we have seen, this complexity is present even in the work and lives of artists who have been ordained as the visual representatives of Egyptian

⁴²⁸ Ragheb 'Ayyad, 'Al-Mushkila al-fanniyya,' *Sawt al-fannan*, September/October 1950, 16 and 69.

nationalism. Indeed, the very fact that it tends not to be acknowledged in the simplified narrative reveals how far this narrative lies from the multi-layered events that, taken together, resulted in the emergence of a tradition of fine arts in Egypt. The disappearance of foreign artists from the historiography thus serves as the most powerful indication of, and metaphor for, the rift between the pedagogical and the performative narrations of the nation in Egyptian art.

Under the circumstances, it is no wonder that the feeling that emerges from Mahmud Sa'id's painting is of a world that is fading away, for it is the idea of art at the service of the nation-state, closely tied to that of a united art scene composed only of Egyptians, that became dominant from mid-century, while art as a pursuit of the cosmopolitan elite of which Sa'id was part was on the wane.⁴²⁹ This was echoed in, and reinforced by, the cultural policy of the Nasserite regime as the state consolidated its control over cultural production.⁴³⁰ As 'Ayyad sings the praises of efforts at unifying the Egyptian art scene, we might rejoice along with him: the visual arts in Egypt had finally found an institutional home. We might also mourn what had, at mid-century, already begun to disappear, namely a diverse art scene with a self-conscious awareness of its problematic ties to a unified discourse of nationalism.

⁴²⁹ On the subject of this shift, Mona Abaza writes: 'The 1952 Revolution aspired to change the existing class structure by nationalization, sequestration, and successive waves of agrarian land reform. The petit-bourgeois Free Officers have often been blamed for destroying the formerly cosmopolitan culture of Cairo and Alexandria, which was mostly dominated by a tiny minority of landed feudalists and the foreign community living in Egypt. One clear consequence was that wealthy private collectors, patrons, and galleries withered away, to be replaced by the omnipotent state as the monopolist of culture.' Abaza, *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art*, 5.

⁴³⁰ A Unesco document published in 1972, in the very early years of Sadat's presidency, provides an in depth look at the structures of state cultural patronage in Egypt. Mahdi Wahba, *Culture Policy in Egypt* (Paris: Unesco, 1972), especially p. 76.

Writing out the foreigners, or nationalizing the story of Egyptian art, was part of the emergence of a consolidated canon, a canon closely tied to an idea of Egypt and of Egyptian art as unified, homogenous entities. This idea found its fullest expression in ‘Ayyad’s article in *Sawt al-fannan*, and indeed in the publication as a whole, as it presented diverse artistic activity under the banner of one Egyptian art world unified in the service of the nation. The narrative of modern Egyptian art that was emerging at mid-century took the form of a simplified nationalized narrative that accounted for events surrounding the emergence of a practice of the fine arts in Egypt mainly through the agency of national inspiration.

I have established in this dissertation that the emergence of Egyptian modernism is indeed inextricable from that of nationalism, and the four artists treated here might aptly be termed artists of the nation. However, the closer we look at their work, the less tenable a reading that sees it as the simple expression of an unequivocal nationalist discourse appears: national and individual identities, and their visual expressions, are the fruit of complex reckonings and must be understood as such. Not only is the work of these four artists stylistically very different from each other’s, they also imagined the Egyptian nation in different ways. Evidently, something much more complex is at work than an unequivocal expounding of a certain type of nationalist discourse.

The project of this dissertation has been to retrieve some of the complexity that marked the emergence of a practice of the fine arts in Egypt, and to do so in a way that both uses as a starting point, and accounts for, the canonical narrative of a purely Egyptian art

inspired by the nation. I have found in Timothy Mitchell's appropriation of Homi Bhabha's notion of the pedagogical and the performative a useful way of thinking about this relationship between the canon of modern Egyptian art and the complex circumstances in which its practice emerged over the course of several decades in the first half of the twentieth century. While the pedagogical is the official story of the nation as a naturalized entity, the performative refers to the fraught process of making the nation in real time, a process that always involves dealing with difference. This otherness poses a challenge to the unitary discourse of the nation in the making; it is rendered unproblematic in the pedagogical narrative of the nation: the woman becomes the symbol for the nation's purity and virtue, while the peasant becomes the repository of an authentic way of life that the artist must preserve.

While it is important that we not take at face value the story of modern Egyptian art as it appears in the historiography, it is also important that we understand the story itself as part of the puzzle: the very fact that such a story exists is revelatory, as it begs the question of what is being left out. What is frequently left out in representations of the nation is the problematic nature of the otherness that challenges the homogeneity of the imagined community.

Highlighting the question of difference in the process of making the nation allows us to address the particular historical and social circumstances under which a specific iteration of modern art took form. In this light, it becomes clear that artists, far from blindly imitating a European model, were responding to their own cultural imperatives, and must

be understood on their own terms. However, the task of addressing modern Egyptian art on its own terms is muddled by the fact that among these terms, its imbrication with European art figures prominently and on multiple levels: in Alexandria, Egyptians worked alongside European artists and were often trained in the private studios of Italians or Frenchmen; the first teachers of the Cairo School of Fine Arts were European; all four of the artists who constitute the canon of modern Egyptian art of their generation, Mukhtar, ‘Ayyad, Nagi, and Sa‘id, were trained in part in the private or state academies of Europe, and all of them spent extended periods of time abroad; finally, they looked to European art, both modern and ancient, for visual sources.

If we are to address modern Egyptian art on its own terms, we must thus fully account for its imbrication in an international context wherein Egyptian art, in terms of art historical sources and art education, was situated in the orbit of a European, most often Parisian, centre. I have argued that we must understand Egyptian art’s relationship to European art and institutions in the terms defined by Clark in *Modernism in Asia* (1993): when forms and techniques change cultural context, they come to have meanings that are sometimes unrecognizable to those from their culture of origin. This is what Partha Mitter has termed a ‘paradigm change,’ and the implication is that modern Egyptian art’s relationship to European art is but one of the terms within which this particular iteration of modernism is inflected, and not necessarily the most important one. Other factors that come into play include Egypt’s social composition, not least the important presence of foreign residents; the country’s predominantly agricultural economy; its Pharaonic history that served as a referent in discourses of the nation; and the changing role of

women in the first half of the twentieth century, to name but a few. These circumstances contributed to the constitution of a tradition of modern art in Egypt that, while initially linked to traditions of modern European art, came to acquire different meanings and to function in different ways in an Egyptian context.

The richness of modern Egyptian art that stems from its historical and geographical specificity is beautifully manifested in the ways in which the imposing monumentality of Mukhtar's sculptures clash with the fragmented reality of the society around him; in the contrast between 'Ayyad's claims to faithfully represent the customs of the popular classes of Egypt on one hand, and his recourse to previously existing images as sources for his 'authentic' peasant on the other; in the fraught circumstances of Nagi's existence that are mirrored in the break down of visual hierarchy on the picture plane; and in Sa'id's deep and sensual images in which he strives to bring a touch of mysticism and permanence to the changing world around him. If we limit ourselves to an enumeration of the signs of an unequivocal nationalist discourse as they appear in images of the nation, signs such as the woman and the peasant as symbols for the nation, Pharaonicism, the Nile, and the countryside, the subject is rapidly exhausted, and the richness described above is lost. However, by approaching these artists and their work as participants in the process of defining a modern national community within specific historical, geographical, social, and political parameters, we gain access to a rich tradition of modern art that contributes to our understanding of visual modernism more broadly.

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