

# Modern Art in Egypt and Constellational Modernism: A New Approach to Global Modern Art

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Collection in complement to Alex Dika Seggerman's *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt Between the Islamic and the Contemporary*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2019.



Fig. 1 Pascal Sebah Photography Studio, *Portrait of Princess Nazli*, ca. 1890, albumen cabinet card, collection of Barry Iverson, Cairo, Egypt

My book, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt* between the Islamic and the Contemporary analyzes the modernist art movement that arose in Cairo and Alexandria from the late-nineteenth century through the 1960s. By incorporating the previously undervalued artists of this understudied region into the modernist canon, I challenge the prevailing understanding that modern art is largely a Euro-American phenomenon. As such, this book serves as post-colonial critique, providing new ways of understanding Egypt's visual culture, as well as modernism, as a global phenomenon. In what follows, I introduce my reader to the problematic intellectual paradigms of modernism in art history and detail the new approach that I develop in my book for modern Egyptian art. I then analyze a selection of artworks, which are not included in the book, and present how they relate to the overarching themes detailed below.

The paucity of knowledge about modern art produced outside of Western Europe

and America prompted me to take a deep dive into the art history of modern Egypt. Over the last ten years, I have located and evaluated primary sources such as state correspondence, art criticism, and physical artworks, approaching them as part of the global phenomenon of modernism. Admittedly, studying this corpus of visual art has often proved challenging, as Egypt does not have thorough artist archives. The families of the artists analyzed in the book provided essential information and resources.

Why focus on the Egypt's modernist art movement? Egypt played a central role in twentieth-century networks of politics, trade, and culture. However, Anglophone scholarship has largely overlooked Egypt's agency in the creation of modernity. As such, Egypt's modernist art movement provides a powerful argument for the importance of Muslim networks to global modernism. To be clear, however, I am not suggesting that Egypt is more important to the creation of modernity than any other nation that Eurocentric understandings of global history have similarly ignored. Rather, my book argues that if we take diverse modernist histories more seriously, we will have a richer understanding of the visual cultures of the world we inhabit.

Several factors came together to make Egypt a particularly vibrant site for the rise of modernism. Due in large part to the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869, Egypt's twentieth-century economy was robust. This robust economy fostered the institutions and markets that cultivated communities of professional artists in Cairo and Alexandria. Cairo was also a capital of the *Nahda*, the renaissance movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that positioned art institutions as crucial to society's progress.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Egypt's world-famous ancient art and monuments, from the Pyramids of Giza to the magnificent 1922 discovery of the tomb of King Tutankhamun, gave Egypt's artists a level of recognition abroad that artists from other non-European regions may not have had. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2 of the book in relation to the artist Mahmoud Mukhtar, this association with ancient Egypt impacted artists' career trajectories and their aesthetics.

As I lay out in the book's introduction, Islam was a factor, but not the defining factor, of modernism in Egypt. Often, it is expected that art from a predominantly Muslim country will be primarily concerned with religion, but this is not the case for Egyptian art in this era. Islam played an important, but not central, role in the Egyptian modernist art movement.<sup>2</sup> Artists neither rejected nor enshrined religion—it was just one aspect of many in their artistic lives. The majority of the artworks presented in the book are non-religious in purpose, content, and execution. Moreover, the artists that I discuss were not particularly religious and many were avowedly non-religious in their writing and artworks. Although I evaluate these artists' incorporation of issues related to Islam, religion, or spirituality, as relevant, often they were much more concerned with other social issues, from feminism to the space race, than they were with religion. Islam was only one of the many connections that Egyptian modernist artists acknowledged in their work.

The history of global modernity is entangled with colonial histories, which continue to inculcate the identities of colonizer and colonized. The existing methodological

approaches to non-Euro-American modernist art movements risk perpetuating colonial narratives. Many scholars have rightly challenged the view of modernism as solely Euro-American. However, expanding modernism's geography does not sufficiently change the scope of modernism or redefine what modernism means. Instead, it risks contributing an additive, alternative story that upholds the paradigm of peripheral modernity. According to this conception of global modernism, non-western actors, such as Egypt, are understood as having a less central role in the creation of modernity than Europe. Moreover, many of these non-western actors, in fact, believed that modernity originated in the West. To challenge the problematic narratives of modernity, perpetuated by both traditional and emergent approaches to modernism, I develop a new paradigm through which I analyze Egyptian modern art. I call this new approach to global modernism "constellational modernism."

Constellational modernism more accurately describes the movement and aesthetics of Egyptian artworks than does a vision of a generalized, hyper-connected web of contemporary globalization. My approach builds on yet differs from Jessica Winegar's ethnography of contemporary Egyptian art and Patrick Kane's political framework for Egyptian modern art in that my method privileges the artworks and their aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, rather than simply reflecting the social or political context of Egypt, I argue that these artworks and this art history are significant for all of global modern art history. Modern Egyptian art and artists circulated in distinct constellations, which encompassed finite local and transnational relations. The artists discussed in my book actively participated in global modernism, and as such were keenly aware of the dominance of European trends on the international art market. They were cognizant both of the competing histories of the French academic style in which most were trained, and of local Egyptian, Arab, and Islamic visual traditions. Their artworks visually map out a constellation of connections to diverse visual sources: embedded in the artworks' aesthetics, they acknowledge and/or point to these references. The Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar exemplifies how Cairo and Alexandria's modern artists circulated in distinct constellations. Born in Cairo in 1891, Mukhtar studied classical Greco-Roman sculpture at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Embedded into his sculptures are complex references to his Parisian training, Egyptian origins, and classical forms.

I dubbed this phenomenon "constellational modernism" because the constellation of connections I map for each artist and in each work is made up of a series of distinct and finite points, resembling the recognizable pattern of a celestial constellation. Constellational modernism also refers to the aesthetic characteristics that these connections make—not simply to the physical locations of movement, but also the way in which these references to diverse visual sources are imaged in the artworks. My hope is that other art historians and cultural theorists apply the concept of constellational modernism to other modernisms, both as a way to rethink the canon of modernism, and also to bring the diverse stories of global modernism into conversation with each other.

In what follows, I introduce and analyze a selection of artworks connected that are not included in the book, and elaborate on how these works relate to the overarching themes I have outlined above.

## Future Publics: The Transnational Origins of Egyptian Modernism



Portrait of Princess Nazli



Unidentified Woman at Home



Unidentified Woman Dressed Up



Studio Portrait of Unidentified Woman



Unidentified Woman Dressed in a Man's Suit



Unidentified Woman Dressed in a Man's Suit



Barbers at Work



Middle Eastern Family



Cover of al-Manar Journal



Original Arabic text of "Pictures and Statues: Their Benefits and Legality" by Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh



Portrait of Aleya Sadek Yehya Hanem in costume as peasant girl



Femme du peuple



Woman in Exotic Costume



Photographic portrait of Weslat Aboulfetouh i-Morali Hanem



Culbute de l'acrobate de Blignières (Somersault of de Blignières the acrobat)



Frontispiece from Egyptian Sketches



Praetor-Urbanus



L'insurrection de l'Institut Amphibie



Two Memnons—  
Jointly Noting



Tewfik driven by Malet



Abu Naddara Watching Egypt  
from Montmartre, Paris



You surround me with walls!  
Don't forget my wings help  
me fly!



An assassination of a nation



Bride of the Nile

عونص بوق عي – ليضف يلزان – هدبع دمحم

In an undated albumen cabinet card of the Cairo- and Istanbul-based Pascal Sébah photography studio, Princess Nazli Fazil of Egypt casually and confidently looks off into the distance. Her shoulders are draped in a luxurious and voluminous dark lace (Fig. 1). Her head is wrapped in a light-colored floral turban, exposing her coiffed bangs. She wears kohl eyeliner, and her eyebrows and lips also appear enhanced by makeup. Her white hand silhouettes against the lace, her fingers grazing where the two edges of the lace meet. Four large rings squeeze her left ring finger, and a double bangle indents the flesh on her left wrist. In this photograph, the princess presents herself as a wealthy woman between cultures—an identity cued for the viewer by the Turkish floral turban and the European lace.

Born in 1853 in Alexandria and raised in Istanbul, Princess Nazli was a great-granddaughter of the governor and modernizer of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849, r. 1805-1849). She was also the niece of the man who orchestrated the opening of the Suez Canal and built a new downtown Cairo, Khedive Isma‘il (1830-1895, r.

1863-1879).<sup>4</sup> In her early twenties, she married Khalil Sherif Pasha (1831-1879), the Ottoman ambassador to France and famous art collector and commissioner of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World*. Following her husband's death and her return to Cairo in the 1880s, Princess Nazli, highly educated and outgoing, befriended leading British diplomats and Egyptian nationalists. For nearly three decades, she hosted a salon in her photography-filled home in Cairo.<sup>5</sup> Although often overlooked by history books, Nazli played a catalytic role in burgeoning nationalist movements in Egypt. In my book, I consider a fascinating double portrait of Nazli in which she crosses gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religious boundaries by dressing as a religious Egyptian man (Fig. 2). The pair of photographs exhibit a burgeoning visual culture that harnessed and toyed with colonial imagery for political ends.

Nazli's performance for the camera in these ory, flipping the script on the classic, colonial ethnographic "type." The developments in photography and printmaking of the late-nineteenth century, as well as the increased presence and circulation of foreign people, ideas, and products in Egypt, led to the establishment of a new visual language for a new Egyptian public. A small series of photographs from a private collection in Cairo illustrate that women were still dressing up for the camera and toying with the different identities in contemporary Egyptian society, fifty years after Nazli (Figs. 3-4). Nazli is an example of a local visual culture producer who incorporated these new visual technologies alongside anti-colonial and nationalist messages to call a new public into being.

This visual culture was part of the larger phenomenon of the Nahda, the Arabic-language theological, literary, and cultural efflorescence of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.



Fig. 2 Detail of Princess Nazli Double Portrait Photograph, ca. 1880, Papers of the Third Duke of Sutherland, reproduced courtesy of Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford, England



Fig. 3 Photograph of young Egyptian woman dressed in a man's suit with bottle of wine, ca. 1930, silver gelatin print, collection of Barry Iverson, Cairo, Egypt

Thinkers who engaged visually with the Nahda embraced, negotiated, and reckoned with the new forms of technology and image-making that were circulating in the Mediterranean, giving rise to a new visual language uniquely tailored to the cultural and political context of Egypt. As such, this chapter includes an in-depth analysis of an essential text for the study of art history in the modern Middle East: Sheikh Muhammad ‘Abduh’s (1849-1905) 1904 article, “Paintings and Statues: Their Benefits and Legality.”<sup>6</sup> ‘Abduh was the *mufti* (chief religious judge) of al-Azhar University. Through a new, thorough translation, of “Paintings and Statues,” I reevaluate ‘Abduh’s article, which is often framed as a *fatwa* (religious judgement) that reversed Islam’s theological prohibitions of image making. Even though ‘Abduh certainly argues against these prohibitions, the majority of the article is concerned with educational development and cultural preservation.

Moreover, it incorporates the same embedded constellational connections of Egyptian modernism writ large. Although his work is not visual, ‘Abduh, like the artists of the larger movement, makes connections with European, Greek, and Arab histories, particularly in his deployment of a famous line of poetry by the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos. These innovations set the stage for the modern arts movement in Egypt. Twentieth-century artists drew upon the public that they engendered, and also adopted the method of constellational modernism that would characterize the next century’s art making.



Fig. 4 Photograph of young Egyptian woman dressed in a man's suit, ca. 1930, silver gelatin print, collection of Barry Iverson, Cairo, Egypt

### Mahmoud Mukhtar: Pedagogical Nationalism



Au bord du Nil



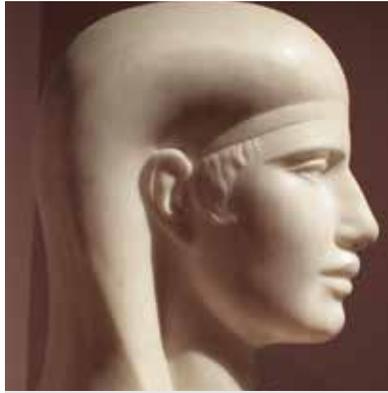
Bride of the Nile



Princess



**Faun of the Fields**



**Head of an Egyptian Girl**



**Isis**



**Khalek Tharwat**



**Nahdat Misr**



**On the Canal Banks**



**Rest**



**To the River**



**Return from the Market**



Front page of Al Lataif Al Musawara featuring subscription card for Nahdat Misr 28 June 1920



Photo spread in Al Lataif Al Musawara featuring celebration for unveiling of Nahdat Misr 28 May 1928



Photograph of Mahmoud Mukhtar in his studio



Prince Youssef Kamal's Palace



Downtown Cairo Opera Square



Qasr el-Nil Lions



Sa'd Zaghloul



Khawla bint al-Azwar



Photograph of the first exhibit of student artwork from the Egyptian School of Fine Arts, Cairo Automobile Club



Photograph of the “Festival of the Four Arts” at the École des beaux-arts



Photograph of Egyptian women protesting during the 1919 revolution



Subscription card of the first model of Egypt’s Reawakening (Nahdat Misr)



Photograph of Mahmoud Mukhtar exhibition at Bernheim-Jeune Gallery



Khamasin



The Last Faun



Nahdat Misr (Egypt’s Reawakening)

## راتخ دم دم حم

Between Cairo on one bank and Giza on the other, the Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum sits on Gezira Island in the center of the Nile, located just past Mukhtar's monumental statue of nationalist hero Sa'd Zaghloul, who delivers an oratory *adlocutio* gesture to the cars streaming off the Qasr el-Nil Bridge (Fig. 5). On the other side of the boulevard, in the Opera complex, is the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art, the Cairo Opera House, the Palace of Arts, and other buildings dedicated to the visual and performing arts. The purpose-built Mukhtar Museum was designed by modern Egyptian architect Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911-1974) to house Mukhtar's oeuvre and mausoleum (Fig. 6). This museum holds the largest collection of Mukhtar's works, but is little-known beyond modern art enthusiasts in Egypt.



Fig. 6 Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo, Egypt, architect: Ramses Wissa Wassef, 1962, photograph by the author, April 2012

Born in the Nile Delta in 1891, Mukhtar moved to Cairo as a young boy, ultimately becoming one of the first graduates of the Egyptian School of Fine Arts, which opened in 1908. The school and its patron, Prince Youssef Kamal, groomed Mukhtar to be a nationalist sculptor; his humble origins became central to his artistic biography. As the son of a *fellahin* family, Cairo's burgeoning art world viewed Mukhtar as a representation of the indigenous Egyptians epitomized in the popular motto "Egypt for the Egyptians"—the rallying cry against British occupation, Ottoman elites, and European economic invasions of all sorts. Mukhtar and his supporters harnessed internationally-resonant ancient pharaonic forms to speak to an audience that extended beyond Egypt's sovereign borders. As I discuss at length in the book, Mukhtar's most famous work, a monumental public sculpture called *Nahdat Misr* (Egypt's Reawakening) blends an agricultural symbol of the stoic female peasant (*fellāha*) with

a masculine, modernized sphinx, rising to stand (Fig. 7). This sculpture delivers a clear nationalist message to Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike about the national identity of modern Egypt based in agricultural prowess and a glorious ancient civilization.

Mukhtar's eponymous museum, however, includes smaller sculptures, which lack these forcefully direct nationalist messages. One such work, *Rest*, has long captivated me (Fig. 8). Like many of his smaller works, this sculpture of an anonymous cloaked woman is devoid of ancient Egyptian references.



Fig. 5 Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Saad Zaghloul*, bronze, installed 1938, Cairo, Egypt, photograph by Abdelrhman Zin Eldin, artwork reproduced courtesy of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi



Fig. 7 Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Egypt's Reawakening (Nahdat Misr)* (detail), pink granite, Giza, Egypt, 1920-1928, photograph by the author, April 2012

Though she nods to the powerful nationalist symbol of the fellāha, she does not hold the vigorous messaging of the monumental *Nahdat Misr*. Beyond the fine arts, the image of the Egyptian peasant woman long held symbolic status in Egypt's visual culture as an emblem of the nation-state.<sup>7</sup> Here, Mukhtar borrows this nationalist image, but tweaks her symbolism for a fine arts context. In doing so, Mukhtar enacts a constellational modernism. The peasant is certainly Egyptian, but the material and technique are French. After graduating from the Cairo School of Fine Arts, Mukhtar continued his training in the studio of Jules Felix Coutan at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and maintained a studio there throughout his life. All of Mukhtar's bronze works were

cast in Paris since Cairo did not have a bronze foundry. The simplicity of the woman's body, and the way in which she dissolves into smooth geometric forms in the metal medium evokes avant-garde techniques prevalent at the time. Mukhtar gently marks his engagement with nationalist Egyptian discourse, his Parisian training and materials, and a knowledge of international contemporary trends. Rather than haphazardly mixing styles, Mukhtar's constellational modernism is an aesthetic approach that carefully pinpoints these references, and asks the viewer to decode them.



Fig. 8 Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Rest*, bronze, ca. 1930, Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo, Egypt, photograph by the author, May 2012, reproduced courtesy of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi

This work is a restful, peaceful synthesis of these elements—local Egyptian subject, academic training, and avant-garde leanings. Mukhtar has negotiated between these differing poles and presented us with a moment of respite. The woman sits with one leg hidden under her *abaya* cloak, while the other serves as a resting place for her weary head (Figs. 9-10). She tucks both hands under her face, and her elongated fingers blur into her raised knee. The cloak covers the woman's head and back in one slow, smooth, swooping motion. The work is about six inches high and wide, and the curve of her back invites the caress of a hand. The tactility of the medium reinforces its modernity, acknowledging its material form and the relationship of that form to the viewer.

The sculpture exudes a restfulness and thus distinguishes the new secular nation of Egypt, represented by the *fellāha*, from its past as a province of the religious Ottoman Empire (1517-1914). Mukhtar self-identified as the “first Egyptian sculptor in 1700

years,” acknowledging both the relative lack of sculpture in the Coptic and Islamic periods, and also the grandeur of ancient Egyptian sculpture, known worldwide, especially after the 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb. Both the Sunni rulers of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the Mamluks before them, commissioned magnificent architecture, but figural sculpture was not a common part of their traditions. The diminutive, tactile *Rest* is neither conflicted nor contentious about the shift to sculpture; rather, it is gently at peace with this new secular nationalism, expressed through a dominant symbol of Egypt—the fellāha.



Fig. 9 Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Rest*, bronze, ca. 1930, Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo, Egypt, photograph by the author, May 2012, reproduced courtesy of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi



Fig. 10 Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Rest*, bronze, ca. 1930, Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo, Egypt, photograph by the author, May 2012, reproduced courtesy of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi

Nevertheless, Mukhtar in this sculpture, and in the majority of his artworks, exploits the Egyptian female body as a place to explore the medium of sculpture and express nationalist messages. Mukhtar’s ultimate pedagogical effort to educate the Egyptian populace about art and nationalism was well-intentioned. Nonetheless, his manipulation

and anonymization of the female body represents the marginalization of female voices in the early history of modern Egyptian art, as well as in modernism globally. Instead of thinking, speaking individuals, Mukhtar's women are solely corporeal. The female artists discussed in Chapter 5, such as Inji Efflatoun and Gazbia Sirry, were deeply entrenched in the Egyptian feminist movement, which, since the turn of the century, had advocated for women's rights, health, and education, and expressed that engagement in their art through a rejection of the female anonymity of earlier artists like Mukhtar. The next artist I discuss in the book, Mahmoud Said, also depicted female Egyptian bodies, but in an even more sexualized and problematic fashion. Both Mukhtar and Said have been framed as heroic nationalist artists, but their position as marginalized artists in the Euro-American canon did not prevent them from marginalizing other voices within Egypt.

### Lawyerly Luxury of Easel Painting: Mahmoud Said



George Khoury



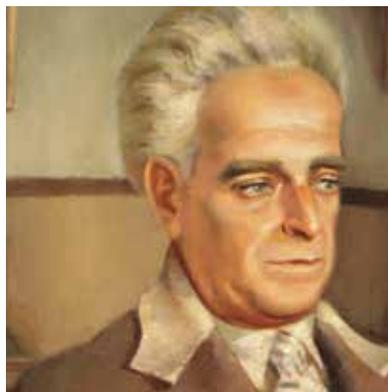
Girl with Head Scarf



Lebanon



Lebanon



Portrait of Painter Lista



Self-Portrait



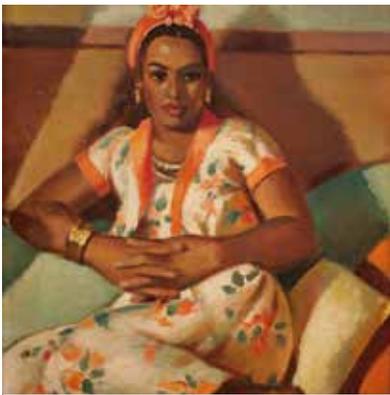
Suburb in Stockholmlom



Sur la Piste



Tombs



Untitled



Woman in a Blue Dress



Women Swimming



Samiha and Saad



Portrait of Ahmed Rassim



Untitled



**Portrait of the Architect Jean Nicolaides**



**Madame Riad**



**Madame Youssef Zulficar**



**Half Nude on a Pillow**



**Untitled Sketch**



**Untitled Sketch**



**Alexandria Mermaid**



**Negress**



**Maternity**



Untitled Sketch



Dhour el-Shoueir Mountain,  
Lebanon



Chouer Valley from  
D'hour-es-Chouer



My Wife in a Green Shawl



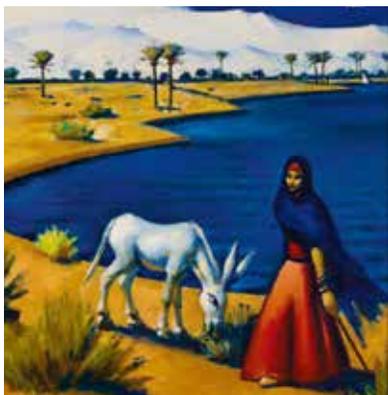
La ville/al-Madīna (The City)



Portrait of Edouard Van der  
Moeren



Bather



Marsa Matrouh—Towards  
Cleopatra's Bath



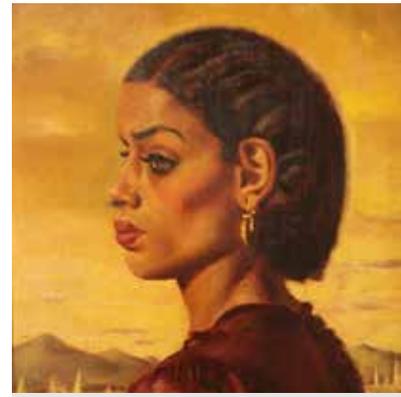
Aswan



Faun of the Fields



Artist's Wife in Hat



Bedia

### دي عيس دومحم

While Mahmoud Said belonged to the same generation as Mukhtar, his Alexandrian origin set him apart from Cairo's professional artists (Fig. 11). Born in 1897 to a wealthy, land-owning family, Said painted for leisure, not as a profession. His father, Muhammad Said Pasha, was briefly Egypt's Prime Minister in the 1910s. After a short stint at the Académie Julian in Paris, a private art school, Said pursued a career in law, working at Alexandria's Tribinuax Mixtes (Mixed Courts), an innovative court of international law established in the late-nineteenth century to adjudicate contracts between the multi-national residents of the city. This legal framework, which supported joint enterprises between citizens of different nations, contributed to the city's flourishing economy. Although many nationalist art historians and critics virtually ignore Said's law career, my book tackles how his engagement with an elite, cosmopolitan network impacted his art.

Unlike Mukhtar's relatively small oeuvre, limited by his premature death at the age of 43, Said's paintings stretch from his adolescence, which he spent studying in local Alexandrian artists'

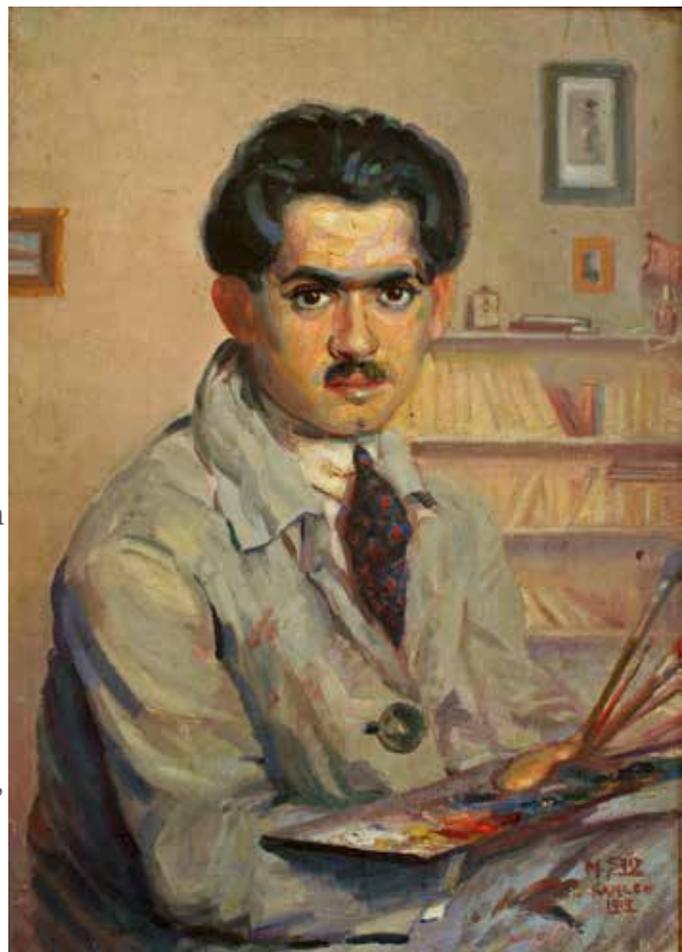


Fig. 11 Mahmoud Said, *Self-Portrait*, 1919, oil on canvas, Mahmoud Said Museum, Alexandria, Egypt, photograph by Stephen Poellot and the author, artwork reproduced courtesy of Samiha Lamerson and Saad Elkhadem

studios in the late 1910s, through to his extended retirement and up until his death in 1964. Said's subject matter evokes aspects of his elite lifestyle: elegant portraits of Alexandrian aristocracy, verdant Lebanese landscapes, picturesque felucca sailboats in Aswan, still lifes, and many nudes (Figs. 12-13). Said attempted to distinguish his and his class's "whiteness," which was associated with an upper-class Mediterranean modern culture, from the darker-skinned lower classes of Egypt; his nude portraits, for example, depict lower class women with darker skin than Said and other members of his elite community. The powerful fecundity Said depicted in the bodies of these lower-class women betrays the upper-class's fear of the indigenous masses, who threatened their wealth and power.

Like his nude portraits, Said's handful of artworks that directly address religious practice also reveal uneasiness towards lower classes. Said's 1934 *Prayer* depicts a religious scene, probably the 'asr (afternoon) prayer (Fig. 14).



Fig. 12 Mahmoud Said, *Women Swimming*, 1932, oil on canvas, Mahmoud Said Museum, Alexandria, Egypt, photograph by Stephen Poellot and the author, artwork reproduced courtesy of Samiha Lamerson and Saad Elkhadem



Fig. 13 Mahmoud Said, *Bedyá*, 1939, oil on canvas, Mahmoud Said Museum, Alexandria, Egypt, photograph by Stephen Poellot and the author, artwork reproduced courtesy of Samiha Lamerson and Saad Elkhadem

Said indicates the space is an Egyptian mosque through the inclusion of local craft objects: three traditional glass mosque lamps and one stained glass window. Light streams in from the western edge of the painting, casting long shadows. The congregants face towards Mecca. Three rows of men in traditional galabia cloaks and turbans bend forward in *ruku'* (bowing), one of the physical movements in Muslim prayer. They stand in a colonnaded space, reminiscent of the arcades of the 'Amr ibn al-'As and Ibn Tulun mosques in Cairo, though Said omits the wooden beams that reinforce those mosques' arches. The rows of men, which extend back into space, mimic the structure

of the pointed arches and columns. As is the case in many of Said's works, the interior architecture of the room here mirrors the bodies' shapes; the curves of the men's backs echo the curves of the arches, almost as if the building too were bowing to God.

The painting references actual spaces and details of Muslim religious practice, like the men's posture in ruku' and the specificity of the 'asr prayer. Yet, this is neither a devotional image, nor a respectful representation of the prayer. The faceless men are as decorative as the mosque's architecture. They are a long row of traditional robes on view for admiration. The man at the center of the composition appears elderly; he has hunched shoulders and is unable to fully bend like the others. The old man's yellow cloak again parallels the architecture, reinforcing the building's antiquated status and suggesting the rituals portrayed are also something of the past. In *Prayer*, Said frames religion as a pleasant, decorative aspect of Egyptian culture. He focuses almost exclusively on the formal characteristics of the image: the curves of the robes and arches, the shadows cast by afternoon light, and the variety of colors in the highlights and shadows. As in most of his paintings, he layers the oil paint in thick and chunky passages, creating a textured surface, especially when representing the textiles of the men's cloaks. Said's focus on the formal qualities of the scene distances the viewer from the depicted space. The viewer stands before a modernist painting, far from being an active participant in devotional prayer.



Fig. 14 Mahmoud Said, *Prayer*, 1934, oil on canvas, Mahmoud Said Museum, Alexandria, Egypt, photograph by Stephen Poellot and the author, artwork reproduced courtesy of Samiha Lamerson and Saad Elkhadem

The feeling of distance Said creates between viewer and subject, aligns Said with the Orientalist painters. *Prayer's* closest corollary is Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1871 *Prayer in the Mosque*, currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 15).

Even though Said's and Gérôme's works differ substantially in their style—Gérôme's canvas is highly illusionistic Orientalist academicism and Said's leans towards Fauvism with its saturated colors and crusty oil paint—both artworks take a more decorative than pious approach to Muslim religious observance. While Said accurately depicts the specifics of Muslim prayer, such as the postures and time of day, he barely acknowledges the individual identities and thus humanity of the worshippers. Said uses their faceless bodies as a surface upon which to explore color, line, and form. When one compares the faceless men of *Prayer* with Said's detailed portraits of his elite community, it is clear that he intentionally obscured the worshippers' identity. From Said's work, we see that, although modern art in Egypt intersected with Islam, Said, a secular, lighter-skinned Mediterranean man, understood himself to possess the power, education, and wealth necessary to create a picturesque image of lower-class men in an old mosque. *Prayer* has much in common with the way in which Said depicted lower-class women in the nude; the nude women and the praying men appear as objects of pleasurable consumption yet also as images *against* which to form an elite identity. Said frames the practice of ritualized prayer as an antiquated foil to the elite Mediterranean community to which he belonged. His quasi-Orientalist depiction of Muslim religious practice reflects his alignment with the semi-colonial state that contributed to his family's wealth. Despite the clear shift in aims and perspective, Said's constellational modernism pinpoints references to local Islamic architecture, Orientalist painting, his French training, and knowledge of avant-garde art movements. Unlike Mukhtar's informative and educational constellational approach, Said's constellational modernism tracks his desire to establish his identity as a wealthy, cultured, and white Mediterranean man. Nevertheless, both artists enact similar processes of incorporating these references into the aesthetics of their art, forcing their viewer to untangle them. The next generation of artists reacted against the colonial, Mediterranean elitism that pervaded Mukhtar's and Said's work, and searched for a more accessible form of artmaking.

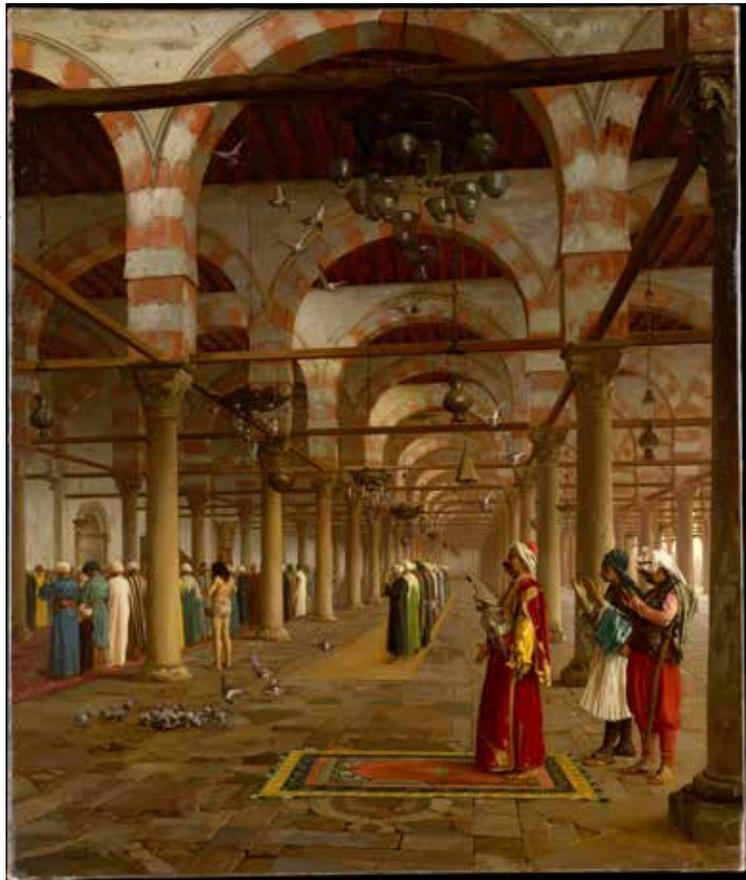


Fig. 15 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Prayer in the Mosque*, 1871, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain.

## The Beauty of Uncertainty: Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and the “Return” of Religion in Art



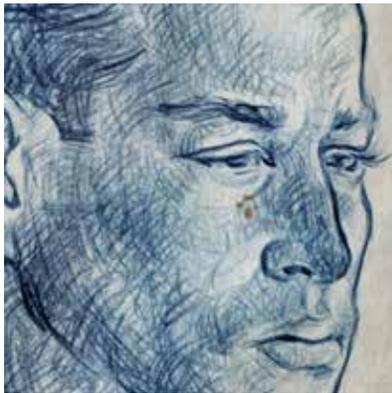
Abstract Composition



Crocodile



Circus Cart



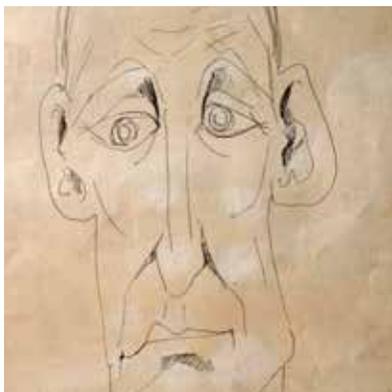
Face



Face



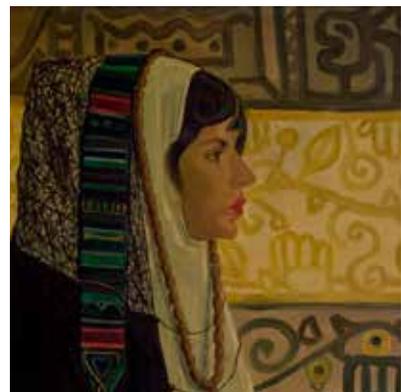
From the Primal Stage



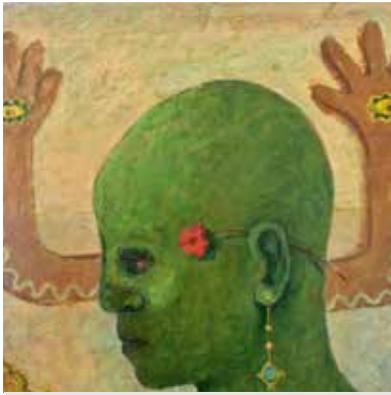
Ink Portrait



Man and Bull



Laila



The Green Man



Work



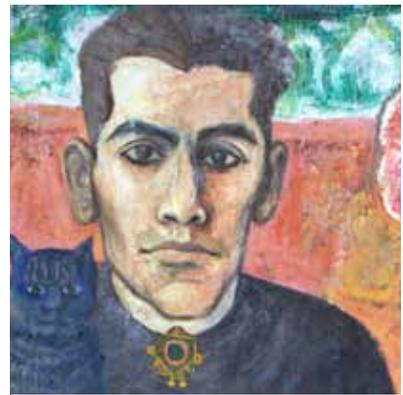
The Story of Zulaikha



Lighthouse of the Red Sea



La ville/al-Madīna (The City)



Man and Cat (Amie Azar)



Man and Shells



Man from Popular Period



Man



**The Popular Chorus**



**Peace**



**Woman Praying**



**World of Spirits**



**The Story of Zulaikha  
(reverse)**



**Gazzar's Wedding Portrait**



**Woman from the  
Primal Stage**



**Photograph of Abdel Hadi  
el-Gazzar with his wife,  
Laila, and daughters Tayseer  
and Yasmeen in Florence**



**Photograph of Abdel Hadi  
el-Gazzar in London**



**Abstraction**



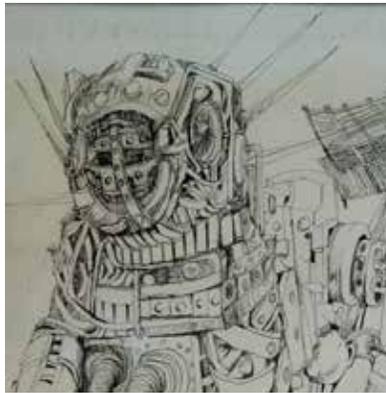
**Photograph of Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar at Gauguin Exhibit at Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany**



**Photograph of Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar visiting the High Dam with students**



**Electricity Station at High Dam**



**Space Man**



**Preparatory Sketches for Peace**



**Photograph of Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and members of the Contemporary Art Group at Hussein Yusuf Amin's home**



**Photograph of Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar at age eleven with his father and siblings**



**The Popular Chorus**



The Charter (al-Mithāq)

رازجلا يداهلا دب ع



Fig. 16 Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, *Man from the Popular Quarters*, ca. 1940s, pencil on paper, Collection of Laila Effat, Cairo, Egypt, reproduced courtesy of Laila Effat



Fig. 17 Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, *From the Primal Stage*, ca. 1948, ink on paper, Collection of Laila Effat, Cairo, Egypt, reproduced courtesy of Laila Effat

World War II and its aftermath shaped the circulation of art and artists in the 1950s. Shifts in the movement of people and images, through air travel, film, and television, alongside the deterioration of French and British colonial power throughout the region, produced a new set of political and cultural connections for artists of the 1950s. Most significantly for Egyptian artists was the change of governance from British occupation and local monarchy to Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab Socialism after the Free Officers

Revolution in 1952. The transformation from colonial monarchy to post-colonial nation-state overhauled the purpose, style, circulation, and meaning of art in Egypt.

Painter Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar (1925-1966) drew inspiration from Art et Liberté (Art and Freedom), an Egyptian surrealist group that was active from the late 1930s through the mid 1940s. Though trained in an academic style at the Egyptian School of Fine Arts, which since Mukhtar's time had evolved from a secondary school to a college, Gazzar was a member of the Contemporary Art Group, a group which renounced this training in order to discover more "truth" in their art. They experimented with surrealist processes and aesthetics, taking inspiration from dreams and engaging in chance drawings. Gazzar's drawings from the late 1940s attest to both his art school training and these early experimentations. With his art classes, he had visited the "popular quarters" of Cairo where the lower classes wore turbans, veils, *galabias*, and *abayas* and often led a more religiously observant lifestyle among the many medieval mosques of Cairo (Fig. 16). Like nineteenth-century Orientalist artists from Europe before them, Gazzar and his art school classmates sketched these scenes. Inspired by surrealist practice, however, Gazzar also produced many drawings, which he dubbed "from the primal stage" (Fig. 17). These monochrome drawings depict naked writhing bodies in undulating landscapes, like some imagined original man before the rise of civilization.



Fig. 18 Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, *Crocodile*, ca. 1963, ink on paper, Collection of Laila Effat, Cairo, Egypt, reproduced courtesy of Laila Effat

As discussed at length in the book, Gazzar united these "primal" images with the religious qualities of the popular quarters into a unified style, which critics of his time called "popular myths." In these paintings, Gazzar employed primitivism to forge a style of painting intended to be accessible to more than just the educated elite.<sup>8</sup> By returning to the imagery of Cairo's religious lower classes, Gazzar expressed anti-colonial sentiments and rejected elitist French academic styles, aligning himself with an international, leftist avant-garde that espoused socialist and communist commitments. These works reveal the constellational aesthetic in which Gazzar blends local mystical references, like the mystical Qur'anic figure of *al-khidr* (literally, the green one) in his famous, *The Green Man*, with Surrealist-inspired approaches and saturated, blended colors reminiscent of the French Post-Impressionist Pierre Bonnard. Unlike Said's distanced representation of lower-class piety, Gazzar embedded himself in these

communities, drawing inspiration from local festivals, such as Mawlid, a celebration of the prophet Mohammad's birthday.



Fig. 19 Stickers showing from exhibition in the 1956 Venice Biennial on the reverse of Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, *Story of Zuliakha*, ca. 1948, ink on paper, private collection, Cairo, Egypt

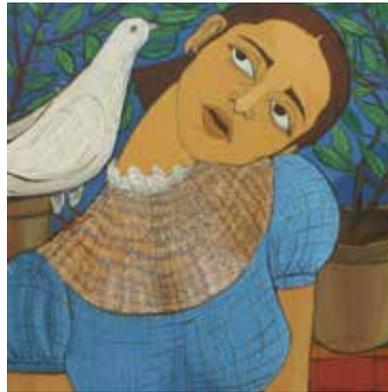
While inspired by the techniques and universalist aims of surrealism in Egypt, Gazzar's early work is embedded within a complex post-WWII dynamic, which called for a more accessible art. Even after he stopped including explicit religious references in his work, Gazzar continued to engage with mysticism. After a four-year stint in Rome, studying at the Central Restoration Institute, Gazzar returned to Cairo with his wife and daughters and took a job at the Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla (College of Fine Arts). Between his return to Cairo and his death in 1966, he executed many ink drawings on paper, such as his 1963 drawing of a crocodile. Unlike the messy, primitivist style of his "primal stage" drawings or "popular mythologies" sketches of the late 1940s and early 1950s, these later drawings are crisper and more methodical. Despite the clear shift in aesthetic approaches, Gazzar maintains a constellational modernism by incorporating a nod to his scientific coursework at the Restoration Institute. *Crocodile* depicts the animal in a barren landscape, appearing gigantic in juxtaposition to a small, leafless tree (Fig. 18). The cross-hatching of the craggy rocks vibrates across the small page. These lines increase ten-fold in intensity in the body of the reptile, culminating in jagged points across its back. The viewer's own eye gets lost in the swirling black lines of the crocodile's body. In these lines, the work ceases to depict the crocodile and the marks take on a life of their own. While it is hard to say if this is a fully finished artwork or an elaborate doodle, it illustrates Gazzar's interest in enchanting his viewer, producing

awe and wonder through his work. His focus on enchantments persisted from his “primal stage” drawings, to his works that referenced mystical Islamic stories, such as the *Story of Zulaikha* (Fig. 19), to the magical, mechanical drawings of creatures in the early 1960s, such as *Crocodile*. Gazzar continued the constellational modernism of his forerunners, visualizing connections to local mystical practices, as well as abstraction, surrealism, and the space race. Unlike Said’s cursory, exploitative imagery of religious practices, Gazzar engaged conceptually with issues of spirituality.

## Potent Flows: The Fellaha and Water Jug



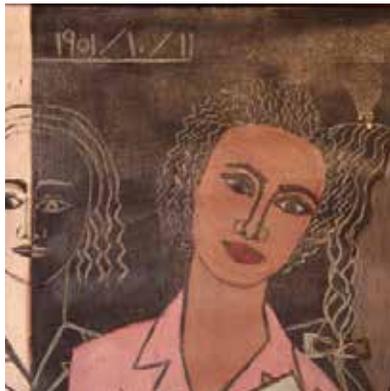
Amna (Fatenn Hamama) and Hanadi (Zahra El-'Ula) carrying water jugs in the film, *The Nightingale's Prayer*



Girl From the East



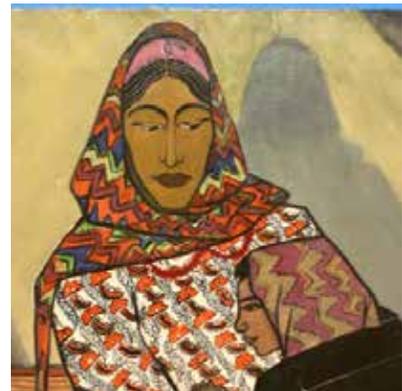
Grief



In the Classroom



Inspiration for Agricultural Reform



Motherhood



On the Canal Banks



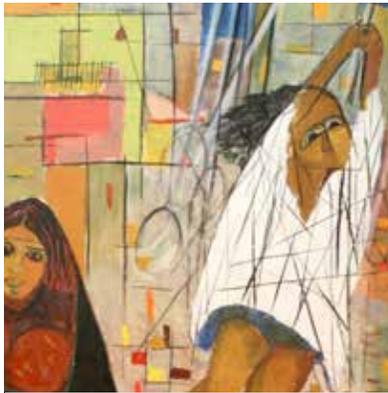
La ville/al-Madīna (The City)



Abbas Bridge



Portrait of Naghi Kamel



Romance



Self-Portrait



Swirl me around, Lemon



Dresses Particular to Egypt



Women of Different Distinctions as They Appear on the Streets of Cairo



**An Egyptian Woman Carrying Water from the Nile**



**Women and Children of the Lower Classes**



**Entrance at the Temple of Amun**



**Femmes fellahs puisant de l'eau aux bords du Nil (Fellah women drawing water from the banks of the Nile)**



**The Prosperity of Egypt**



**An Egyptian Peasant Woman and Her Child**

يرس ةيبذاج – نوطالف أيجنإ

The first four chapters of my book discuss how artists engaged in a constellational modernism by referencing key points of intersection through an aesthetic that prompted the viewer to discover those connections through analysis. However, the fifth chapter takes a different approach; it focuses on the icon of the fellāha and balās jug. In charting this image's circulation between different media and locales, it reveals the deep, longstanding histories of modernist constellational routes, stretching back to the eighteenth century.

The 1959 film *The Nightingale's Prayer* is set at the turn of the century and tells the story of Amna, a young woman from an Egyptian village along the Nile. Based on a 1934 novel by cultural theorist Taha Hussein and directed by Henri Barakat, the film stars Fatenn Hamama, a leading actress of Egypt's golden age of cinema. In one of the film's first scenes, Amna and her ill-fated sister, Hanadi, carry water from the Nile in balās water jugs (Fig. 20). As I demonstrate in Chapter 5 of the book, these balās evoke idealized visions of peasant womanhood. In the film, shot in black and white and on

location, the bright sun creates a stark contrast between the actresses' black *abaya* cloaks and the lighter-colored hill they climb (Fig. 21). As they pass a young man on their walk, Amna teases Hanadi for flirting with him. This brief moment is the only time we see the sisters before their family is struck by tragedy. The balās water jugs and gentle flirtations indicate their idyllic life and hopeful marriage prospects. Amna's life and family are subsequently torn apart due to patriarchal exploitation of women's sexuality, both in the village and in the city where they soon head to work. We never see the jugs again.



Fig. 20 Film still from *Nightingale's Prayer*, directed by Henri Barakat, 1959



Fig. 21 Film still from *Nightingale's Prayer*, directed by Henri Barakat, 1959

By the twentieth century, the image of the fellāha (peasant woman) and balās (water jug) was ubiquitous in Egypt's visual culture. The Egyptian pairing of fellāha with balās has its roots in printed western European travel literature (Fig. 22). Images of female water carriers stretch back millennia and are commonly found in ancient Mediterranean iconography.<sup>9</sup> However, the specificity of the fellāha and balās as metonymic of larger ideals of colonialism, national, feminism, and social progress is unique to the modernist period under consideration. In the book, I argue that the reason for the icon's increased potency is the link between the jug and the contested and powerful waterways of Egypt—the Nile, the Suez Canal, the Mahmudiyya Canal, and the Mediterranean coast. Echoed in the sublime and taboo power of the rounded jugs' resonance with a pregnant belly or milk-laden breast, the confluence of femininity and powerful flows embedded increased symbolism in the image and led to its continued use in the century's visual culture. The transformation and continuity of the fellāha/balās trope showcases the transnational nature of visual culture in Egypt. The image highlights how popular iconographic subjects circulated through technologies like photography, lithography, and, later, film and television, maintaining porous boundaries with painting and sculpture.

By the 1950s, these images gave way to a rising group of Egyptian women artists. In the book, I analyze the work of Gazbia Sirry (b. 1925) and Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989). Rejecting the anonymized, symbolic woman depicted by Mukhtar and Said, Sirry and Efflatoun painted working women from various classes and backgrounds. In *Motherhood*, Sirry depicts a woman with a child on her lap (Fig. 23). Her hands are crossed so intensely to hold the child that the contours of her hands overlap and

intersect. The two figures echo the fellāha and the balās, though here there is a child instead of a jug. Sirry employs bold colors in contrasting patterns across the bodies of the mother and child, foregoing modeling to flatten the fabrics of their clothing. Yet, here the fellāha/balās icon takes on yet another level of meaning. As both painter and subject are women, the pair is replicated both inside and outside the painting: Sirry's liquid labor is her oil paint. The fellāha/balās pair thus becomes a point within the constellation of Sirry's modernism, referencing the long history of images of Egyptian peasants, the implicit maternity in those images, the new Arab socialist state, and her knowledge of global artistic trends. The artist leaves the viewer with a visual map of those connections, and the deeper we dig, the more complicated, and compelling, those connections become.



Fig. 22 J. Clark after Thomas Legh, "An Egyptian Woman carrying Water from the Nile" from *Narrative of a Journey in Egypt*, 1817, aquatint, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, reproduced courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art

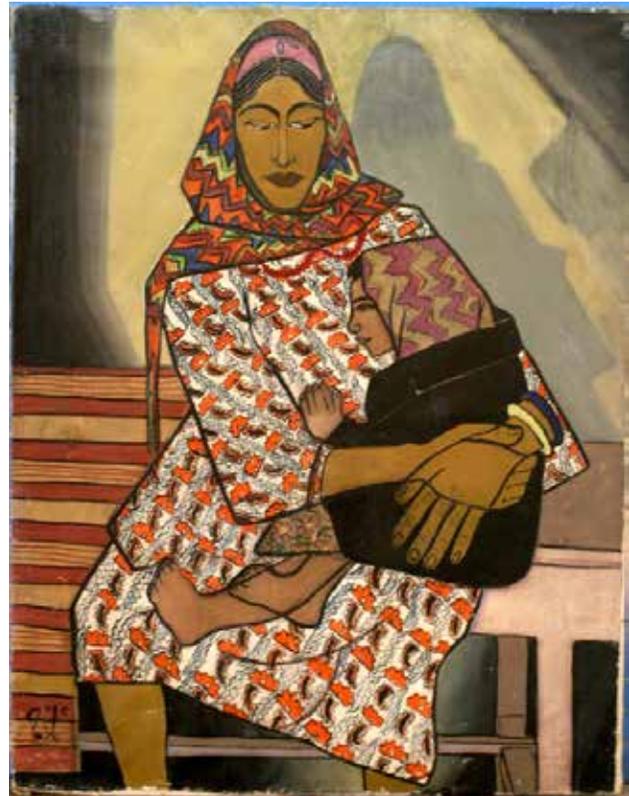


Fig. 23 Gazbia Sirry, *Motherhood*, 1952, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, Cairo, Egypt, photograph by the author

## Conclusion

In this essay, I provide a brief overview of *Modernism on the Nile's* theory of constellational modernism, alongside an expanded collection of images. This is just a small fragment of what is discussed in the book. I encourage any curious reader to continue on to the print version, where I expand on broader social, historical, and religious contexts.



Fig. 24 Political graffiti on the exterior walls of the American University in Cairo, corner of Mohammed Mahmoud Street and Tahrir Square, photograph by the author, August 2012

Over the long arc of Egyptian modernism, Egyptian artwork exhibited a consistency, which I call “constellational modernism.” Constellational connotes that the artworks pinpointed a series of transnational and trans-historical connections that their makers and audiences traversed in order to produce the work. Unlike the connotations of infinite interconnectedness of the “global” or the governmentally-approved routes of the “transnational,” these constellational connections are specific and finite, and often flout state-sponsored limitations. Moreover, these connections are not simply in the biographies of the artists or in the artworks’ exhibition histories; rather, they are *visualized* in the artworks themselves, through both form and content. Constellation thus refers both to the type of interconnectedness, and also where it is discovered: within the artworks.

Constellational modernism is both an aesthetic and a conceptual approach maintained through stylistic changes. The artworks presented in this essay showcase this trend across media and technique. I began with a discussion of nineteenth-century producers of visual culture, like Princess Nazli, who innovated a new visual language for a new Egyptian public that included local and international voices. I then turned to nationalist sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar, who deployed a constellational approach to define the new nation of Egypt to the world and to educate a rising class of Egyptians about the power of art in political struggle. In the following section, I address how Mahmoud Said, from the coastal city of Alexandria, used the technique to assert an elite, Mediterranean identity through oversaturated colors in oil paint on canvas. After World War II, Abdel

Hadi el-Gazzar was concerned more with art's accessibility to the broader public. As such, Gazzar's constellational method includes more references to mysticism and local religious practice, despite shifting in the 1960s from post-surrealist techniques to futuristic ink drawings. The final section of this essay examined the enduring symbolism of the image of the fellāha and her water jug, arguing that the fertility of the peasant woman's laboring body represented an enduring anxiety around Egypt's powerful waterways. The fellāha/balās icon does not necessarily showcase the aesthetic of constellational modernism per se. Rather, it is a poignant example of how an icon ricocheted through three centuries of constellational visual networks, marking the pathways that twentieth century artists would employ. These artists' constellational modernism unites the long history of art and visual culture in Egypt, and provides a model for analyzing modernisms globally.

The fieldwork that supported this book took place mainly in 2011-2012, commencing just before the January 25th uprising in Tahrir Square through to Mohammed Morsi's presidential victory in the summer of 2012. During these eighteen months, Egyptian protestors often occupied the streets of downtown Cairo. While contemporary art and street art were not the focus of my project, I recognized that Cairo's graffiti was an extension and a culmination of this constellational approach (Figs. 24-25). The artists were, again, highly cognizant of their multi-national audiences, cannily playing to the local and the global. Instead of Parisian bronze cast sculptures, the medium was derived from American hip-hop culture's history of transgressive graffiti, blended with local political content and Egyptian art histories, ranging from the pharaonic to the Islamic.



Fig. 25 Political graffiti on the exterior walls of the American University in Cairo, corner of Mohammed Mahmoud Street, photograph by the author, August 2012

The instantaneous dispersal of these ephemeral works through social media and the internet marks a new stage in viewer engagement with and access to visual material. Twentieth-first-century artworks cannot afford to be finite in the way that modernist artworks were. Systems of distribution now radiate farther; the online image world is more saturated every day. We have access to so many more images and ways of viewing and consuming them. The immensity of our options prevents stability. Today, images often gain prominence through virality rather than through institutionalization. In the end, I hope that the theory of constellational modernism, presented as a unifying feature of Egyptian modernism, can open up other modernisms and establish connections for more comparative approaches. These visualizations of interconnectedness, manifested in Egyptian modernism, offer a prescient precursor to today's world.

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## Citation Guide

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## Notes

1. The *Nahda* is a thoroughly documented movement. One of the classic texts on the subject is Albert Habib Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Since its publication in 1983, there have been many more detailed studies on the *Nahda*, which are addressed more thoroughly in my book.

2. Following Shahab Ahmed, I conceptualize Islam in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Cairo and Alexandria not solely as a religion, but also as a "human and historical phenomenon." See *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 5.

3. Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); Patrick Kane, *The Politics of Art and Culture in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-Building*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

4. Princess Nazli was widely known by her first name, following contemporary customs of identifying royalty. I refer to her here and in the book with her honorific as “Princess Nazli” due to her royal status.
5. I searched the archives for evidence of direct connection between Nazli and the founders of the art school and art movement. While there is certainly a high probability of interaction, I was unable to find any direct evidence. It is clear, however, that Sheikh Muhammad ‘Abduh (discussed further in the remainder of this section) was Nazli’s friend and visitor to her salon, though the content of their conversations is still waiting to be discovered.
6. Muhammad ‘Abduh, “al-ṣuwar wa al-Tamāthīl wa Fawā’idhā wa Ḥukmihā [Pictures and statues: Their benefits and legality],” in *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abdūh (1266-1323 H=1849-1905 M): Wa-fīhi Taḥṣīl Sīratih wa-khulāṣat Sīrat Mūqiz al-Sharq wa-ḥakīm al-Islām al-Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī*, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, (Cairo: Dār al-Faḍīlah, 2003), 2:497-502.
7. Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
8. Ṣubḥī Shārūnī, *‘Abd Al-Hādī al-Jazzār: Fannān al-Asāṭīr Wa-‘ālam al-Faḍā’* (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmīyah lil-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nashr, 1966).
9. See for example the ca. 510-500 BCE terracotta hydria (water jar) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (06.1021.77). <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247244>.



Yale

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